

# DISCORDANT ECHOES

## HOW CHAMBERLAIN'S EXCEPTIONALISM BECAME BIRMINGHAM'S PECULIARITY

Matt Cole

Joseph Chamberlain's work gave Birmingham an exceptional combination: the high profile and powerful role of the Council; and, joining the forces of its Liberals and Unionists, eliminating the Liberals and inhibiting Labour, changing the political values of the city and emphasising Imperialism and civic action for social improvement. With the demise of Neville Chamberlain, however, the consensus about exceptionalism ends. Some see Birmingham emerging from the Second World War as just another city. Roger Ward says of Neville that 'with him to the grave in 1940 went 'Birmingham exceptionalism''.



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The political legacy of the Chamberlain family still resonates in Birmingham today: Neville, Austen and Joseph Chamberlain, with Hilda and Mary. c. 1890s.

**K**enneth Newton's study of Birmingham politics in the 1970s asserts: In spite of the fascination of returning to the scene almost 100 years after Joseph Chamberlain's first election as Mayor, the concern of this book is not with Birmingham as an exceptional city, but rather with the extent to which it now reflects general patterns common to most cities.

Yet it seems unlikely that the disappearance of a single family can bring to an end a tradition of such distinctiveness. On closer inspection Birmingham's politics remained different from those of the surrounding area and of superficially similar cities; the differences, however, were less pronounced, and not always ones of which Chamberlain would have approved.



Birmingham Council House, erected under Joseph's mayoralty, remains the centre of civic leadership in the city to this day.

moved on as soon as their parliamentary duties ended. Roy Jenkins (Stetchford 1950-77) said frankly that 'Birmingham is not a city which easily clutches at the heart strings' but that it 'enabled me to be a latter-day example of that now distinctly endangered species – the part-time MP'. Roy Hattersley described being a local MP as 'a love affair – with Sparkbrook, not with Birmingham'.

Nonetheless, there remained a discernible effect of the Liberal Unionist phenomenon in Birmingham's party support, for the Conservatives proved more resilient in adversity, and more successful at their height, than their counterparts in other cities. Vivian Bird insisted in 1974: 'Birmingham has always had its peculiar electoral factors.'

The Conservatives recovered quickly after 1945, depriving Labour of control of the City Council within two years and managing it alone themselves by 1949. In the 1950s, as well as achieving swings greater than their party nationally at general elections, the Conservatives won over half of the Birmingham vote at local elections, and in 1959 Labour hopeful in Sutton Coldfield, Roy Hattersley, felt that 'in Birmingham, the fire had almost gone out'. A new surge pushed the Conservative local vote share to over 56 per cent in 1965. By 1970 *The Economist* could describe the Party's command of the council chamber, with 120 of 155 seats, as 'a domination unequalled since Joe Chamberlain's heyday'. Even at the height of the recession, the Party won control of the City Council from 1982 to 1984, and since 2004 their partnership with the Liberal Democrats made them the only Conservative group running a major municipal authority in the UK in recent times.

## Weakness of the Liberal Party

The official Liberal Party in Birmingham never recovered from the schism of 1886. By 1949 they had only 2 constituencies with an agent and a candidate in place across the whole of the West Midlands for the next year's general election; in 1953 they lost their last Birmingham councillor with the death of Alderman Paul Cadbury and fielded no candidates in council elections.

The Party had to be reconstructed from the ground up, and though Liberals suffered a desperate decline in most parts of the country, their recovery in Birmingham started from a lower point than most partly because of Chamberlain.

## Conservative Persistence

Until 1945, Chamberlain's partnership of Liberal Unionists and Conservatives forged in 1886 ensured that no official Liberal candidate was elected to the Commons for Birmingham after that date, and that Labour won only seven of the city's twelve seats between the wars – none twice. After World War II elections were a two-party affair, Labour making sweeping gains in 1945, and running the City Council for most of the post-war era. In every general election except one (1959) Labour won at least half of the city's seats.

Whereas in the 1930s Birmingham took its policies to the country, supplying five cabinet ministers at one point, the relationship after 1945 was reversed, so that the city's post-war representation came to include more high-profile figures with little Birmingham patriotism, parachuted in on the assumption that national voting patterns would guarantee them victory. Woodrow Wyatt (Labour, Aston 1945-55) and Edward Boyle (Conservative, Handsworth 1950-70) were government ministers with no previous connection to the city who



Courtesy M. Cole

*The Chamberlain dynasty was a cultural as well as a political phenomenon, as this Spode commemorative plate, in tribute to the Munich Settlement of 1938, illustrates.*



## Labour and Chamberlain

**L**abour's success in recent general elections seems most at odds with the Chamberlain tradition: yet even in this there is an ironic trace of his influence. Birmingham has been distinctive recently for its repeated comprehensive rejection of aspirant Conservative MPs, their last win being Edgbaston in 1992.

Edgbaston was targeted in 2010 by the party to which Chamberlain was allied, but proved immune to its appeal, though on the national swing the Conservatives would have won. This is partly due to the personal vote of Gisela Stuart, but it is also explained by the reluctance to vote Conservative of a group of electors whose growth in numbers was encouraged by Joe Chamberlain: public sector workers.

Only eight constituencies out of 632 in Great Britain have a higher proportion of public sector workers than Edgbaston, and employees of local authorities, the NHS and educational interests such as the University of Birmingham, of which Chamberlain was the founder, are significantly less likely to vote Conservative than those in the private sector. It is therefore unsurprising that Edgbaston proves a hard nut to crack for Conservatives sceptical about the efficiency of public services.

Across Birmingham a third of the constituencies have work forces in the twenty most dominated by public sector workers, and the city as a whole has a ratio of 2.4 private sector workers to public servants where the figure for all UK cities is 2.7. The Conservatives' perceived hostility to the institutions which Chamberlain pioneered is giving Birmingham a new distinctiveness – in favour of the one party he never joined.

Part of the explanation for this is to be found in changes amongst the Birmingham Conservatives. For the first two decades after the Second World War, there remained leading figures with direct experience of the Chamberlain tradition: Geoffrey Lloyd, MP for Ladywood, King's Norton and Sutton Coldfield between 1931 and 1974 had served under Baldwin and remained President of the Birmingham Conservatives into the 1970s; the Beale, Kenrick and Martineau families which had ties to the Chamberlains over generations were still represented on the City Council 25 years after the War; and manufacturing chiefs such as Sir Peter Bennett (MP for Edgbaston from 1941 to 1953) and Sir Charles Burman (Birmingham Conservative Chairman for several years from 1963) still had a role.



The venue for over a century of political dispute, debate and decision-making, the Council Chamber is still at the very heart of Birmingham municipal government.

With their return to control of the council in 1966, however, the Conservatives had noticeably changed, being increasingly led by what *The Economist* called 'little men... small businessmen more concerned to turn local government into a profit-making business than uphold the Chamberlain municipal legacy'. Under the leadership of Frank Griffin the City Council privatised its restaurants, ran down its Direct Labour services and even sold off the freehold of land around Paradise Circus bought by Joe Chamberlain. The sale of 4,000 council houses to their tenants was stopped only by the Labour government.

In the context of the city's strong commitment to municipalism, it is hardly surprising that Labour took advantage, especially once the ideas being distinctively promoted by the Birmingham Conservatives were adopted by their national leadership under Margaret Thatcher. Thus in 1983 Birmingham became distinctive by its swing protecting Labour rather than the Conservatives against a national collapse. The two parts of the Chamberlain tradition – his party and his faith in the council – remain stronger today in Birmingham than elsewhere; but they have become somewhat separated.

## The City Council

The status of the City Council remains a long-term legacy of Chamberlain. It has the largest housing stock in the UK, developed by adding 81,000 homes in place of 55,000 demolished between 1945 and 1970. The shopping centre was rebuilt, Spaghetti Junction constructed, and on the centenary of Chamberlain's Mayoralty, the new library in the square named after him was opened, in Chris Upton's words 'as a remarkable sign of the '70s City Council's continuity with the Civic Gospel of the Victorians'. The City Council promoted the building of the NEC, and since the 1990s the centre of Birmingham has been redeveloped again – including the opening of another new home for the city library, which Upton had regarded twenty years earlier as 'probably inconceivable'.

Less quantifiable measures reflect the distinctiveness of the council, too: Nicholas Budgen asserted that 'Birmingham remains the Victorian creation of the non-conformist families who assisted Joe Chamberlain in his plans for municipal reform' because 'it has splendid public buildings'. Roy Jenkins enjoyed the sight of the Lord Mayor's Rolls Royce with its LM1 registration, and argued that the council retained an unusually influential role both within and outside the city:

One part of the Chamberlain legacy remained intact up to and throughout nearly all my Birmingham years. This was the tradition of a strong City Corporation exercising firm civic power from the Council House... Councillors were a considerable presence in the minds of the electorate. They were men and women of substance, and the yearly elections were events of significance in the life of the city.

Jenkins also argued that the national influence of the Birmingham corporation was 'far from negligible', citing the overturning of a Treasury regulation which threatened in 1956 to ruin Neville Chamberlain's Municipal Bank, following a meeting between Jenkins, Chancellor Harold Macmillan and the City Treasurer 'who had all the authority of a Whitehall permanent secretary'.

There remains, as in the careers of the Chamberlains, a connection between the council and Birmingham's Parliamentary representation so strong that *The Economist* complained in 1970 that 'at the next election only two Tory candidates will not be local men'. Neville's successor as MP for Edgbaston, Sir Peter Bennett, (Conservative, Edgbaston, 1940-53), Victor Yates (Labour, Ladywood 1945-69), Julius Silverman (Labour, Erdington and Aston 1945-83), and Harold Roberts (still using the title 'Unionist', Handsworth 1945-50) all had pre-war council experience, Roberts having been Lord Mayor in a record stretching back to 1922.

Later MPs with a decade or more of service on the City Council include Harold Gurden (Conservative, Selly Oak 1955-74), Denis Howell (Labour, All Saints and later Small Heath 1955-92), Anthony Beaumont-Dark (Conservative, Selly Oak 1979-92) and his successor, Labour former Housing Committee Chair Lynne Jones (Selly Oak 1992-2010).

Wallace Lawler (Liberal, Ladywood 1969-70) and John Hemming (Lib Dem, Yardley 2005 onwards), were on the City Council for nearly three decades between them, both serving as their group's leader. This link keeps alive Chamberlain's faith that municipal politics is vital to democracy. Though opposed to Chamberlain's party, Denis Howell remembered growing up in pre-war Birmingham learning that 'he created the finest municipal services this country has ever known'.

Most recently the campaign preceding the 2012 referendum over whether or not Birmingham should institute a directly elected Mayoralty reflected the city's continuing pride in its municipal heritage. It would be presumptuous to attribute the rejection of the proposal to public attachment to the status quo in the council's structure; what is indisputable is the use by both sides of the Chamberlain tradition as authorisation. 'Just as Joseph Chamberlain earned Birmingham the reputation of the 'best governed city in the world' as mayor', the 'Yes' campaign's website reassured voters, 'a newly elected mayor would help build on Birmingham's reputation as a leading city.' For the 'No' case Councillor James Hutchings retorted that 'Joe Chamberlain was a very powerful mayor and achieved great things for Birmingham but he was an elected councillor and worked with the committee system.'

## Conclusions

It may be contended that this celebration of Chamberlain's continuing impact is exaggerated. Control of hospitals, schools and revenue was lost to other regional and national bodies following the

Second World War. Sentimentality and political opportunism are sometimes behind appeals to the Chamberlain tradition.

There are other reasons too for the distinctiveness Birmingham retains – the Conservatives' strength owes something to their popularity on the race issue and the inclusion of Sutton Coldfield in Birmingham. Certainly much of the funding for redevelopment projects has come from London or Brussels as well as Birmingham.

However, Birmingham remains if not exceptional then – to use Vivian Bird's term in its technical sense – 'peculiar'. Birmingham's pride in its governance and the balance of its political forces is a heritage with clear links to the work of Chamberlain, although the echoes of his call are not always sounds he would have liked to hear. ●

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### Further Reading

R. Jenkins, 'Birmingham', in *Twelve Cities: a Personal Memoir* (Macmillan, 2003).

K. Newton, *Second City Politics: Democratic Processes and Decision-making in Birmingham* (Clarendon, 1976).

C. Upton, *A History of Birmingham* (Phillimore, 1993), especially chapters 29 and 30.

'The Politics of Birmingham', *The Economist*, 7 February 1970.

Recent and current public affairs are discussed on The Chamberlain Files ([www.thechamberlainfiles.com](http://www.thechamberlainfiles.com)), a blog run by public affairs consultancy RJF.

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