

The Politics of Place: Three Devon Constituencies and the 1900 General Election

Paul Lambe

Introduction

'Every seat lost to the Government is a seat gained to the Boers:'¹ so ran a telegram from Joseph Chamberlain. It is often quoted to emphasise the centrality of the Boer War to the outcome of the 1900 general election. By the late 1890s the Conservatives had been slipping electorally and 'the Boer War was, from this point of view a godsend'.² In many accounts of general elections the predominant refrain of national issues, such as the Khaki Election of 1900, often obscures the local dimension, which, in many cases is much more than a nuance in electoral behaviour. Indeed, for many historians and political scientists electoral behaviour is regarded as homogeneous and where a voter lives is not considered to have any relevance. Such views of the determinants of general elections both past and present are encapsulated by David Butler and Michael Pinto-Duschinsky:

That it is tempting to conclude that, by and large, elections are won and lost nationally; the few local deviations which do occur are usually due to chance or to population movements rather than to exceptional constituency organization or any other local stimulus'.³

However, a micro-study of a particular region can illuminate to what extent voting is determined by national issues and to what extent the peculiarities of the 'political personality of the area [which] is largely the product of the locally dominant groups, interests and traditions,' impacts upon the calculus of the voter.⁴ Furthermore, comparison between constituencies within a particular region, it is hoped, will reveal the diverse local rhythms of political behaviour that make up the elaborate composition of a general election.

Although, this paper is limited to comparisons between three constituencies, their selection has been determined by the desire to analyse constituencies that are representative of the primarily agricultural divisions and the borough and urbanised county-divisions that made up the county of Devonshire in 1900. With this view in mind the choice of Devonport, a provincial borough and urbanised county division, Tavistock, a primarily agricultural division, and Ashburton, a substantially agricultural division with small industries in some towns, has been made. Any selection has an arbitrary feel to it, but Devonport recommends itself because of the peculiar electoral dynamics generated by its double member seat status. It was one of 23 such territorial constituencies in which an elector had two votes and returned two MPs after the 1885 electoral reforms changed the English constituencies from a 'predominantly two-member to a predominantly single member basis'.⁵

The 1900 general election, was held between 28 September and 24 October and, in the United Kingdom as a whole, the Unionists polled 50.3 per cent of the total votes cast, and the Liberals 45.0 per cent. Labour polled 1.3 per cent and the Irish Nationalists 2.6 per cent⁶, in an election that was characterized by the large number of unopposed returns; Unionists 163, and Liberal 22, and by the reduced turnout.⁷

However, just as in the 1895 general election, Devon, (like Cornwall) saw a much less-marked swing to the Unionists than nearly all the regions of the United Kingdom.⁸ Six Liberals, five Conservatives and two Liberal Unionists were returned in 1900 as they had been at the 1895 election. Each party had its strongholds but in general marginal constituencies predominated.⁹ Honiton, Tiverton and Exeter were Conservative strongholds, as were Ashburton and South Molton for the Liberals. However, the remaining constituencies were mainly marginal.¹⁰ Four constituencies were vulnerable to a swing of less than 2.5 per cent, and two more were vulnerable to a swing of 5 per cent. Hence, Conservative and Liberal support in Devon was quite finely balanced. The anomalous nature of voting behaviour in the county is highlighted when the average percentage vote per opposed candidate nationally is compared to the Devon average.¹¹ Nationally the average share of the vote per opposed candidate at the 1900 general election was 52.5 per cent for the Conservatives and 48.2 per cent for the Liberals. In the Devon constituencies a figure of 49.8 per cent for the Conservatives and 50.2 for the Liberals indicates the region's marginality. Though the issues and composition of electorates are always different at successive general elections there is a remarkable degree of continuity in the turnout for 1900 in Devon when compared with that in 1895. However, it is clear that national average is only the mean of different results. The advant-

age of the case study approach is that it can look at the building blocks that make up this deceptive quotient.

Before Democracy

A keystone of any election, irrespective of issues, is the effective extent of the franchise. In 1900 its extent was largely determined by the Franchise Act of 1884, and the Registration Act of 1885. The former represented a theory of property rather than individual rights,¹² and the latter 'so replete with technicalities, complications, and anomalies, that every obstacle is put in the way of getting on, and every facility exists for getting struck off, the register'.¹³ Possession of a franchise qualification and the ability to fulfil the registration criteria gave an adult male the right to vote. Women, felons, certified lunatics, peers and aliens were automatically excluded, as were those in receipt of poor relief.¹⁴ Domestic servants living with their employer were disfranchised, as were sons resident with parents. Seven distinct franchises have been distinguished: the property, freemen, university, occupation, household, lodger and service franchises.¹⁵ However, in order to be entered on a register of voters, occupation, household, lodger, and service franchises necessitated twelve months possession of that status. Furthermore, a six month delay applied to all franchises because of the interim between the July preparation of a register and its subsequent 1 January implementation. Eighteen months was then the least time required to effect a registration. Change of either residence or qualification category in the year prior to the July deadline could delay an entitlement to vote up to two and a half years. Change of address within a single borough or single constituency, which was a change within the same type of qualification, maintained the right to vote. Lodgers, however, could only move within the same house if they wished to maintain continuity of their qualification, which had a ten pounds per annum rental requirement. However, 'lodging' was a much disputed definition, the interpretation of which could decide qualification, as 'unlike the household franchise the lodger franchise had to be claimed every year, and if challenged had to be defended, at some expense to the individual, before a revising barrister'.¹⁶ Payment of rates was also a requirement of the occupation, household and service franchises. Hence, the efficiency of local party organisation, and in particular the ability of the party agent to maintain the accuracy of the register, was often a major determinant of electoral success. It has been estimated that in the Edwardian period 5 per cent of the population of the counties moved each year, and in the boroughs 20 to 30 per cent.¹⁷ It indicates the key role of the twelve months residence

requirement, and the importance of party agents at the revision courts, as contributory factors to the outcome of the 1900 election. Indeed, the very timing of the election itself meant that the July 1900 register, still in the process of its six month preparation, could not be used and the July 1899 register was employed in its stead. The register of voters was by then fifteen months old and as such, 'included many who had no title to vote and excluded many more who had every right to do so'.¹⁸

Furthermore, the majority of those registered under the university, freemen's, and property franchises, and a substantial portion of occupiers, had more than one vote.¹⁹ Borough freeholders in Plymouth, for example, were entitled to a county vote, thereby inflating the ownership vote in the Tavistock Division to the highest in the region.²⁰ The extent of any bias in favour of the party of property, the Unionists, is much disputed. One study revealed a slight Unionist bias and suggested that 'the plural vote was distinctly less partisan than is often alleged'.²¹ However, the plural vote, according to other studies 'did most to create a class bias in the electoral system . . . [and] also gave the Tories an enormous advantage over the Liberal party'.²² Furthermore, it has been contended that plurality's concentration in the counties and smaller boroughs 'frequently [contributed] five to ten per cent of all votes' accounted for Unionist predominance in this period.²³ The age and marital status of an elector were also more important factors in distinguishing voter from non-voter, as males across the social classes delayed marriage for economic and career reasons. Thus the franchise system predicated on property had more married householders than young single men. This view regards the franchise as approximately representative of class, but not of age and marital status.²⁴ However, the poor's greater work driven mobility, sub-tenancy of rooms and refusal of local officials to recognise their franchise rights, must be borne in mind when bias is considered.

Ecological analysis of elections has, however, many practical restraints, post-1872 the absence of poll books being the most obvious disadvantage. Further, the electoral districts do not correspond to the districts from which social and economic data have been extracted, and the uneven distribution of plural votes estimated at seven per cent of the total electorate, 'make sophisticated forms of ecological analysis very difficult to sustain'.²⁵ It has been widely held that the Conservative success between 1886 and 1900 can be explained through low electoral turnout and maintenance of a restricted franchise to keep the electorate small. However, it has also been shown that 'since turnout was falling most sharply in seats already firmly within the Conservative fold',²⁶ especially at the 1900 election, then low turnout does little to explain vic-

tory. As for levels of franchise and voting patterns, there is little to suggest that 'the Conservatives relied upon low levels of enfranchisement for success'.²⁷ Clearly the electoral system poses formidable obstacles and hinders attempts to unravel the determinants of partisanship in pre-1918 elections. In addition, the electoral dynamics of double-member constituencies where the voter had two votes, presented the possibility of ticket-splitting, a further complication to the interpretation of the aggregate results.²⁸ However, 'plumping' could backfire, as Edward Clarke the Conservative M.P. for Plymouth explained; in the 1895 election 'at three o'clock in the afternoon, both sides thought Mr Hubbard [the other Conservative candidate] and I were winning. Some of my old friends were anxious to see me at the top of the poll and plumped for me. Forty-two did so, and Mr Hubbard was beaten by twenty-six'.²⁹

Constituencies and Candidates

The borough of Devonport, a seaport, site of royal dockyards and a market town, returned two MPs. It has been estimated that 29.9 per cent of the borough's working population were directly employed in occupations connected with defence and a further 6.4 per cent in occupations connected with the manufacture of ships and boats.³⁰ Indeed, it was reputed that elections in Devonport were, 'entirely in the hands of the Dockyardsmen'.³¹ Dockyard workers were government employees paid from Admiralty funds and thus 'the issue of dockyard wages could be raised directly for debate in Parliament during the annual discussions on the Naval Estimates'.³² Devonport, although once a safe Conservative seat, where the party polled 60.3 per cent of the vote at the 1886 'Home Rule' election, was however, from 1892, a Liberal held marginal. The Liberal incumbents at the 1900 general election were Hudson Kearley and Edward Morton. Since 1881 they had assiduously nursed 'a budget of Dockyard grievances . . . [that] had arisen which the . . . [Conservative] members had failed to redress . . . Messrs. Kearley and Morton – interviewed every branch of the service, mastered hitherto inscrutable problems of classification, and jobs and tasks . . . impeached the Admiralty as "The Champion Sweater" . . . and pronounced for . . . a general re-adjustment of the laws affecting Labour – inside the dockyards as well as without'.³³ In 1898 Frederick McCormick-Goodhart was selected as one of the Unionist candidates for Devonport and John Lockie as the other. Both, by the dissolution of parliament, 'had paid great attention to the constituency in the last twelve months', but were considered 'new to naval questions'.³⁴

The electorate of Devonport in 1900 was to some extent made up of

a floating population. The constant changing of servicemen and a dock-yard employment structure whereby 2000 were established [permanent] workers and 5000 were temporary hired labour, dictated 'considerable changes in the voter lists every year'.³⁵ However, the 1900 election coincided with prosperity and secure employment in Devonport. Development of 118 acres to increase the capacity of the dockyards had begun at Keyham in 1896 was not completed until 1906.³⁶ The buoyancy of the labour market was indicated by Devonport's Medical Officer; despite high rents prevailing in the borough 'there were many applicants for new houses in excess of the number who could be accommodated'. However, only those 'Householders, lodgers, tenants, caretakers, persons residing in rack-rented houses, occupiers of shops, stores, & Co., who were in possession prior to July 15th [1899 were] entitled to have their names registered'; but those qualified for enfranchisement since that date did not have the right to go to the polls, and all those who had moved or upgraded since it had to vote in the place of their old qualification. These requirements applied to all constituencies; however, the regulations were even more complicated and confusing for the ever-changing Devonport electorate. The Revision Court at Devonport met on the 19 September 1900 and the lists of borough voters and, county voters of the Tavistock constituency resident in Devonport, were settled. The Conservatives had 'a much larger number of lodger claims than their opponents, and as usual, the great battle . . . centre[d] around this particular section of the applicants'. It was claimed that because of the use of the old register no less than an estimated 1200 Devonport workmen were deprived of their vote.³⁷

The Tavistock constituency was by far the largest of the eight in the county of Devon, both in electoral and geographical size. It comprised 39 polling districts, covered eighty parishes and contained an electorate of 12,202, which included the freehold voters of Plymouth and Devonport.³⁸ Primarily agricultural, it was however, subject to a 'great and continuous exodus of the rural population into the towns'.³⁹ The main industry on which the town of Tavistock depended, copper mining, was 'in a depressed condition'.⁴⁰ The Unionist candidate, John Spear's self-description as 'intimate with Agricultural, Commercial and Mining Industries', reflected his birth and subsequent continuous residence.⁴¹ Spear's Liberal opponent John Wallop, no doubt reflected on the seat's recent history. A Liberal gain in 1892, but retained by a margin of 3.8 per cent of the vote in 1895. Both men were contesting the seat for the first time as their respective party forerunners had both retired in 1900.

In the mid-Devon constituency of Ashburton the candidates in 1900 were Charles Seale-Hayne for the Liberals, and John Nix for the Conser-

vatives. The constituency embraced 'nearly sixty parishes, scattered over a considerable portion of Dartmoor',⁴² and contained a 'large mining and agricultural district and large woollen manufactories'.⁴³ However, the market town of Newton Abbot was a centre of employment, hosting the Great Western Railway's locomotive and carriage works, a tannery, iron foundry, breweries, malt-houses, flour and sawmills.⁴⁴ Seale-Hayne had been first elected in 1885 with a majority of 1251; however, by 1895, when Nix first contested the seat, Seale-Hayne's majority was reduced to 404.⁴⁵ Between 1892 and 1895 Seale-Hayne 'had improved his position by nineteen votes only', which no doubt encouraged Nix to pay 'periodical visits to the constituency and lived down the bitter feeling of hostility formerly displayed against Conservative candidates'.⁴⁶

As far as party organisation in Devonport was concerned, although both parties were 'Fully absorbed in the revision of the voting lists . . . the organised work [was] well in hand and the opposing forces . . . [were] not . . . taken at a disadvantage on account of the suddenness of the contest'. Furthermore, an editorial in *The Western Daily Mercury* commented upon 'the excellent organising work' of the Unionists and consequently how 'the election should produce a very stiff and decisive struggle'. Unionist organisational ability was such that in the elections to the municipality and poor-law board of guardians, 'where party politics have been introduced . . . latterly the Unionists . . . threaten the majority in the Council'. Perhaps this reflected the avowed intent of 'Government Whips and chief agents . . . that great attention is to be given to the propagation of Unionism in the West of England'. Indeed, in the Tavistock division strong voting by the Plymouth and Devonport freeholders was ascribed to 'the powerful organisation . . . which had been brought to Mr Spear's aid'.⁴⁷ The observation of Liberal organiser Herbert Gladstone that on the 'degree of enthusiasm' of local party activists to bring their supporters to the polls, 'elections are won and lost', had a general resonance at a time when the parties lacked a direct approach to the electorate, and a particular significance in the remoter rural wards of Devon. However, the cost of maintaining a party organisation, the vigour of the local party organisation, and the prospective candidate were interdependent. The candidate not only had to generate enthusiasm among the party workers but was also the main subscriber of money to improve the registration machinery, or pay for outside speakers. In 1892, the Ashburton Unionist Association required 'a sum of £500 yearly . . . to adequately carry on Conservative work in the Mid-Devon Division'.⁴⁸

Jam Tomorrow

For the candidates for Devonport, Ashburton, and Tavistock, the 'khaki' issues of Empire, Boer War, 'Little Englandism' and the associated jingoistic rhetoric, were almost peripheral in their electoral addresses. There was little difference between the Liberals and the Unionists. In fact of the sixteen Liberal candidates in Devon and Cornwall, ten were Imperialist Liberals, compared with 142 out of 402 Liberal candidates nationally.⁴⁹ Kearley and Morton in their combined electoral address contended that, 'On the only point which could be in dispute, namely the annexation of the territories of the ex-Republics, there is in point of fact no dispute: all Parties of the State believe they must be annexed'. Furthermore, they agreed with the Unionists that 'Kruger was bent on war from the beginning', and added, 'we are and always have been Imperialists', and 'have consistently voted irrespective of party considerations for all measures for the money asked for by the Government to prosecute the war'. Their divergence from the views of their Unionist protagonists was over the timing of the dissolution; premature they argued, because the government 'cannot much longer shield their misdeeds behind the patriotism of the Nation, or screen their own incompetence and neglect behind the valour of our soldiers'. This view was echoed by the Ashburton Liberal candidate Seale-Hayne, who opined that 'the object was to disenfranchise . . . something like a million people [for] fear of the voice of the people'. McCormick-Goodhart and Lockie, the Unionists in the palest of khaki terms, referred to the inevitability of the South African war and conceded the 'urgent' need of a 'complete reorganisation of the system under which our army is administered.'⁵⁰

Spear, the Liberal Unionist candidate for Tavistock was more strident in his electoral address. He condemned both 'certain Radical Members of Parliament' and 'Little Englandism', lauded the logistical victory of fighting a war in South Africa as a 'feat unparalleled in the history of the world', while conceding the 'need to modernise our War Office Administration'. However, one indication of the lack of weight accorded to the khaki argument was its peripheral status in Spear's address, and was subordinate to a much more focused exposition of his policies on a range of social and economic issues of both national and local significance. In contrast, his Liberal adversary Wallop, an avowed Imperialist, claimed 'the election had been forced upon them . . . because Lord Salisbury wished to take the opinion of the country upon one thing . . . the war' and that 'the election should not turn on that alone'. The preced-

ence Spear gave to 'bread and butter' issues over the khaki argument, ostensibly belied the Liberals' charge.⁵¹

Seale-Hayne, the Liberal incumbent for Ashburton, argued that 'the ill advised attempt of the Boer Leaders to seize ... British territory ... made the appeal to arms unavoidable', and added that he had 'supported the Government in obtaining the supplies necessary'. Surprisingly there was little khaki rhetoric even from the Unionist candidate, apart from Nix's election address. He lamented later that the electorate 'did not care a fig for South Africa'.⁵²

Local and regional industries gave a particular slant to some national issues and also generated concerns peculiar to the locality. Agriculture, the most important employer in the Tavistock and Ashburton divisions, coloured the local political debate not only in these two rural seats, but also within the single industry constituency of Devonport. The Agricultural Rates Act 1896 gave the farmers back one half of their rates, a measure intended to relieve the owners and occupiers of farmland from some local fiscal burdens.⁵³ However, this raised the divisive issue that the agricultural community benefited 'at the expense of the townspeople', such as the urban ratepayers of Devonport, where there was 'a big outcry against the rapid increase in rates, especially among the working classes'.⁵⁴ An increase of 5d in the pound to a new rate of 6s.1d., of which 3s. was expended on the poor, focused the attention of both Devonport ratepayers and the competing candidates, on agricultural and urban rating. The issue was given a sharper class dimension by virtue of the fact that tenant farmers argued that the Agricultural Rates Act only benefited the landowners, who were at liberty at the end of a lease's term to increase the rent. This was exacerbated by the tenant farmers' dissatisfaction with the second Agricultural Holdings Act, passed in 1883, which ostensibly forced landlords to compensate a departing tenant for the value of unexhausted improvements made to the land. However, because there were no universal standards for valuing improvements, disputes raged.⁵⁵ On the one hand, Free Trade had impacted locally as cheap food benefited all, especially the urban working class, but on the other, it had caused local agriculture 'to fall into a state of decadence and disuse'.⁵⁶

Dockyard issues had relevance in the constituencies of the rural hinterland, in that the interchange of commodities was essential to the economies of both, and, with a foot in each camp, the plural voters with both borough and county franchise qualification personified the overlap of inter-constituency interests. In the borough of Devonport there were 450 shipwrights employed in the dockyards with parliamentary votes, among whom there was a 'very general discontent [and,] at the root of

the dissatisfaction' lay the classification scheme that determined their wage level. This scheme divided them into three classes receiving respectively 32s., 32s.6d., and 33s. per week. However, the shipwrights and the Trades Union Congress contended that the rate of pay in Her Majesty's Dockyards should be uniform and equal to the rate of pay in private sector ship-yards.⁵⁷ Adding to the dockyard discontent were petitions to Parliament; from the general labourers for a minimum wage of £1 per week, a demand by the hired men for a pension instead of a gratuity, the recognition of hired men as permanent employees, and a call for pensions for widows and orphans of those in government employment on land or afloat. As well as these dockyard matters, and of consequence to all the constituencies, were the national issues, namely ritualism in the Church of England, temperance Reform, naval efficiency, old age pensions, poor law provision and funding, and working-class housing *inter alia*.

The Outcome

At Devonport, Kearley and Morton, the incumbent Liberal candidates, kept their seats with a combined majority of 312 votes, a 40 per cent decrease on their 516 in 1895. The pro-Liberal *Western Daily Mercury* pointed to the 'effect of the tricky dissolution in robbing 1,200 Devonport workmen of their vote', and 'an unusual combination of adverse circumstances', including the nursing of the constituency by the conservative candidates while Kearley and Morton were fulfilling their duties in the House of Commons. A more pertinent reason made by the newspaper to account for the decline in Liberal support was the fact that Devonport had been 'exceedingly prosperous for the last seven years'. Some of the electorate, it was argued, had been persuaded that this affluence was due to the Tory government. The Conservative candidates, Goodhart and Lockie, had made much of the fact that the government had provided the work and enabled the workforce to earn more than under the Liberals, while simultaneously advancing the impossibility 'in the present state of finances of the country to grant old age pensions'. The main thrust of the Liberal's campaign had concentrated upon the electorates' pocket. Kearley warned the electorate, 'not to be gulled by the promises of Mr Lockie about wages' and reminded them that at 'the last election the country was promised old age pensions'. Most damagingly to Conservative fortunes, Kearley had exposed the contradiction between Lockie and Goodhart's promises regarding the reform of shipwright classification and the actual government line of no change, a decision expressed by Austen Chamberlain 'as final'. The Liberal can-

didates played both the class and religion cards unashamedly; the government's 'own friends were the landlords and the parsons, upon whom had been squandered from two to three millions . . . instead of upon the excellent artisans in . . . Government employ'.⁵⁹ This was a clear reference to the controversies over agricultural rating and voluntary schools. All candidates had been questioned by the Liberal-supporting Devonport Temperance Electors, and the Protestant Electoral Associations.

Dockyard issues were probably an important factor in the outcome of the election at Devonport. Rates of pay and conditions of employment appear to have figured largely in the electorate's decisions. Despite Conservative attempts to claim credit for Devonport's prosperity, and the obvious boost to dockyard employment deriving from the South African War, the Liberals were returned. Devonport had been Liberal since 1892. Hudson Kearley, later Lord Devonport, had built up a considerable 'personal vote' and attributed this success to 'the personal attention [he] had always given to the affairs of [his] constituents'.⁶⁰ Kearley and Morton had marginalised the 'khaki' issues. However, the Unionist position in the region had been somewhat compromised by the resignation in February 1900 of their MP for Plymouth, Sir Edward Clarke, one of a group of Conservative and Liberal Unionists who opposed the war and its handling. Nonetheless, Liberal support had declined. The combined majority of the two Liberal candidates in 1892 had been 696 votes; in 1895 it had been reduced to 516, and at the 1900 general election it fell further to 312. Declining Liberal support was also evident in municipal elections where the Unionists threatened the Liberals' council majority. The estimated 5 per cent plural vote in the borough probably benefited the Unionists most and highlights how control of the dockyard vote was crucial to the outcome. The effect of the old register upon the balance of the parties and the outcome of the election at Devonport must be considered with some caution. Much ink was spilt in the Liberal press about the disfranchisement of around 1200 workers and assumed a disadvantage to the Liberals. However, the *Western Daily Mercury* also commented how 'neither party appears particularly perturbed . . . and it may prove that the losses are fairly evenly distributed'.⁶¹ Furthermore, the municipal election on 1 November 1900 was taken on the new register and the party balance remained.

The Tavistock constituency returned the Unionist candidate Spear by a wafer-thin majority of fifteen. The constituency had been represented by Lord Portsmouth since the Redistribution Act of 1885, initially as a Liberal and then as a Liberal Unionist. In 1892 the Liberals won the seat, increasing their majority in 1895. Wallop, the 1900 Liberal candidate, a Devonian and resident at his estates at Morchard Bishop

in the county, was Portsmouth's brother. Local and national newspapers expressed surprise over how 'the constituency had disregarded local ties in favour of Unionism'.⁶²

Spear's handling of the controversy over agricultural rating can perhaps partially explain his victory at the polls. With an eye to the urban plural voters of Plymouth, he presented a plausible argument for the seemingly unfair disparity between urban and rural ratings. The interests of the urban and rural districts were, Spear argued, interdependent, and maintained that if the agricultural districts were prosperous then the exodus to the towns with the resultant pressure on the urban poor rate would subside. Furthermore, Spear denied that the agricultural rating system was unjust to urban ratepayers, and represented a compensation for low food prices deriving from free trade, which disadvantaged the rural population. Wallop in contrast attacked the recent Agricultural Rating Act as 'little better than a fraud', and argued that it would in the long run favour landlords, not tenant farmers. When tenancies changed hands, landlords might increase the rent, and thereby effectively pocket the benefit of the half-rate ostensibly advantaging tenants. The majority of existing tenants at the time were benefiting, and Spear promised if elected to render it impossible for landlords to appropriate what was intended for the tenant.⁶³

Spear adopted a more equitable position on most of the issues that he and Wallop contended. On temperance Spear agreed that there were too many public houses, but recommended that holders of revoked licences should be compensated from monies deriving from remaining licencees. Church questions were complicated by the fact that the Unionist candidate Spear was a Nonconformist, and the Liberal Wallop an Anglican. Wallop attacked endowments given to voluntary schools, while Spear defended such grants as intended to assist education, not to propagate religious principles. The controversy over Church practices made little impact on the Tavistock electorate. Wallop's brother, Portsmouth, the national president of the Layman's Protestant League, tried to make it an electoral issue by 'expressing very loud-voiced Protestant convictions'. Spear successfully deflected the attempt with a statement of support for 'any reasonable and non-persecuting measure that will secure obedience to the law of the Church of the realm, and maintain the Protestant and reformed character of the Church', which served to unanimously secure the Devonport Protestant Electoral League's support. However, Wallop's credibility was undermined by Spear's charge that he had formerly supported the Unionists and had 'turned his coat', to be countered by Wallop's observation that Spear's conversion from

ardent radical Nonconformist to his present position on church questions, constituted 'nothing short of an acrobatic performance'.⁶⁴

Wallop in his electioneering slated the Unionist record on social reform. He compared Lord Salisbury's manifesto of 1900 with the numerous promises made in its 1895 predecessor. Old age pensions, compensation for all workmen's accidents and conciliation boards to decide disputes between capital and labour, remained unfulfilled by a government that came into power – according to Wallop – with a 'majority, one of the best known in history'.⁶⁵

However, one factor that seems to account for the unexpected Unionist victory was organisation. Spear toured the division extensively. Wallop bemoaned his 'inability to reach all parts of the constituency . . . and on polling day . . . [the] many parishes where I have never been, and where nobody has ever seen me', while the Unionists had 'a decided and valuable advantage', in the number of carriages at their disposal to take electors to the polling booths, 'a disparity [which] prevailed in practically every district'. Party finances were crucial for successful electioneering especially with such a dispersed electorate, a fact which did not escape Wallop who remarked enviously how the Conservatives had for years 'top dressed the constituency with agents and money'.⁶⁶

The re-election of the Liberal Seale-Hayne by a majority of 771 for Ashburton revealed an increase of 107 over 1895, while Nix's vote fell by 254. As the 1900 turnout was 2 per cent lower than 1895, and the effect of the old register meant an addition of only fifty names, the *Western Morning News* correctly commented that Seale-Hayne's victory 'was not due altogether to the increase in the number of votes recorded for him, but to an astonishing decline in the Unionist vote'.⁶⁷

Seale-Hayne's success can perhaps be explained by his pragmatic approach to issues of economic concern to the electorate of this predominantly agricultural constituency. The fierce competition between America and Russia for the English market, especially in the import of oats, meant the continued decline in the values of all corn crops in the western counties. Although the agricultural depression was not so severe as in other parts of the country or, indeed other parts of the west, the situation for tenant farmers in the constituency was far from easy. Labour costs rose through enforced competition with urban pay-rates, and farmers faced the economic reality that 'it was useless to try to keep men on farms unless the wages were on a par with those in the towns'. Seale-Hayne made much of both the Agricultural Rating and the Agricultural Holding Acts. He attacked Conservative agricultural policies, and charged that the 'British farmer was treated very scantily by his Tory friends'. In particular he focused upon the capital invested by

tenant farmers, which served at the end of a lease to enhance the value of landlords' property. The Agricultural Holding Act had been drawn up in such a way that to get any compensation for capital improvements, tenant farmers had the expense of employing lawyers. Seale-Hayne argued that 'there was no trade in which capital was invested that was so insecure as the capital of the tenant farmer'.⁶⁸

Furthermore, Seale-Hayne was able to marginalise Nix's khaki rhetoric by agreeing over the cause of the war, and by his record of patriotic support of the government. Nevertheless, Seale-Hayne throughout his campaign had emphasised the practical consequences of the inflationary costs to his constituents. 'Coal had gone up 30 per cent . . . furniture 10 to 20 per cent . . . paraffin oil 2d a gallon . . . gas bills increased . . . soap 1d a lb'. The economic theme of Seale-Hayne's appeal included the recommendation that Poor Law and School Board Rates be charged to the exchequer. He also argued that despite ample funds raised by the 1894 Liberal innovation of death duties, the government had initiated inadequate social reform, and 'squandered their money in doles to their political friends'.⁶⁹

In contrast to Seale-Hayne's pragmatism, Nix warned the electorate not to trust the Liberals with the empire. Nix talked of the future and the eventual rewards of imperialism, when 'a great empire with common aims . . . would be one of the grandest things the world has ever seen'. Seale-Hayne talked to the electorate of the bread and butter issues of the here and now. Though nothing separated the candidates over the temperance question, Nix was rather less forthcoming on religious issues, which he rebuffed with the curt reply, 'I am not in favour of mixing up questions of that kind with party politics'.⁷⁰ Seale-Hayne was more in touch with the electorate physically as well as emotionally. Nix's campaign comprised far fewer public meetings and despite contesting the seat since 1895, he 'had been unable to get into some of the villages more than once'.⁷¹ In contrast, his opponent had been working in the constituency since 1885 and had a large personal vote. At his lowest electoral ebb in 1895, his share of the vote in 1895 had been 52.4 per cent, compared with 58.2 per cent at its highest in 1885.⁷² He was a formidable opponent with a well-oiled party machine that included help with electoral transportation needs throughout the district. In defeat, Nix rather lamely asserted that 'I am not a great believer in canvassing'.⁷³

The outcome of the election in each of the three constituencies may or may not have been influenced by the bias of the region's newspapers, whose political affiliations in Devon in 1900 were fairly evenly balanced. Out of fifty-six newspapers, thirty-one were neutral or independent, four-

teen were declared Unionists, and eleven favoured the Liberals.⁷⁴ The Unionist *Navy and Military Record and Royal Dockyard Gazette* attempted to deflect the Devonport electorate away from 'bread and butter' issues and toward the 'khaki', declaring that 'Dockyard pay is emphatically not the main question before the country ... these side issues are to be deplored'.⁷⁵ However, the countervailing force of the Liberal-biased, but Plymouth-based and regional newspaper, the *Western Daily Mercury* tried to focus the electorate's attention around pay and conditions. The regional *Western Morning News* cajoled for the Unionists, though the Tavistock constituency was subjected to the Liberal blandishments of the *Tavistock Gazette*, and the Ashburton constituency the Liberal-leaning *Western Guardian*. The electorate was deluged by a variety of leaflets, bills and cartoons from both sides. The Tories circulated references to the past political views and actions of the Liberal candidates, and the Liberal literature criticised the government over the war.

Conclusions

The Liberal candidates in the Devonport constituency, especially Kearley, had, over a period of years successfully 'reshaped the social purchase' of their policies.⁷⁶ Although Liberal support in the constituency had been in steady decline between 1892 and 1900, the Liberal candidates retained much of the decisive dockyard vote. They successfully articulated the concerns of the working-class electorate of Devonport and were able to stave off the challenge from the Unionists for this marginal seat. It appears that at this election, class subordinated religious denomination as the interest 'around which voters could adhere'.⁷⁷ Wage rates, conditions of employment in the contractual sense, and local rates figured largely in electoral calculations, and not only for the working classes. The MP who, like Kearley, could successfully argue for wage increases and contractual concessions during the annual debates on the naval estimates, 'would do so knowing that behind him lay the weight of the affluent townspeople as well as the voice of the dockyard labourer'.⁷⁸ The local traders and shopkeepers had as vital an interest in job security and increased wages as the dockyard workers. Furthermore, the class nature of Conservative legislation was pointed up by the Liberal candidates, notably by contrasting rural and urban rates and emphasizing the government's inadequate measures in social policy.

This is not to say that khaki issues were insignificant. Clearly, the Liberal candidates in Devonport had to re-affirm their patriotic credentials before the electorate in order to marginalize the khaki issues pedalled by the opposition. Criticism of the war's conduct, concern over its

costs and a 'softening of their opposition to the war',⁷⁹ were a successful strategy to counteract the Unionist's charge of Liberal imperial irresponsibility. It would also appear that the national issue of ritualism in the Church of England played little or no part in the outcome of the election in Devonport. Nevertheless, like the khaki issues the concerns of the local Protestant Electoral Association had to be addressed. However, before the 1902 Education Act 'transformed – seemingly overnight – the Nonconformist commitment to Liberalism from a vague sentiment into an active electoral alliance', the Free Churchmen were 'as hopelessly divided as the politicians themselves'.⁸⁰ The *Methodist Times* and the interdenominational *British Weekly* both endorsed the Liberal Imperialists defence of the government's policy in South Africa. Baptist, Congregationalist, Unitarian and Primitive Methodist leaders inclined in the Little England direction, and a number of Wesleyan and Unitarians stood as Unionist or Conservatives. Nevertheless, nationally the vast majority of Free Church candidates defended the Liberals.⁸¹ Despite these differences, Nonconformists were in accord over ritualism in the Church of England, the Bishop's veto, and lay tribunals, and endorsed the candidate who would defend these principles in parliament. It would be speculative to contend that the candidates in the three constituencies under review derived electoral benefit from the endorsement of their local Protestant Electoral Association, but it cannot be excluded altogether.

Any imminent disadvantage of the registration qualifications to the Liberals through increased working-class mobility, may have been mitigated by the period of prosperity and settled employment the dockyards enjoyed from 1896 to 1906. Increased prosperity and the 5 per cent of the electors being plural voters, may account for the Conservative's improved electoral fortunes, more than the effect of the old register explain the decrease in the Liberal vote. However, the key to Liberal success at Devonport was control of the vote in the most significant industry in this small borough constituency.

In the Tavistock constituency the explanation for the Unionist turnaround can be located more in the way the candidate handled the Agricultural Rating controversy, and the local party's superior campaign organisation, than in any saliency of the war issue. Spear presented a plausible argument about the disparity between agricultural rating and urban rating. At least to the tenant farmers who were its beneficiaries and, it seems, many of the urban plural voters who turned out in strength to support him. Furthermore, Tavistock, with the addition of the Plymouth and Devonport Borough freeholders had the biggest ownership vote in the region. Therefore, if it is accepted that rural depopulation dispro-

portionately affected the lower classes, then it follows that Liberal support would have fallen while Unionist support would have remained steadier with the inherent advantage of plurality at its foundation. The Tavistock constituency was gripped by agricultural depression, with its main urban industry in recession, and if it is accepted that marriage was delayed in such an economic climate, then the numbers enfranchised by dint of ownership would have decreased. This would have affected the poorest in the division, and with it adversely impacted on the Liberal vote more than the Conservatives. Thus, the estimated plural vote of 5 to 10 per cent could have been decisive for the Unionists. Nevertheless, Spear's more efficient local party organisation not only resulted in a strong turnout of Borough freeholders but also enabled him to campaign extensively throughout the sprawling agricultural division. The efficiency of local party organisation would have been particularly important regarding the Registration Courts. The Unionist candidate had more money and a greater number of party agents at his disposal, a fact much lamented by the Liberal candidate Wallop.

Seale-Hayne declared in the wake of his election for Ashburton, 'I am glad there has been no khaki fever in this constituency'. The remark is given weight by Nix's lament about the electorate's lack of interest in the question of South Africa. Seale-Hayne had successfully counteracted the issue and focused voters' attention upon more pragmatic issues. In Newton Abbott, the industrial centre of the constituency, and solidly Liberal, Nix was even refused a hearing. The impact of the costs of the war, and the Agricultural Holding Act were it seems more pertinent to the electorate. Further, superior local party organisation seemed to give Seale-Hayne the edge. Temperance and the Church questions do not appear to have figured largely in the constituency, although both candidates made their views publicly known to the respective associations. A ward meeting at Chudleigh was described as lively by the press and attributed to Nix's inadequate responses to demands for satisfactory answers about Church issues. However, it was apparently an isolated incident.⁸² The decrease in the Unionist vote is perhaps explained by the dissatisfaction of erstwhile Unionist voters with the government's agricultural policies. Cereal prices had tumbled in the 1870s, to the advantage of the livestock producers who populated the moorland of this constituency. However, the removal of barriers to competitive imports affected livestock producers after 1880 at a time of a vast increase in the meat and dairy products available on the world markets. Prices declined but labour costs remained unchanged. Landlords generally had a 30 per cent decline in rental income from the land between 1900 and 1902.⁸³ Add their disaffection to that of any Conservative-voting farming ten-

ants, who had falling income and distrust of the Agricultural Holding Act, and an explanation for the fall in Nix's following may be found.

In conclusion, the evidence from this study suggests that the national issue of the Boer War, credited as a major determinant of voting behaviour at the 1900 'Khaki Election' was not a salient issue in these three Devon constituencies. First, for an issue to be salient voters have to be concerned about the problem; the evidence, however, points to a large degree of voter indifference. Secondly, public opinion has to be divided over the issue. Clearly the evidence suggests that public opinion was not that polarized. Thirdly, the opposing parties at an election have to offer distinct alternative policy solutions; however, the details suggest that candidates from opposing parties disagreed over relatively minor aspects rather than promoting views that clearly identified one party from another, and thereby splitting the electorate along party lines.

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the influence of an efficient campaign organization, the personal following cultivated by an established candidate in his constituency, constituency association finances, and the ability of party agents at the Revision Courts to maximize their parties' support whilst minimizing that of the opponents, were all contributory factors to electoral outcomes. Urban rating, agricultural rating and the Agricultural Holding Act were all mediated through each constituency's local political context, and impacted differently upon the electoral calculus of the voter dependent upon location. The local issues of dockyard pay and conditions, urban rating, and the personal following cultivated by Kearly and Morton through knowledge of complex local industrial relations, are contextual influences that cannot be discounted as influences upon the electoral outcome in Devonport.

The evidence of this comparison of three Devonshire constituencies at the 1900 general election indicates that 'local stimulus', the politics of place has a much greater explanatory role in parliamentary electoral outcomes than is generally given credit for. Indeed, 'detailed study of grass-roots politics is essential for understanding change [as] national developments are essentially an aggregate of local politics'.⁸⁴

Notes

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