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BUSINESS, LIBERALISM AND DISSENT IN NORWICH 1900-1930¹

In much of the literature on the decline of the Liberal party, there is an implicit assumption that the bulk of the party's middle-class support, and in particular its business support, had defected to the Conservatives by the early 1920s.² This literature also assumes that only two real issues separated the middle-class in the pre-war period - religion and free trade.³ Thus, when the war brought an end to free trade and quickened the decline of organized religion in Britain, the middle class united in a property-owning, anti-socialist alliance under Conservative leadership.⁴ This article will challenge some of these assumptions by showing that significant sections of the Norwich business and dissenting communities continued to support Liberalism right down to 1930, and that chapel culture, in particular, was of considerable importance in maintaining the Liberal party after 1919.⁵

I

In the early nineteenth century the economy of Norwich went into steep decline as the textile industry which had sustained it for so long transferred to the mechanizing north-west. During the middle decades of the century, the city was in the economic doldrums, yet by 1914 it was once again the most industrially developed centre in East Anglia.⁶ This economic revival was a result of the second industrial revolution - the consumer revolution - brought about by rising real wages and increasing urbanization. In the second half of the nineteenth century the new, town-dwelling industrial working-class began to demand more than just the basics of existence, and industries emerged to satisfy this demand.⁷ In Norwich, factories developed in the high class and children's footwear market, food processing, especially Colman's Mustard, ready-made clothing, printing and publishing, and all the trades associated with the construction sector, especially builders' merchants.⁸ As all these industries depended on the increased purchasing power generated by cheap food, their leaders were staunchly free trade and remained so until the 1930s.

The revival of the economy brought with it the physical expansion of the city. In 1801, 91% of Norwich's 40,000 inhabitants lived within the city walls. By the outbreak of war in 1914 this had declined to about 36% of a population of over 111,000.⁹ As a result of this suburbanization process, discrete areas of social class emerged. Working-class suburbs developed in the north of the city and to the west of the walls around Lakenham. The middle classes favoured Eaton in the west and Thorpe in the east - although the potential of the latter to be *the* élite suburb was curbed by the building of the railway in the 1840s - whilst the city centre became increasingly slummy, despite small pockets of élite residence around the Cathedral Close.¹⁰ From the 1880s right through to the 1930s Eaton was the home of the industrial and professional middle class and, as such, was vitally important in cementing the political alliances of business and dissent. Satellite villages did

emerge, for example Catton and Thorpe St Andrew, but these tended to be inhabited by members of city families who had acquired their wealth in the eighteenth century, rather than the entrepreneurs of the revived Victorian economy.¹¹

Norwich's rich protestant tradition assured it a vibrant religious culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From mid-century onwards Baptists and Congregationalists flourished, whilst Presbyterianism reappeared in the 1860s. Amongst Methodists, the Primitive, United and Wesleyan denominations were all active, although the Unitarians and Quakers, who had dominated the dissenting scene in the eighteenth century, were experiencing stagnation and decline.¹² In the period following the religious census of 1851 many new dissenting churches were erected in and around the city. In the working-class areas of Lakenham to the west and Catton to the north, new churches were built by all the main denominations, usually on main roads. These were often in a free classical style, although gothic was beginning to creep in towards the end of the century, executed to plans by Edward Boardman, a deacon of Prince's Street Congregational Church.¹³ Most of the sects concentrated on the respectable working class - the Primitive and United Methodists, the Quakers, most Baptist churches and one or two Congregational chapels having predominantly working-class congregations.

Rather more surprisingly, very few chapels appeared in the middle-class suburbs, as most of Norwich's elite dissenters continued to attend city centre churches. In particular, Prince's Street Congregational and St Mary's Baptist. Were one to construct a hierarchy of Norwich's dissenting congregations, it would have been headed by Princes Street Congregational, which numbered many prominent businessmen and professionals, including the Colmans, among its members.¹⁴ However, the most important and nationally significant chapel in the city was St Mary's, whose unusually prominent membership for a Baptist church included five Liberal MPs between the 1840s and the 1940s.¹⁵ In addition to the railway contractor, Sir Morton Peto, St Mary's MPs included J. J. Colman, who left the chapel to attend Prince's Street in the 1870s; Sir George White, third lay President of the Baptist Union and chairman of the nonconformist group in Parliament; Geoffrey Shakespeare, MP for Norwich 1929-45 and a junior government minister in the 1930s; and finally Percy Jewson, who represented Great Yarmouth for most of the Second World War.¹⁶ The ministers were no less important. William Brock was called to be the first pastor of the Bloomsbury Chapel in London, whilst his successor, George Gould, was significant in the controversies over church rates and open communion in the 1860s. Gould was followed by J. H. Shakespeare, who left to take up the office of Secretary to the Baptist Union during the Edwardian period, and he was replaced by Thomas Phillips, who held the ministry during the Passive Resistance campaign before moving on to the pulpit at Bloomsbury.¹⁷ But St Mary's also followed an active forward policy and when, in 1910, they established a new church in working-class Silver Road, the Lord Mayor, Dr E. E. Blyth, and various members of the Jewson family were prominent in its leadership.

However, the strength of the gathered churches meant that the Unitarians and Quakers, who had attracted the cream of Norwich dissent in the previous century, were now small communities, though the Unitarians did retain some of their élite membership. Furthermore, the Wesleyans were less middle-class than their co-religionists elsewhere in the country, whilst both the United and Primitive Methodists, apart from one or two prominent figures, came primarily from the artisan and white-collar sections of society.

In politics Norwich had been a turbulent place famous for political corruption, but by the late nineteenth century its political practices had become more legitimate and the most important areas of debate were rates and religion. With the new century, new issues emerged, in particular the 1902 Education Act which was vehemently opposed by dissenters, Chamberlain's tariff reform proposals which upset free trade industries like footwear and food processing, and the Liberal reforms of 1908-14 which divided businessmen, not necessarily on party lines.¹⁸ Electorally, Liberals had fared badly after J. J. Colman retired as MP in 1895. However, at a by-election in January 1904 they regained a parliamentary seat and from then until 1945 they only failed on one occasion to return a Member of Parliament for the city. This success was partly the result of Norwich being one of the remaining double member constituencies in the country. Under this system a constituency returned two members on the same ballot paper, each voter having two votes, though these could not both be given to the same person. The Liberals were able to exploit this anachronism by fielding only one candidate in some sort of arrangement with Labour to 1918, and the Tories thereafter. In local elections they were less successful, winning control of the Council only in the period 1903-7. After this date their representation on the Council declined, and in 1920 they formed an electoral pact with the Conservatives which operated until 1926. In the all-out party warfare which followed the breakdown of the pact, the Liberals were mostly defeated, but the need to extend their organization into areas they had not fought for many years greatly benefited them in their preparations for the 1929 election.

II

How do these developments tie together in a study of business, politics and dissent? The close relationship between these factors in the nineteenth century is well understood,¹⁹ but their continued importance, particularly in the post-1918 period, has been greatly understated. In Norwich the bulk of those active in the new industries were dissenters, as were a majority of those active in the Liberal party at all levels. Thus, of the twenty-six Liberals who held the offices of Mayor, Sheriff or Alderman in the pre-war period, sixteen were dissenters, of which half were Congregationalists and 40% Baptists. Half the Liberal Councillors in the same period were nonconformists, again mostly from Prince's Street. At another level, 40% of the élite Norfolk and Norwich Liberal Club's members attended non-Anglican worship. This close relationship did not stop in 1914. The Liberal party's

share of post-war Mayors, Sheriffs and Aldermen numbered nineteen, of whom thirteen were dissenters and another two, whose religion is not known, were the sons of nonconformists. As in the pre-war period, these élite positions were held almost exclusively by Congregationalists and Baptists (six each). Furthermore, 45% of newly elected councillors up to 1932 were free churchmen, although the figure for new club members was down to 25%. Thus, on average, a third to a half of all Liberal activists up to 1932 were free church members; others may have attended chapels without becoming communicants.²⁰

Study of the occupational profile of Edwardian party activists reveals that boot manufacturers, the city's most significant entrepreneurs, occupied the main civic offices, served as councillors and featured prominently in the membership of the Norfolk and Norwich Liberal Club - a trend which continued after the war. Merchants, such as the Congregationalist Porters and Baptist Jewsons, both importers of timber, dominated the party at all levels in both periods, and were joined by a number of general manufacturers, especially the Colmans. Members of the Colman family and senior employees of the firm were present throughout the local party, holding the mayoral chain on three occasions, as well as serving as councillors, candidates or just activists.²¹ But not all Liberals were businessmen, any more than they were all dissenters. A large number at every level of activism were professionals, particularly lawyers, accountants and architects. Holding any of these positions in the early twentieth century involved a considerable amount of business acumen and a high level of actual involvement in the business world of the city, for example as a company secretary or as secretary to an employer's organization.²² This profile can be partly explained by reference to the age structure of Norwich Liberalism. The bulk of those active in the pre-war period were first generation middle-class, born between 1841-71. As such, many of their sons and daughters first entered politics amid the education and tariff controversies of the Edwardian era, which fostered a lifelong commitment to the Liberal party.

This inter-relationship between Liberals, dissenters and businessmen was reinforced by cultural and environmental influences. Whereas the businessmen of London and the north-west were gradually moving out of the urban environment in which they made their living, to houses in distinct suburbs or satellite villages,²³ the new manufacturing middle-class of Norwich remained firmly attached to their city. Unlike many of their Conservative counterparts, who moved out to villages such as Catton, Cringleford and Thorpe St Andrew, most chose to reside in the suburbs of Eaton and Thorpe, close to the city centre. Thus they were not separated from the urban environment and the culture and community of the city, as were those who chose to live in the county. This involvement in the urban community was enhanced by attendance at the city-centre chapels of Prince's Street and St Mary's, both of which were close to such members' businesses and the homes of their employees.

Many of the leading figures in these chapels were involved in the plethora of

social work organizations the churches ran. They acted as Sunday School Superintendents, Adult School teachers, or leaders of Christian Endeavour societies, whilst their wives and daughters were involved in teaching, district visiting, and work with mothers and children in the surrounding slum areas.²⁴ The chapels acted as the focus of their social life, providing a place to meet on Sunday and during the week, allowing members to share interests and gossip and learn social and political skills: many future politicians received their first experience of public speaking or committee work in the church. The chapels were also a focus for political activity. Most ward Liberal meetings were held in their school rooms or lecture halls, whilst the campaign against the Education Act involved the churches and their ministers directly in political action.

However, it is arguable that the chapels' most important function for the Liberal middle-classes was as a place to meet suitable marriage partners. The web of shared interests among business/Liberal/dissenters was cemented by an interlocking kinship so complicated and self-sustaining that it made the marriage patterns of the county élite look open. Virtually every leading Liberal could be connected to every other and the closed nature of the system was indicated by the almost total lack of any Conservative or county encroachment into the web. A series of connexions centred on the Congregationalist Boardmans and Baptist Jewsons, linked the Colman, Cozens-Hardy, Spelman, Jarrold, Howlett and White families. Over three generations, these eight leading business and professional families provided the Liberal party with four MPs, eight mayors, three sheriffs, two aldermen and three councillors, in addition to one Labour MP. Before 1914, only Frank Jewson married into a Tory Anglican family and, whilst some did give up their free church membership in later life, only Russell Colman, son of the MP, actually defected to the Conservative party before the 1930s.²⁵

III

What did these Liberal dissenting businessmen stand for in politics? They were free traders - their livelihood depended on that. In the Edwardian period they sought to do battle with privilege in all its forms: landlords, brewers, the military, the established church, and their arch-enemy, the House of Lords, which they perceived as the source of most and defender of all these evils. In 1903 George White, Liberal Alderman of Norwich, MP for North West Norfolk, a deacon of St Mary's and President of the Baptist Union,²⁶ delivered his presidential address on the subject of 'The Nonconformist Conscience in its Relation to our National Life',²⁷ a speech which typified the thinking of the Liberal businessman and dissenter. He encouraged his audience to take a leading part in politics and to 'reject that low and contracted view of religious life which would stand aside from conflict when the liberties of a people are tampered with'.²⁸ He highlighted the main areas of interest to dissenters: land, housing, social reform, temperance, and the privileges and 'priestcraft' of the state church. The latter had recently been given expression

in the Balfour Education Act which, he suggested, they must all oppose by breaking the law if necessary.²⁹ He epitomized what the Liberal dissenters of Edwardian Norwich stood for when he stated that:

As citizens we should strive to have the best things common to all. This is not a question of dividing money or property, but of equality of opportunity, of destroying privilege, and placing within reach of the people 'without money and without price' the advantage of moderate leisure, recreation, education, social advancement and the best spiritual influences.³⁰

This crusade against privilege - exemplified by the rural House of Lords and its defender, the Conservative party - finally culminated in the People's Budget of 1909.³¹ During the January 1910 election campaign, Liberals and dissenters united behind the government, with the minister of St Mary's urging his congregation to vote against the Lords.³² Although the elections of 1910 led to the restriction of the Lords' power, it did not mean the end of privilege and Liberals had still to face it for many years to come.

IV

Norwich was in no sense unique in having a Liberal dissenting middle-class, closely intermarried and living in elegant suburban villas. It was, however, odd in still having such a structure by 1929 - or so we might believe from the existing literature. It was also unusual in being one of the few industrial towns to return a Liberal MP in 1929. This may have been a result of being a double member constituency, although during the election the Liberals fought very much on their own, in most cases refusing to become too closely associated with the Conservatives and their candidate.³³ Furthermore, the result indicated a fair degree of Liberal autonomy, with their candidate topping the poll, a Labour candidate second and the sitting Tory beaten into third. The structure of the constituency and the electoral pacts of the early 1920s certainly helped to keep the Liberals active, but the real reason for their victory that year was the economic, religious and cultural make-up of the party.

The late development of the city's economy, based on the products of the consumer revolution, created an economic and cultural environment like the industrial north-west in its heyday³⁴ - but fifty years later. Many Norwich businesses were still strongly in favour of free trade in the late 'twenties so, when Lloyd George suggested that the problems of the nation could be solved by the methods highlighted in *We Can Conquer Unemployment*, these proved far more attractive than Tory calls for tariffs.³⁵ Added to this belief in free trade was the impact of religious dissent. Although religion itself was no longer an issue at elections, the cultural world of the chapel still pervaded the Liberal party and the culture of dissent was still essentially Liberal.

Russell Colman, the richest member of the city's free church community, was exceptional in defecting to the Tories, yet all too often historians have looked to his

type, rather than the ordinary urban middle-class, when tracing the fate of political nonconformity. Certainly the majority of Liberal free churchmen were anti-socialist by 1929, but their pre-war experiences, combined with the individualism fostered by the gathered churches, made them distrustful of Baldwin's style of Conservatism. Few of the second generation of Norwich dissent had attended public school or university, nor were most sufficiently wealthy to enter the dilettante, upper-middle class world described by Glaser.³⁶ Instead they stuck to their business life, suburban homes and chapel connexions and continued an intimate relationship with the Liberal party their fathers had created. By maintaining this link with the party, they were able to deprive the Conservatives of funds and provide leadership in the dark days of the mid 1920s, culminating in the victory of their Baptist candidate, Geoffrey Shakespeare, at the 1929 election. Admittedly, this was the swan-song of Independent Liberalism in Norwich, and by the mid-1930s a new political generation had emerged. Often élite-educated, their ideology was informed by the experiences of the Great War and the class conflict of the 1920s, rather than the cultural politics of the Edwardian era. And although a number did remain true to the free churches and the Liberal party, most allied themselves with the consensual Conservatism of the mid-twentieth century.³⁷

Thus middle-class Liberalism persisted in Norwich into the 1930s because the issues which separated Liberal and Conservative were deeper than simply free trade and religious education; they were divisions of culture, fostered by a life centred around the gathered church, the factory and the urban environment, which combined to form people who stood in stark contrast to a Conservatism which, even in 1929, appeared to typify the establishment and the privileges that entailed.

NOTES

- 1 An early version of this paper was presented to the First Symposium on the History of Religious Dissent in East Anglia, Cambridge 1989.
- 2 For example, P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, Cambridge 1971; Christopher Cook, *The Age of Alignment: Electoral Politics in Britain, 1922-1929, 1975*; John Ramsden, *the Age of Balfour and Baldwin, 1902-1940, 1978*.
- 3 Clarke, *op.cit.*; Neal Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People: The British General Election of 1910, 1972*.
- 4 Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-1935, 1966*; Cook, *op.cit.*
- 5 For a more extensive development see Barry M. Doyle, 'Middle-class realignment and party politics in Norwich, 1900-1932', PhD thesis, University of East Anglia, 1990; and 'Urban Liberalism and the "Lost Generation": Politics and middle-class culture in Norwich, 1900-1935', *Historical Journal*, forthcoming (1995).
- 6 J. K. Edwards, 'The decline of the Norwich textile industry', *Yorkshire Bulletin of Economic and Social Research*, 16, 1964, pp.31-41; and 'Industrial development of the city' in C. Barringer (ed.), *Norwich in the Nineteenth Century*, Norwich 1984, pp.136-59.
- 7 W. H. Fraser, *the Coming of the Mass Market 1850-1914, 1981*.
- 8 W. L. Sparkes, *The Story of Shoemaking in Norwich: From the Earliest Time to the Present Day*, Northampton 1949; J. Gurney-Read, *Trades and Industries of Norwich*, Norwich 1989; E. & W. L. Burgess, *Men who have made Norwich*, Norwich 1904.
- 9 Peter Travers, 'The changing pattern of prestige residence in Norwich, 1871 to 1971: A case study in the geography of segregation', PhD thesis, University of East Anglia, 1984, p.375.
- 10 Travers, *op.cit.*; Stefan Muthesius, 'Nineteenth century Norwich houses', in Barringer (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.94-117; Rosemary O'Donoghue, 'A Victorian suburb: Some aspects of town planning

- in 19th century Norwich', *Norfolk Archaeology*, 38, 1983, pp.321-8.
- 11 Walter Rye, *A History of the Parish of Catton in the City of Norwich*, Norwich 1919.
 - 12 R. W. Hale, 'Nonconformity in nineteenth century Norwich', in Barringer (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp.1176-97; Revd C. T. Rae, 'The free churches of Norwich' in Major E. Felce (ed.), *Norwich: Civic, Industrial, Historical*, Norwich 1935, pp.80-88; C. B. Jewson, *The Baptists in Norfolk*, 1957.
 - 13 For an interesting insight into the scale and cost of chapel building and refurbishment in the later nineteenth century, see the section on 'Nonconformist places of worship' in *Norwich 1890: History and Directory William White Ltd.* Facsimile edition introduced by Michael Winton, Kings Lynn 1988, pp.34-7. For Boardman's plans, R. Salt, *Plans for a Fine City*, Norwich, 1988.
 - 14 Helen C. Colman, *Prince's Street Congregational Church, Norwich, 1819-1919*, Norwich, 1919; *Prince's Street Congregational Church Yearbook, 1913*, and *1929*, Norwich, 1913, 1929.
 - 15 *Handbook of the Church and Congregation Worshipping in St Mary's Baptist Chapel, Norwich*, Norwich 1912; Jewson, *op.cit.*
 - 16 D. W. Bebbington, 'Baptist MPs in the nineteenth century', *BQ* 29. 1. 1981, pp.3-24, and 'Baptist Members of Parliament in the twentieth century', *BQ* 31, 6, 1986, pp.252-87.
 - 17 C. B. Jewson, 'St Mary's, Norwich', *BQ*, 1940, pp.399-406.
 - 18 For more detailed discussion of politics in twentieth-century Norwich, see Doyle, 'Realignment', chs.3, 8, and 9; S. Cherry, *Doing Different? Politics and the Labour Movement in Norwich, 1880-1914*, Norwich 1989.
 - 19 D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience*, 1982; J. Glaser, 'English nonconformity and the decline of Liberalism', *American Historical Review*, 63, 1958, pp.352-63; R. Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 1991.
 - 20 P. Palgrave-Moore, *The Mayors and Lord Mayors of Norwich 1836-1974*, Norwich 1978.
 - 21 G. L. Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England*, 1986, Table 1.8, p.24; Doyle, 'Urban Liberalism', Table 1.
 - 22 For a revealing insight into the business connections of Norwich professionals, see C. Binfield, 'An excursion into architectural cousinhood: the East Anglian connection', in Norma Virgoe and Tom Williamson (eds), *Religious Dissent in East Anglia*, Norwich 1993, pp.103-6.
 - 23 F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Rise of Suburbia*, Leicester 1982.
 - 24 Jewson, *Baptists in Norwich*; Colman, *Prince's Street*.
 - 25 Doyle, 'Realignment', ch.6; 'Urban Liberalism', Figure 1.
 - 26 F. W. Wheldon, *A Norwich Century: And the men who made it*, Norwich 1946, pp.44-56.
 - 27 George White, *The Nonconformist Conscience in its Relation to our National Life*, Presidential address to the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 27 April 1903.
 - 28 *ibid.*, p.5.
 - 29 *ibid.*, pp.24-8. White was one of the key political leaders of the passive-resistance movement and a noted propagandist for the cause. S. Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics*, 1975, pp.48-9; George White, 'The case against the Education Act' in W. T. Stead, *Coming Men on Coming Questions*, 1905.
 - 30 White, *Nonconformist Conscience*, p.10.
 - 31 For the People's Budget as an assault on privilege, Bruce K. Murray, *The People's Budget 1909-10: Lloyd George and Liberal Politics*, Oxford 1980.
 - 32 *St Mary's Magazine*, 14, December 1909, p.1.
 - 33 Robert Bignold, *Five Generations of the Bignold Family, 1761-1947, and Their Connection with the Norwich Union*, 1949, p.293; Geoffrey Shakespeare, *Let Candles Be Brought In*, 1949, pp.98-9.
 - 34 Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The culture of the factory in later Victorian England*, 1980, ch.1.
 - 35 John Campbell, *Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness*, ch.7; Ramsden, *Balfour and Baldwin*.
 - 36 Glaser, *op.cit.*, pp.360-1.
 - 37 For the fate of Norwich Liberalism after 1929, see Doyle, 'Realignment', ch.3, and 'Urban Liberalism'.