Britain in the 20th Century - Progress and Decline: The Character of Twentieth Century Britain Transcript

Date: Tuesday, 21 September 2010 - 12:00AM
Location: Museum of London
This is the first of a series of lectures on British history in the 20th Century. It is worth beginning by looking at the year 1900 and highlighting the differences between then and the present time, because these are things that tend not to be noticed because our history is so evolutionary.

Britain has the same institutions that it had over 100 years ago - the House of Commons, the House of Lords, the monarchy - but they have very different functions today from those they had in 1900.

Over 100 years ago, there were general elections, as there are now, but they were very different affairs.

The first, and most obvious, difference in the year 1900 is that fewer than half the population had the vote in 1900. No female had the vote, but neither did all males have the vote. Women could vote in local elections - that was thought to be women’s business, to deal with education and local matters, but not with the great matters of the nation and the empire. Males had to qualify to have the vote; there were seven different ways of qualifying, most of them connected with property. The main qualification was the household qualification, a voter had to be a householder, but there were also various qualifications for lodgers. Broadly speaking, around 60% of adult males had the vote in 1900. To put it another way, out of a 40 million population, 6.5 million had the vote. Of those 6.5 million, 73,000 were classed as illiterate voters and had to be guided, so anyone who has a golden age view of educational standards should note that even amongst that 6.5 million, there were quite a large number of illiterates.

The movement in the 20th Century was away from these different ways of qualifying for the vote to one simple way: namely, to reach the age of 18, and the vote is now thought of as a right of citizenship whereas it was then thought of as a privilege, to be derived largely from a connection with property. The country has moved from the year 1900 to the present time, from a diverse franchise - seven ways of qualifying for the vote - to a simple franchise with just one way of qualifying.

However, as regards the electoral system, the country has moved in the opposite direction, from a simple electoral structure to a much more diverse one, because, in 1900, all elections were carried out by the ‘first past the post’ system, but today there is a large variety of systems. Anyone who lives in London is used to no fewer than four different electoral systems: the ‘first past the post’ system for electing Members of Parliament; the regional list system of proportional representation for electing Members of the European Parliament; a different system, called the additional member system of proportional representation, for electing the London Assembly; and the supplementary vote for electing the Mayor of London. So there are four different systems, and in 1900, there was just one system, so there has been a shift in the opposite direction in terms of the electoral system.

Women were first given the vote in 1918; however they had to be over 30 with a property qualification. Women over 21 were not given the vote until 1928. Therefore Britain was far from being a full democracy in 1900. Indeed, from one point of view, it was less democratic than Germany or France because they both had universal male suffrage, and Britain did not. The effect of the various restrictions on registration were not so much to keep out what might be termed the working class, because the majority of trade unionists had the vote in 1900; it was to keep out primarily young men living with their parents, who did not have a property qualification, and people who were very mobile and therefore were not on the electoral register.

Thus, from one point of view, Britain was less democratic than Germany or France, but, from another, it was more liberal, with a small ‘l’, because it was the only country in Western Europe, apart from the Scandinavian countries, where the Government was fully responsible to the legislature - the legislature controlled the Government. Federal Germany had a Parliament elected by a male universal suffrage, but it did not control the Chancellor of Germany - the rough equivalent of the Prime Minister - or the military, the army or the Kaiser, so Germany did not have the system of responsible government that Britain had.

In addition to the restrictions on the franchise, there was a further anomaly in the system. Some people had more than one vote - known as plural voting. Indeed, individuals could acquire as many as seven votes. They had an extra vote according to their place of residence, so if they had houses in two different constituencies, they would have two votes. Furthermore, individuals
had an extra vote if their place of business was in a separate constituency from where they lived - that gave another vote. All university graduates - only about 44,000 - had an extra vote for university constituencies, which were non-geographical constituencies.

In 1918, legislation was passed ensuring that no one had more than two votes, but up to 1918, someone could have up to seven. In 1948, plural voting and the university seats were abolished by the post-war Labour government. The effect of plural voting was to benefit the Conservatives. It gave the Tories a small number of extra seats at each election - between about 10 and 12.

There was also a strong mal-distribution of representation. The present Government is producing a Bill to equalise constituency boundaries, but in 1900, there were no proper procedures of re-distribution, and Ireland in particular was over-represented.

Britain then included the whole island of Ireland, because Ireland did not become de facto independent till 1922. However, Ireland was very strongly over-represented because her population had declined, partly through famine and partly through emigration through the 19th Century, but there had not been any redistribution, and politicians were rather frightened to reduce the number of Irish seats because of hostility from the Irish nationalists. Thus a vote in Ireland was worth much more than a vote in England, and there were some very small constituencies in Ireland. At its most extreme, a vote in Kilkenny was worth 20 times vote in Romford - the Kilkenny constituency was one 20th the size of that in Romford. Proper redistribution procedures were not introduced until 1918.

In 1900, if people had been asked about the nature of Britain they would have said it was an empire. At this time, 20% of the world's land mass was part of the British Empire and 23% of the global population was part of the British Empire. This was the largest land empire the world had ever known. There were about 40 million people living in Britain in 1900 but the Empire comprised 400 million people.

Of the 400 million people who lived under British rule, 300 million lived in India which was ruled directly from Westminster. There was a Secretary of State for India in the Cabinet and a Viceroy or Governor General of India, but it was ruled directly from Westminster and had no real representative institutions in 1900.

Of the 300 million people living in India, 67 million lived in what were known as the Princely States which were run by various maharajas - the largest of which was Hyderabad. These had a certain degree of domestic autonomy, but they could not make decisions in matters of foreign policy or defence as these were made in London. In 1914, when Britain declared war, it declared war on behalf of 300 million people in India even though it could be argued that concerns with Serbia and Belgian neutrality had little to do with India but nevertheless India went to war.

There were various other colonies, in Africa and Asia, which were also ruled directly from London. At that time, most people, even on the left, did not think that self-government was appropriate for people who did not have white skin. People on the left thought at some, very distant date in the future, possibly India might have self-government, but they did not think that Africa really ever would. Therefore the colonies were ruled directly from Westminster.

The other set of countries in the Empire, which would become self-governing in domestic affairs were the so-called colonies of settlement: Australia, Canada and New Zealand. There gradually moved towards independence as their autonomy increased.

There was a clash between British settlers and Dutch settlers, the so-called Boers, in one colony of settlement - South Africa. In 1900 the British were in the middle of fighting the Boer War. In that year, it seemed that Britain had won the war fairly easily, and a general election was held by the Government to capitalise on that, a khaki election. However, victory would be harder to win than had initially been thought and the war lasted until 1902 because the Boers, defeated in the field, became perhaps the first country to adopt guerrilla warfare and to show the potential of that style of combat. That conflict was very important in British history because it first exposed worries that Britain might not be strong enough to retain the Empire if it could not defeat a small group of ragged farmers.

It is important to note that in the Boer War, Britain was not fighting alone, but, for the first time, countries from the colonies of settlement voluntarily sent troops to assist the war effort. This was the first sign of a strong imperial sentiment, which was to be there in both World Wars.

Britain was also, and here, there is something similar to the present day, engaged in Afghanistan, trying to defeat tribal problems. Harold Macmillan once said 'The first rule in politics is never get involved in Afghanistan.' Nevertheless Britain was
involved there in a rather futile attempt to defeat the guerrillas.

The Government which presided over the war, and which was re-elected with a very large majority in 1900 was a broadly Conservative Government. The Prime Minister was a very strong conservative, Lord Salisbury, and he was the last peer to be Prime Minister. After that, it was accepted that a Prime Minister had to be a member of the House of Commons.

Salisbury's cabinet was very aristocratic: nine of the 20 members of it were also peers. Two others were baronets, one was the son of a peer and one was the nephew of a peer. Many members of the Cabinet, and also of the junior ranks of the ministry, were, in some way, related to Lord Salisbury. The left nicknamed his Cabinet 'the Hotel Cecil' because the Salisbury name was Cecil.

By 1900, Lord Salisbury was aging and succeeded, in 1902, by his nephew! Arthur Balfour became Prime Minister. Salisbury's first name was Robert, and the phrase 'Bob's your uncle' comes from that.

Although Salisbury and Balfour were both Conservatives, this was not a wholly Conservative Government, but - and this is some similarity with the present day - a coalition government of Conservatives and another group, who were the Liberal Unionists.

The Liberal Unionists were a group of Liberals who had broken away from the main branch of the Liberal Party in 1886, in protest against Gladstone's proposal to give home rule to Ireland. Therefore, the Government was known as Unionist because it was not wholly Conservative. The breakaway of the Liberal Unionists in 1886 had the consequence of making the Conservatives the dominant grouping in the country. Between 1886 and 1905, there were just three years of Liberal Government; a minority Liberal Government between 1892 and 1895 which was dependent upon the support of the Irish Nationalists. It is important to note that the Unionist coalition was based on a negative proposition, namely, that home rule should not be given to Ireland and that the union between Britain and Ireland should be maintained.

There were no opinion polls until 1937, when Gallup opened its offices in Britain but it is probable that the most popular figure in the Government was a Liberal Unionist, namely Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary. There is no longer a Colonial Office, and when it did exist, it was seen as a rather minor ministry. However, in Britain's imperial prime, it was seen by many, and certainly by Chamberlain, as the key ministry in the Government, because it controlled the destiny of the Empire.

After Chamberlain broke with Gladstone in 1886 he thought he would never hold office again. However, he confided to his wife that if he ever did hold office again, the post he would like to have would be Colonial Secretary. In 1895, when Salisbury's Unionist Government was formed, Chamberlain was offered by Salisbury whatever Cabinet post he wanted so he became Secretary of State for the Colonies. Chamberlain defined Salisbury' ministry as a popular imperialist Government and he was the person probably most identified with the Boer War which gave the Conservatives their great victory of 1900.

This is an important motif of the 20th Century which was very much the Conservatives' century as they were in power most of the time. There were only four occasions when there were large left-wing majorities: 1906, with Campbell-Bannerman's Liberal landslide; 1945, with Attlee's Labour triumph; 1966, with Wilson; and 1997, with Blair. For the rest of that time, nothing could be done which the Conservatives did not support. The Conservatives were in control for much of the 20th Century, and they won a number of landslides: in 1900, through Joseph Chamberlain; in 1918, after the First World War, with Lloyd George; and in 1931, with the formation of the National Government under Ramsay MacDonald.

Chamberlain, Lloyd George and MacDonald were called many different things in their political careers, but no one ever thought they were Conservatives. Nevertheless, they helped to give the Conservatives very large majorities, and it may be that the Coalition today will have the same effect. However, it shows that the Conservatives were a very adaptable party which had the ability to appeal to others who were not conservatives and this was an important reason for their electoral success.

Harold Macmillan once said, rather mischievously, that the last purely Conservative Government was that formed by Disraeli in 1874, because every other Conservative Government has had accretions from the left in it: the Liberal Unionists after 1886, the Lloyd George Liberals after the First World War, the National Labour Party following MacDonald in the 1930s, or the National Liberals in the 1930s. The Conservatives' success has been because they attracted people from the centre and the moderate left.

However, even when there were left-wing majorities in this period, the Conservatives still had great influence, because they were the dominant force by far in the House of Lords. In 1900, the House of Lords was composed completely of hereditary peers - no women - Bishops and the Law Lords, who did not play a major role.
The Conservatives were very dominant after the split in the Liberal Party in 1886. One sign of Conservative dominance in the House of Lords was the vote on Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill in 1893. Gladstone managed to have it passed by the House of Commons but in the Lords it was defeated on a straight party vote by 419 votes to 41. The House of Lords at this time was the equivalent of a one-party chamber. Regardless of who won the election in the Commons, the Lords remained strongly Conservative. In 1909, there was clash with the Government over Lloyd George's People's Budget, and that dispute led to a restriction on the powers of the Lords with the 1911 Parliament Act. However, in 1900, the powers of the Lords were, in law, absolute and equivalent to those of the Commons. By convention, the House of Lords did not interfere with money issues, and that was the matter that caused the major dispute in 1909 but nevertheless there was a tremendous Conservative bias to the constitution at that time apart from the relationship between property and voting rights.

The major opposition at that time was not the Labour Party, which it is today. The Labour Party had just two seats in the General Election of 1900 but the main party of the left was the Liberal Party. They faced a very difficult problem after the retirement of Gladstone, their great leader, in 1894, which can only be compared with the problems the Conservatives had in recent years after the retirement of Margaret Thatcher. After a very powerful leader, who has left his or her imprint on the Party, there is always the problem that other potential leaders have been squashed and that the Party lacks direction. The Conservatives were unsure whether to preserve Thatcherism or go beyond it. Similarly, the Liberals did not know whether to adhere to Gladstone's legacy or do something different.

Gladstone himself was very much against what he called construction - which is now known as state intervention. In many ways he was a very right wing liberal; indeed, Margaret Thatcher once said that if Gladstone had been alive in the 1980s, he would have been a member of her Administration. Gladstone believed that any state intervention undermined individual independence and individual liberty so should be restricted. Liberalism, for him, meant primarily constitutional and moral reforms: Home Rule for Ireland; devolution for Scotland and Wales; reform of Local Government; reform of the licensing laws - a very strong Liberal cry in the 1870s which was not very popular; and reform of the House of Lords. Gladstone, also thought that imperialism and intervention abroad were vulgar and expansionist.

Whether or not he was correct, this stance meant that the Gladstonians were going against the new spirit of the end of the 19th Century and beginning of the 20th century where ideas of state intervention and imperialism were growing. There was a reaction against Gladstonian liberalism, and people said Britain needed more intervention at home to deal with very serious social problems - poverty, ill-health, and unemployment - and also needed much more intervention abroad, to strengthen the Empire and Britain's position in the world. Gradually, during these years, this caused the development of New Liberalism which argued that the state should play a much more active role than it had in the past.

Another great difference between 1900 and 2010 is that an ordinary law-abiding citizen would barely notice the existence of the state in 1900 as there were hardly any dealings with the state. There was no National Insurance until 1911 and no old age pensions until 1908. There were no state benefits in the modern sense, and a person's only contact with the state would be that they would pay a low level of income tax if they were fairly rich. People went through their lives without knowing that the state existed. This changed dramatically in the new century, with the legislation of the Liberal Government of 1906. An even greater change happened as a consequence of the Great War. Conscription was introduced in 1916 and the state mobilised the whole of society to win the war, because the First World War was a very different type of war from the Boer War or even the Crimean War. The previous conflicts were small wars fought by groups of professional soldiers.

The First World War was very different. It was a war fought by large masses of people. A large amount of manpower was required, so this made conscription necessary. Even more than that, the war could not be won unless the factories were producing armaments and other crucial necessities at the right rate so, to some extent; the person at home working in a factory was of as much importance to the war effort as the soldier. The consequences of the war thus were the legitimisation of trade unions; the enfranchisement of women due to their work in the factories; the direction of labour; and the nationalisation of major industries. This would not have been thought of in peace-time so and it was the war which triggered great centralisation and state expansion.

One central change in the 20th Century was the replacement of the Liberals by the Labour Party as the main party of the left. It can be argued that this was inevitable with the rise of the state as the Liberals were ideologically opposed to the creative use of the state to solve difficult problems. Others have suggested that they could not adapt to universal suffrage while some people believe that their demise was the result of bad luck and contingent factors - the First World War, the split and the quarrel between Asquith and Lloyd George. Historians still argue about this issue but it is clear that no-one in 1900 would have thought
that the Labour Party would overtake the Liberals.

In 1900, the Labour Party was not called the Labour Party. It was called the Labour Representation Committee, and it changed its name to the Labour Party in 1906. The Labour Party was actually formed in 1900 in February in a meeting at Farringdon Hall. It was formed shortly before the General Election, and did not really have time to prepare adequately which is perhaps why it returned only two candidates. Those two candidates were returned because the Liberals did not oppose them, so they did not win any seats against the Liberals who were their main anti-Conservative rivals.

The Labour Party, or the Labour Representation Committee, as it was, was a very different animal from what it is today. It was a federal party, composed of three different elements.

There was, firstly, the Independent Labour Party, not to be confused with the Labour Party, called the ILP. The Independent Labour Party was a socialist party, founded by Keir Hardy, the man with the cloth cap, in 1893. A lot of people, including some historians, overestimate the support this party had. It had very few members. Socialism was not very popular at that time in Britain. It had about 7,000 members in 1900 which was smaller than the membership of the Conservative Party in any large city in Britain - a very small number of people were socialists.

The socialist societies were the second element in the Labour Party. The Fabians were the most important, and they still exist, but, again, although they had a lot of influence, one should not exaggerate their numbers. There were only about 700 members of the Fabian Society at this time but they did have a great intellectual influence.

It was not possible in those days to join a constituency Labour Party. It could be joined only through one of the constituent elements, that is, the Independent Labour Party, the Fabians, or the trade unions, who were the third, by far the largest, most important element in the Labour Party.

The ILP, with 7,000 members, was not making any significant progress, and the problem for any people who wanted the representation of the labour interest was, firstly, they could not get the requisite amount of people and secondly, they did not have sufficient money. Therefore, they relied, for the money and the support, on the trade unions. The significance of the Independent Labour Party was it was the only one of those small socialist parties that was actually prepared to work with the trade unions. The other socialist groups took a rather purist view - perhaps they were correct, logically, but it did not help their cause. They argued that in a socialist society with a planned economy there was no role for independent trade unions so they refused to work with them. They also argued, with reason, that the trade unions were not themselves socialists.

The main concern with the trade unions in 1900, as today, was with their members’ interests. At this time, Britain was in the middle of a depression, and the employers wanted to cut costs. One way in which they tried to cut costs was to bring in non-union labour, particularly into the railways, but also into other industries. This was the period of what has been called the employers’ offensive against the unions. This offensive was buttressed by the courts, perhaps the judges were more conservative than they are now, which said that the trade unions were liable in tort for any actions undertaken during a strike. This threatened trade union funds, which they had built up for many years, and threatened what the trade unions thought was the secure position that they had attained in British society, had been recognised. The legislation recognising unions and legalising peaceful picketing had been passed by Disraeli's Conservative Government in the 1870s, but that position was now under threat, and the unions had to decide how to combat the threat.

The interesting thing about the trade unions is that they tended to act together in the 20th Century only when their position was under attack. What they were doing, in 1900, was not trying to make gains, but to defend the status quo. In the 1926 General Strike, which was supported by the TUC, it was not attempting to make gains; it was trying to defend the status quo. They were fighting against a reduction in the wages of miners. Similarly, in 1974, with the strike which ended the period of the Heath Government, they were fighting to retain differentials which were already in existence.

This highlights something important about the role of organised labour in the 20th Century: it was at its strongest when it was on the defensive. That was the only time when there was strong union or working class solidarity. At other times, this did not exist and that was certainly the case in 1900. The trade unionists said to themselves ‘What are we going to do about the employers’ offensive?’ and their answer was a very characteristically British one: they realised they had to put this right in Parliament and the House of Commons. However, the difficulty facing them was that they did not have representatives in the House of Commons. The employers had lots of representatives in the House of Commons, in both the major parties, the Conservatives and Liberals, but no-one who would represent the organised working class. Therefore, the trade unionists
decided that they needed their own people and their own party who could speak up for labour in Parliament. The trade unions noticed the ILP who they knew would work with them so they proposed forming the Labour Representation Committee. However, they instructed the ILP, that they would only co-operate if they abandoned all the nonsense about the class war and left socialism at a distance. They were interested in the immediate material concerns and repairing their own position. They succeeded by putting pressure on the Liberal Government that came to power in 1906 and passed the 1906 Trade Union Act which removed the liability of the unions during strikes. The unions were interested in improving the economic position of their members, not in ideology.

A lot of people make the mistake of looking back to a golden age of the Labour Party when it was genuinely socialist. Tony Benn is particularly liable to do that by talking about Keir Hardy but it was not formed as a socialist party; it was formed as a party to deal with immediate practical interests. Indeed, Labour did not have a creed of socialism until 1918, and many of the trade unionists and many of the leaders were not socialists even then. The key feature of Labour was representation of the working class and not ideology.

Labour was formed in February 1900 at a meeting in Farringdon Hall, and it was not noticed much in the newspapers. However, one very prescient newspaper man said that this was ‘...a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, which could grow to something very large and important.’

At the beginning, a small party under our electoral system could easily be smashed by the other two parties. It is very difficult for small parties to get off the ground under first past the post. However, the Labour Party had a stroke of great luck, as the Liberals were willing to help them by making an electoral pact. Electoral pacts are in the news now, but there was an actual electoral pact between the Liberals and the Labour Party. The Liberals were willing to help because they had been in opposition for so long, they did not believe that they would ever get into power again; and they could not foresee the landslide of 1906. If they could have done, they might well have smashed the Labour Party, which they could easily have done, by putting up candidates against all Labour candidates. However, they thought they could win working class and trade unionist votes if they made an electoral pact with the Labour Party which they did in 1903. The pact was not made public, although a sensible observer could guess that it existed.

It was facilitated by a feature of the electoral system then, that there were a number of two-member seats, so one candidate could be Liberal and another Labour. The single member constituency only became universal in 1948.

Keir Hardy should not be seen as a pure-hearted socialist - he was perfectly happy to have a pact with the capitalist party. Indeed, without that, the Labour Party would never have had any electoral success. Most of the (29) Labour seats won in 1906, and the (42 and 40) seats won in 1910 were won through Liberal aid. They would not have won many without the Liberals who did not appreciate the danger when they could have crushed Labour.

I have mentioned three parties: the Conservatives (and the Liberal Unionists); the Liberals; and the LRC. However, there was another party in Parliament, frequently called the Irish Nationalists. It called itself the Irish Party, and the success of the nationalists was a consequence of the extension of the vote under the 3rd Reform Act in 1884. The agricultural labourer in the whole of Britain was given the vote, and given that Ireland was primarily an agricultural country, this made a tremendous difference in Ireland, so the General Election of 1885 was the first quasi-popular election in Ireland, if not fully democratic. Of the 103 seats in Ireland, the Irish Party won 80. Outside Ulster, the Irish Party won every seat but two. The two they failed to win were: the university seat of Trinity College Dublin, which was primarily a Protestant university at that time and not sympathetic to Nationalists; and the constituency in Dublin where the English residents and rulers lived - it was Rathmines. They won every other seat and received about two-thirds of the Irish vote.

Their leader, a charismatic man, who died young, was called Charles Stewart Parnell. Parnell stated in 1885, that there was just one plank on the Irish platform and that was Home Rule, the establishment of an Irish Parliament in Dublin, which is now called devolution. It was not clear whether devolution was meant as a step to independence or not. There is a statute - in O'Connell Street in Dublin, of Parnell, and underneath it is his famous statement: 'No man can limit the march of a nation.' However, he also said 'Under the British constitution, the most that we can ask for is our own Parliament in Dublin.' Therefore it was unclear whether Home Rule was an alternative to or step towards full independence.

The Irish said that they did not want to keep any MPs in Westminster, unlike the SNP; they wanted a Parliament in Dublin. In effect the Irish MPs were sent to Westminster to say that they did not want to be there. This was a problem for a liberal state because the politicians wanted to see what the opinion of the public was. The Irish made it clear they wanted Home Rule and as
When Gladstone proposed his first Home Rule Bill in 1886, it was defeated by a breakaway of the so-called Liberal Unionists, led by Joseph Chamberlain. In 1893, there was a second Home Rule Bill, which got through the Commons, but was defeated in the Lords by 419 to 41. Gladstone, at that point, said that he wanted to dissolve Parliament and take the issue of the peers versus the people to the country, but his colleagues would not let him because they thought most people in the country were opposed to the Irish, so Gladstone, shortly after resigned over the issue of increased naval defence expenditure.

It is difficult to comprehend the opposition to Home Rule, but it cannot be underestimated. Firstly, it was argued that it was an age of great empires: Germany had recently been united in 1871 and was now a great empire; there was a large Russian empire; America was a large country and competitor to Britain. America had almost broken up in the Civil War and was held together by force. For the same reason, it was argued that it was necessary to hold Britain together, even by force, if necessary. It is worth remembering that Gladstone, who favoured Home Rule for Ireland, was also in favour of the independence of the South in America, on grounds of self-determination. Joseph Chamberlain took the side of the North, on the grounds that great empires should not be broken up wantonly, and that was the view he took about Britain.

Furthermore, it might have been seen as surrender to violence because some of the Irish Nationalists had adopted violent and militant methods.

Thirdly, Ireland would have been a Catholic country and one cannot underestimate the fear of Catholics at the time. Britain was then a profoundly Protestant country, in a way difficult to imagine now. Tolerance was given to Catholics, and other sects, for that matter, but they were very much guests in the house - Britain was a Protestant country.

Finally, people were worried about Ulster which was strongly Protestant. The Ulstermen did not want to be ruled by Dublin. The problem with arguing self-determination and localism for Dublin was that the logical conclusion was that Belfast had the right to be autonomous from Ireland.

Therefore, Home Rule was rejected in 1886, and the response to the Irish who said that they did not want to be at Westminster was to tell them that they actually did. The Conservatives had two policies towards Ireland: what they called killing Home Rule with kindness, to establish various social reforms - local government reform and reform enabling more people to acquire their land - to undermine the demand for Home Rule; but secondly, 20 years of resolute Government - if Ireland was shown authority, then the Irish would realise that they did wish to remain in Westminster. This did mean ruling Ireland against the wishes of the population which was very difficult for a liberal state to do.

British politicians spent 36 years trying to reconcile Ireland to the British connection. It failed, and in 1922, Ireland won de facto independence. At that point, the Unionist coalition ceased to call itself Unionist, because it had failed to save the union, and they called themselves again Conservatives. By 1922, as I say, Ireland became independent. The Unionists had to go much further than Gladstone had gone in 1886, without winning the goodwill that Gladstone had hoped to win. It was a sad failure.

Meanwhile, the Irish at Westminster tended to block proceedings in the House of Commons, and because of the presence of the Irish, in seven elections, between 1886 and 1914, three (1892, January 1910, December 1910) resulted in Hung Parliaments. Given the Irish had between 80 and 85 seats in every election, a major party therefore needed about 100 seats more than the other party to have a working majority so the Liberals tended to be dependent on the Irish vote.

It is often argued that the Irish issue proved a distraction from other, more important, matters which British statesmen could have been thinking about. Gladstone once said that Ireland was the one example of the failure of the British political genius, and I think that is true.

The Unionist coalition had been formed in 1886 for a single negative purpose: to oppose Home Rule. Britain, under the Unionists, faced great challenges in the world, and in particular, as I said, the rise of new empires that were challenging Britain's industrial supremacy, commercial supremacy, and also, perhaps, her military and, even more important, her naval supremacy. Particularly, there was worry about Germany. Until the beginning of the 20th Century, Britain had a position of what was called 'splendid isolation'. She had no allies, no alliances with people, and needed none. That came to an end with the new century. In 1902, Britain signed her first alliance, with, of all countries, Japan, and that was because Britain and Japan had a common interest in resisting Russian expansionism into Asia. In 1904, not quite an alliance, something more informal than that, but the Entente Cordiale with France, making up with the ancient enemy and establishing better relations, and then, in 1907, an Entente with Russia, who was France's ally so gradually, Britain became absorbed into an alliance system in Europe.
This interventionism did not solve the commercial problem that Britain seemed to face: the fear of British decline economically, as her rate of growth was falling, and the rate of growth of other countries was increasing.

When people looked at the new developing empires - Germany, America, Russia and France - they found they all had one thing in common: high tariffs on imports. Some people thought this was very damaging to Britain, because it meant British companies could not sell their exports to these countries. On the other hand, there was a flood of imports from those countries, whose labour costs, so some people argued, were much lower than those in Britain. Their goods, some people said, were poorer quality, and they were flooding the British market and putting British people out of work.

Now, there was one area where it was clear, and the Boer War had shown it, that Britain could look for help, and that was the self-governing colonies of the Empire - Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Some people were beginning to argue that if Britain was to meet the challenge of these new empires, then the Empire had to be united. There had to be defence cooperation from the Empire leading to some form of imperial unity. That was a step too large at the present time, and the self-governing countries, having won self-government, were not easily persuaded to merge their defence with Britain. However, some thought that a first step could be taken in terms of economic and that the Empire should join together as an economic unit to match Germany or America and impose its own tariff, with preferences given to imperial goods.

In March 1903, Joseph Chamberlain, the key figure of the Government, made a powerful speech in Birmingham, which one of his supporters said 'it was like Luther at Wittenberg,' because Chamberlain was challenging a key British article of faith which had existed since the hungry 1840s. Chamberlain was saying that free trade was no longer the way forward; and that it must be abandoned if Britain was to survive in the new world of gigantic empires. Chamberlain cast his speech in the form of a demand for an inquiry, but everybody knew it was a call for a totally new policy. He argued that if Britain had an imperial tariff with preferences, she could benefit economically, and could also, perhaps contradictorily, use the money gained for social reform, in particular for introducing old age pensions.

This was a tremendous challenge to everything most people in Britain held dear, and Chamberlain realised that it would not be easy to persuade people to accept what he was proposing. Therefore, he resigned from the Conservative Government and said he would lead a campaign in the country to try and bring opinion round to his ideas. For the next few years, he stomped the country, a remarkable achievement for a man of his age - he was then 67, which was older then than it is now. He went round the country speaking in favour of tariff reform. However, this policy did not only split the country, it split the Unionist coalition, and Chamberlain's opponents begged him not to raise this issue because, if he did, he would split the Unionist coalition and bring in a Home Rule Government to power, thus breaking up the United Kingdom.

It split the Conservative Party, and reunited the Liberals, because, whatever else the Liberals disagreed about, and there were lots of things, they all agreed that free trade was the Ark of the Covenant which must never be challenged.

It also brought the country around to the Liberals, because people had a folk memory, perhaps inaccurate, of the so-called hungry '40s, before the repeal of the Corn Laws, when, so it was said, people were starving because bread was so expensive. Therefore, the main cry of the Liberals in the General Election of 1906 was that tariff reform means dear bread - it means a rise in the cost of living for the working classes, who would pay the cost of the tariff.

Now, the Liberals won in 1906 as decisive a landslide as the Conservatives, or Unionists, had won in 1900. It is important to note, although it proved to be one of the great social reforming Governments of modern times, that this victory was won on a negative, and just as the Unionist coalition had been held together solely by a negative and broke up when a positive was introduced, the Liberal victory was not won amid positive proposals for social reform, which would have delighted people very considerably. It was won on through negativity and opposition to protectionism. So it appeared that liberalism had won a great victory, and with it, a number of supporters of the Labour Party brought in.

But, perhaps all this was just as deceptive as the Unionist victory of 1900, because this great Liberal Government of 1906 was to lead Britain into the First World War, which ended not only the Liberal Party, but, with a small 'l', a certain liberal civilisation that had existed before the First World War. The death of liberal England was shortly to come about and was brought about by the Liberal Government returned so triumphantly in 1906. Even though it was a very pacifically inclined Government, a Government of the left, a paradox perhaps like Blair in Iraq, it involved Britain in this terrible War, which destroyed both their party and, in a sense, liberal civilisation.

©Professor Vernon Bogdanor, Gresham College 2010