

The Torquay Divisional Contest: The General Election 1900

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Historians refer to the 1900 General Election as the Khaki Election. Parliament was dissolved two years before its term was up reputedly to take electoral advantage of military successes. The Boer War victories of the summer of 1900 are considered to have fuelled a jingoistic fervour in the British electorate that reversed the prospect of an eventual Conservative-Unionist defeat presaged by the military blunders and government inadequacies exposed by the war. Indeed, contemporary opinion expected the swing of the pendulum to remove the party in power as it had in every general election since household suffrage had been introduced.¹ Psephological studies appear to substantiate the view of a dissolution driven by expedience. The Salisbury administration's majority had fallen from 152 to 128, and the reluctant prime minister was persuaded to launch the election on a changed tide of public opinion. Hence, 'Victory snatched on a single issue at an opportune moment', has characterized it as the Khaki Election.² Time has done little to alter the orthodox view that Empire is central to any explanation of the outcome of this election. Though many studies suggest a multiplicity of determining factors, there is little of substance to challenge just how khaki in fact, the Khaki Election was. It is the purpose of this case study to reconsider the somewhat monolithic view of the khaki explanation of election voting behaviour in 1900 and suggest that political Britain in 1900 was more than a little heterogeneous.

The Torquay Division was one of eight county divisions for the parliamentary representation of Devon reorganised under the provisions of the Redistribution of Seats Act, 1885. Torquay comprised the petty sessional division of Paignton and the municipal borough of Dartmouth.³ Voters on the Devon registers for Torquay numbered 10,039 in 1895. In 1900 they totalled 9,313. At the 1895 General Election there were 980 lodgers on the Torquay register; by 1900 the number of lodgers registered had fallen to 205. The total electorate for 1900 was 726 fewer

than 1895.⁴ Franchise qualification divided the electors into: 7,431 Occupiers, 1,675 Owners and 207 Lodgers, and the election was held on a register over two years old.⁵ Thus, in order to qualify a voter must have been in residence in a constituency since July 1898 with the consequence that many working men who had recently met the voting qualification were disfranchised.⁶ Torquay had many political clubs and associations, Conservative, Primrose League, Unionist, Liberal Unionist, and Liberal. Locally the constituency was served by two newspapers, the *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, and the *Torquay Directory and South Devon Journal*: both claimed independency. Regionally the division was served by the *Western Morning News*. Religious profession in the division was predominantly Anglican; however, the spectrum of Nonconformity was well represented, and Roman Catholics were in an increasing minority. Owing to significant population increase in the division in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the findings of the 1851 religious census are unreliable. However, the non-Anglican population of the division was estimated at only 10.5 per cent in 1922.⁷ The local press, like political partisans in constituencies across the country, considered that 'the election in the Torquay Division will be a khaki election'.⁸ The British Commander in Chief in South Africa, General Redvers Buller, added to local interest in this contentious imperial debate by virtue of being a Devonian.

The polling at previous elections, since the creation of the Torquay constituency in 1885, indicates that the normal voting strengths of the parties were fairly evenly balanced. The Conservatives had been incumbent for fourteen years, since 1886 when Reginald Mallock won by a majority of eighty votes, a mere 1.2 per cent of those cast. In 1892 Mallock retained the seat and increased the conservative majority by 314 votes, or 5 per cent. His successor Captain A. S. Phillpotts, defeated the Liberal candidate in 1895 by 175 votes, representing 2.2 per cent of votes cast. Phillpotts announced his intended retirement and introduced Reginald Rankin to the constituency as his successor, some eighteen months before the 1900 General Election. Then Rankin contested the constituency with the Liberal candidate Francis Layland-Barratt, who had first fought the seat in 1895 against Phillpotts.⁹

As a result of the formal announcement of the dissolution of Parliament on 25 September 1900, one local newspaper observed that 'the election takes place somewhat suddenly and at a holiday period'.¹⁰ Both candidates were on holiday, Rankin in Scotland and Layland-Barratt at an east coast resort, when the intention to dissolve Parliament was first made public on 18 September 1900. Both men hurried back to Torquay. Fortunately their respective party agents 'conscious that Parliament might be dissolved

any day' had already begun preparations.¹¹ Layland-Barratt and Rankin were formally chosen respectively by the Liberals and the Unionists on 21 and 22 September, and polling scheduled for Torquay on Monday 8 October a mere twenty days after the public announcement.

Layland-Barratt was born in 1860 at St. Austell into a county family of landed gentry.¹² He married Frances Layland in 1884 and assumed the additional surname of Layland by Royal Licence in 1895. He had attended Plymouth Grammar School then the University of Cambridge, and by twenty-one years of age was 'an active and prominent politician'. After a period as chairman of the St. Austell Liberal Committee he was invited to contest that constituency, but an accident prevented his candidature in 1881. In addition to being a Cornish JP, Layland-Barratt had also served as a member of Cornwall County Council, and was High Sheriff in 1897. In 1900 he was President of the South-East Cornwall Liberal Association and vice-president of the Egremont Division of Cumbria. Layland-Barratt had a family home from 1895 at the Manor House, Torquay; a London residence at Cadogan Square and his ancestral pile near St. Austell.¹³

Reginald Rankin was born in 1871 in Hereford. He attended Eton and then Oxford. He was the son of Sir James Rankin, Bart., Conservative MP for Leominster in Herefordshire. Reginald Rankin married the Honourable Nest Rice in 1896, and was called to the Bar in 1899.¹⁴ A keen sportsman, prolific writer, mountain-climber, big-game hunter in America and India, Major in the Hereford Rifles, J.P. and Deputy Lord Lieutenant for Hereford, he was adopted for the Torquay seat by the Unionists in 1899. In January 1900 Rankin went to the Cape and enlisted as a trooper with Rimington's Scouts, of which his younger brother was adjutant. Rankin quickly became a lieutenant. However, in July 1900 when 'dissolution was in the air', Rankin was given permission to resign and returned to England to prepare for the coming election. He moved to Torquay and leased Lanscombe, a house at Cockington.¹⁵

The campaign for the Torquay Division extended over a fortnight during which time the electorate was 'fairly deluged with the inevitable flood of oratory and literature'. Liberal women workers addressed over 40,000 circulars, and both candidates delivered many speeches at campaign meetings throughout the constituency. Layland-Barratt's election addresses broadened the scope of issues beyond 'Joe's War' and contended that there was no difference of opinion between the parties 'which justified an appeal to the country'. Liberal criticisms were directed not at the army but the manner in which the government had managed the war, at diplomacy, tactics, inadequate preparation and inferior weapons.

Lauding the gallantry of the Devon Regiment, and repudiating the unfair criticism of General Redver Buller while the 'war in South Africa was unfinished and the results of enquiries into it still unknown', Layland-Barratt promised that a Liberal government would overhaul the War Office and the army by instituting promotion by qualification and ability. Further, he contended that the consolidation of the new colonies by giving self-government as soon as was possible, together with fair treatment of blacks and abolition of compulsory labour, would make these colonies 'as happy and as loyal as were Canada and Australia'. On social questions Layland-Barratt gave his support for 'any well considered practical scheme of old-age pension', and favoured a Workman's Compensation Act. He urged action to be taken to deal with housing for the working classes, in both town and countryside; he supported Lord Peel's Minority Report which inclined to the views of the temperance reformers on the main issues of the reduction in the number of public-houses and the basis for compensation of their owners and proprietors. The need for Reform of the Electoral Registration Laws was, Layland-Barratt maintained, made apparent by the exclusion of former electors at this election. Concerning the controversy over ritual and doctrine in the Church of England, the Liberal protagonist declared in favour of strengthening the Protestant religion: 'as long as Church and State remain connected', he pledged, 'the duty of state was to see the authority of law maintained'. It is significant that in the candidates' notices to the electors, expounding their respective platforms, which appeared side by side in the local newspapers, Layland-Barratt unequivocally addressed the church problem, while Rankin ignored the issue.¹⁶

Rankin wrapped himself in the Union Jack, a strategy affirmed in a letter to the electorate of the division from the Rt. Hon. A. J. Balfour, who urged that because of the Imperial crisis, 'I sincerely trust ... the usual party issues ... the electors will set on one side'. Rankin linked the prosperity of the nation to strong Unionist foreign and colonial policy, which he argued, increased exports and raised wages, and increased commercial enterprise in lands 'where firm government is necessary'. He cautioned the electors not to entrust the destiny of the Empire to the Radicals, as the loss of the Sudan and the abandonment of General Gordon to an 'ignominious death' exemplified the fruits of their 'foolish policy' in the 1880s. The Radicals, he warned, would give independence to the Boers, and thereafter all colonists would recognize the 'futility of depending on British protection' whereupon the Imperial system would collapse. Rankin reminded the electorate that the Unionists had recovered Britain's reputation with the 'glories of Omdurman' and the Unionists would ensure 'the British flag will fly over ... Boer or Britain ...

justly governed ... justly taxed.' Rankin recounted the social achievements of Unionist policy over the last five years of their government; compensation for workmens' injuries, acquisition of houses on easy terms, reduced land tax and land rates, aid to Board and Voluntary schools. He promised to consider old-age pension and vote for any measure to increase the welfare of the working classes. However, Rankin's emphasis resounded in his peroration 'Crisis in our Imperial history'; this he contended, was a greater issue than Home Rule because it threatened 'the severance of the rest of the Empire'. Rankin did, however, refer to the religious question, albeit less publicly than his Liberal opponent. Preaching to the converted at a conservative delegates meeting in Paignton, rather than the full public scrutiny of the notice to the electorate in the press, Rankin discounted it as 'a thorny subject ... calculated to lose votes rather than gain them'.¹⁷

Both candidates did the rounds of public meetings. Rankin alluded to Liberal malpractice after organised heckling by 'youths ... too young to possess a vote ... paid threepence to indulge in interruptions'. Mrs Layland-Barratt characterised Rankin's war service as 'a picnic' and vehemently denied accusations of paid heckling. Both candidates were sounded out by local political pressure groups as to their positions on specific issues; the local branch of the Navy League, the local Temperance Federation, and the Torquay Council of the Protestant National League, were fierce inquisitors. The latter's object was to maintain the Protestant Constitution and the Established Church by securing a strong representation in the House of Commons. Signatories to the Protestant Electoral Roll pledged themselves to support the candidate endorsed by the League who in turn would vote in Parliament in the interests of Protestantism irrespective of the claims of party. The increasing use of what were considered illegal practices in services and ceremonies, namely incense, elaborate vestments and the confession, compounded by the Conservative governments' unacceptable concessions to Rome, as illustrated by Balfour's proposal for a state-funded Roman Catholic University for Ireland, posed a threat to the Anglican and Protestant Nonconformist traditions. Because Anglican archbishops had failed to enforce the law regarding these Romish errors the need to select a candidate who would oppose the Bishop's veto and, ensure that a lay council's voice would be heard, was considered essential. Since the early Victorian period three parties had contended for influence within the Church of England: the Evangelicals; the Latitudinarians or Broad Church; and the High Church party. Each was distinguished by attitudes towards the Church, theology and politics. The Evangelicals inclined to be Tory and mistrustful of any party that appeared to countenance Roman Catholicism. The Broad

Church inclined towards liberalism in politics and theology and hoped for reconciliation with the Nonconformists and to re-establish a National Church of England and Wales. The High Church placed emphasis on the authority of the visible Church, the sacraments and tradition. There was conflict between these parties within the Church as well in defence of the Church of England from outside attack. The Ritualists of the High Church party because of their emphasis on formal liturgical ceremonies were at odds with the anti-Ritualist Evangelical and Broad Church parties. Politically the Ritualists were problematic to the Tories as they made mobilization of Anglicanism as an electoral force difficult. The Nonconformists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Unitarians, Methodists and Wesleyans, were as hopelessly divided, though they could unite against ritualism in the Anglican Church. Furthermore, they were in accord both in the intention to end the Bishops' veto whereby Bishops could decide if prosecution for acts of ritualism would come before the secular courts and, over the maintenance of lay tribunals. Thus Nonconformists had some common ground with the Evangelical and Broad Church parties of the Church of England.¹⁸

Both candidates satisfied the enquiries of the Navy League; its Honorary Secretary S. Bretton, judged that 'both ... were sound on the Navy question' which demanded candidates' pledges to maintain naval strength sufficient to command hold of the sea against a coalition of any two other maritime powers. Regarding the Temperance vote the president of the Torquay Federation, Mr T. Viccars F. G. S., asked their views about temperance legislation, and on a motion seconded by the Reverend Jehu Martin, passed a resolution that pledged support to Layland-Barratt. At a meeting of the signatories to the Protestant Electoral Roll, it was decided which candidate would receive their support. Both had been questioned by the Central Electoral Council. They asked candidates to subscribe to the following principles: first, the maintenance of the Royal supremacy in ecclesiastical suits; secondly the maintenance of a lay tribunal in ecclesiastical cases and thirdly the abolition of the Bishop's veto. The latter was accepted unreservedly, by Layland-Barratt, but Rankin refused, and explained to the Council that 'I do not intend to tie myself down to any declaration as to the veto'. The Central Electoral Committee decided that Mr. Layland-Barratt was the better Protestant; its Chairman explained that in

this matter we are neither Liberals nor Conservatives: we are Protestants. The object ... is to send to Parliament a man who will assist in maintaining ... on our behalf the Protestant character of the Church.

The resolution was formally passed and all nine hundred signatories to the Protestant Electoral Roll urged to support the Liberal candidate.¹⁹

The issues involved in the religious question were said by the Revd. Martin 'to be of more vital importance than any Colonial war can be, since they are matters which affect the very Protestant life of our beloved England, and the elementary education of the future men and women of the British nation'. Protestantism was seen by the Protestant National League as the 'tap root' of the nation's prosperity and accounted for 'our Imperial ascendancy' and 'precedency amongst the nations'.²⁰

Predictions of the outcome of the election for the Torquay Division were mixed, and as may be expected with a protracted national election tended to change over the course of the campaign. *The Western Morning News* was rather cautious during September 1900. However, as the bias of this newspaper was towards the Conservatives, this caution was more a salutary warning to the Unionist electorate. Layland-Barratt was said to have nursed the constituency and spent freely on organisation. The *Morning News* predicted that the contest would be more uncertain than the two previous and warned that 'The Unionists will have to work the hardest to hold the seat'. By October it was predicting that 'the Unionists will have no difficulty in retaining the Torquay Division', and along with other divisions 'will, we hope, see a substantial addition to the number of Unionists returned for Western constituencies'. A more equitable attitude was adopted by the weekly *Torquay Directory and South Devon Journal*; its pre-election edition declared that 'the fight will be close'.²¹

Layland-Barratt won the contest for Torquay by a majority of 129 from a total poll of 7,911 votes. As the total number of electors was 9,313 a disparity of 1,042 votes has to be accounted for by deaths, removals, spoilt papers, and abstentions.²²

The opinions of the two local Torquay newspapers, both of which professed independence, were fair; neither favoured the victor nor expressed sour grapes over the loser. Autopsies were carried out through the letter columns in both and explanations of victory were balanced by accounts for failure. Party organisation was the focus of the Conservatives' wound licking, and the loss of the seat was put down to 'their own local mismanagement'. In contrast, 'as ... Torquay is very susceptible to the khaki influence, and war a Tory asset [the Liberals] with a good candidate and efficient organisation were able to counteract these influences'. Much ink was spilt over the Church discipline question and the Conservative candidate's handling of it that resulted in the recommendation to vote for Layland-Barratt by the Torquay branch of the Protestant National League. Though professing impartiality the two local newspapers focused throughout the campaign upon the Church discipline question. The

meetings and speeches of both candidates were reported assiduously but, unlike the regional *Western Morning News*, which credited the religious question with little significance, the *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser* and the *Torquay Directory and South Devon Journal* made much of it. Part of the reason can perhaps be located in the ownership of the newspapers. The *Torquay Directory's* owner, Walter Grogan, seconded the nomination of Layland-Barratt.²³ Among those who supported Grogan's choice were the Revd. Martin, and Revds. Etherington, Edwards and Johnston. The Revd. Martin also seconded Hodges' proposal to the Temperance League to adopt Layland-Barratt as their recommended candidate. Mr. T. Viccars, the President of the Temperance League, Hodges and the Revd. Martin were all members of the Protestant National League.

However, whilst not suggesting that a cabal of local Protestants, comprised Evangelicals and Broad Church anti-Ritualists of the Church of England, together with various Nonconformist denominations determined the outcome of the election, it is within reason to suggest that the Unionists did not appreciate local feeling and, once the Liberal candidate had taken the wind from their sails by being in almost complete accord over Empire, the issues of religion and temperance became decisive. Because of the narrow margin of past Conservative victories they were particularly susceptible to any shift in opinion. The Liberal share of the poll fell by only ten votes: polling 4,030 in 1895, and 4,020 in 1900. The Conservative vote fell by 314. The admonition of the Protestant National League that its nine hundred members should vote as Protestants not as Conservatives or Liberals can possibly account for the fall in the Tory vote. Compounding this, the Liberal Unionists of the division were not consulted by Rankin during the campaign and possibly abstained instead of supporting the Tory, as might be expected if he had made Home Rule a more prominent election issue. The shift of focus from the issues of Empire, the essence of the khaki election, to the Church discipline question may not have won the Liberal candidate any more votes but it may likely have caused enough abstentions to secure the seat. Being such a closely contested seat with majorities in previous elections down to 1.2 per cent, and never more than 5 per cent, it is suggested that the influence of the Protestant National League was a factor in accounting for the Liberal victory. This is not to say that khaki issues were insignificant. Clearly the Liberal candidate had to re-affirm his patriotic credentials before the electorate in order to marginalize the khaki issues pedalled by the opposition. Like the khaki issue the concerns of the local Protestant Electoral Association over ritualism in the Church of England had to be addressed. It has been argued that

before the 1902 Education Act 'transformed seemingly overnight the Nonconformist commitment to Liberalism from a vague sentiment into an active electoral alliance', that Free Churchmen were 'as hopelessly divided as the politicians themselves'.²⁴ Indeed, the *Methodist Times* and the interdenominational *British Weekly* both endorsed the Liberal Imperialists' defence of government policy in South Africa. Baptist, Congregationalist, Unitarian and Primitive Methodist leaders inclined in the Little England direction, and a number of Wesleyans and Unitarians stood at the 1900 election as Unionists or Conservatives. However, nationally the vast majority of Free Church candidates defended the Liberal interest.²⁵ Despite these differences Nonconformists were in accord about the issues of ritualism in the Church of England, the Bishop's veto, and lay tribunals, and endorsed the candidate who would act accordingly in Parliament. It is likely that the Liberal candidate derived some electoral benefit from endorsement by the local Protestant Electoral Association.

It is a 'vast dark chasm' that divides the historian from the mindset of those in even the recent past.²⁶ However, there were few surprises in the presentation of the Conservative Party by their candidate Rankin as the party of the 'true Protestant Englishmen, of Church and Empire'.²⁷ The Tory tradition that the leader leads and the followers follow, was also borne out as Rankin refrained from any grass-roots issues and stuck rigidly to party policy to fight the election solely on the issue of the Imperial crisis. The local Tory electoral machine was, unsurprisingly, blamed for the defeat despite the careful planning of transport provision for voters and organisation of volunteers. The large number of abstentions bears out the fact that despite the extension of the franchise after 1884, many were disfranchised because they moved frequently to find employment and thus, either no longer lodged as per register, or had not been resident for the mandatory one year in order to register. This was, no doubt, exacerbated by the election being held on a two-year old register. Torquay had seen a large fall in the number of artisans lodging in the town as building land became scarce, leading to a contraction in urban expansion, and with it employment opportunities in the building industry had dried up. It seems, however, that a synthesis of the religious, moral and economic, an electoral consciousness associated normally with the earlier Victorian period, continued to exert influence and, indeed, suggests that at least in some constituencies the term khaki can conceal and disguise more than it reveals about the so called Khaki Election of 1900.

Notes

1. P. Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900–1990* (1996), p. 20.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Kelly's *Directory of Devon* 1902 (1901), p. 7.
4. *Torquay Directory and South Devon Journal*, 26 Sept. 1900.
5. *Ibid.*, 10 Oct. 1900.
6. *Ibid.*, 26 Sept. 1900.
7. M. Kinnear, *The British Voter: An Atlas and Survey Since 1885* (2nd edition, 1981), p. 129.
8. *Torquay Directory and South Devon Advertiser*, 2 Sept. 1900.
9. *Ibid.*, 10 Oct. 1900.
10. *Ibid.*, 19 Sept. 1900.
11. *Ibid.*, 26 Sept. 1900.
12. *The Devon and Cornwall Guide and County Blue Book* (1896), p. 535
13. *Who Was Who*, Vol. 3 1929–1940 (1941), p. 70.
14. *Who Was Who*, 1929–1940 (1967), p. 1121.
15. *Torquay Directory and South Devon Journal*, 26 Sept. 1900.
16. *Ibid.*, 26 Sept. and 17 Oct. 1900. *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 28 Sept. 1900.
17. *Torquay Directory and South Devon Journal*, 26 Sept. and 3 Oct. 1900. *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 28 Sept. 1900.
18. E. Royle, *Modern Britain: A Social History 1750–1985* (1987), pp. 303–4.
19. *Torquay Directory and South Devon Journal*, 3 and 10 Oct. 1900.
20. *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 5 Oct. 1900.
21. *The Western Morning News*, 18 Sept. and 6 Oct. 1900. *Torquay Directory and South Devon Journal*, 3 Oct. 1900.
22. *Western Morning News*, 17 Sept. 1900.
23. *Torquay Directory and South Devon Journal*, 10 Oct. and 28 Nov. *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 12 Oct. 1900.
24. S. Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics* (1975), pp. 32–8.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
26. D. Powell, *The Edwardian Crisis: Britain 1901–1914* (1996), p. vii.
27. P. Thompson, *The Edwardians: The Remaking of British Society* (2nd edition, 1992), p. 213.