

JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN A MASTERFUL POLITICIAN

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Joseph Chamberlain is perhaps the most important political figure that Birmingham has ever produced. Mayor of Birmingham for the period when the city became the model for the modern conurbation, leader of the Radical Liberals until 1886 when he was blamed as 'the man who killed [Irish] Home Rule', Colonial Secretary at the height of the 'scramble for Africa' and pioneer of modern politics, his influence lived on after his death in 1914 as his son Austen rose to be leader of the Conservative Party and his other son, Neville, became Chancellor of the Exchequer and then Prime Minister. And yet, despite his sustained status in his adopted city, Chamberlain is not highly regarded outside the West Midlands.

Enoch Powell's famous aphorism that 'all political careers... end in failure' first appears in his 1977 biography of Chamberlain. 'Joe' never held any of the major offices of state despite an active parliamentary career of thirty years, and his eight-year tenure of the Colonial Office was marred by the conspiracies surrounding the outbreak of the Second Anglo-Boer War and the bungled and long drawn-out execution of that conflict.

Neither of his sons' political reputations has fared much better: Austen was the only Conservative leader not to become Prime Minister in the twentieth century (apart from William Hague) and Neville's reputation will always be blackened by the 'Great' Depression of the 1930s and his policy of appeasement towards Adolf Hitler.

It is true that Joseph Chamberlain put a number of issues on the political agenda for the first time, but Peter Marsh believes that 'he failed to find answers to the great questions' such as state education, land reform and welfare provision, in particular old-age pensions. Not only did he not produce any meaningful solutions to these issues, nor to the Irish question, of course, but any legislation with which he was involved was soon swept away by

the changed circumstances of the First World War and the mass democracy that followed it.

He famously broke two political parties, but both of these had managed to reconstruct themselves by the time of his death in July 1914 and his last great crusade for a reform of British import tariffs had been repudiated by the newly-united Unionist parties in the previous year. Unsurprisingly therefore, Richard Jay describes 'an aura of failure' that surrounds his historical status.

Turning Points

The key dates which most people know in Chamberlain's career are: 1873, when he began his three-year mayoralty of his adopted city; 1886, when he broke with Gladstone over Irish policy; and 1903 when he left the Conservative Cabinet to launch a campaign calling for retributive

tariffs against foreign imports and concessions for goods from the Empire and Commonwealth.

I would like to suggest that, as well as these three, there are two more turning points in Chamberlain's biography that do more to account for his distinctly untypical career, his immense force of will



Liberal poster satirising that the 'bubble burst' on several of Chamberlain's radical schemes and policies, c. 1906.

and, possibly, his ultimate failure in all the things he strove to achieve once he had left Birmingham.

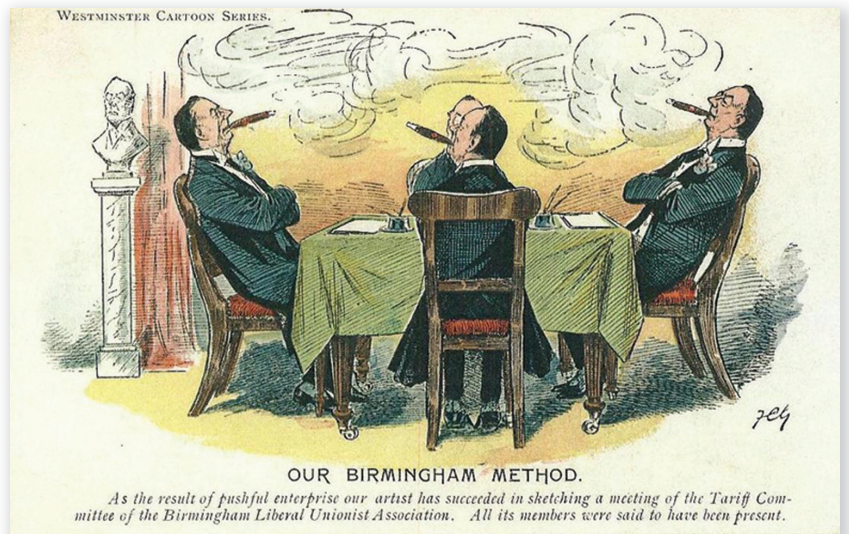
Although Chamberlain formed lasting personal friendships and strong bonds with the people of Birmingham, his personality is difficult to warm to. He is described as aloof, highly strung, contemptuous of the feelings of others and relentlessly ambitious – he was referred to as ‘Pushful Joe’ by writers in a golden age of British political satire. Beatrice Webb, who once seriously considered becoming Chamberlain’s third wife, wrote in her diary that his desire for complete obedience from his family and colleagues was due to the loss of his first two wives after childbirth. His love of power replaced the love he had enjoyed briefly but intensely with Harriet and Florence Kenrick.

Family Tragedies and their Impact

Writing to his sister-in-law, Emma Kenrick, after the death of his first wife, Harriet, in 1863, his grief is palpable ‘I can hardly trust myself to say what she was to me’. Later in the same letter, when he describes his wife’s delirium, he writes pathetically, ‘Oh! It was piteous to see and even now I cannot see the words I write’. That Chamberlain was devastated is clear, but he married Harriet’s cousin in 1868 and threw himself into politics, working for the National Education League to achieve the establishment of state-funded, non-denominational primary schools.

His second wife, Florence, was a crucial support in his mayoralty of Birmingham, during which time, according to *The Times*, ‘Birmingham ... rose to a level of dignity and autonomous power surpassed by no other civic community in the world.’ One can then only wonder at the impact that the death of Florence and their infant son in 1875 had upon him. There is a small memento of this event in the Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, written by Chamberlain. One section is worth quoting in full. Chamberlain admits that the memory of Harriet’s death haunted him during his second marriage and that: ‘when that peace and happiness were fullest, when the love and sympathy of my dear Florence were most precious to me and my confidence in her judgement and reliance on her counsel most complete, (my) vague fears have been fulfilled and her pure, unselfish and useful life has been cut short.’

He then reflected on the experience of his first two marriages: ‘in the perfect communion and intercourse I have had with these two, I have known the highest form of human happiness; – by their deaths I have twice been called on to bear the keenest pain and intensest sorrow.’



His way or no way: ‘Pushful Joe’ was frequently depicted in the satirical press as oppressive and dictatorial. Political postcard, 1903.

His response to this loss is the key to Chamberlain’s manner which did so much to alienate potential allies. He wrote to Charles Dilke in 1885, explaining how this double tragedy, which was closely followed by the death of his mother, destroyed his faith:

I began as a devout Unitarian. The death of my first wife brought the whole thing very close to me & the doctrines which did very well before broke down under that calamity. After trying to find an explanation of the ‘great mystery’, I gave it up once and for all, satisfied that there was quite enough to occupy me in this life without bothering about what is to come afterwards.

From Local to National Politics

Chamberlain promptly retired as mayor and set out to enter national politics. There are hints in his subsequent national career that Chamberlain regarded national politics as a mere distraction from morbid reflection and he certainly never allowed himself to become emotionally involved in politics in the way he had done before 1875. As well as the letter he wrote to John Morley in July 1876 when he claimed that ‘I have broken with my old life’, there is the play he wrote in 1895 entitled *The Game of Politics*. During the crisis that year which nearly led to his premature retirement, he commented significantly to his wife that ‘the game is not worth the candle’.

His apparent lack of sincerity after 1875, which later translated itself into accusations of political opportunism and inconstancy, may well have been the consequence of this deliberate remoteness from human dramas. Friendships were sacrificed for the sake of Chamberlain’s career. That with Sir Charles Dilke ended over a scandalous divorce case in 1885 when Chamberlain realised he had ceased to be a suitable political ally. That with John Morley ended when he refused to bow to Chamberlain’s will and follow him into the political wilderness in 1886. In the same year, the always well-informed W.T. Stead commented in a letter to Chamberlain that ended an eight-year correspondence, ‘you have seemed to me to subordinate the public interest to personal or party considerations’.

Political Ruthlessness

Chamberlain constantly used and exploited those around him and then ruthlessly discarded them as soon as they ceased to be of political value to him. He worked his loyal lieutenant, Joseph Powell Williams, to death; he immediately ceased to

protect junior colleagues if they became a political hindrance; and he even considered sacrificing his own son Austen in 1892 when his candidature in East Worcestershire was blocked by his Tory rivals.

His language towards those who opposed him was unremittingly harsh and dismissive. In 1903 when Liberal Unionist allies of eighteen years were castigated for failing to back Tariff Reform, his former lieutenant, Sir Henry James, believed that Chamberlain seemed 'somewhat unsteady mentally'. Even his loyal Birmingham supporters sang on his seventieth birthday that:

His blows are like the strikes of steel

His words are like burning wine

A Fearless Bravado

The hardening of Chamberlain's character was, however, tempered by some characteristics more attractive to modern eyes. He was capable of a bone-dry wit that must have been a rarity in sentimental Victorian Britain. Writing to Francis Carruthers Gould, the one journalist who did most to damage Chamberlain's public persona with his acerbic cartoons in the *Westminster Gazette*, the Liberal Unionist leader thanked him for his letter 'with the enclosed photograph which I shall treasure more than if it had been your real and not fictional scalp'.

He also inspired a quite fanatical loyalty among his political allies such as Jesse Collings. He appears to have been afraid of nobody and nothing, criticising the established church, cherished political leaders, vested interests and even the aristocracy with a fearless bravado that takes one's breath away even a hundred years later and which inspired the young David Lloyd George, who learnt from Chamberlain's political mistakes and left a far more lasting legacy (albeit an equally divided Liberal party).

1887: The Break with the Liberals and its Impact

Chamberlain's greatest mistake was not, however, in opposing Gladstone over Home Rule, as even the Grand Old Man had to admit that his scheme had its faults. The mistake was an unwillingness to rejoin the Liberals with Gladstone still as leader when the offer was made during the 'Round Table' negotiations of January and February 1887. If he had done so, and been able to force Gladstone and Morley to shelve Home Rule for the sake of domestic reform (as Lloyd George and Asquith did in 1906-10), he would probably have become leader of the Liberals on Gladstone's retirement.

As it was, he persuaded himself, after pressuring Salisbury to grant elected county councils in 1888 (1889 in Scotland), free schooling in 1891 and a Small Holdings Act in 1892, that he could extract more social reform from the Conservatives than Gladstone as long as 'Ireland blocks the way'. After the defeat of the Second Home Rule Bill in 1893, while in opposition, he launched a campaign for a social programme which included promises of better housing, old-age pensions, employers' liability and shorter working hours. As he announced in Birmingham, as a Liberal Unionist, he was 'determined to maintain an undivided Empire, and... ready to promote the welfare and the union, not of one class, but of all classes of the community'.

Chamberlain and the Conservatives

Historians such as Paul Readman and Martin Pugh have identified how crucial this policy was in the 1895 Unionist landslide General Election victory, but Salisbury had little intention of carrying out any of these reforms, revealing that his true priority was neither the Empire nor the welfare of all, when he warned his nephew and putative successor, Arthur Balfour: 'I fear these social questions are destined to break up our party.' Salisbury arranged for his subordinates, Richard Middleton, the chief Conservative agent, Alfred Austin, leader writer for the Tory *Standard*, Aretas Akers-Douglas, the Conservative chief whip, and George Curzon, to stir up Tory anger at Chamberlain's 'socialistic schemes' both in the constituencies and in the press.

Southbourne,
Augustus Road,
Exhaston.

June 30. 76

My dear Sir

Many thanks.

I am better - especially
in spirits since the
goat came out. It is
an exceedingly respectable
creature & much endear
me to the Tories!

Yours of Spaly
J. Chamberlain

© Cadbury Research Library. Special Collections

*Letter from Joseph Chamberlain,
30 June, 1876, which illustrates his
dry wit: 'My dear Sir, Many thanks.
I am better – especially in spirits
since the gout came out. It is an
eminently respectable disease &
must endear me to the Tories!
Yours Truly,
Joseph Chamberlain.'*



This early twentieth century cartoon depicting Joseph's 'coat of many colours', lampoons his perceived lack of consistency and loyalty, particularly in his later career.

After the humiliating rejection of his chosen candidate for Warwick and Leamington, a seat near his Birmingham 'fiefdom', in spring 1895, Chamberlain was forced to abandon his scheme and to accept a subordinate post in a Tory-dominated cabinet which he had promised his wife he would never do.

With the Tories winning a majority without even needing Liberal Unionist support in that summer's General Election, Salisbury could privately gloat that 'happily [social reform] seems to be at a discount'. Austin became Britain's worst Poet Laureate, Curzon became viceroy of India, Akers-Douglas got a seat in the Cabinet and Middleton received an inscribed silver casket and a cheque for £10,000.

Chamberlain and Broken Promises?

Politically neutered, Chamberlain bitterly commented 'if the working classes ... will not pay for [old-age pensions], then they must go without' and his election address for the 1900 General Election contained no mention of any social reform. He was even forced by his new political circumstances to tell the Birmingham Liberal Unionist Association that he had 'changed his mind since 1870' on his opposition to church schools, the very issue which had brought him into politics in 1869.

Critics like Carruthers Gould constantly reminded the public of Chamberlain's broken promises to such an extent after 1895 that large portions of the public and his own party either lost faith in him or began to question his sincerity, an issue that his haughty manner and new-found love of the London social scene did nothing to assuage. As Beatrice Webb commented at this time: 'no one trusts him, no one likes him, no one really believes in him.' While Chamberlain wrapped himself firmly in the imperial flag in his eight years at the Colonial Office to win over doubting Tories, the Boer War that was

nicknamed 'Joe's War' provided him with a political return that very quickly diminished.

Tariff Reform was, therefore, a last attempt to seize the political initiative, but so desperate was Chamberlain to win the cause that he forced the political nation into an extreme choice between absolute free trade and imperial preference and failed to dislodge the electors' long-held positive association between free trade and economic prosperity. His behaviour was so aggressive and confrontational (in a way that presaged the 'Punch and Judy' politics of today's Westminster) that he alienated many potential supporters, including his fellow Radical Unionists who controlled Glasgow.

Nearly seventy years old, he drove himself to the debilitating stroke that ended his political career, shortly after the nation (apart from Birmingham) categorically rejected Tariff Reform in the 1906 General Election.



Popular or not, Chamberlain was undeniably a national celebrity, as this 1897 theatre advertisement illustrates.

Chamberlain's Political Method and Style

Perhaps Chamberlain's greatest legacy lies not in legislative achievement, but in the method and style of politics that he championed. Peter Clarke has described him as the first truly modern, professional politician. His ruthless use of the caucus (the Birmingham Six Hundred), his exploitation of his local, denominational and seemingly classless background and his engagement with modern media, especially the use of systematic canvassing, the employment of paid political agents and the production of electoral propaganda, mark him out as a crucial figure in this transitional period of British political culture.

In Birmingham, where real legislative achievement meant that his style of politics won popular favour, Chamberlain may still be remembered as 'Our Joe'. Elsewhere in Britain, however, a professionalised, distant political class, playing 'the game of politics' in their Westminster bubble, in the fashion that Chamberlain pioneered, has never been accepted and is today finally being questioned by comedians and commentators alike. Some have recently blamed Margaret Thatcher for this historical development, but Chamberlain should be seen as the progenitor of this very mixed blessing for the British Parliamentary system. ●

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Further Reading

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Richard Jay, *Joseph Chamberlain: A Political Study* (Clarendon, 1981).

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Henry Pelling, *The Social Geography of British Elections, 1885-1910* (Macmillan, 1967).