

# **CAMPAIGNING FOR CHANGE:**

Lessons from history

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A demonstration in Bow Street by the newly-formed Gay Liberation Front, London, 1971.

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- **Historians:** Luke Blaxill, University of Oxford; Lawrence Black, University of York; Malcolm Chase, University of Leeds; Lucy Delap, Cambridge University; Richard Huzzey, Durham University; Jane Jordan, Kingston University; Henry Miller, Durham University; Jim Phillips, University of Glasgow; and Sarah Richardson, University of Warwick.
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## Preface

*Lucy Delap, Deputy Director, History & Policy network  
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This collection is particularly important in the current British political climate, in which recent and proposed legislation challenges the rights of activists to campaign freely. The articles gathered here illustrate the role campaigning has had in shaping our society over the past 200 years. It reminds us how much of what we now treasure, in terms of freedoms and rights, is due to the hard work of activists. It both celebrates campaigning and enables readers to draw lessons on how campaigning can change our world.

*Campaigning for Change: Lessons from History* is the result of an exciting collaboration between Friends of the Earth and History & Policy. These two organisations share a commitment to expanding the range of debates and ideas that can be brought to bear on how we imagine the future. Since our establishment in 2002 History & Policy has facilitated the sharing of expertise of a network of more than 500 historians across universities throughout the world. Our members contribute to independent inquiries, parliamentarians, civil servants, civil society and European policy networks. We exist because we know that historical perspectives can bring important insights, as well as an exciting sense of possibility and innovation, to debates on policy and society.

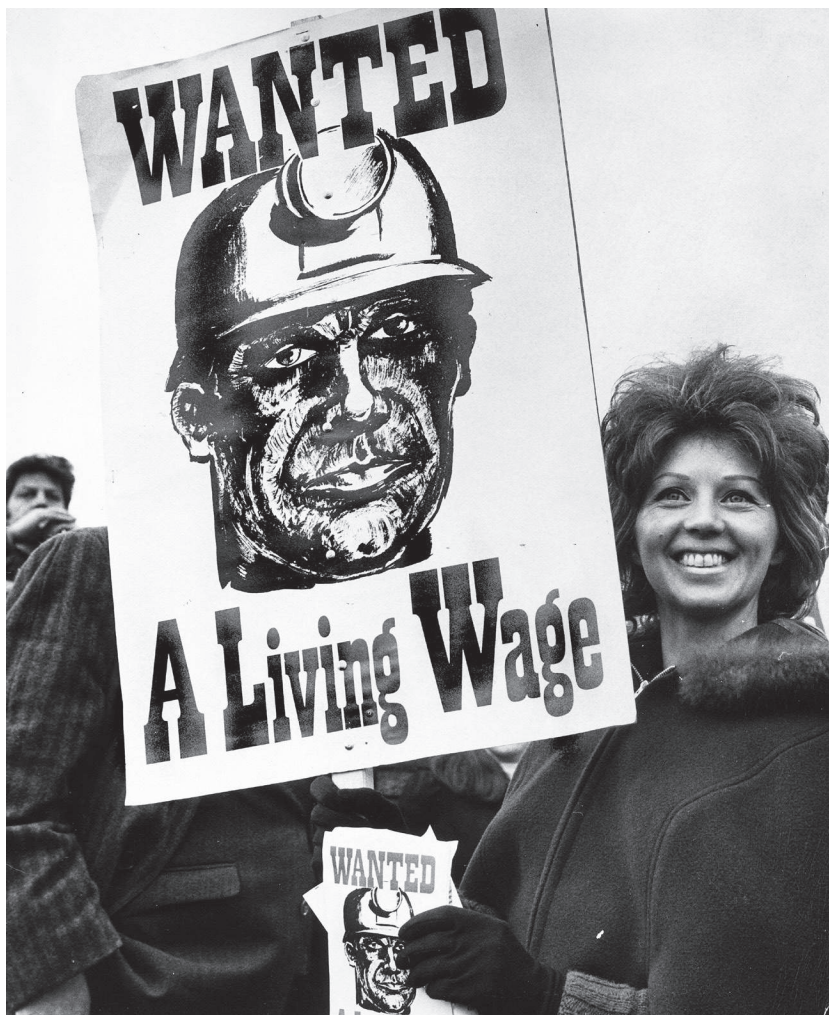
We have been delighted to find a willing partner in Friends of the Earth, whose project Big Ideas Change the World engages with broad and deep questions that necessarily require thinking about historical precedents and contexts.

History & Policy has partnered with Friends of the Earth in a series of events which have enabled campaigners to explore how history can inform their current practice. In summer 2015, for example, we hosted a conference on how change happens, promoting a dialogue between historians and representatives of charities and campaigning organisations in fields spanning social



justice, environment, criminal justice, women's rights, and law reform. This collection has grown from a follow-up seminar, held in November 2015, which brought together historians and campaigners from civil society groups to consider histories of campaigning and to learn from each other.

As the case studies in this book illustrate, documenting activism and organising for change in the past gives us greater understanding of strategic choices, communications strategies, timing and serendipity in campaigning, as well as some extraordinary examples of mobilisation on a scale that today's campaigners can scarcely dream of. The use of the past in policymaking will always be contested. But *History & Policy* exists to ensure that such a dialogue flourishes – we are proud to create opportunities for historical scholars to communicate their research to a broad audience. And we are proud of this collection and our collaboration with Friends of the Earth, because as academics we understand the importance of campaigning and campaigners in safeguarding our freedoms and creating a better future for people and the planet.



Margaret Dobb, the wife of a Nottinghamshire miner, holds up a placard reading: 'Wanted: A Living Wage' at a strike meeting at Tower Hill in London, 1972.

# Introduction

*Richard Huzzey, Historian, Durham University*

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‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it’ has become, with some varieties of mis-quotation, a commonplace in British political discussion. However, while politicians and pundits often stretch into history to understand our own times, the terms on which they do so are rarely thought through carefully. The famous phrase itself comes from George Santayana, a Spanish philosopher who wrote these words in the first decade of the 20th century with a very particular notion of how ideas of the past shape present experience. Rather than assume a simple, timeless truth to his words, any consideration of past and present has to consider the terms on which we can relate the one to the other.

This volume brings together academic historians and professional campaigners to consider how the past might provide new

insights for campaigners today. In producing this collection, we wanted to offer accessible histories of past campaigns and then show what some of today's campaigners have learned from them. To prepare this publication we organised a seminar between historians and campaigners. We pre-circulated papers from the historians – which you now have in revised form as the chapters of this collection – and we held a seminar to discuss common themes and hear campaigners' personal reflections. The conclusions of this exercise – collated by my co-organiser Mike Childs – draw together these perspectives.

Our approach means there is no single method or style of history among the historians, and no settled conclusions from the campaigners. Instead, we offer our interpretations in order to stimulate further discussion and debate. We all agree on one point, at least, which is that thinking historically helps us think better about our own society today.

In this introduction, I explain why we chose these historical case studies from modern Britain for this collaboration with contemporary campaigners. I explain the approach my fellow historians and I have taken in writing our papers, and why they are personal to each author. I also offer a personal interpretation of the dilemma facing historians when they offer their research to policymakers or the broader public as a window through which we can see our own time more clearly. I touch on three of the issues most likely to make academic historians queasy – how you choose your questions, the truthfulness of historical explanations, and the unique character of historical events. These are key to appreciating how we choose to remember the past and how we see ourselves repeat it. If we are to get more than a motto from Santayana's words, then we need to think deeper about how we use the past.

### **Choosing your histories**

When we decided to bring together present-day campaigners and historians of their predecessors, we had to resolve how we were defining campaigns. One of the attractions of looking into the past is the sheer variety and scale of difference in past societies,

divorced by time and distance from our own. We might reasonably be accused of parochial cowardice for restricting our case studies to the past 200 years of British history. However, we were influenced by both principled and practical considerations.

On the one hand, teasing out common themes or questions across case studies comes more readily when they are drawn from a similar historical context. In our case, 200 years of modern British history includes momentous change – in notions of citizenship, equality, individualism, and identity – but also consistencies – in parliamentary government, a powerful state, and a dynamic civil society. Comparing campaigns within this period of time in this particular society seemed likelier to generate comparisons and contrasts about the campaigns themselves, rather than diverting us onto the differences between historical societies, as comparative historians would enthusiastically wish to do. On the other hand, we were also swayed by the practical consideration that our campaigners would be more familiar with the modern history of their own country. They would then be readier to rise to the daunting challenge of pronouncing on the essays. Both intellectual and defeatist imperatives, then, pointed to assembling our case studies from the past few hundred years of Britain's past.

A more fundamental problem might arise were our expectations about campaigners and campaigns today to restrict our view of the past. Because we began by assembling leaders of the UK's non-governmental organisations and charities who consider themselves campaigners, we are accepting a dominant model of a campaigning organisation (a charity or company limited by guarantee). These contemporary campaign organisations are strongly shaped by the emergence of subscription-based, associational groups in the 18th and 19th centuries and deploy many of the same tactics. Many of our partner organisations are the legal or at least the spiritual successors of earlier societies. Without doubt, a certain style of organised pressure politics has emerged from the inspiration of early campaigns by abolitionists, free traders, or political reformers in the early 19th century. The same reasons we are attracted to the study the past parallels in petitions, public

meetings, and parliamentary lobbying reveal that we are bringing a particular definition of campaigning into our history. This model of membership-backed, largely London-based campaigning is rather genteel, respectable, and, then as now, usually led by privileged white men. We admit therefore that our self-imposed remit is narrow not only in the location and time-period, but also in the breadth of campaigning we consider.

In selecting case studies we did however try to avoid too narrow a focus. We looked to Jim Phillips's work on the miners' strike, for example, to include collective labour in our study of campaigning. We encouraged Lucy Delap to consider the long succession of different campaigns for homosexual equality which won piecemeal victories. We also welcomed Sarah Richardson's decision to take a long-run view of women's citizenship rather than focusing on the well-known period of suffragist activism at the turn of the 20th century.

However, we readily accept that both contemporary and historical ideals of political campaigning tend to focus on groups which engage with the state and, at least generally, play by the rules of representative government. Direct action and civil disobedience do feature in our case studies, and the tactical and strategic value of challenging wider social norms is one of the things we asked each historian to do; but our focus on campaigns with defined objectives privileges legislation as the outcome and restricts our terms of reference.

In the end, we felt that the challenge of bridging the gap between academic historians and professional campaigners required us to confine the scope of the topics we would discuss. That is an inevitable feature of selecting case studies and offering up any definition which cuts across different histories. Our historians all highlight the extent to which campaigns included broader popular support and included female activism. However, in many cases, the well-documented, influential roles of rich men predominate, and that reflects the patriarchal nature of British society in the past two centuries – as the women studied by Jane Jordan and Sarah Richardson argued.

Perhaps most perniciously, our focus on campaigning within British politics risks making British history insular, shorn of its powerful colonial and international influences. This is not to say that Britain's imperial past is ignored in our case studies; it is there in the humanitarian campaign against slavery or the conflict over Ireland's place in the United Kingdom; and Malcolm Chase pays attention to the support of William Cuffay, a 19-century black Briton, for Chartism. Yet it is revealing that Chartism – a popular, unauthorised movement for working-class men to get the vote – had a more racially diverse leadership than the more respectable campaigns we examine as case studies. Our greatest regret, in reflecting on the design of this project and our own campaign to recruit willing historians to volunteer for it, is our failure to include a case study of black British campaigns against racism in the second half of the 20th century. The Runnymede Trust's recent publication of *How Far Have We Come? Lessons from the 1965 Race Relations Act* (2015) took a long view of precedents and impacts of that seminal equalities legislation, and we hope our readers will consult it in addition to the histories we examine here.

We were keen to select case studies which stretched across the politics of the past and did not just come from a pantheon of trail-blazers worshiped by campaigners today. Our campaigners, while differing on many issues, generally come from organisations perceived to be progressive. We did not think our case studies should just come from causes which won and formed part of the march of progress in modern Britain. Rather, we asked Lawrence Black to write about Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers and Listeners' Association in order to reveal how she mounted an insurgent, grassroots campaign against elite liberalism. Similarly, we asked Luke Blaxill to consider the campaign against – not for – Irish Home Rule in the later 19th century. That is also an example of a campaign which caused a realignment in the composition of Britain's political parties, and so highlights the ways campaigns fit into – rather than transcend – party politics.

The selection of historical case studies for our campaigners was a creative exercise which inevitably shaped their engagement

with the past. The inclusion or exclusion of particular campaigns would be likely to generate a different discussion and hence, in the campaigners' reflections, different insights. We are well aware of the deficiencies, perhaps the impossibilities, of the choices we made, but we are deeply grateful to the generosity and expertise of the historians who were willing to distil their nuanced, scholarly research into short, readable summaries.

### **Choosing your historians**

In commissioning the essays, I asked my fellow academics to ensure they wrote a summary of their interpretation of why a campaign succeeded or failed, rather than a bland summary of events. Yet, when politicians, policymakers and the broader public turn to history, they tend to want to know the facts. In critiquing popular histories on television or the cinema screen, historians can fall into a similar trap of fact-checking the number of buttons on a particular uniform at Waterloo or the variety of turnip used at Henry VIII's court.

Such approaches can get lost in style over substance; Napoleonic dress and Tudor turnips do not have a direct impact on the interpretation of history presented. Facts and evidence matter, but so does the interpretation you draw from them. How we interpret, balance, or emphasise contradictory evidence, generating causes and explanations from diverse sources pointing in different direction, is the cause of arguments. Historians necessarily offer their own interpretations, not least because we are fallible and we disagree amongst ourselves. Sometimes, we find that a previous researcher fell for a lie disseminated by somebody creating our historical sources with an intention to deceive; more often, we disagree over how representative or insightful a set of sources really are, and draw different conclusions over why things happened the way they did.

In this way, historians can disagree over the validity of data or evidence, but we are more often bickering over the precise significance of, or relationship to draw between, our sources. We are ultimately measured against a barometer of plausibility in the



eyes of fellow scholars, rather than any certainty. Many experimental scientists would probably admit that this is also true of their work too, though their ability to vary and repeat processes to produce or reproduce data, or check the statistical confidence of their results, gives them greater comfort than historians can ever imagine. All of this points to the fact that, before we start to apply lessons from the past in the present, we must recognise that we cannot all even agree on what actually happened in the past. Although we have a host of scholarly conventions for sharing our research – which we have avoided for the present purposes, you will be pleased to learn – historians are often equivocal and promiscuous in the methodologies they follow. Scholars in literary studies or the social sciences often laugh at historians' traditional lack of concern for applying theory. Yet, in choosing how to balance particular factors and judge why history happened the way it did, we are making judgements based on our own perspectives, approaches and prejudices, with only our peers and our readers to act as juries.

This is to say that historians' interpretations can never be definitive. Just as campaigners might draw different lessons from the same historian's essay, so fellow historians would have written each essay differently. My explanation of abolitionism or Henry Miller's account of the Anti-Corn Law League will differ, sometimes radically, from what other scholars have written. That creates big problems if we think studying the past will generate formulae or to-do-lists to guide future success for campaigners seeking particular goals. However, that is not the way I find it helpful to look into the past.

### **Translating past into present**

Instead of looking for lessons from history – mistakes to avoid repeating – I think we should consider how history sharpens our understanding of our own challenges. Even if our understanding of history were perfect, we would still need to know what the parallels are to apply lessons from the past to the present. It often feels as if politicians and policymakers raid the past for

comforting proof of their prejudices, making rival claims of historical parallels. How often have you heard people referring to the appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s or the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as definitive proof of their preference for action or inaction?

We face multiple problems in knowing what kind of parallel is the right one, since changing contexts with even subtle differences can generate different results. Just as we cannot repeat a moment in history to see how things would turn out differently with a few changes, so it is impossible to divine which particular lessons or factors will give us success today. Anyone who offers to tell you the laws of history is really just telling you what their contemporary preference is.

This does not mean our enterprise is in vain. It just means that we have to work harder – but perhaps gain more – than absorbing the abstracts of historians' research conclusions. Thinking about why a campaign triumphed in the past helps alienate us from our expectations and prejudices in the present. Stepping outside our own time makes us think critically about the principles of successful campaigners even when they campaigned on very different issues and in very different circumstances those of today.

Often a particular case study or explanation will highlight a factor we had not properly considered in the present. If we want to understand a social or political problem, whether now or then, we need to step back and see how it really works – and whether we approach it with assumptions anchored in our own experience. In this approach, we cannot use the past as a laser to point out the precise path we should follow. Rather, history is like a mirror which lets us see ourselves and understand our own time from new angles.

On this basis we asked all our historians to structure their essays around themes which would allow us to make comparisons and think about the variety, not the similarity, of these campaigns. All of our historians, then, consider the focus of the campaign they have studied: what was it trying to achieve? In doing so, they give us a sense of how well defined a campaign was. In some cases, as in Lucy Delap's study of homosexual equality,

we can see a series of debates linked by different generations of activists and slowly achieving cultural and legal acceptance for same-sex love. In other cases, such as Jane Jordan's examination of opposition to the Contagious Diseases Acts, multiple organisations emerged very quickly in response to particular legislation by the British Government.

One of the most striking things about the case studies is the variety of ways in which they did – or did not – challenge the status quo. We therefore asked historians to think about what campaigners challenged about their own societies and how far they repurposed or deployed traditions. The Chartists imagined extending the vote to every man in Britain, regardless of their wealth and property; yet some of their arguments for this rested on patriarchal assumptions about a husband's role as head of a household, and women's suffrage did not get a look-in. Abolitionists, who in 50 years transformed their country from the world's leading slave trader to an empire without slaves, claimed Europeans' racial and cultural superiority as one of the justifications for why African slavery was not an extension of unfree labour and serfdom common in pre-modern societies. In many cases, these were not tactical choices of moderation and complicity, but examples of how many ideas remained rooted in the broader assumptions of their own time.

Related to this, we asked the historians to consider what the campaigners were up against: did they seek to propose new and surprising changes? Or did they uphold some tradition against new developments? Stemming from this, we find big differences in historical campaigns' opponents. At first, Chartists or gay rights activists were up against received traditions – though, as we will see, these were challenged as those traditions were being applied in new ways. By contrast, abolitionists and the miners challenged specific, organised opponents – West Indian merchants or coal industry bosses.

In thinking about the methods of campaigners, many of the historians naturally consider how far they built alliances within government or 'the establishment'. Jim Phillips identifies the

lack of support beyond a shrinking numbers of unionised miners and their families as the political failure of the miners' strike. By contrast, Henry Miller finds the Anti-Corn Law League developing insurgent electoral campaigns and pressure tactics at the same time that establishment politicians warmed to free-trade ideas. Lucy Delap confirms Mary Whitehouse's prejudices against establishment liberals, since the Church of England and the Government tended to run ahead of public opinion in accepting the claims of gay rights advocates. This question is familiar to political scientists, who study how modern campaign groups struggle to straddle the different expectations of an outsider appeal for public outrage and an insider appeal to civil servants and politicians in power.

In considering methods, our case studies offer competing evidence for campaigners seeking solace in compromise or purity. On the one hand Chartists and abolitionists mustered some solidarity behind their overall objectives, despite tactical differences. By contrast opposition to the Contagious Diseases Act and support for women's votes were spread across rival organisations, and there were ideological as well as personal differences between their leaders. Historians differ, in different case studies, on whether violence or law-breaking advanced those campaigns which embraced such weapons.

Finally, we asked our historians to explain the outcome of the campaigns they studied. It is fairly easy to discover whether a law was passed or repealed. But we wanted to think more broadly about whether campaigners developed follow-up demands, whether they slowed or reversed trends which later continued anyway, or whether they are best understood in a long-run change rather than a win-once campaign. These are pertinent questions for campaigners today, whose organisations might be focused around a specific goal, such as Dignity in Dying's calls for assisted suicide legislation, or a broad cultural shift, as in Friends of the Earth's diverse environmentalism.

When the campaigners considered these chapters, they did not find any comforting lessons of the perfect focus, contention,

methods, or outcome which they would apply to their own campaigns. Rather, they found themselves problematising familiar dilemmas in new ways or considering precedents outside their usual frame of reference. At a more mundane level, a few commented on the comfort of seeing how incremental or halting change eventually yielded success for historical campaigns which suffered setbacks too.

History never repeats itself exactly, but studying the past makes us think more clearly about our present. As historians, the authors in this volume have different professional judgements and, I dare say, different politics. However, we can all agree on the value of our experiment with campaigners, and the insights we have gained from hearing campaigners apply our work to their own. At the end of the day, the questions we ask the past are shaped by our questions in the present, and thinking about the reflexive, difficult relationship between understanding of the past and the present is something we all need to do more. By showing our working, in how academics anatomised historical campaigns and how campaigners responded to our essays, we hope to encourage more work of this kind and learn from that ourselves.



# CASE STUDIES



Josiah Wedgwood's famous campaign image of a slave kneeling before an abolitionist.



# Britain's Anti-Slavery Campaigns, 1787-1838

*Richard Huzzey, Durham University*

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## **Focus**

British abolitionism emerged rather suddenly in the 1780s; a growing empire of slaves in the Americas and a leading role in the 18th-century slave trade had previously attracted little serious political challenge. In the British West Indies, tensions between resident slaveholders and slave traders had generated contentious battles over taxation of re-exported captives; in some less prosperous North American colonies, such as Georgia, slavery had been initially banned as an incentive to attract British migrants. The clearest precedent for a challenge to slavery as an institution lay in the Quaker communities of Pennsylvania, focused on the

Delaware Valley, who started to criticise slaveholding and, by 1761, ban slave traders from their Society.

Only a few American Friends went as far as John Woolman in shunning all products involving slave labour at any stage in their production. However, periodic debate of these issues within a religious community eventually stimulated a political challenge to Parliament: in 1783, a group of Friends in London sent a petition to the House of Commons and sustained a modest campaign to insert anti-slave-trade pieces into the periodical press.

Their efforts found little support, however, until they helped found a broader-based Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787. This group included Anglicans, such as Rev. James Ramsay, who had denounced the slave trade based on his own experiences in the Caribbean. Early subscribers included evangelical members of the Clapham Sect, such as Tory MPs William Wilberforce and John Thornton.

The Society also drew on the experience of Granville Sharp, a philanthropist who highlighted the plight of slaves aboard the ship *Zong*, whose crew threw 132 Africans overboard when supplies of drinking water ran low during their 1781 voyage to Jamaica. Sharp had crucially championed the 1772 case of James Somerset, an enslaved man brought from the Americas to England. The judgement of Lord Chief Justice Mansfield in Somerset's case dodged questions about the legality of slavery within England, but forged a widely-held belief that mastery could not be enforced outside of those colonies whose laws positively endorsed the ownership of fellow humans.

Crucially, the Society embraced the young Thomas Clarkson, who had become committed to abolition of the slave trade after answering a 1785 prize essay competition at Cambridge University. Famously, Clarkson realised that the glory he won from his Latin thesis (soon translated into English and published by the committee) was trifling compared to the higher purpose to which he was called by its subject matter.

The choice of essay topic by the University Vice-Chancellor may have owed its inspiration to the religious arguments voiced

by the Quakers and Sharp during these formative years; Clarkson's principal contribution was to see national, public agitation as the best means to secure serious attention in Parliament. Rather than circulating tracts or magazine articles, he set off on tours of the country's leading towns and cities. There, he sought local allies and prepared them to raise petitions at the moments of maximum impact on legislators' deliberations.

Throughout the principal period of public agitation to ban the slave trade, 1787-92, abolitionists made an effort to show that they did not demand – or even support – any law banning slave ownership. Clarkson's instructions to his Scottish emissary, William Dickson, reveal that emancipation was a topic to avoid, along with questions about the exact economic costs of abolition.

Even after the abolition law of 1807, campaigners focused on the peace process with France (through extensive petitioning in 1814), a Slave Registration Act (passed in 1815) to make illegal importation difficult, and further powers for the Royal Navy's campaign to suppress illicit traffickers (throughout the 1820s). Abolitionists had long insisted that abolition of the slave trade would force slave-owners to reduce the high mortality of the sugar colonies by commuting slavery into a gentler, civilising system of labour.

The switch to demanding emancipation and denying any rights of property in human beings did not originate from the anti-slavery movement's London-focused leadership. Their parliamentary leader from the 1820s, the liberal MP Thomas Fowell Buxton, accepted a government focus on 'amelioration', whereby Parliament would ensure colonial compliance with existing legislation and thereby moderate the grossest cruelties in the West Indies.

A radical Leicester dissenter, named Elizabeth Heyrick, published (at first anonymously) her call for *Immediate Not Gradual* Emancipation in 1824. She chastised the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Dominions for accepting merely a statement of intent from the Government. Within a few years, the leaders of the re-named

Anti-Slavery Society had followed her in demanding a Westminster law to terminate slavery, rather than ameliorate it – though they still expected a gradual preparatory programme.

### Contention

The relative absence of any moral censure of Britain's slave trade, before the 1780s, and the economic focus of all legislation concerning it speaks to the radicalism of abolitionists' demands. While 18th-century writers might express distaste for slave dealers and stereotype West Indian whites as degenerate *nouveaux riches*, projects of imperial reform did not contemplate abolition as a political possibility.

Indeed, Britain's Caribbean slave-owners were experienced in manipulating colonial tariffs and laws in favour of their sugar business, thanks to paid agents in London and well-organised MPs voicing their concerns. By contrast, there was no precedent for abolitionism, not least because lobbying for trade regulations or property law was usually confined to those with a clear interest in the proposals.

The campaigners of 1787-92 lacked a traditional economic stake in the slave trade. The West Indian lobby challenged the admissibility of early abolitionist petitions to the House of Commons on the basis that the petitioners had no legitimate interest in the matter they raised. In applying religious concerns to a matter of trade policy, abolitionists expanded – geographically and philosophically – the boundaries of the public interest in colonial affairs.

Indeed, one historian has persuasively argued that, during the American Revolution of 1776-83, blame for the slave trade first became a political liability in rhetorical conflicts over Britons' or colonists' greater love of liberty: partisans on either side of this civil war attributed the tyranny of slaveholding to residents of the other side of the Atlantic.

Abolitionist campaigners broke new ground in demanding recognition of some measure of humanity in enslaved Africans – and especially in representing African domesticity, disturbed by the wars stimulated by European demand for captives. Throughout

the 18th century, sentimental literature and plays had presented the personal tragedy of a captured African (invariably a prince, whose enslavement was therefore especially regrettable to the author). Abolitionists went much further in attacking the entire slave system, especially by challenging the myth that slaves were criminals or prisoners of war, deported to civilised European colonies rather than being executed.

It is a grave mistake to cast abolitionists as early racial egalitarians, however. Repetition of the bible's dictum that 'God hath created all nations of one blood' spoke to the slave trade's murderous blasphemy rather than equality. While 18th century notions of human difference were more fluid and situational than we might expect, in light of later essentialist or biological racism, a strong cultural bigotry could safely use skin colour as a proxy for civilisation or barbarism.

Abolitionists, before and after they turned from the slave trade to slavery, expected their reforms to aid a process of what they thought of as 'civilising' Africans; indeed, one common argument suggested that the slave trade hindered the spread of Christianity in Africa and among black West Indians. Few Britons would have imagined freed slaves rising beyond the status of a poor peasantry.

Indeed, many observers have noted that Josiah Wedgwood's famous campaign image – of a slave kneeling before an abolitionist – embodied their supposed roles of subservience and paternalism. Abolitionist efforts to establish a model colony of freed slaves in Sierra Leone soon fell back on white authority and coercive labour to deliver the desired results.

The successful revolt against French colonial rule in Haiti, by black citizens and slaves, did not offer a welcome model for the British West Indies. Campaigners back in the United Kingdom barely acknowledged slave resistance and rebellion as part of their political struggle; rather, the threat of insurrection might be proffered as a risk inherent in keeping, not ending, slavery in Britain's colonies.

In attacking the slave trade rather than slavery, abolitionists respected hackneyed English traditions about the sanctity

of private property. Parliament enjoyed an established prerogative to regulate trade, even if American rebels had innovatively demanded representation alongside taxation. Even so, slave traders protested the extermination of a business long promoted, not discouraged, by parliamentary activity. Long before abolitionists advocated emancipation, they promoted the abolition of the slave trade and amelioration of West Indian labour regimes precisely because they would transform the nature of slavery. So, abolitionist respect for property rights lay in the eye of the beholder, depending on exactly whether an established trade or the disposability of human property should be honoured.

A broader libertarian tradition, stretching self-consciously back to the 1688 Glorious Revolution, lent itself less ambiguously to abolitionists' appeals. However, campaigners found themselves denying the liberties of free-born English slave traders in defence of the liberties of Africans, and so this familiar language required rather novel deployment. Incisively, Clarkson and other authors drew on widespread suspicion of West Indians to depict slavery as corrupting, debasing, and inimical to British traditions.

Hence, abolitionists consistently portrayed their target (whether the slave trade or slave holding) as a long-term threat to liberties in Britain. Appeals to justice, in this sense, complemented the deep religious terms of anti-slavery campaigning. Though the growth of non-conformist dissent had fractured the Church of England's claims to social hegemony, protestant Christianity remained a common cultural touchstone. In applying selective biblical verse and existing theology to colonial slavery, abolitionists turned old tools to new work.

Some parliamentarians found the providential – almost apocalyptic rhetoric – of evangelicals like Wilberforce to be old fashioned: predictions that abolition would stop God unleashing disasters, such as a war-time victory for France, evoked a waning faith in supernatural interventions.

However, more general expectations about God's natural order in the world allowed campaigners such as Clarkson to fall back on the maxim that what was sinful was impolitic, and vice-

versa. This appeal to moral repulsion and religious duty helped abolitionists dodge their opponent's frequent complaints about the imperial wealth and national hazard involved in ending the slave trade or slavery.

Anti-slavery activists, then, tended to prefer to fight on social, moral and cultural issues, defending economic criticisms in general terms or denying their relevance to a religious duty. When Liverpool merchant James Cropper promoted economic arguments for the productive superiority of free labour in the mid-1820s, he worried those allies who feared empirical tests would be a distraction.

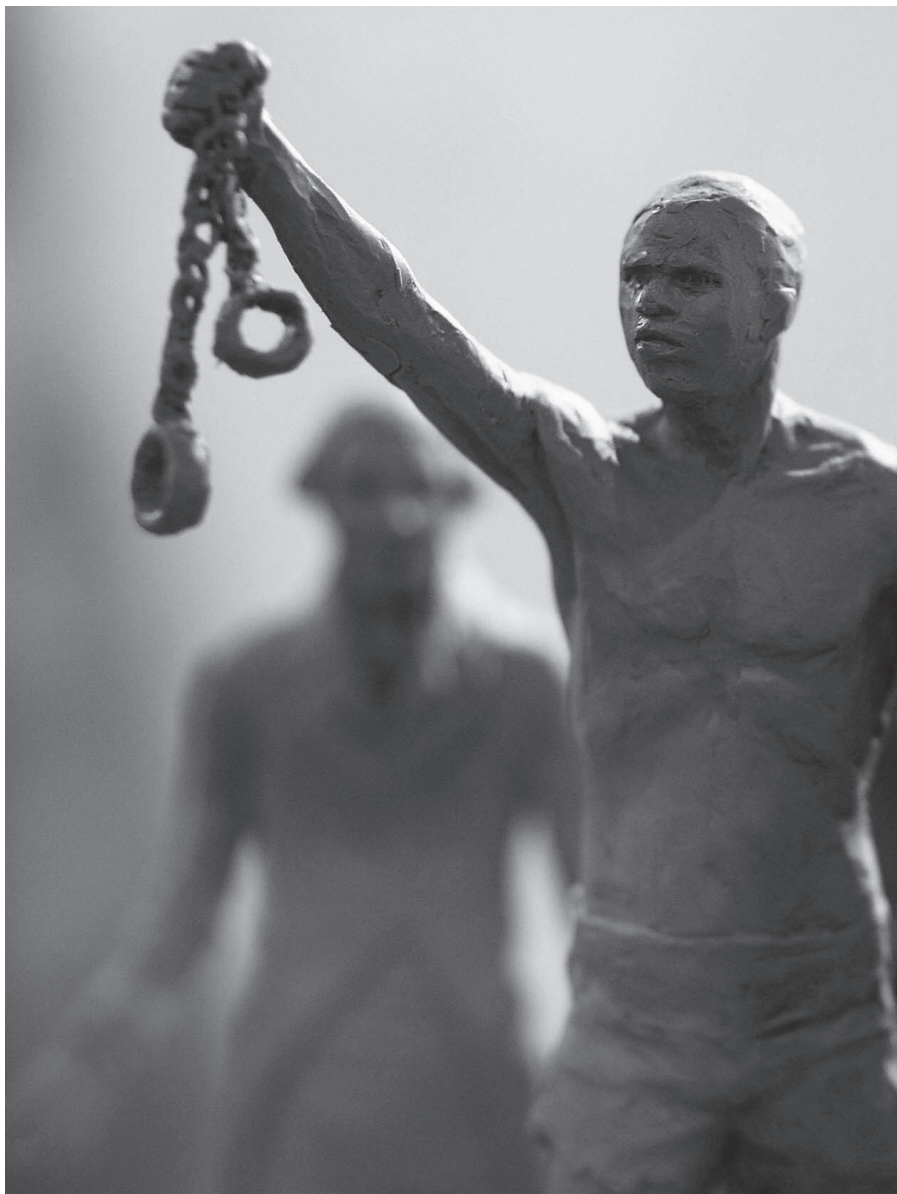
More commonly, abolitionists relied on moral claims to lead; the long-term policy advantages of abolition rested on the assertion that such inhuman cruelty and destruction of life could never be a rational policy. In hindsight, the promiscuity of abolitionist arguments was more of a blessing than a curse, since it produced a range of theologies, ideologies, or priorities with appeals to different constituencies of support.

The religious tenor of abolitionism helped shield campaigners from greater state suspicion that their innovative campaigns posed a subversive or revolutionary threat to the United Kingdom. After 1792, Pitt the Younger's repression banning public meetings in response to the fear of regicidal rebellion spreading across the Channel, killed off abolitionist agitation for the duration of the wars with France. However, the support of respectable local and national elites, together with the subversion of pre-existing mechanisms of loyal dissent, especially petitioning, avoided other reprisals or crackdowns.

In this sense, abolitionists worked within the frame of loyal respectability, adapting existing traditions to achieve a surprisingly radical set of goals. The movement's breadth of support meant that a radical such as Thomas Clarkson could work alongside Wilberforce, a close friend of Pitt and defender of order.

## **Methods**

In 1787, when the Society began its public campaign, abolitionists called for abolition of the slave trade through parliamentary



A maquette of a statue, to be erected in Hyde Park, London, commemorating the enslaved Africans whose lives were lost during the slave trade.





legislation. It is striking how quickly they won their first victory, in the form of Sir William Dolben's 1788 act limiting slave ships to three Africans per ton in a bid to avoid the worst overcrowding (which, parliamentarians acknowledged, might result from news that the trade's future was being debated).

Prime Minister William Pitt proposed a government inquiry in the same year to publicise the facts of the slave trade and resolve disputed facts. The abolitionist victory on his motion to the House of Commons would be a pyrrhic one, since the April 1791 vote on the inquiry's findings rejected abolition by 163 votes to 88. The intervening time had allowed the slave traders and the West India lobby time to offer their own alternative facts and steel MPs against humanitarian demands.

In pressing the interest of all British subjects in the conduct of a particular trade or colonial government, abolitionists already stretched existing norms of popular political participation. Their tactics, in raising such anxieties, stretched the limits of parliamentary sovereignty still further. Drawing on previous outbursts of petitioning in recent decades, such as during the American Revolution or Yorkshire's campaigns for electoral reform, Clarkson and his allies encouraged national petitions to Parliament with tactical timing.

Whatever credit belongs to the London-based Society, the success of abolitionism lies in the provincial communities embracing the cause of slave-trade abolition so suddenly after 1787. Not only did they call meetings to rally inhabitants to petition, but they distributed or developed literature to persuade fellow Britons of their responsibility to end a practice sanctioned by a Parliament which represented all the King's subjects.

For example, in 1789 the group in Plymouth devised and printed a broadside poster featuring the illustrated plan of a Liverpool slave ship, the *Brooks*, with 300 Africans tessellated into the inhuman geometry of a 297-ton ship. They used the horrific image to appeal for funds to subsidise the costs of transporting witnesses to Parliament for Pitt's inquiry. Not only did it conjure the reality of the middle passage better than any prose, but the

accompanying text noted that a second layer of planks held a further 300 in the hold of the Brooks.

This powerful iconography – familiar with us to this day – was paired with Josiah Wedgwood's 'Am I not a man and brother?' cameo image to offer what some scholars consider the first examples of humanitarian visual culture. In texts, abolitionist pamphlets adapted the sentimental tone of 18th-century literature to evoke sympathy for slaves. Plenty of individuals – including Hannah Moore and William Cowper – privately published poetry inspired by the romanticised plight of Africans.

The former slave Oluadah Equiano raised a subscription to publish his *Interesting Narrative* in 1789, often considered the first narrative testimony of slave experience. Though evidence now calls into question the empirical details of his early life – especially his claims to have been trafficked from Africa rather than born in the Americas – Equiano's book is typical of the testimony sought and offered from those with personal experience of Atlantic slavery.

Moreover, parliamentary rejection of abolition in 1791 generated new models of political participation. The radical bookseller Martha Gurney published a pamphlet by William Fox calling on Britons to abstain from the consumption of West Indian sugar and rum, in order to achieve through the shopping basket what elected representations had failed to secure in the lobbies of the Commons. That tone, disrespecting parliamentary deliberation, worried MPs such as Wilberforce and coincided with Pitt's repression of civil disobedience within Britain.

Still, this essay, which identified all consumers as accessories – nay, commissioners – of the crime of slave trading, quickly went through 26 editions. While petitioning had sometimes included men without the parliamentary franchise, abstention from consumer produce involved an even wider range of Britons in direct action: contemporary evidence suggests that many families, led by women's or children's wishes, laid off sugar. Thomas Clarkson later declared that 300,000 families (in a nation of 8 million souls) had participated in the 1790s, though we (and he) have no way of knowing.

This tactic enjoyed further popularity in the 1820s, since Elizabeth Heyrick had placed it at the forefront of her demands for immediate abolition. Unfortunately, when the abolitionist James Cropper invested in alternative South Asian suppliers of sugar (as opposed to complete abstention), he immediately attracted criticism that West Indian emancipation must be a populist front for greedy rival producers.

Anti-emancipationists shunned the populist appeals of their enemies, relying instead on economic and patriotic warnings of disaster. One of their most effective rebuttals involved drawing attention to the conditions of the British poor, supposedly worse off than enslaved Africans. This did not undermine truly popular support for abolitionism, but we should be cautious in assuming anti-slavery campaigners obliterated distinctions of class. Certainly, some committed abolitionists fiercely disliked Tories such as Wilberforce and Pitt. While petitions broadened the political public, especially from the 1820s, the role of women and poorer men remained mediated by husbands or social superiors.

Abolitionists also struggled to avoid tactical splits. At a local level, there is evidence that disagreements over other issues – especially religious controversies such as the emancipation of Catholics – distracted or splintered longstanding anti-slavery alliances. Nationally, a younger group of activists formed an agency committee in 1830 to tour the country, stirring popular pressure on MPs during elections and demanding pledges over how they would vote. While this helped push emancipation into rowdy constituency debates (which traditionally focused on rival candidates' claims to independence and patriotism), it offended parliamentary traditions concerning a deliberative parliament. By 1832, a separate Agency Society split away to campaign for immediate abolition and reject the cautious approach supported by parliamentary emancipationists.

### **Outcome**

While some historians pointed to the rising influence of powerful vested economic interests against West Indian slaveholders,

most scholars now credit the success of anti-slavery campaigns to the impact of popular contention. Even so, the broader economic context and the high politics of elites played pivotal roles in the timing of abolitionist victories, whatever the scale of national support.

The abolition of the slave trade (1807) during the Napoleonic wars came long after the petitioning and abstaining activism of 1787-92. The *de facto* suppression of rival European slave traders by British naval supremacy (after the 1805 battle of Trafalgar) made abolition less risky in the international context. However strong the continuing influence of pre-war popular agitation, the passage of slave-trade abolition illustrated the insider tactics of parliamentarians and campaigners who pushed, first, to abolish the supply of slaves to foreign colonies and, then, to close down Britain's trade entirely.

The Emancipation Act (1833) was more clearly the climax of popular campaigning rather than insider lobbying. In some ways, the tone of the final parliamentary debate reveals the extent of anti-slavery's ideological victory, as opponents felt obliged to frame their points in terms of gradualist caution rather than defending slavery as an institution. Yet, the Whig government and anti-slavery leaders in Parliament sought to see a peaceable, sensible transition from slavery to freedom; they accepted an intermediary stage of so-called 'apprenticeship' for black freed people to work, without wages, for up to six years.

More radical abolitionists, such as those in the Agency Society, opposed the case for £30 million compensation to be paid to West Indian slave owners. While such reparations rewarded – and acknowledged – the sin of owning fellow humans, other campaigners accepted the rights of property or highlighted the nature of colonial slavery as a *national*, not *individual*, sin – something which had long justified abolitionist interest in the sins of their countrymen. Joseph Sturge and other veterans from the Agency Society successfully campaigned for the premature end of apprenticeship in 1838, using the threat of black resistance to terminate this slavery by another name.

Such disagreements mask broader points of consensus over the other terms of Britain's very conservative revolution against slavery. Abolitionists rarely imagined racial equality, but sought the political and religious freedom required for labourers to gradually improve themselves. Criticism of West Indian tyranny over black Britons would re-emerge later in the century, in controversy over the brutal suppression of the 1865 Morant Bay rising in Jamaica. However, the continuing British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society was perfectly comfortable with supporting the expansion of empire in Lagos (1861), the Gold Coast (1872), or Uganda (1892).

While anti-slavery sentiment became a point of patriotic pride in Victorian Britain, few people could agree on what abolitionism meant after emancipation. This made for a confusing clash of competing anti-slaverys, as well as varied attempts to appropriate or monopolise the legacy of a successful campaign. A wide variety of political campaigners aped the tactics of anti-slavery activists, using petitions, propaganda, and parliamentary pressure.

Despite significant female participation during Britain's campaigns, there is no comparably clear link to women's rights activism as we find in the United States; even if Josephine Butler's campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts consciously claimed the Victorian mantle of 'abolitionism', following her anti-slavery father, we have no equivalent of the 1848 Seneca Falls conference held by American women who had met opposing slavery.

In roughly 50 years (1787-1838) abolitionists enjoyed considerable success. But the halting nature of their progress (with a wartime hiatus in 1793-1805 and tactical confusion in 1815-1824) underlines the contingency of this success. Moreover, modern audiences should recognise the limits of anti-slavery – which was not anti-racism or anti-colonialism – and the patchy legacy for popular politics in modern Britain.

## Further reading

Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006)

Nicholas Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-Ownership, Compensation And British Society at the End Of Slavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery* (Macmillan, 2005)

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John Oldfield, *Transatlantic Abolitionism in the Age of Revolution: An International History of Anti-slavery, 1787-1820* (Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759-1815* (Ashgate, 2009)

David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860* (Routledge, 1991)

THE  
**PEOPLE'S CHARTER;**

BEING THE

**OUTLINE OF AN ACT**

TO PROVIDE FOR THE

JUST REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE OF  
GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

IN THE

**COMMONS' HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT:**

EMBRACING THE PRINCIPLES OF

UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE,  
NO PROPERTY QUALIFICATION,  
ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS,  
EQUAL REPRESENTATION,  
PAYMENT OF MEMBERS, AND VOTE BY BALLOT.

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Title page for an edition of the People's Charter published in 1838 or early 1839  
— before the presentation of the first petition.



# Chartism

*Malcolm Chase, University of Leeds*

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## **Focus**

The term Chartism emerged early in 1839 as a descriptor for the largest parliamentary pressure movement in British history. *The People's Charter* (published May 1838) had quickly become the focal point for a mass agitation that sought to complete the work that Magna Carta (1215) had begun, namely the transfer of political power down the social scale. There was nothing new in the Charter's famous six points (a vote for all men aged over 21, no property qualification to become an MP, salaries for all MPs, voting in secret, equal-sized constituencies and annual general elections).

These demands were an established part of radical campaigning. What was new about Chartism? It dwarfed all earlier campaigns in size and vitality. The eye-catching title was a

factor here, but so too was the particular context from which it emerged. The 1832 Reform Act had exploded the conceit that the British constitution was beyond improvement. It was widely believed that the Act was only an initial instalment of parliamentary reform. However, its primary beneficiaries, the Whig Party, were resolute in proclaiming its finality and this strengthened a popular perception that Parliament acted only in the interests of its (largely land-owning) members. Added to this was growing support for the reform of factory working conditions and hours of labour, resentment at recent reforms to the Poor Law, and widespread concern about government handling of trade unionism and of political unrest in the colonies. Over-arching all these factors was a deepening economic recession.

There had been earlier popular campaigns for parliamentary reform but Chartism was different for four principal reasons. First, it was genuinely national, reaching from north east Scotland to west Cornwall. Its mutual dependence with one of the first and most innovative mass-circulation newspapers, the *Northern Star*, was a decisive factor here. Second, it was integrally linked with industrial workers' grievances, to the extent that it has often been characterised as the earliest political expression of mass class-consciousness. Third, it took the well-established tactic of mass-petitioning Parliament to new heights. Fourth, it broadened the repertoire of political campaigning in Britain, through the development of a nationwide popular press, the employment of a professional staff to promote the cause, and by encouraging many of its supporters to get involved in local politics (where qualifications to vote were more generously defined than they were for Parliament).

### **Contention**

Chartism emerged rapidly out of impatience with the 1832 political settlement and existing campaigns for factory reform and against the Poor Law and Whig foreign and trade union policy. From the end of 1837, when *Northern Star* was founded, there was effectively a national movement, though it had as yet neither a central co-ordinating body nor a name. *The People's Charter*

itself was the work of the London Working Men's Association and more specifically its secretary William Lovett, a cabinet maker and socialist. The Association gave serious thought to demanding the vote for women but concluded that this would alienate support and delay universal male suffrage. That, however, did not prevent large numbers of women from lending their support to Chartism, and specifically female associations were a conspicuous feature of the movement in its early years.

Though Chartism did not lack middle-class or rural support, it was primarily a movement of industrial workers. Their perceptions of social and economic injustice increasingly came to the fore in the movement. The Charter was essentially a means to a far wider end: a parliament that would legislate in the interests of the majority of the population. These interests were never conceptualised as confined to regulating working conditions and humanising poor relief. So by 1842 the formal demands of the movement had broadened to include home rule for Ireland, complete religious freedom and an end to all legislative links between the State and the Church of England, abolition of the national debt, the standing army and the civil list, and an end to class bias in the administration of justice.

The 1842 demands were embodied in a petition (Chartism's second) to Parliament signed by more than 3.3 million people (approximately one in three of the adult population). To be a Chartist need mean no more than being in favour of the *People's Charter* and most signatories probably saw themselves as simply demanding the Charter. Detailed discussion of the policies expected of a reformed parliament was the preoccupation of smaller activist core, the size of which is impossible to define. *Northern Star* sold around 50,000 copies weekly at its peak: the widely documented practice of reading the paper aloud in workplaces, and at formal and informal meetings, suggests a core support several times greater than the paper's circulation. (The paper's own estimate in April 1839 was 400,000.)

An organising body to direct the movement's efforts, the National Charter Association (NCA), was not established until the autumn of 1840. Before then systematic coordination was attempted only

between February and September 1839, the duration of a national convention, mainly convened to manage Chartism's first national petition, which was presented that June with 1.3 million signatures. The NCA itself required no more commitment than assent to the six points of the Charter and the payment of a small annual subscription. This subscription base peaked in 1842 at 50,000 but there were numerous localities which only loosely affiliated to the NCA, while organisation in Scotland was largely independent of it.

This looseness was actually a source of great strength: a wide range of opinions existed and even flourished under the Chartist umbrella, notably education reform, temperance, religious radicalism, rural resettlement and land redistribution, the assertion of women's right to the vote, and international solidarity. Chartism also commanded the support of virtually all who belonged to the contemporary socialist movement (commonly called Owenites after its leader Robert Owen). But Chartists were wary of becoming too closely identified with Owenism, primarily because of the latter's atheistic character. The idea that Jesus Christ was in effect the first Chartist, or that a small-producer economy would best achieve economic justice, did not sit comfortably alongside Owenism. Furthermore, Owen's progressive stance on gender roles and, even, sexual relations was seen as inimical to family values and the male breadwinner ideal that were close to the heart of Chartism.

Yet Chartism was anything but socially and politically conservative. The audacity of its demands are difficult to comprehend in 21st-century Britain. We take parliamentary democracy for granted, while until very recent flurries around the Scottish referendum and Labour Party leadership, participation in the political process has been steadily diminishing (as evidenced in electoral turnouts, party activism and membership). However, the challenge Chartism posed to Britain's political, social, and economic elites was fundamental. The French Revolution of 1789 had left the British political establishment profoundly cautious about all concessions to popular opinion. The 1832 Reform Act had been conceded only after two years of strenuous extra-parliamentary agitation, including major breakdowns in civil order

in Bristol and Nottingham. The newly enfranchised middle class in turn showed little appetite for Chartist demands. Though a minority were prepared to support calls for the ballot, for a suffrage based on household headship, and triennial parliaments, the Whig cabinet minister Thomas Macaulay, articulated the more typical view when he argued in the Commons that ‘Universal suffrage would be fatal to all purposes for which government exists’ and ‘utterly incompatible with the very existence of civilisation’. If Parliament were to be elected on the principles of the People’s Charter, ‘how is it possible to doubt that famine and pestilence would come before long to wind up the effects of such a state of things?’

Central to opposition to Chartism was the belief that working men were at best unfit to exercise political judgment and, at worst, intent upon the spoliation of property. It was a commonplace that a government answering to a mass electorate would not long be prepared or able to defend the principles of private property. It is worth noting, therefore, what Chartism did not demand. Though there were Chartists (like Lovett) who regarded themselves as socialists, public ownership of the means of production was not part of the movement’s agenda. Indeed, an important adjunct movement, the Chartist Land Plan (1846-51), aimed to instate its members on smallholdings purchased on the open market with their savings. Chartists demanded a reduction in the tax burden but not a socially progressive tax system. Although the cost of the monarchy was one of the targets of the 1842 petition, criticism of the Crown was never at the forefront of Chartism’s demands. Nor was reform of the House of Lords.

It was to be 1851 before a much shrunken NCA added taxation of land and accumulated wealth, plus ‘gradual land nationalisation by government purchase’ to a range of other social democratic measures. These included free education, a universal old-age pension, state support for producer co-operatives and a reform of employment law. ‘The Charter and something more’ as this programme was usually called, envisaged a modicum of government regulation of industry, but no more.



The Great Chartist Meeting on Kennington Common, organised by O'Connor 1848.



## Methods

It must be stressed, though, that the Chartism of 1851 was not the Chartism of 1839 or 1842. Support for the movement had ebbed during the economic recovery of the mid-1840s, and although it surged forward again during a further economic crisis in 1847-48, the presentation of a third mass petition in April 1848 was premature. The NCA's authority over the national movement had been only partly restored when the petition was presented and the national network of Chartist localities was not fully rebuilt. Amidst leadership claims that 5 or even 6 million had signed, the petition was exposed as having only 2 million signatories. This was hardly desultory, given that the British population itself numbered only around 17 million, but allegations of bluster and wild exaggeration were impossible to shake off.

Critically Parliament, which had at least received the 1842 petition with courtesy, was in no mood to make any sympathetic gestures to radical reformers when continental Europe was in the throes of revolution. In November 1839 Chartism had impressively withstood the impact on its reputation of an attempted rising in South Wales – indeed in 1840 more people petitioned for the leaders of that insurrection to be pardoned than had signed the 1839 petition for the Charter. In 1848 the humiliation of April was followed by the exposure in August of sufficient evidence of a revolutionary conspiracy to tarnish Chartism almost fatally. Petitioning campaigns in 1849 and 1852 yielded only 54,000 and 12,000 signatures respectively. The NCA struggled on until 1858, a minority pressure group for social democratic reform, and it never revived the tactic of petitioning Parliament.

However, this does not detract from Chartism's achievement during its first decade in mobilising an unprecedented level of criticism against the undemocratic nature of the British state. This was in effect Britain's civil rights movement and it had moved society closer to recognising that humanity and dignity are promoted and protected only when government answers to all people and not merely to the propertied. Petitioning was at the heart of movement's approach to campaigning. It is important to emphasise



that these were canvassed petitions: they were not laid down to await the signatures of the already converted as had been, for example, the petitions of the anti-slavery movement. Chartism stood on the cusp of a largely oral popular political culture and the predominantly written culture that emerged during the Victorian period. Canvassing signatures was therefore a multi-layered action, about much more than getting names on a page. Petitions 'parade Chartism in open day', to quote the movement's greatest national leader Feargus O'Connor, 'and bring us under the eye of the heretofore blind'.

Petitioning was a powerful recruitment tool. In every contributing locality – there were almost 1,000 of them in 1839 – canvassing was a major intervention in political life. The petitions made a particular rhetorical claim for legitimacy. Signing constructed the movement, that was 'banded together in one solemn and holy league' but excluded from economic and political power. The subscriptional community created by its petitions were 'the people', a term that clearly included not only men but also women and children. This was a different and wider meaning of the term 'the people' from that used by Chartism's opponents and it was a profound departure.

The Chartists were also the first movement to collect all their local efforts in order to create a single monster petition, whose presentation to Parliament would become a headline-grabbing event. In 1842 all the sheets of signatures were stitched into a single roll of paper, six miles long and weighing over 300kg. Carried by relays of building workers through London's streets, accompanied by an elaborate mass procession, the petition was a powerful visual statement about the iniquities of the electoral system. And it proved too large to fit through doors into the House of Commons. After attempts to dismantle the doorframe failed, the petition had to be disassembled and the sheets heaped onto the floor of the House where it towered above the clerks' table on which, theoretically, it was supposed to be laid. It was a powerful moment of political theatre.

Paradoxically it is doubtful that any Chartist expected petitioning to succeed. There was no lack of commitment to the

strategy, but rejection was widely predicted since one of the central premises of Chartism was that Parliament acted exclusively in the selfish interests of its members and those able to vote for them. So why do it? First, constitutional and legal propriety: extra-parliamentary agitations were hedged around by legal restrictions but meeting to organise a petition evaded most of the prohibitions. These petitions tested Westminster opinion: each was presented to a new parliament (following a general election). What should happen after rejection was a vexed question: but that petitioning was the prerequisite was never contested. Moral suasion, boycotts of taxed goods, general strike, open revolt and sheer pressure of numbers all featured in the various scenarios for which Chartists argued after petitioning failed. But every strategy depended on the mobilisation of mass support. And here the petitions were indispensable.

There were both radical and moderate campaigning factions within Chartism, especially after the events of 1839. Co-operation between those who adhered to at least the principle of direct action (the majority of Chartists) and those who favoured moral persuasion dwindled, although mass petitioning and the People's Charter itself remained powerful unifying forces. This was most vividly demonstrated in 1842 when O'Connor and Lovett (leading figures in these so-called 'physical force' and 'moral force' strands) jointly opposed co-operating with an organisation of middle-class reformers, because the latter insisted on the terminology 'Chartism' and 'People's Charter' being dropped.

Complementing the national petitions (and the micro-political processes that made them possible) was a wide range of lower-level political interventions, designed to maintain support and press Chartism's claims on local and regional elites. Mass occupations of Anglican churches were held in 1839. Meetings of middle-class reformers, notably the Anti-Corn Law League (which promoted free trade as the panacea for economic injustice) were subjected to boisterous disturbance. No less boisterously, Chartists gathered en masse at parliamentary election hustings (the open air meetings, required by law, where candidates were

formally nominated ahead of polling). Here they often proposed their own candidates who would then be elected by a show of hands; and on more than 60 occasions between 1839 and 1859, Chartist candidates actually stood at the poll (Feargus O'Connor sat as Chartist MP for Nottingham, 1847-52).

The most enduring tactic, however, was to participate as Chartist electors, candidates and elected representatives in local politics, where the right to vote was more widely, if still unequally, distributed. The extent of this activity has yet to be fully understood, but it was particularly pervasive in the English midlands and north and it ranged from local highways boards and parochial vestries to local councils and borough corporations. This aspect of Chartism was the cradle from which popular participation in local politics (along with the close canvassing and doorstep politics necessary to prevail) became the norm.

Local political activism also largely defined the occupational groups most committed to Chartism: the declining crafts where jobs were most vulnerable to mechanisation (such as handloom weaving and hosiery knitting), factory workers, and skilled craftsmen who still had considerable autonomy at the workplace, such as shoemakers and printers. Support from urban workers thought of as unskilled and from agricultural workers was far weaker. Journalists and lawyers were disproportionately represented among Chartism's national figures, the most widely and passionately acclaimed of whom was Feargus O'Connor, the presiding genius over *Northern Star* as well as one of the most accomplished public orators of the early Victorian age.

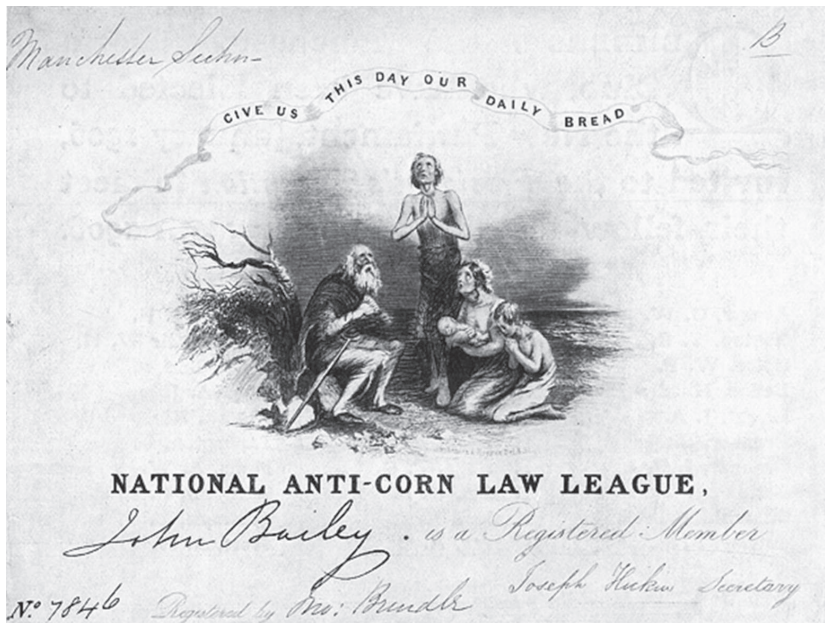
### **Outcome**

The broad social democratic programme adopted (as we saw) by the National Charter Association in 1851 did not stem the decline of Chartism. The organisation held its last national convention in 1858. It was a muted affair compared to that of 1839, albeit one that at last recognised the case for co-operation with middle-class radicals. The Chartists failed to achieve any of the six points of the People's Charter. Universal male suffrage became

a reality only in 1918 and the possibility of securing annual parliaments is as chimerical now as it was in 1838. It is important to register that annual parliaments were as integral to the Chartists' demands as universal male suffrage, intended to create a practical and direct representative democracy in which MPs would be the mandated delegates of their constituents, rather than effectively unaccountable and carefully managed by party machines.

Yet Chartism was characterised by a multiplicity of small victories. Although Parliament rebuffed all demands for the Charter, from the mid-1840s legislation that was more obviously in the national interest rather than that of the landed classes became increasingly prominent. The worst effects of the Poor Law were also ameliorated by local pragmatism (not least because of Chartist pressure). Participation in the movement generated the social capital that individual Chartists took forward into successful participation in local politics, in the emerging Liberal Party, campaigning journalism, and in voluntary organisations (notably trade unions, consumer co-operation and independent working-class education).





National Anti-Corn Law League membership card.

# The Anti-Corn Law Campaign

*Henry Miller, Durham University*

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## **Focus**

The campaign for free trade emerged in the early 19th century and focused on opposition to the Corn Laws, the statutes that regulated the import, export and internal trading of grain (wheat, oats, barley and rye). The Corn Laws had existed since the 17th century but became increasingly controversial because of the tariff placed on foreign corn to protect domestic agrarian farmers. The Corn Laws created a fundamental tension between agricultural interests (including landowners who still dominated the political elite) and the growing urban populations of the manufacturing districts.

At the end of the wars with France in 1815, Parliament passed a new corn law that imposed a very high tariff on foreign corn,

designed to effectively prohibit imports. The 1815 Corn Law was a concession from a parliament and government dominated by landowners to farmers, who had borne much of the burden of wartime taxation. As Britain had been at war almost continuously during the previous century, ministers were also nervous about what we would today call food security. They argued that government policy should encourage domestic food production and Britain should avoid being reliant on other countries for its food supply.

However, Britain was rapidly urbanising at this time and the 1815 Corn Law was unpopular in many of the large industrial areas. A disproportionate part of the average diet consisted of wheaten bread and critics argued that the Corn Laws increased the price of bread for ordinary people. Opponents also argued that landowners had abused their political power to pass a measure to protect their own economic interests: the Corn Laws were intended to keep farmers' grain prices high, enabling them to pay high rents to their landlords. The Corn Law was revised in 1822 and 1828, substituting the high prohibitory tariff for a sliding scale of duties on foreign corn, which changed depending on the average price of domestic corn.

By the late 1830s, opposition to the Corn Laws was well-established in many urban areas, but was uncoordinated and ineffective. This was even though conditions were now more favourable to campaigners than ever before. The 1832 Reform Act had given greater weight to urban areas within the political system, and from 1830-41 the Whig party (aristocratic liberals) were in power, who were less wedded to the Corn Laws than were their Conservative rivals. In 1836 an Anti-Corn Law Association was formed by metropolitan radicals in London, but it proved short-lived and lacking in focus.

The establishment of the Manchester-based Anti-Corn Law League in 1838 was a major turning point. The League acted as the fulcrum for the free trade campaign until the abolition of Corn Laws in July 1846. The goal was the 'immediate and total abolition' of the Corn Laws, the wording deliberately echoing the



successful anti-slavery agitations. The League maintained a singular focus on the Corn Laws. Crucially, this allowed the League to avoid divisions and successfully mobilise a broad coalition on the very narrow question of the Corn Laws. The League consistently refused to take up other causes such as political reform, fearing that this would encourage division and dilute the focus of the campaign. While the League welcomed proposed revisions to the Corn Laws by the Whig and Conservative governments in 1841 and 1842 respectively, as steps towards free trade, they did not cease campaigning for total and immediate abolition.

If abolition of the Corn Laws was the immediate objective of the League, the broader aim was to promote global free trade. The ideas articulated by the League and its leader Richard Cobden, envisaged a world where nations freely traded with each other and became more economically interdependent, promoting international peace and prosperity. Cobden argued that free trade (principally understood as the removal of tariffs) would benefit consumers and producers. Consumers, above all the working classes, would gain from cheaper prices. The abolition of the Corn Laws would encourage Britain to import food from other countries, selling its manufactured goods in return. Export-led economic growth would lead to increased employment and higher wages to meet demand. The League's vision of global free trade, then, was largely of the state withdrawing to play a neutral role, rather than favouring particular economic interest groups. Barriers and obstacles to what the League referred to as the 'natural laws' of supply and demand were to be removed. As they often argued, this would enable consumers to buy goods in the cheapest market, and producers sell to their labour in the dearest market.

### **Contention**

The free trade campaign combined three distinct components that are perhaps rarely found in the same campaign. This explains why the campaign has been presented in very different lights by scholars. The values and norms challenged (or not challenged) by

the anti-corn law campaign depend on which of these strands is given more emphasis.

First, many of the free trade campaigners were masters of the dispassionate, cool language of economics and trade statistics. At a time, when the 'natural laws' of political economy were increasingly influential among policy-makers, parliamentarians, and opinion-formers, this gave the campaign credibility with these audiences. When giving evidence to parliamentary committees, speaking in Parliament or writing pamphlets, free traders used this language, which had an objective, neutral and disinterested tone. Unlike protectionists, who plainly appealed as a vested interest deserving special treatment, free traders used abstract reasoning to argue that their policy was in the national interest. An important aspect of this element of the campaign was the founding of *The Economist* (subsidized by the League), to promote free-trade ideas. The League was much more comfortable with the dry language of economic reasoning than its more passionate protectionist and Chartist rivals who were much more critical of the 'natural laws' of political economy.

Second, the League has often been regarded as a business lobby group as it was dominated by industrialists connected with the Lancashire cotton trade. However, this meant that free traders could speak with authority about the impact of the Corn Laws in manufacturing areas. The campaign began during an unprecedented economic depression (1837-42) when people were looking for explanations for the unpredictable boom-and-bust cycles of early industrial capitalism. By blaming the Corn Laws for restricting foreign trade, free traders offered a diagnosis and a remedy for contemporary economic distress. While workers would benefit from increased wages, employment and cheaper prices, employers were attracted to free trade by the promise of greater access to overseas markets. Although business is today viewed as an insider group, at the time many of these provincial industrialists, shut out of most of the metropolitan centres of power, viewed themselves as outsiders.

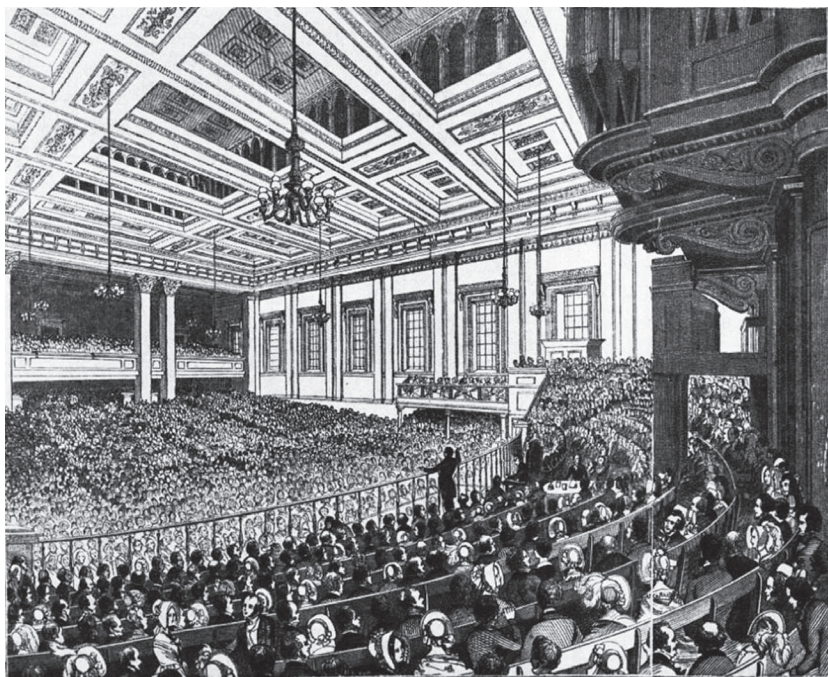
Third, alongside the technocratic and business-friendly aspects, the free-trade campaign had a strong moral, human-

itarian and religious dimension. The universal moral appeal of free trade, particularly in terms of promoting peace, was especially attractive to religious congregations. Like the anti-slavery campaign, the League mobilised the energies of religious congregations, especially women, and in 1841 held a series of highly publicised conferences of religious ministers in England, Scotland and Wales. The use of emotive religious rhetoric presenting the Corn Laws as contrary to God's will was frequent in free trade speeches and petitions.

Anti-corn law campaigners faced powerful opposition and hostile interests. In particular, most of the political elite who held power in government and Parliament were landowners and the abolition of the Corn Laws seemed to go against their economic interests. After 1841 the strongly protectionist Conservative party was in power with a large majority in the House of Commons, and even more dominant in the Lords. Protectionists, particularly farmers, organised a counter-campaign that drew great strength from agricultural areas.

At the same time, the League faced competition for popular support from the Chartist campaign for democratic reforms. The League struggled to dispel the suspicion of many Chartists that the free-trade campaign was a manufacturers' conspiracy to lower wages. Tensions between the League and Chartists were often sharpest in industrial areas, reflecting deeper antagonisms between employers and workers. While some free traders sought to develop a compromise programme to appeal to working-class radicals, the League refused to adopt political reform as part of its official policy. This was even though the League's critique of the Corn Laws admitted that the political system allowed landowners to abuse their legislative power.

Free trade may not appear to be a radical idea now, but at the time it was untested and untried. Although it was gaining ground among the intellectual elite, it's debatable whether a purely intellectual campaign would have led to the abolition of the Corn Laws within a short period of time. Finally, while free trade was couched in the language of political economy, it offered a far more



A meeting of the Anti-Corn Law League in Exeter Hall in 1846.

optimistic view of economic growth. This was a significant break with the pessimistic, even fatalistic, views of many policy-makers at the time – essentially that economic depressions were ordained by God and little, or nothing, could be done to alleviate them.

## Methods

The League's strategy relied on securing abolition of the Corn Laws within the existing political system. The League always maintained an official independent, non-party stance (although in practice many free traders were Liberals in politics). The League exploited and perfected the tactics developed by earlier campaigns, while also pioneering new methods. In the early phase of the campaign (1838-43) free traders sought to educate public opinion through the mass dissemination of print, public meetings and lectures, and then mobilise popular support through the mass petitioning of Parliament. Taking advantage of new printing technologies, railways and cheap postage the League distributed huge quantities of tracts and pamphlets. Between 1839 and 1843 more than 17,194 anti-corn law petitions were sent to the House of Commons, containing over 6.2 million signatures. The League sought to maximise the number of signatures and petitions, encouraging large petitions from the big cities but also petitions from workshops, religious congregations, villages, and other smaller communities. At times, free traders also petitioned Queen Victoria, particularly through female petitions appealing to her as a woman.

Dissatisfied with the slow progress of change and faced with a Conservative Government, after 1843 the League sought to change Parliament through a policy of electoral pressure. This meant getting free-trade MPs elected and exerting pressure on existing MPs to convert to free trade. The League ran candidates at by-elections against the two main parties and, exploiting loopholes in the voter registration system, enrolled free traders as electors and got protectionists removed from registers. As part of this change in strategy, the League sent more than 5 million anti-corn law pamphlets to electors, the first example of a national mailshot targeted specifically at voters. After 1843 the League also

began campaigning in agricultural areas, attacking the strongholds of the protectionists. The Corn Laws were abolished in 1846 before the League's policy was ever tested at a general election.

To fund the electoral strategy, the League embarked on huge fundraising drives, bringing in £50,000 (£2.2m at 2005 prices), £100,000 (£4.4m) and £250,000 (£11m) in consecutive years from 1843. Much of this came from subscriptions from the businessmen who formed the core of the free trade campaign, but also through innovative new techniques. In 1843 and 1845, free trade bazaars were held in Manchester and London, where products and goods linked to the campaign were sold to raise funds. The London bazaar raised £35,000.

The free-trade campaign was remarkably united over tactics and strategy; there were few dissenters from the goal of total and immediate abolition. Some free traders split off in 1842 in a failed attempt to form a cross-class campaign for abolition of the Corn Laws and political reform, but otherwise there were few secessions. While the League projected an increasingly respectable face after 1843 as it sought to impress parliamentarians and middle-class opinion, in its earlier phase it had contemplated direct action. In the depths of the depression in 1841-42 League propaganda whipped up popular feeling against the Corn Laws and many of its lecturers became notorious for their demagogic style. When a strike wave broke out in industrial areas in the summer of 1842, many commentators and the Government believed that free-trade employers had been complicit. Ultimately, the League's enormous financial resources gave it more options in terms of tactics and strategy than poorer campaigns. Privately, however, the League was willing to get its hands dirty. Ruffians were hired to beat up Chartist hecklers who interrupted free-trade meetings and the League was willing to bribe electors in close by-election contests. Publicly the League was wary of being associated with disorder or violence, believing this would discredit it in the eyes of the public, politicians and middle-class supporters.

The campaigners comprised a broad coalition. The leaders, including Cobden, were mostly businessmen drawn from Lanca-

shire and other industrial areas. These people were the core of the free trade campaign, and much of the unity of the campaign can be attributed to the similar geographical and social background of the leadership. Paid agents and lecturers were important in organizing the campaign on the ground, while the League also paid a number of charismatic lecturers like George Thompson and William Johnson Fox to speak at its big, set-piece meetings in Covent Garden Theatre. Religious ministers and congregations were important as activists and supporters and much of the emotional intensity and energy of the campaign came from this source. The free-trade campaign offered opportunities for female participation in politics, albeit in a subordinate role to men. Middle-class women, often the wives or daughters of members of the League, were key figures in canvassing and signing petitions and organising fundraising events, particularly the bazaars.

The strongholds of free trade were urban, industrial provincial Britain, but the campaign had influential intellectual support in the circles of power, particularly among officials at the Board of Trade. A small number of Whig peers and radical and liberal MPs were committed free traders, even if they were unsympathetic to some of the League's campaigning methods. Free trade was advocated by much of the liberal and radical press in London and the provinces, while intellectual support came from some of the heavyweight periodicals of the time such as the *Edinburgh Review*.

### **Outcome**

The Corn Laws were abolished in 1846 by the Conservative Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel, splitting his own party. The Irish potato famine was ostensibly the reason for Peel's conversion to free trade, but his motives have long been debated. Some have argued that Peel had long privately planned to abolish the Corn Laws in any case and regardless of the League's pressure. The Victorians generally gave the League the credit for the abolition of the Corn Laws, but its impact on politicians remains debated. What is clear is that the anti-corn law campaign won the battle for public opinion against protectionists. While 1846 was hailed

as the victory of free trade, in fact the Corn Laws were phased out over three years and a nominal duty on imported corn was retained after 1849. However, the abolition of the Corn Laws was followed up by other free-trade measures and when a minority Conservative Government in 1852 refused to bring back protection for agriculture, the triumph was complete. Politicians vied with each other to protest their free trade credentials and remove other taxes on articles of working-class consumption. Another legacy of the campaign was the notion that the state should be fiscally neutral and not favour particular economic interest groups. After 1846 free trade had an unassailable parliamentary majority and such was its popularity that as a policy it survived the revival of a powerful protectionist campaign in the early 20th century. Indeed, free trade was only formally abandoned as public policy in 1932.

Free trade became firmly entrenched in public policy but also in public opinion as a result of the anti-corn law campaign. The League's repertoire of tactics such as mass petitioning, electoral pressure, and fundraising, were widely imitated by later campaigns, although few could match the financial resources at its disposal. Yet it is revealing that other campaigns led by Cobden and his allies for non-sectarian state education, peace, land reform, and financial and parliamentary reform, struggled to replicate the success of the League, although they employed much the same tactics. A couple of points seem relevant here in explaining the success of the free-trade campaign compared to these later agitations.

First, the free-trade campaign was essentially a negative attack on an unpopular policy. The League could dominate the campaign, achieve unity and mobilise a broad coalition with a narrow focus and a simple, clear objective. Other issues were more complicated, and the education and parliamentary reform plans were far from being the only proposals that were in circulation at the time. Putting forward a detailed plan in such cases invariably led to criticisms, objections and defections. Second, the issue of the Corn Laws brought together different strands that enabled free



traders to appeal to different audiences both among the public, policy-makers, and the business community. The peace campaign appealed to the moral and humanitarian sentiments of religious free traders, but less the hard-headed businessmen who by the 1850s had come to believe that Britain should use force to open up overseas markets in China and elsewhere. Third, and more positively, the free-trade campaign was successful because it won the battle of ideas with opponents and offered a compelling explanation of current problems and a solution to them. Free traders and the League crafted a persuasive, optimistic appeal capable of being reworked to different audiences in different languages.

Finally, the League mobilized the broadest and largest possible coalition of support on the narrowest point.

For a number of reasons the League has a well-deserved reputation as a formidable and successful campaign. It built on and perfected existing forms of campaigning, such as mass petitioning and dissemination of print, and took them to new heights. At the same time, the League pioneered new forms of political campaigning, such as targeted mailshots to electors, electoral pressure, and innovative fundraising schemes. Finally, the League appealed to and mobilised a variety of constituencies, all of whom played a vital part of the campaign.

Josephine E. Butler leader  
of the Ladies' National  
Association for the  
Repeal of the Contagious  
Diseases Acts.



# The Campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts

*Dr Jane Jordan, Kingston University*

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## **Focus**

In 1864, in response to pressure from the War Office, the Government introduced a temporary piece of legislation designed to control the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among the armed forces. This law demanded the registration and examination of prostitutes working in and around 11 garrison towns and naval ports. Two further Contagious Diseases (CD) Acts, in 1866 and 1869, extended the province of the original legislation to cover 18 towns and cities, the majority in the south of England. Undoubtedly, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among the British Army and Navy had reached alarming proportions (as

evidenced by the statistics compiled by army doctors in attendance during the Crimean War a decade earlier). However, the Government's response was to treat the spread of syphilis purely as a sanitary issue. Moreover, the legislation applied to one sex only; the prostitutes themselves (or women the police believed to be prostitutes) were to undergo regular examination and, if necessary, quarantine while they underwent medical treatment. Similar examinations of their male clients were never seriously considered. Thus the legislation had the effect of a guarantee of security from disease to those men stationed in areas subject to state regulation: any male civilian living in or visiting these areas could also take advantage of knowing that registered prostitutes, or 'Government Women' as they became known, were 'clean'.

The CD Acts were, to a degree, modelled on a system of regulation already established in several European countries and which applied to the civil population, not just the armed services. Opponents were justified in their fears that the British Government might be persuaded to extend state regulation to the whole of the British Isles. As early as 1866 the Harveian Medical Society (with the backing of *The Lancet*) supported the extension of the CD Acts to cover the whole population.

A National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts was founded in the autumn of 1869 at the Social Science Congress, but its leadership was exclusively male. Within weeks, a sister organisation, the Ladies' National Association (LNA), was launched in recognition of the fact that since the CD Acts punished women only it was crucial for women to publicly speak out on behalf of their own sex. The LNA was fortunate in its choice of leader: Josephine E Butler, the wife of a Liverpool headmaster, who for several years had rescued prostitutes and understood the economic causes of prostitution. Butler was one of the architects of the LNA manifesto, 'The Ladies' Appeal and Protest', signed by 124 women, including Florence Nightingale, which was published in the *Daily News* on 1 January 1870. A copy was eventually delivered to Parliament with an accompanying petition bearing the signatures of 2,000 women.

The political goal of the campaign was the unconditional repeal of the CD Acts. The case for repeal can be condensed thus: the Acts were ineffective in preventing the spread of disease, and were, moreover, immoral, unjust and unconstitutional. The CD Acts were impractical in a medical sense given that the soldiers and sailors who frequented brothels were not themselves examined (in other words, a diseased client remained at liberty to infect other prostitutes – even his own wife – unless he chose to seek medical treatment voluntarily). Repealers were able to argue that the European system of regulation had not reduced the spread of syphilis, nor had it raised morals – rather, regulation could be regarded as having actively encouraged immorality: prostitutes were denied the opportunity of reforming (if diseased, they were treated in order that they might continue their trade), and were therefore condemned to a life of sin. Furthermore, it became Josephine Butler's belief that state regulation, to use a modern term, de-sensitised men to prostitution and led some to seek out more dangerous pleasures and ever younger victims – hence the physical brutality shown towards Indian prostitutes used by the British Army in India (see below) and the rise in sexual assault cases involving children in Britain's cities.

However, early on, opponents of the CD Acts learnt that it was futile to depend on the support of medical men. In 1872 the National Association delivered a petition to the Home Secretary, Henry Austin Bruce, signed by 50 physicians and surgeons opposed to the CD Acts; medical men in favour of regulation responded with their own petition signed by 1,000 doctors. In fact, for campaigners the efficacy of the Acts in containing or reducing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases was not by any means a primary concern; they demanded that politicians look beyond prostitution as a sanitary issue and instead examine its root causes and the moral and constitutional implications of state regulation.

Repealers argued that the CD Acts were unjust in that they punished women only, and working class women specifically (since only they could be picked off the streets by the police). Moreover, the Acts failed to recognise that there were many moral gradations

between the chaste woman and the prostitute. The arresting police officer was only required to suspect a woman of being what was termed a 'common prostitute'. Campaigners tried to gain capital from publicising miscarriages of justice involving innocent women (single women were particularly vulnerable; so, too, those known to co-habit with men) who were coerced into signing the police register against their will and thus, unjustly, criminalised.

Repealers also made the case that the CD Acts were unconstitutional in that accused women were denied trial by jury. A woman suspected of being a 'common prostitute' could be arrested and forced to sign the police register and so-called 'voluntary submission' form (in other words, such women were *required* to incriminate themselves) and undergo a fortnightly examination. Any woman who denied that she was a prostitute and/or refused the examination could be imprisoned on the say-so of a single magistrate until she did sign. Furthermore, a registered prostitute found to be diseased was effectively imprisoned in the local lock hospital where she would undergo a course of treatment for a maximum of nine months; she could only be released on the authority of the police surgeon. As Butler herself put it, the repeal campaign was becoming 'more and more a fight on the part of us women for our *bodies*'. Butler would dedicate her legal analysis of the CD Acts, *The Constitution Violated* (1871), 'to the Working Men and Women of Great Britain'.

### **Contention**

The repeal campaign drew attention to the central premise of the CD Acts, which was legislation underpinned by an adherence to the *sexual double standard* – that is, the notion that gendered difference is inseparable from sexual (i.e. biological) difference. Thus, male sexual infidelity, even promiscuity, came to be regarded as natural (a forgivable, venial sin), whereas female sexual desire was deemed unnatural (unpardonable) unless legitimised by and contained within monogamous marriage and child-bearing. Indeed, the sexual double standard underpinned pretty much all legislation affecting married women under British law. Applied to

prostitution, the sexual double standard led to a central paradox: in industrialised Britain, prostitution had come to be perceived as a very real social necessity given the rising age at which aspiring middle class men chose to marry, yet it was also conceived of as the ‘Great Social Evil’, and prostitutes themselves were feared as the carriers of contagion (literally and morally). It is, though, important to recognise that Abolitionists by no means preached moral laxity. The LNA in particular argued that *both* sexes should lead morally pure lives. One key element of the repeal campaign was the moral education of young men and the promotion of sexual abstinence before marriage.

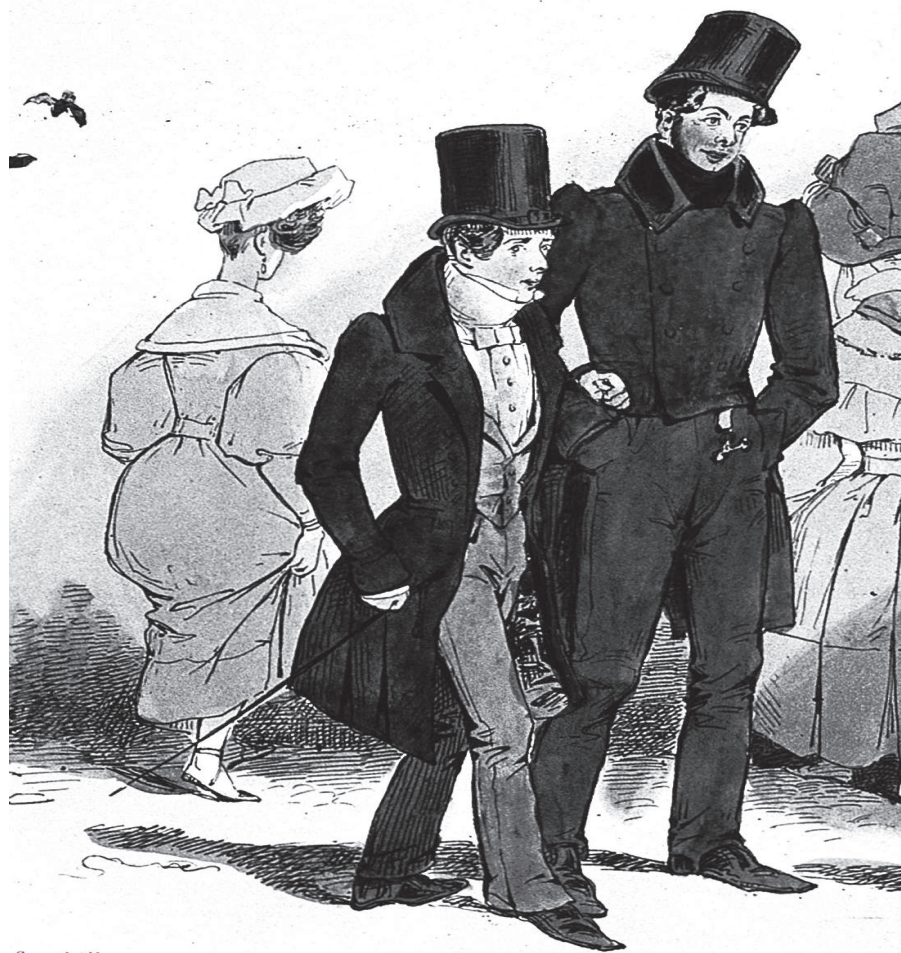
Another significant aspect of the LNA campaign was its breaking down of the artificial barriers which separated the pure and the fallen, and which required women of the middle and upper classes to know nothing of their degraded sisters. Feminist campaigners challenged the mid-Victorian feminine ideal, entering the public sphere to discuss a taboo subject by speaking out against the examination by speculum as ‘surgical violation’ or ‘instrumental violation. Josephine Butler not only had to speak in public, but speak about a subject unmentionable among women of her own class. Yet she never ceased to urge her fellow women to take their place in the foremost ranks of the repeal movement, convinced as she was that women were ‘called to exercise a bold self-assertion’ – again, a loaded expression given that the feminine ideal was precisely *selfless*. Even more importantly, Butler’s leadership of the LNA claimed for British women a public voice in political debate, and a public presence in the Houses of Parliament. In 1883 she issued a circular to every MP in the country, defending her right to listen to the debates in the Commons (see below): ‘I say that as long as any woman is obliged to *suffer* [the] foul outrage [of being forcibly examined] I should be ashamed to speak of the pain to myself of *hearing* it’.

## Methods

The 16-year campaign to abolish the CD Acts was primarily a parliamentary campaign, and as such utilised familiar methods:

A gentleman and his son are  
approached by a prostitute  
holding a mask of a young  
face behind which she is  
actually a skeleton.

Voyage pour l'...



Grandville.

*Voulez-vous monter chez moi, mon petit Monsieur?*





Lith. de Langlumé

sieur, vous n'en serez pas Sâché, allez.

à Paris, chez Bulla, rue S. Jacques N. 38, et chez Aubert Galerie Vero. Doré.

petitions, including what repealers referred to as their 'Monster' petition (like the Chartist petition a generation earlier); processions and delegations to the Home Office; circulars to MPs; and, when repeal was in sight, occupation of the Ladies' Gallery in the Commons. Repeal leaders also gave evidence to a number of committees, including a Royal Commission, called to examine the efficacy of the Acts. One innovation was to hold prayer meetings (open to people of all faiths) at Exeter Hall in order to support their MPs in debate in the Commons. Their earliest and boldest tactic was to contest by-elections, putting up their own candidate to split the Liberal vote if need be, even to support the Tory candidate in preference to a Liberal proponent of the Acts (as with Hugh Childers in Pontefract). In October 1870 the sitting Liberal MP for the garrison town of Colchester died and the party approved the candidature of Sir Henry Storks, a veteran and former Governor of Malta. Storks was a vocal advocate of the CD Acts and the National Association put up their own candidate to stand against him. The repealers who campaigned in Colchester required police protection from local thugs, but Storks was ousted and the Conservative candidate won by more than 500 votes. At the Pontefract by-election two years later, repealers campaigned against the Liberal candidate Hugh Childers, a former First Lord of the Admiralty who had overseen the working of the CD Acts in Plymouth and Portsmouth. Again they faced violent opposition and again they managed to dent the Liberal vote. However, their experience suggested that they needed salaried electoral agents working for them. By the close of 1872, two new committees were formed: the Northern Counties League and the Midland Counties Electoral Union; a third Political Committee was formed in 1883. The movement's first parliamentary representative, William Fowler, lost his seat at the 1874 General Election, but he would be succeeded by James Stansfeld MP, the Radical Member for Halifax who had served in the first Gladstone administration (1868-74), and it would be Stansfeld's motion that led to the suspension of the Acts in 1883, prior to their abolition in 1886 (see below). But it was a treacher-

ous course. At the General Election of 1880 it was estimated that the repeal movement lost more than 150 sympathetic MPs.

Repealers were largely drawn from the Non-Conformist element within the Liberal party (Quakers, Methodists, Baptists) based in the North of England, many of them newly enfranchised by the 1867 Reform Act. They used the rhetoric of the Abolition movement, referring to themselves as ‘New Abolitionists’. Josephine Butler’s father had been an anti-slavery campaigner in Northumberland and was a distant cousin of the Prime Minister Earl Grey whose Liberal Government was responsible for bringing in the Abolition of Slavery Act in 1833. One of the great strengths of the repeal movement was the campaigning profile of the LNA, in particular the personal contribution of their charismatic leader, Josephine Butler. Butler had impeccable social connections and a spotless reputation. She also had valuable experience of soliciting public support for issues such as women’s access to higher education. A feminist and an evangelical Christian, Butler was convinced of women’s right to equality with men and was personally responsible for encouraging hundreds of women of her own class to join the repeal movement in Britain and throughout Europe – through impassioned written appeals and public speaking (her speeches were recorded in the campaign newspaper, *The Shield*). Butler’s political vision was grounded in her experience of working on small-scale efforts to rescue and rehabilitate prostitutes in Liverpool where she established a refuge and training home funded by charitable donations. Thus she was a trusted figure to prostitutes on the police register from whom she gathered evidence in the garrison towns of Kent at the start of the campaign.

### **Outcome**

While repeal bills continued to be obstructed, on the night of 20 April 1883 a majority of 72 MPs voted to support James Stansfeld’s simple motion that ‘This House disapproves of the compulsory examination of women under the CD Acts’. The Commons vote had the immediate effect of suspending all those clauses relating

to the 'voluntary submission' and examination of women, and thus repeal had been achieved in effect if not in name. The Government's response was to propose a compromise. The Secretary for War, the Marquis of Hartington, began to prepare a bill that would make the examination of prostitutes truly voluntary rather mandatory, but Hartington himself began to doubt the medical effectiveness of the Acts and withdrew his bill. Momentum grew, and a total of 261 pro-repeal MPs were returned at the November 1885 General Election. When the Liberals again took office in February 1886, Stansfeld took the opportunity to introduce a bill calling for total repeal which passed into law on 15 April.

Even though the CD Acts were repealed in Britain, the practice of forcibly registering, examining and detaining prostitutes used by British soldiers posted abroad continued unabated in Britain's Crown Colonies. Documentary evidence that regulation continued in India was collected by the Quaker Alfred Dyer. A member of the Gospel Purity Association, Dyer had previously worked undercover to investigate white slave trafficking (involving British girls trafficked to Paris and Brussels). He now managed to intercept what became known as the 'Infamous Memorandum'. This document not only proved beyond doubt that the British Government in India continued to enforce the CD Acts but that officials actively colluded in the system, authorising funds for the procurement of Indian girls 'sufficiently attractive' to satisfy the demands of British soldiers stationed there. The publication of this document was a great embarrassment to Parliament, and when the repeal of the CD Acts in India was debated in the Commons on 5 June 1888 the vote was carried unanimously. From Simla, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in India, Lord Roberts, argued that the situation in India was very different from that at home: British soldiers serving abroad were surrounded by temptation; moreover, prostitution was regarded as a trade among the Indians, and 'shame, in a European sense, does not attach to it'. The following year the CD Acts were reintroduced in India in everything but name under the Cantonment Act of 1889. Further outrages against Indian women were publi-

cised in repeal newspapers. Butler herself followed the sensational story of a 14-year-old widow and Christian convert sold into prostitution (many of the 'Government Women' in India were young widows sold to the British Army by their families). But it required the undercover investigation of two members of World's Women's Christian Temperance Union (one a woman doctor, the other the widow of a Methodist missionary) to provide comprehensive evidence that the army continued to provide troops with 'clean' prostitutes. As a consequence of their findings, Lord Roberts was called to appear before a Parliamentary Committee in London in August 1893. Roberts's claim that regulation had been repealed in India back in 1888 was refuted by the army's now retired Quartermaster-General (author of the 'Infamous Memorandum'). The Cantonment Act of 1889 was finally replaced by India Act No.V (passed February 1895), which prohibited the forcible registration and examination of prostitutes – nine years after the repeal of the CD Acts in the British Parliament.

Once repeal had been achieved, many members of the LNA were now free to labour on behalf of Female Suffrage, but campaigners from the various repeal organisations also migrated towards the cause of social purity. Many joined the National Vigilance Association founded by WT Stead (editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and a prominent Liberal Non-Conformist) in the wake of the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act in August 1885 which raised the age of consent for girls and brought in new measures to tackle procurement and trafficking. That a split emerged between suffragism and social purity is characteristic of the mixed motives of the repealers, but key figures such as Butler felt that the repressive ideology of the NVA (with its focus on the suppression of brothels and pornography) was essentially at odds with the ethos of the repeal campaign which had sought to defend the civil liberties of prostitutes not to punish them.

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Christabel Pankhurst  
holding a Women's  
Social & Political Union  
(WSPU) flag, 1909.





# Fighting for the Franchise: The Campaign for Women to Obtain the Vote

*Sarah Richardson, University of Warwick*

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## **Focus**

Women's fight for the right to vote was a struggle lasting decades. Whilst much focus has been on the Edwardian suffragists and suffragettes, the campaign for women both to obtain and *retain* this privilege dates back at least to the 18th century, if not before. The rules on who could vote – that is, who possessed the franchise – in parliamentary elections had been largely unchanged since the 15th century. In seats covering whole counties, the so-called 40-shilling freeholders were able to vote. In privileged boroughs granted their

own MPs, there was a wide spectrum of franchises. Some constituencies permitted all ratepayers to vote, while others designated freemen or members of the corporation as electors. There were no electoral registers and the right to vote was usually vested in property- or office-holding rather than in a person. Thus, it was not entirely clear if women property-owners, freemen, or office-holders were disenfranchised from voting for members of Parliament. Indeed, a number of test cases brought before the King's Bench in the 18th century established that women possessed both the right to vote and the entitlement to hold office at a local level. In spite of the legal ambiguities, there is no surviving evidence that women did exercise the parliamentary franchise; instead some used servants or tenants as proxy voters on their behalf. However, the historical precedents were an important thread of later campaigns. Everything changed with the 1832 Reform Act which vested the right to the parliamentary vote in male persons for the first time. This was immediately challenged by a Yorkshire woman, Mary Smith, who presented a petition asserting that 'every unmarried female, possessing the necessary pecuniary qualification, should be entitled to vote for Members of Parliament'. She argued that as she paid taxes she should be able to elect a representative. She further stated that as women were liable to all the punishments of law, they ought to have a voice in the making of them.

Lobbying for the female franchise continued through the 1840s and 1850s. A notable example was Anne Knight, an anti-slavery activist, who founded the Sheffield Female Political Association in 1851 and published an *Address to the Women of England* demanding women's suffrage. However, the national suffrage campaign is usually dated to 1867 after the failure of a petition to the House of Commons demanding that women were granted the vote in the Reform Act of that year. Two major women's suffrage committees were founded: the London Society for Women's Suffrage and the Manchester Society for Women's Suffrage. The London Society had John Stuart Mill as its president and included Millicent Garrett Fawcett who later became leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). It was a relatively

conservative group whose model was based on conforming as far as possible to accepted middle-class norms of womanly behaviour, stressing the feminine nature of its female campaigners. Most of its members were middle-class Liberals and it saw itself as an influential pressure group. The Manchester Society by contrast sought to develop a large, nationwide campaign inspired by the success of the Anti-Corn Law movement. It was led by Lydia Becker who did much to inspire this by travelling and speaking up and down the country. Emmeline Pankhurst, who was later to become the charismatic leader of the often labelled 'militant' Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), was part of the Manchester movement. The Society had links with the working class and industrial politics of the north. The local societies were given a national voice with the formation in 1868 of the National Society for Women's Suffrage established by Helen Taylor, the wife of John Stuart Mill and a formidable campaigner for women's rights.

The evolution of the women's suffrage movement throughout the late 19th and into the early 20th centuries was characterised by debates about tactics and strategy and immense resistance from the male political establishment. Societies were formed across the political spectrum with Conservative, Liberal and Socialist-influenced groups. The key organisations were the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) founded in 1897 with 660 branches; the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) founded in 1903 with 90 branches; the Women's Freedom League (WFL) founded in 1907 with 61 branches; and the Conservative and Unionist Women's Franchise (CUWFA) Association founded in 1908 with 68 branches.

The campaigners' goal at first appears self-explanatory: the organisations have been widely characterised as single-issue groups seeking to achieve votes for women. However, the 19th-century electoral system was not based on the enfranchisement of individuals but of interests, largely based on property-holding and rate-paying. Thus, even after the Third Reform Act of 1884 only 60% of adult males possessed the vote. Those men excluded from voting included servants, lodgers, non-ratepayers, and men whose

occupations were relatively mobile meaning they did not meet residence qualifications. The early women's suffrage organisations largely argued that the vote should be given to single or widowed female ratepayers (a franchise which operated at the parish level). The assumption then was for a household franchise, where each rate-paying property would have one voter representing the rest of the inhabitants. The Conciliation Bills of 1910-12 modified this premise with the proposal that women householders and £10 occupiers would be enfranchised, which would have led to the extension of the parliamentary vote to just over 1 million women. Although the scheme was supported by Millicent Fawcett of the NUWSS, it led to a great deal of dissent both with the women's suffrage movement and among parliamentarians. For many, the measure was not radical enough and only adult suffrage would suffice. Others, such as Winston Churchill, considered the measure was designed only to enfranchise wealthy Conservative women. Debates continued after the introduction of the female franchise in 1918 to women over the age of 30. Some activists were content that women's suffrage had finally been achieved, while others continued to lobby for equal representation, achieving their goal in 1928.

### **Contention**

The main challenge of women's suffrage campaigners was to the idea that women were somehow unfit to hold the parliamentary franchise. Interestingly, alongside the crusade to introduce new legislation, they argued that the national vote had only recently been removed from women (in 1832) and thus they were only seeking to restore previously long-held rights rather than to innovate. They also pointed to parish government where women were successfully voting and holding office generally without public controversy or comment. Books such as *Women's Suffrage* by Helen Blackburn and Charlotte Stopes' *British Freewomen*, along with essays by Mabel Atkinson and Rose Graham helped to shape the argument that women had historically enjoyed the right to participate in civic life. Although this search for a lost (or myth-

ical) golden age of women's agency in some ways hindered the development of more radical models of female citizenship, activists were able to demonstrate a continuous thread of participation from the early modern period.

The eligibility of women ratepayers to vote in parish elections highlights another area where activists were challenging established views. The fact that there were women voters at the local level was used by some commentators as ammunition in their campaign against the inadequacies of the vestry system in 19th-century communities (parochial church councils also responsible for secular parish business, such as administering locally the poor law). Dickens, for example, derided what he termed the 'vestrylisation' of local services, and satirised parish elections and officials. He coined the word 'Bumbledom' as signifying all that was wrong with local government, and his critique of parish democracy reflected the view that the institution was venal and corrupt because in part the electorate contained women voters. However, female campaigners countered this view by demonstrating that female voters and office holders were quietly performing many of the key tasks of local government efficiently and effectively and therefore there was no reason to suspect they would not do so at the parliamentary level. For example, campaigners for the election of women as Poor Law Guardians in the 1880s emphasised the special contribution that women could make. Louisa Edwards, a candidate for St Paul's parish in Bedford in 1887, added a paragraph to her campaign poster arguing that women should be on the Board of Guardians because

"the larger number of Paupers are women and children. Because the care of the poor, the aged, the sick, and the miserable devolves on Guardians. An important part of the work of Guardians is the election of nurses and female servants. In the great matters of housekeeping, clothing, and education the matron and the house committee are obviously entitled to the assistance of women guardians."

Here Edwards refers to a sisterhood comprising those who were receiving assistance, those administering relief and those

employed to care for the poor. Women Guardians could, it was argued, provide particular insights into the lives of pauper women. They could also act as capable intermediaries between the male guardians and the nurses, matrons and female servants providing services for the poor.

On the other hand, early suffragists were often keen not to challenge established gender or class norms and emphasise their femininity and their bourgeois respectability. Ironically, the leadership of the WSPU, viewed as the most militant women's suffrage organisation, sought to narrow its social base with Christabel Pankhurst arguing that, 'Parliament shall be more impressed by the demonstrations of the feminine Bourgeoisie than of the feminine Proletariat.' She went further, emphasising elite superiority when she argued that:

"a working woman's movement is of no value; working women are the weakest position of the sex; how could it be otherwise? Their lives are too hard, their education too meagre to equip them for the contest. Surely it is a mistake to use the weakest for the struggle. We want picked women, the very strongest and the most intelligent."

This deliberate strategy to exclude the working class was not adopted universally. Christabel's sister, Sylvia, split from the WSPU establishing her own East London Federation of the Suffragettes; and Teresa Billington-Grieg founded the Women's Freedom League arguing that the WSPU had become 'socially exclusive, punctiliously correct, gracefully fashionable, ultra-respectable and narrowly religious'. The NUWSS was more inclusive employing working-class speakers and encouraging activism in industrial communities, although its leadership remained resolutely middle class.

The leader of the most successful group campaigning for the female franchise, Millicent Fawcett, eschewed militant tactics and committed the organisation to constitutional methods of campaigning. But her approach – to follow the course that appeared to offer the best chance of success – seemed to endorse rather than challenge the male political establishment. When the Concilia-

tion Bills failed and she threw the weight of the NUWSS behind the emergent Labour Party, many argued that she would have had greater success if she had continued to support the Liberal majority. The ongoing failure of the movement to achieve change put pressure on the leaders of the various factions and led to inconsistencies.

Advocates of women's suffrage were taking on formidable political opponents. The only political party in favour of female suffrage (and only after the failure of the 1912 Conciliation Bill) was the Labour Party which announced that it 'could find no [government] bill acceptable that does not include women'. Although the party did not publically pledge support for a separate women's suffrage bill until 1914, it remained the only parliamentary party to acknowledge support for the female franchise, albeit as part of broader adult suffrage measures. The Liberal Party (like many early socialist MPs) was unwilling to support the extension of the vote as it considered women to be natural Conservative electors and thus feared it would be voting for its own demise if it supported female suffrage. Many MPs played an active role in the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage, including John Massie, Rudolph Lehmann and Alexander MacCallum Scott. More Conservatives and Unionists supported anti-suffragism especially after 1906 when not in government and could be more forthright in their views. In addition to Lord Cromer and Lord Curzon, successive presidents of the National League who feared that women's suffrage threatened the Empire, other front-bench politicians supported the League including Joseph and Austen Chamberlain, FE Smith and Walter Long in the Commons and Lord Lansdowne, Lords George Hamilton and Lord Northcote in the Lords.

The first collective protest against suffragism occurred in 1889. Encouraged by Frederic Harrison and James Knowles (editor of the *Nineteenth Century*), Mary Augusta Ward (writing as Mrs Humphry Ward) published an article against demands for the extension of the suffrage to women, signed by 104 prominent women. More than 2,000 women from many parts of Britain signed an accompanying 'female protest'. Women were also mobilising opposition with

a number of women writing in *The Times* and *The Spectator* in 1905 and 1906 expressing their concern about the growing activity of the suffragists and suffragettes, arguing that it was time for the 'antis' to become active. They argued that there was a silent majority that supported their views and during 1908 produced an anti-suffrage petition containing 337,018 signatures. The launch of the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League in July 1908 was achieved largely through the efforts of Mary Ward who remained as intransigent in her opposition to women's suffrage as she had been two decades earlier. The women's league later joined with the men's league to become the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage. By 1910 they had more than 100 branches, 16,000 members and 400,000 signatures on petitions.

Anti-suffragist arguments drew on Victorian notions of separate spheres and on what was suitable for each sex according to their supposed nature: women's role should relate to the domestic world: men's to the realm of business and national politics. Women anti-suffragists agreed on the essential differences between the nature of men and of women but used this as the basis for a different political future for women than for men. They supported the so-called 'forward policy', which sought to encourage women's further involvement in local politics where their suitability had already been proven, and to take an advisory role to male politicians on supposedly feminine matters such as education and health. This would be achieved by establishing a women's national council or advisory committee to influence male members of parliament.

## Methods

Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903 recalled that 'We resolved to limit our membership exclusively to women, to keep ourselves absolutely free from party affiliation, and to be satisfied with nothing but action on our question. "Deeds, not Words" was to be our permanent motto.' Emmeline's sentiment sums up the popular image of the militant suffragettes (an initially derogatory term coined by the *Daily Mail* in 1906). Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney initiated the militant phase of the suffrage move-



ment on 13 October 1905 by interrupting an election meeting addressed by the Liberal Home Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, to ask whether the Liberals would grant votes for women. They spat at the policemen who tried to remove them and were arrested. These unladylike tactics and arrests resulted in widespread national and international coverage and put the question of women's suffrage on the public as well as political agenda. Suffragette actions graduated from heckling to more violent methods including sabotage, vandalism, looting, arson, attacking MPs and ultimately martyrdom when in 1913 Emily Wilding Davidson 'threw' herself (or fell) under the King's horse on Derby Day. This type of action embodied in Emily's death, polarised opinion among suffragists themselves as well as among the general public. A martyr and hero to some, Emily represented to others why women shouldn't get the vote. If this was what educated women could do, what would less-educated women be capable of if they did get the franchise? Historians have sought to minimise the divisions between the militant suffragettes and the constitutionalist suffragists demonstrating that all those campaigning for the franchise employed an array of approaches and tactics to further their cause. The escalation in violent tactics was also seen by activists as a response to male and state brutality perpetrated against campaigners. For example, women were often physically abused by men when giving public speeches on behalf of women's suffrage. When suffragettes protested peacefully outside the Houses of Parliament and Downing Street they were dealt with roughly and violently by the police – such as on the notorious Black Friday. Women complained that they were sexually molested by police officers when they were being arrested. In prison women were force fed under the Liberal Government's Prisoners Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Act (1913) better known as the 'Cat and Mouse' Act. This physically damaging and painful procedure was likened by many suffragette victims to rape. The failure of the political establishment to respond to calls for the extension of the franchise led to more ingenious methods to capture public attention but these were not necessarily increasingly violent.

Older methods of campaigning such as petitioning continued to be popular, with thousands of members of the public appending their names to calls for the extension of the vote. The organised suffrage campaign was itself inaugurated by a petitioning movement organised by the Women's Suffrage Petition Committee in 1865. In the mid-1890s there was a massive national effort termed the women's suffrage special appeal in which around 3,500 women worked to collect a total of nearly 250,000 signatures. The appeal was presented to Parliament in 1896. Even the WSPU continued to use the tactic alongside its more extreme approaches. In 1914 Emmeline Pankhurst was arrested and imprisoned for attempting to present a petition to the King, after failing to engage his ministers.

Processions, pageantry and visual spectacle were a prominent feature of the campaigners. The introduction of the suffragette colour scheme by Emmeline Pethick Lawrence in the spring of 1908 just before the Hyde Park Rally enabled the public to identify with the cause that they fought for. Purple was the colour of dignity, white represented purity and green was the symbol of fertility and hope for the future. The so-called 'theatre of the streets' was a crucial part of the 'performance activism' and 'visibility politics' of the suffrage organisations. Activists also appropriated the parading of banners. These had historically been a masculine convention associated with trade unions; but by using the traditionally feminine skills of appliqué and needlework, women demonstrated collective workmanship and sisterhood. The connection between women and work was further emphasised in the organisation of campaigners into occupational groups with separate associations for teachers, actresses, artists and so on.

Members of the Women's Freedom League advocated methods of civil disobedience inspired by Ghandi's tactics in India. Their key tactic was to refuse to co-operate with government officials and processes. The Women's Tax Resistance League was established in 1909 and members boycotted the payment of taxes on their earned income. Again, they drew on historical precedence, highlighting John Hampden's opposition to the payment of Ship Money and the American colonists' slogan 'No Taxation Without Representation'.

In 1911 a mass campaign against the completion of the decennial census coincidentally had a special focus on women's fertility. Women were urged either to refuse to complete the census return at their home address or to ensure they were absent from their home address during the enumeration period. A rally at Trafalgar Square was also organised on census night. Those who did complete the forms defaced them with slogans such as 'I am a woman and women do not count in the state' and 'No vote – no census'.

Campaigners also used a variety of public platforms to further publicity for their cause. These included press campaigns; posters, cartoons, banners and other visual material; the theatre, literature and the stage; and the courtroom. When Christabel Pankhurst was arrested in Manchester she used the court dock to express her political views. Although she was chastised by the judge for doing so, she again was invoking strategies used by radical campaigners including John Wilkes and Thomas Paine to subvert the court procedures to publicise the cause. She stated, 'we cannot make any orderly protest because we have not the means whereby citizens may do such a thing; we have not a vote; and so long as we have not votes, we must be disorderly'.

Campaigners for the female franchise thus incorporated and adapted age-old acts of disturbance and protest. They challenged notions of femininity, increasing women's visibility in the public sphere, emphasising their political agency and employing an elaborate propaganda campaign to support their aims and objectives.

### **Outcome**

In spite of the immense pressure from campaigners, by the start of the First World War women remained unenfranchised. The Speaker's Conference – a committee set-up to look at the franchise – met during the war to deal with problems including soldiers' omission from the electoral register. The committee added the grant of the vote for women to its recommendations. Women over 30 who were on local government registers, or wives of registered men and/or graduates of British universities were enfranchised by the 1918 Representation of the People Act.

Although the vote was obtained after the war, the ‘gift’ thesis – that women received the vote in return for their war effort – has been discredited by historians. Only women over 30 were given the vote, thus excluding the vast majority of women who worked during the war. Some historians have argued that the vote was won for women by men who took up the cause during the Speaker’s Conference rather than as a reward for war work or by the campaigning of the suffragists/ettes. However, recent feminist historians have demonstrated that the NUWSS kept up the pressure during the war and it is likely the Government wanted to escape renewed suffrage aggression after the conflict ended. What all historians can agree on, though, is summed up by Sandra Stanley Holton: ‘an appreciation of the suffrage campaign as a site for gender contestation’ – in other words, it was about more than the vote.

The enfranchisement of women had an immediate political effect. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, noted in the final chapter of her memoir *The Women’s Victory and After*, that between 1902 and 1914 only two really important Acts bearing especially upon the welfare and status of women had been passed but in the year following the Reform Act of 1918 ‘at least seven important measures effecting large improvements in the status of women have rapidly gone through all the stages in both Houses of Parliament’. These included the Sex Disqualification Removal Act, 1919, which, among other things, enabled women to enter certain professions and to take up public roles from which they had previously been debarred. They could, for example, for the first time become barristers, solicitors and magistrates and sit on juries. The changes were slow to take effect: for example, in 1947 women still provided only 25% of magistrates and they edged towards equal numbers with men only in the 1990s. Fawcett believed that such changes in the law were the necessary next step after women gained the vote. She wrote:

“We did not, except as a symbol of free citizenship, value [the vote] as a thing good in itself... but for the sake of equal laws, the enlarged opportunities, the improved status of women

which we knew it involved. We worked for it... because... it would benefit not women only, but the whole community... it was the cause of men, women and children.”

The 1918 General Election was contested by 1,623 candidates of whom 17 were women. Few suffrage campaigners stood for election, though they included Mary Macarthur for the Labour Party. Christabel Pankhurst was the most successful, failing to win a seat as a Conservative by a mere 775 votes. The Labour and Liberal parties nominated four female candidates each and Sinn Fein two. Only one woman, Sinn Fein's Constance Markiewicz, was elected. Conducting her campaign from Holloway jail where she was held on suspicion of conspiring with the enemy against Britain, having received an amnesty for her part in the 1916 rebellion, Markiewicz refused to take her seat in protest at British imperialism. Viscountess Astor was the first woman to take up her parliamentary seat after she won the Plymouth by-election of 1919, caused by her husband's accession to the peerage. Indeed, the first three women in the Commons all replaced their husbands. In all 15 Conservative seats were won by women from 1918-39; four Liberal; 16 Labour; one independent (Eleanor Rathbone) and one Sinn Fein. This pattern roughly fits with the period of government of the three major parties, so the presence of women did not change the party political balance. The bills women MPs introduced were largely on social policy including the bastardy laws, adoption, nursing home regulations, the Poor Law, expectant mothers and the death sentence, hire purchase and alcohol licensing.

There were limits to how much the first generation of women voters could achieve at any level. It was easier, although not very easy, to change the law on divorce than to achieve equal pay. Gender equality in the divorce courts had been achieved by 1939, gender equality in the pay packet had not. There were vigorous campaigns for equal pay and on other workplace issues, such as abolition of the 'marriage bar', which excluded women from paid work on marriage. But women campaigners were less successful at achieving change in the labour market than in state welfare issues.

The women's suffrage campaign mobilised and politicised thousands of women who hitherto had been voiceless and outside the formal public realm of government. Although the focus has usually been on the actions of militant suffragettes, non-violent resistance and use of traditional methods of campaigning and protest such as petitioning, mass demonstrations and pamphletting kept the movement at the forefront of public life for over 20 years.

## Further Reading

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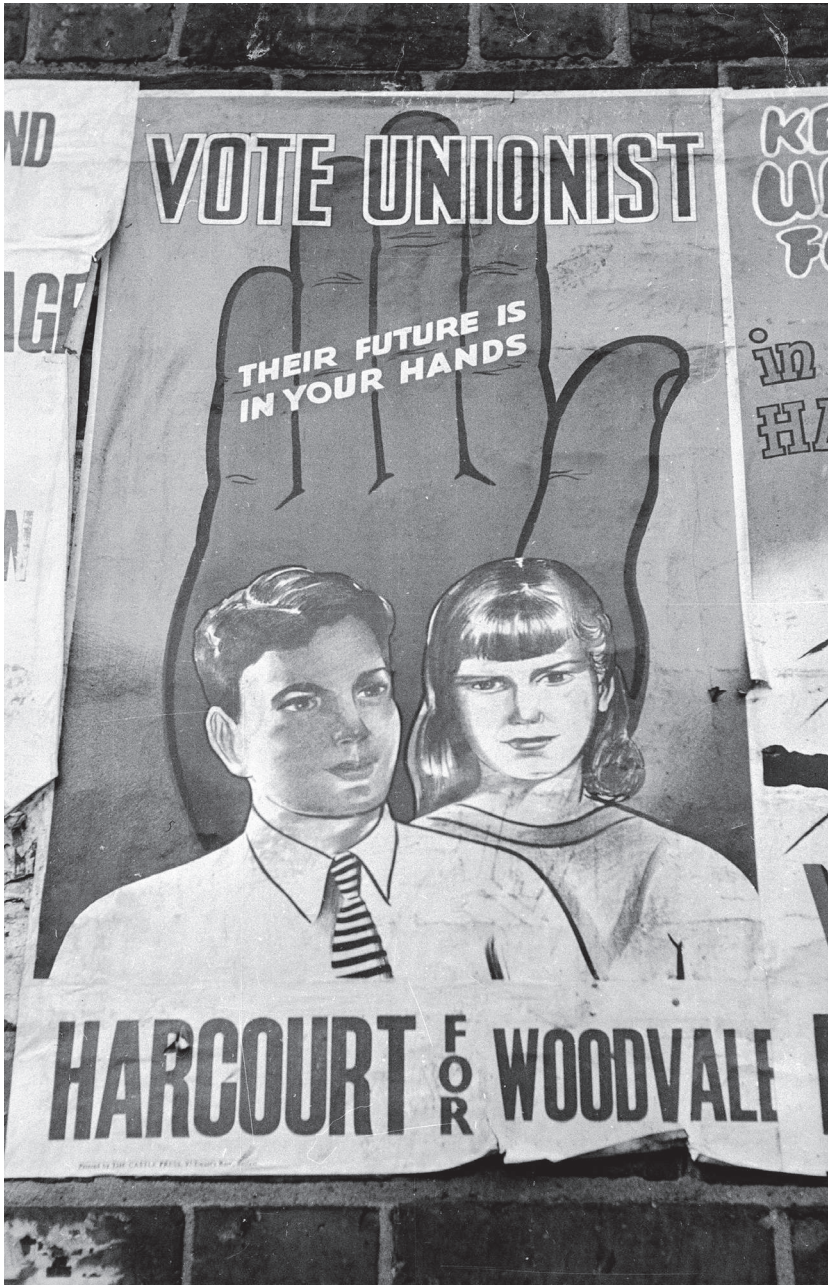
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A Unionist poster on a wall in Belfast urging people to vote for candidate Harcourt.



# Opposition to Irish Home Rule, 1885-1922

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## **Focus**

Irish Home Rule was the proposal to establish a devolved Parliament in Dublin, much like Holyrood in Scotland today. It was one of the most important issues in British politics from the mid-1880s to the advent of partition and the creation of Northern Ireland in 1920-21. The campaign to oppose Home Rule was conducted in and outside Parliament, and took on different characteristics in Ireland (where it was the dominant political issue in these four decades) and in the rest of Britain (where it was often eclipsed by others).

The historical background to the campaign stemmed from the Act of Union – effective from 1801 – which incorporated Ireland

within Great Britain, creating the United Kingdom. The Act abolished the Dublin parliament, and Ireland was represented at Westminster by 100 MPs and 32 peers. While Ireland kept its own courts of justice and civil service, it was governed from Westminster by an appointed executive based in Dublin Castle. The majority of the population were Catholics living in the countryside, most of them agricultural labourers or tenants at will. They were often poor, illiterate, and beholden to Protestant landlords. Catholics were initially formally excluded from public office until Catholic Emancipation (1829), debarred from British universities (until 1871), and mandated to pay for the upkeep of an Anglican established Church via tithes (until 1869). In the general election of 1874 (the first held under secret ballot) 60 of the MPs returned for Ireland were Nationalists agitating for the restoration of the old Irish Parliament, which they believed would redress the political and economic grievances of the Catholic majority. In the election of 1885 the Nationalists, led by Charles Stewart Parnell, won 86 seats, encroaching even into the Unionist heartland of Ulster, and achieving a clean sweep in the rest of the country. This large block of well-disciplined MPs enabled Parnell's party to agitate for reforms (especially regarding rent and ownership of Ireland's arable land) and create such mischief at Westminster that 'the Irish Question' became difficult to ignore.

While Irish independence had negligible support among the British establishment, a minority were prepared to consider devolving some powers back to Dublin via a measure of home rule. The vast majority, however, took the view that devolution would weaken the authority of the British Empire, strengthen the already overbearing deleterious power of the Vatican in Ireland, and subject the propertied loyalist minority to the tyranny of a Catholic majority intent on retribution. It was thus an enormous surprise to all when, in late 1885, the Liberal Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone suddenly announced his conversion to an extensive measure of Home Rule, proposing to devolve to Dublin powers over all matters exclusively affecting Ireland. Britain would retain control over defence, foreign affairs, trade, and

coinage. Apart from restrictions on Customs and Excise, Ireland would also control her own taxation, and continue to return MPs to Westminster (which in itself was controversial, in much the same way as today's 'West Lothian Question' in Scotland).

Gladstone's force of personality and political authority carried most Liberals with him, but a large number rebelled and voted with the Conservatives, and the bill was defeated by 30 votes in June 1886. Gladstone resigned, and went to the country on the issue of Home Rule. The dissident Liberals fought the election as 'Liberal Unionists' in an alliance with the Conservatives, and won a landslide victory, securing 393 MPs (of which 316 were Conservatives and 77 were Liberal Unionists), compared to the Liberals' 192 and the Irish Nationalists 85. Although it was predictably popular in Ireland, Home Rule almost certainly contributed to heavy Liberal defeats across the rest of Britain. While more independently-minded than today, MPs and activists in this era felt considerable loyalty to party, and the willingness of the Liberal Unionists to desert an enormously popular leader and injure their party, is testimony to the strength of contemporary unionist feeling that Home Rule must be averted at all costs.

Although the Bill had been defeated, the events of 1886 made it likely that the Liberal party (now purged of its anti-Home Rule element) would introduce it again when they returned to office. Sure enough, a second Home Rule Bill was attempted in 1893, and a third in 1912. The opponents of Home Rule thus knew what they were up against from the start. Their first objective was to prevent the Liberals returning to government. When that could not be achieved, they had to use either the House of Lords or other extra-parliamentary means to keep it from the statute book.

### **Contention**

In contrast to many of the other case studies in this volume, the campaign against Home Rule was about averting rather than achieving change. In the minds of the anti-Home Rulers, this meant the burden was on proponents to articulate a contention sufficiently pressing to warrant the disruption and violence that

creating a Dublin Parliament was sure to have. Unsurprisingly, the opposition was at its fiercest when the Liberals were in office, and a Home Rule Bill seemed possible. This was the case during 1885-56, 1892-93, and 1911-14. Outside those times of immediate danger, the aim of the campaign was essentially to militate against apathy, especially in Britain after 1893, where the electorate was widely reported to be sick and tired of the Irish Question, which many saw as peripheral to their lives.

The campaign in Britain primarily consisted of the so-called 'Unionist alliance' between the Conservative and Liberal Unionist parties, which remained firm throughout the period. The dissident Liberals who left in 1886 were mainly drawn from the old aristocratic whig faction led by Lord Hartington. While it would not be inaccurate to place them on the right of the party, many held the Conservatives in contempt, viewing them as unintelligent and reactionary. The smaller Liberal Unionist faction was led by the Birmingham radical Joseph Chamberlain whose followers – largely adherents of their leader's municipal Socialism – were on the opposite side of Liberalism. For their part the Conservatives – led by Lord Salisbury – were still dominated by the aristocracy and gentry, which had won just two elections in the previous 56 years. While electorally formidable on paper, the Unionist alliance necessitated that politicians and party activists work together with their natural political enemies to prevent Home Rule. The Liberal Unionists maintained a consistent Parliamentary representation of between 25 and 77 MPs, but also contributed money, influence, and activists to the Conservative cause. While predominantly a campaign led by this party alliance, opposition to Home Rule also energised groups and individuals without particular party persuasion throughout the country. For example, from the 1880s, a large number of working men's clubs, debating societies, and other social organisations became 'constitutional clubs' which maintained at least the veneer of party independence, but were nonetheless committed to empire, throne, and the maintenance of the United Kingdom.

In Ireland the campaign was primarily conducted by popular organisations. The Irish Loyal and Patriotic Union (ILPU) was set

up in 1885, and by 1891 had evolved into the better-known Irish Unionist Alliance (IUA). The first objective for both the ILPU and IUA was to ensure that elections in Britain went the way of Unionism, and that their British friends did not get distracted by other pressing political issues. The second was to pre-emptively organise resistance to any Home Rule bill enacted: to refuse to recognise a Dublin Parliament, obey its laws, pay its taxes, and to resist it by force if necessary. Although some propertied Catholics were involved in the ILPU and IUA, the vast majority were Protestants. They were, unsurprisingly, strongest in Ulster (especially in the six most north-easterly counties), which also represented the most prosperous parts of Ireland, with a booming linen and shipbuilding industry centred in Belfast. Unionism also had a small (and rapidly diminishing) base in the South, concentrated around Dublin and wealthy landowning families in Kerry, Waterford, and Leitrim. While but a small holdout, southern Unionism was politically important because it made it possible to present the campaign as a national – as opposed to merely regional – cause in a country which was around three-quarters Catholic. The leaders of the IUA were Edward Saunderson and from 1910 the formidable Sir Edward Carson, backed up the organiser James Craig. This main grassroots body was also supported by numerous smaller organisations, including the Unionist Clubs Council, the Ulster Defence League, and the various lodges of the Orange Order.

### **Values and arguments**

To understand the Unionist campaign it is first necessary to appreciate the political culture in which it operated. From 1886 until 1918 around two-thirds of adult men could vote in both Britain and Ireland, and elections were primarily conducted through vibrant public speaking campaigns, where huge audiences (of both voters and non-voters) were common. Constituency candidates would often make more than 100 hour-long public speeches even in a three-week campaign, and these were thoroughly reported (sometimes verbatim) by a diligent local press. Candidates would be applauded, cheered, hissed, and would routinely be the target

of hecklers, missiles, and sometimes physical assault. Holding the stage against such opposition, and skilfully and wittily putting down hecklers, was part of the art of the accomplished stump speaker. On the national stage, party leaders would also make huge set-piece speeches reported in national dailies such as *The Times*. Posters, handbills, election songs – and an element of beer, violence, and bribery – added further spice. External pressure groups would often join the fray to agitate for various causes, from Irish Home Rule, to women's suffrage, to anti-vivisectionism. While this vibrant political culture was most associated with elections, similar public meetings and campaigns routinely took place at other times, usually at moments of political excitement.

The Unionist campaign against Home Rule had to adapt its case to fit this contemporary political environment. It had to be able to produce arguments sufficiently entertaining, punchy, and pithy to ride the hurly-burly of the platform, but substantial enough to stand up to the sober criticism of next morning's press. While these arguments took many forms, and were tailored to various local audiences, the most common drew on deep-seated historical values, norms, and prejudices which had to be re-explained, restated, and reinvented to maximise their power and salience when used in public speeches and campaign literature. The most famous exposition was Oxford Professor A.V. Dicey's popular *England's Case Against Home Rule* published in 1886. Dicey expounded three main arguments, which formed the core message of the Unionist campaign.

The first drew on the contemporary stereotype of the Irish as a foolish, drunken and hot-headed race who had produced little of cultural value. Their backwardness, it was argued, made them susceptible to demagoguery and cultish and monolithic behaviour, which explained their fascination with the autocracy and flashy ornamentalism of the Catholic Church. These tendencies made them unsuited to independent self-government, which was proven by the unhappiness, disorder, and poor economic performance that had characterised the period between 1783 and 1800 when Ireland had enjoyed legislative devolution through the 'Grattan

Parliament'. These 17 years – hitherto the subject of little historical interest – were now subjected to rigorous scholarly analysis by both sides in attempts to prove whether the Irish could be trusted to self-govern or not. It should be remembered that Social-Darwinist thinking was influential at this time, especially the racialist view that different peoples possessed essentialised characteristics which made some natural colonial masters, and others natural colonial subordinates. British Unionists were able to demonstrate their point with well-worn comic stories of the stupidity of 'Paddy'. Of course, while this humour was mainly directed against Catholic Irishmen, Protestants also often disliked it, feeling that they were also being tarred with a generic anti-Irish brush.

The second argument – that the loss of Ireland would mean the start of the disintegration of the British Empire – tapped into the imperialist mindset of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. During these years, the British Empire comprised 20-25% of the land mass of the Earth, and its imagery festooned public life, with imperial symbols appearing on biscuit tins, flags, and towels. Imperial exploits were the subject of songs, theatre, and popular fiction. Heroes such as Cecil Rhodes and Lord Roberts were venerated. A popular children's picture book, *The ABC for Baby Patriots*, published in 1899, contained the passages 'C is for colonies... rightly we boast, that of all the great nations, Great Britain has most' and 'E is our Empire where the sun never sets... the larger we make it, the bigger it gets'. Although it would be a misnomer to suggest that a majority of the British public were flag-waving imperialists (indeed, such gaudy jingoism was also widely criticised) imperialism represented a powerful rhetorical resource. It played on the fear of the slippery slope: that if the beloved institution of the British Empire were compromised even slightly, the precedent would lead to the disintegration of the whole. The third and perhaps most important argument drew on an appeal to not abandon fellow Protestant loyalists who would be left to the tender mercies of the Catholic majority, egged on by a vengeful priesthood. The anti-Home Rulers assumed that a government would be installed in Dublin that would

immediately subject the Protestants to civil and religious persecution. It would also implement confiscatory Socialism, subjecting the rich counties of Ulster to punitive redistributive taxation and forcibly divesting Protestants of their land and property. This argument was founded on the elite belief that democratic political systems were suitable only for settled nations of high political intelligence and not for those that were sharply divided on class or sectarian lines, where democracy would give open licence for the majority to tyrannise the minority. An heroic image was promoted of the virtuous loyal Ulsterman holding out for the Empire in a land inhabited primarily by his enemies. Whereas there had previously been little attempt to differentiate the characteristics of the Ulsterman from the population in general, he suddenly found himself depicted as stout, manly, and resolute, standing erect beneath the Union Jack. Despite hailing from Dublin, Edward Carson became the living embodiment of the broad-shouldered straight-taking Ulsterman who would lay down his life for the Crown. For their part, Ulsterwomen were depicted as darkly beautiful, but also as possessing courage and pluck, being prepared to fight to the death should their menfolk fall. The militarised depiction of Ulsterwomen, particularly carrying weapons carried an additional shock factor.

My research into East Anglian politics provides a flavour of what these arguments sounded like when articulated from the political platform. In 1886 for example, Lord Elcho (Conservative candidate for Ipswich) remarked in a speech in 1886:

“If this Bill was passed, they knew every landlord in Ireland would leave the country. Every landlord employed a certain amount of labour, and, putting the number of persons employed at five by each landlord, then the absence of five thousand employers would mean that 25,000 persons would be thrown out of employment”

In the same election, Robert Bourke (Conservative candidate for King’s Lynn) argued:

“There must come a time in the life of an empire [...] and they would see it if they read history, for history after all was the



reflection of the future [...] when the rottenness will show itself and lend to disintegration. The moment a show a rottenness [sic] to the core was the moment at which they began to break up.”

In 1910, the tempo had seemingly been raised still higher. Colonel Kerrison at South Norfolk predicted that:

“Our loyal friends should be handed over to the tender mercies of Roman Catholicism. If we handed them over body and soul to the followers of a creed which was in reality bitterly hostile towards us, we should be doing our fellow creatures a grievous wrong, which we should everlastingly regret.” (Applause)

In the same election NP Jodrell, the candidate for North-West Norfolk, commented on what he saw as ‘Irish characteristics’:

“There exists in that people a certain characteristic, – if I may say so, a want of backbone, a want of stability in self-governing qualities, and a tendency to violent excitement. (Hear, hear.) They are not able to govern themselves; they have never been able to govern themselves since the dawn of history, and I repeat it, that the institutions under which we live – Parliament, jury system, laws, what you like – that have made the British empire and keep it going, are made in England and nowhere else.”

## Methods

The first Home Rule bill had been sprung on Parliament, but once it was defeated the Unionist movement held most of the aces. The trump was simply that Home Rule’s proponents were directly challenging the longstanding consensus view of British politics since 1801, and this meant their enemies were fighting an uphill battle. Despite carrying the majority of Liberals with him, Gladstone had created an electorally formidable opponent in the shape of the Unionist alliance. Indeed, the Conservatives plus Liberal Unionists conceded an overall majority to the Liberals in only one election in this period (1906). With the Liberals out of office, Ireland could return Nationalists for all 100 constituencies if she wished, and still not achieve Home Rule.

The Unionists' electoral advantage was founded on the strength and flexibility of the alliance. Having two parties and two sets of leaders allowed the Unionists to appeal to a broader group of voters and remain anchored in the political centre. They also were able to keep the majority of newspaper editors on their side. The Conservatives plus Liberal Unionists also commanded a large majority in the House of Lords who would, if constitutionally viable, use their veto to derail Home Rule bills which passed through the lower house. This happened in 1893, when the second Home Rule Bill was squeezed through the Commons but crushed in the Lords.

In Britain the campaigning strategy of the Unionist alliance was to capitalise on its inbuilt advantage. The 'whig' element of the Liberal Unionists had brought with it the majority of the Liberal party's main donors, and the Conservatives were already well-funded. This financial advantage allowed them to run campaigns and field candidates wherever they wanted, and leave few seats uncontested. It also allowed Liberal Unionists to fight in constituencies where some (or all) of the existing Liberal party organisation remained with the Gladstonians. They were able to employ agents, conduct speaking tours, pay for propaganda – and bankroll the returning officers' expenses – despite being a new party. These financial challenges would normally have represented a huge obstacle for a budding party, as Labour (which was emerging at this time) could testify. Many wealthy British donors were also sending money, speakers, and (after 1913) guns across the Irish Sea, which meant the Ulster Unionists seldom ran short of resources.

The Unionist alliance also attempted to defeat its opponents in elections through superior organisation. The ability to tactically run Liberal Unionists in parts of the country where the Conservatives were comparatively unpopular (such as Scotland and Wales) and allow the Tories to concentrate on areas where they were strong, allowed the alliance usually to fight on its own terms. The Liberals, starved of cash and without such a ruthless party machine, left numerous seats uncontested, and often made

poor tactical decisions on where to concentrate their limited resources. Between elections organisers like Aretas Akers-Douglas and Captain Middleton made tactical choices where to send visiting speakers (often from Ulster), distribute propaganda, and when and where to campaign hard on Home Rule to achieve maximum effect. In short, the alliance played the system expertly, and was usually at least one step ahead of its Liberal opponents. It also bears repeating that Home Rule was in itself widely seen as a vote-loser for the Liberals, and raising its spectre usually represented an easy hit for a Unionist speaker, even if there were many occasions when the cause (at least in Britain) was pushed down the agenda by other issues, and where overusing it sometimes risked giving the impression of flogging a dead horse.

Although winning elections – and dominating Parliament – was the primary strategy for the anti Home Rulers, this could not succeed forever, as the Liberals were likely to return to office sooner or later, especially if they were coy about their Home Rule ambitions. More worrying for Unionists was the possibility that the Liberals might be reliant on Nationalist MPs to govern (whose price for co-operation would surely be Home Rule) and this would force the hand of even a reluctant Liberal Prime Minister. In Ireland, Unionists were acutely aware of this ticking time bomb, especially after the passage of the 1911 Parliament Act, which replaced the Lords' veto with the ability merely to delay bills for two years. The campaign began to organise intensely at the grassroots to prepare for possibility that the first line of defence in Westminster might be breached.

To be useful the IUA had to adopt a different strategy from its Unionist allies in England. While the latter could target elections and persuade the undecided, Irish Unionists could gain comparatively little through such approaches. This was simply because, as a largely sectarian cause, there was little chance of changing anyone's mind on Home Rule (especially by 1911). There was also comparatively little to be gained by running more efficient electioneering efforts, because it was more or less impossible for the Unionists to win any more than 25 Irish seats. The campaign thus

relied on publicity-grabbing demonstrations of Unionist resolve to reject any Dublin Parliament, and resist it by force if necessary. In 1905 the Ulster Unionist Council was formed in Belfast to act as a provisional government if Home Rule was passed. But it was in 1912 – when it looked likely the Liberals would introduce a third Home Rule Bill and back it up with the Parliament Act – that the IUA's campaign really went into overdrive.

Carson's most famous publicity step was the creation of the Ulster Covenant in September 1912. This document pledged the signatory to refuse to recognise a Dublin Parliament, obey its laws, or pay its taxes. The Covenant was signed by Carson beneath the largest Union Jack ever made, at an enormous ceremony. Carson – a gifted platform orator with a particularly personal speaking style – described the Covenant as 'you trusting me and me trusting you'. It was abetted by every conceivable propaganda device: postcards, films, badges, pamphlets, posters, and photos. Many of these used gaudy and powerful symbolism: the red hand of Ulster, William of Orange, the King, Moses, and idealised images of Carson himself. These were accompanied by huge public meetings under the slogans 'Home Rule is Rome Rule', 'Ulster will Fight, and Ulster will be Right', and 'No Surrender'. Carson, meanwhile, was almost deified with carefully choreographed appearances, using the most dramatic modern lighting techniques. His cult of personality was such that James Craig declared in August 1913 that 'Sir Edward Carson has been sent from heaven'. In addition to generating nigh-fanatical enthusiasm (the Covenant eventually gained 471,414 signatories) Carson also managed to galvanise Irish Unionism's disparate strands as never before, uniting working-class organisations, bourgeois loyalist industrialists, and the embattled southern landed gentry.

While the Covenant represented a graphic display of Unionist solidarity (and helped keep British attention focused westwards) it did not demonstrate anything particularly new. That both sides (nationalists as much as loyalists) were passionately and even fanatically devoted to their respective causes was already obvious, but even the largest displays of Irish Unionist enthusiasm could

not hide that they were in the minority. Regardless of the Covenant, the third Home Rule bill was passed by the Commons at the end of 1912, and the Lords duly used their remaining blocking power to delay it for two years. But this meant that time was running out to stop Home Rule.

Carson had one final card to play, which was to threaten violent resistance. By expanding the terms of the Covenant it was comparatively easy for the IUA to transform the document into a call to arms, and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was founded in January 1913. This militia soon boasted 85,000-100,000 men pledged to take up arms against Home Rule. The UVF was regularly – and publically – drilled in military manoeuvres. Initially they used wooden weapons, but after the Larne gun-running in April 1914 (when prohibited military-grade weapons were secretly landed on Ulster beeches) the marches assumed a thoroughly more menacing character, with the most modern machine guns paraded on platforms through Belfast. The official police (who were themselves largely loyalist) either could not – or would not – stop the marches. The message was made abundantly clear: Carson and his private army now effectively controlled Belfast, and Home Rule could not be implemented without something approaching civil war. If the Liberal government balked from implementing their policy, they would almost certainly have to resign and face a general election where it looked highly likely (judging from recent by-elections) that they would lose.

### **Outcome**

We do not know whether Carson's actions would have defeated the third Home Rule Bill, because the outbreak of war in July 1914 stalled implementation of the policy. Both sides – the UVF virtually to a man, and the majority of the Irish Volunteers (the equivalent militarised Nationalist movement) – became absorbed in the war effort. In 1916 a small group of the Volunteers – some of them members of the nascent Sinn Fein – led a violent uprising in Dublin, and occupied the General Post Office. By the time the British authorities intervened to put down what became known

as the Easter Rising, 466 people had been killed. In Westminster there was increasing talk that partition after the war might be the only solution, and even Carson himself had privately been starting to entertain the idea. The argument was rendered still more compelling when, in the general election held shortly after the Armistice in 1918, the radical Sinn Fein almost entirely overturned the old Nationalist Party, capturing 73 seats. Sinn Fein boycotted Westminster, and in 1919 formed its own breakaway government (Dáil Éireann) and declared independence. Fighting followed for the next two years, and British politicians – preoccupied with post-war reconstruction in a world turned upside down – tried to come to a compromise to solve the Irish problem once and for all.

The solution eventually reached was to create of Northern Ireland out of the six most Protestant counties of Ulster, and to annexe the remainder. The UVF had been all but wiped out on the Somme, and the will to resist partition greatly weakened. Carson – highlighting the Protestant minorities in the South and the exclusion of the remaining three Ulster counties of Monaghan, Cavan, and Donegal – declared his deep unhappiness with the compromise, but was in private relieved to retain as much of Ulster as he had. As well as the stranded Protestants, many Catholics (who made up 34% of the population of the new Northern Ireland) felt abandoned. Insofar as this represented a resolution, it was a product of the circumstances arising from the aftermath of war. The devastation meted out on both sides made some form of compromise possible where it would not otherwise have been, and politicians after 1918 took advantage of the moment to beat out the best possible solution to what had seemed an insoluble problem.

For British and Irish Unionists partition represented both success and failure. They had failed to maintain Ireland within the Empire, which – just a decade before the Easter Rising – still looked achievable. Outside the times of political excitement discussed above, Ireland was mostly peaceful in this period, and enjoyed steadily improving living standards. Unionists believed

that by governing Ireland sensibly (and by judiciously redressing the roots of grievances over faith and land) they would be able to 'kill Home Rule with kindness' and depoliticise the Catholic majority. But a newly radicalised generation of nationalists – perhaps in part galvanised by the militarisation of the UVF – seized a chance which many believed had disappeared with the retirement of Gladstone in 1894. Insofar as the Unionist cause had succeeded, it gave Protestants a homeland – and almost certainly a larger one than their numbers alone justified (Carson had suspected privately that just four counties might be offered). They had also defeated two Home Rule bills, and may well have beaten the third if the war had not happened. The Unionists did in the end defeat Home Rule, but the penalty was partition.

Finally, the struggle created founding fathers for both Irish states. Carson stands today atop a high column in front of the Stormont Parliament while Éamon de Valera, who fought in the Easter Rising, occupies a similar position in the history of the new Irish Republic.

### **Analysis: the weakness of the Unionist Campaign**

Although the Unionists were a formidable movement – both at parliamentary and grassroots level – they suffered from an inherent weakness common to most reactionary campaigns: namely, their opponents only had to succeed once to win, whereas they had to succeed many times. One disaster or moment of political excitement could ruin years of patient nullification and once lost, the old constitution would be all but impossible to resurrect.

This was a key problem because it was challenging to keep the British (and particularly the English) electorate permanently interested in the Irish question. For much of the period Home Rule was pushed off the agenda by other issues, and the fear that a bill would slip through under the radar was ever present in Ulster. Had the war not happened (and supposing the Unionists had won the general election expected in 1914 or 1915) it still seems unlikely that continually raising and re-raising the Home Rule phantom was a sustainable electoral strategy that would have

yielded success *ad infinitum*. To permanently defeat Home Rule would have required skilled statecraft and a gradual redress of Irish grievances through the existing system of government. To be fair to the Unionists, their stewardship of Ireland in the period after 1886 was generally both prudent and conscientious. It is the stuff of speculation, but if they had managed another decade of killing Home Rule with kindness, twinned with an innovative measure of Irish local government, while somehow taking the edge off Unionist and Nationalist tensions, perhaps they could have succeeded in gradually asphyxiating the Irish Question, and maintaining the United Kingdom as constituted in 1801.

In terms of tactical errors, it can be argued (with the benefit of hindsight) that the militarisation from 1912 was counterproductive. Not only did it galvanise the Irish Volunteers (who raised considerably more soldiers than the UVF), radicalise nationalism (which led to the birth both of Sinn Fein and the IRA), but it also demonstrated that Unionism was now a movement isolated in Ulster. The absence of enthusiasm outside the six most Unionist Ulster countries made it easier for British academics and politicians to begin to think of partition as a viable solution. By the time it was placed on the immediate political agenda in 1918, the idea was no longer seen as revolutionary. Whether partition represented a defeat or victory for the unionism campaign, however, remains an open question.



## Selected further reading

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Demonstrating against discrimination in the Old Bailey district of London, 1979.

# Campaigning for homosexual rights in 20th-century Britain

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## **Introduction**

In England and Scotland, sodomy laws have long provided for legal sanctions against men who had sex with men. In the late 19th century legal sanctions became more intrusive and wide-ranging, criminalising a variety of sexual acts between men. A last-minute addition to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill in 1885, the ‘Labouchere Amendment’, successfully criminalised what it vaguely termed ‘gross indecency’ between men. This intervention was prompted by the growing power of ideas of so-called ‘normality’ in sexual relations, as well as moral panic over sexual ‘vice’ after some high profile cases involving men in the 1870s.

In practice, criminalisation did not produce an entirely hostile environment for people who were beginning to be named ‘homosexuals’. There was tolerance of homosexual subcultures among elites (at Oxbridge colleges, and in the Navy, for example) between the 1880s and 1950s. Certain workplaces and professions – such as the theatre and the merchant marine – also saw flourishing subcultures of sex between men. However, there were also moments of deep hostility from the press, churches, public opinion, and political figures. Fears about the lowering birth rate, for example, produced lurid and sensational tabloid exposes of ‘mincing’ or ‘perverted’ queers and fags in the early to mid-decades of the 20th century. There were particular concerns over homosexual disorder linked to treason and national security during periods of war. Policing and judicial practices varied but could be vigorous, often prompted by zealous attitudes of an individual newspaper editor, home secretary or director of public prosecutions.

Lesbianism was not formally criminalised – sex between women was never associated with the same threats to the family, morals, and society as sex between men. Indeed, women’s partnerships were sometimes viewed as socially beneficial, providing a solution to the demographic imbalance between the sexes of the early 20th century. Lesbianism was less high-profile than male homosexuality within the press and public opinion; reactions in the popular press were not only of disgust and condemnation, but could be of laughter, and admiration at the ability of female cross-dressers to trick others. However, some lesbians did lose custody of children, and lesbian literature such as Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* was censored as obscene, and only legally published from 1949.

### **Broad social changes**

There was a notable change in moral attitudes in the decades after World War One; sex education became more widely available; sex and sexual pleasure became more openly discussed. Marriage manuals provided new ways of talking about sex, and the Church of England began to view sex as pure and sacred rather

than dirty and profane. The rise of more complex families, including divorced and never-married parenthood, made for a less judgemental and moralising intimate realm in the mid-20th century. There was a stronger emphasis on love and companionship as validating intimate relationships, replacing an older stress on pragmatic reasons for forming relationships. From the 1960s normative masculinities became less oriented to emotional restraint and physical vigour, and began to stress emotional literacy, friendship and sensitivity. The colours, fabrics and styles of men's clothing diversified, and there became a wider variety of ways of styling oneself as a man.

The influential *Kinsey Report*, published in the United States in 1948, played an important part in changing post-war attitudes to sexuality. Kinsey's research suggested the diversity of sexual practices between adults, with 37% of American men claiming some homosexual experience. It helped prompt public debates in the early 1950s around the status of what was termed 'inversion' or homosexuality. Nonetheless, the committee appointed under John Wolfenden by the Churchill government to examine homosexuality after a series of high-profile convictions referred to 'homosexuals' by a euphemism 'for the sake of the ladies' in its meetings between 1954 and 1957. By 1957 the Wolfenden Committee had recommended that the law on gross indecency be changed, because it had become out of step with public opinion.

The decline of religious orthodoxy was both cause and consequence of these changes in sexual morals. The Christian churches had always sustained an uneven response to homosexuality, with some Catholic and Anglo-Catholic religious institutions providing spaces of relative tolerance. But there were limits to this – sympathetic churches tended to provide a euphemistic tolerance or sympathy towards homosexuality, while others displayed open hostility and intolerance. The Anglican Church contributed to decriminalisation debates with progressive advice spurred by its 1952 report, *The Problem of Sexual Inversion*. The reduction in religious faith in the late 20th century had led to diminishing traction for theological objections to homosexuality. Nonetheless,

the Church of England continued to equivocate about whether homosexuality was sinful, and offer homophobic statements, well into the 21st century.

The growing significance of psychoanalysis was a further important influence on 20th century sexual cultures. Psychoanalysis provided a language to name and theorise homosexuality. Freudian ideas problematised sexual ‘normality’ and displaced earlier, more hostile languages of deviance and sin. Freud argued that all humans could be homosexual if they failed to resolve the complexes and fantasies of infancy and childhood. For most analysts and therapists homosexuality was still a disorder, but one that could be treated rather than punished. Treatment ranged from chemical castration and aversion therapy to talking cures. These approaches of course proved highly problematic – many treatments were so painful and traumatising that they might be termed punishments. There was little love lost between the ‘psy’ professions and homosexual campaigners. Nonetheless, psychoanalysis contributed to the idea that homosexuality was a tragic, treatable affliction, best treated through medical rather than criminal justice avenues.

The changing nature of homosexual cultures and practices also contributed to more socially acceptable versions of male homosexuality. The 1950s witnessed the rise of so-called ‘respectable homosexuals’ in the 1950s, replacing older traditions of flamboyant ‘queans’, gay clubs and cafes and homosexual prostitution. Cultural depictions of gay and lesbian characters became more sympathetic in literature, cinema and broadcast media, though the censorship regime still limited what could be said until the 1960s. A 1952 novel, *The Heart in Exile* by Rodney Garland, depicted homosexual men as troubled but not fundamentally dangerous, despite the furore over the homosexuality of the 1951 defectors Guy Burgess and Donald McLean. Alongside connotations of treason a strong association remained between acts of homosexuality and paedophilia – both had been prosecuted under the same designation of gross indecency, and this produced an enduring sense of stigma and moral threat that persisted into the 1970s.

These social changes, therefore, produced a promising environment, but one which would have been unlikely to have sponsored legal change without the active interventions of committed campaigners.

## Methods I

A number of individuals across the 20th century argued in public that the law was unjust, including Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) and George Ives (1867-1950). Figures such as Peter Wildeblood (1923-99, convicted of gross indecency in 1954, and one of three homosexual men who would later give evidence to the Wolfenden Committee) claimed to feel love and desire that paralleled heterosexual emotions. In his influential book, *Against the Law*, written after his trial, Wildeblood distanced himself from extravagant promiscuity, cross-class relationships, cruising and camp. Instead, he declared, 'I am no more proud of my condition than I would be of having a glass eye or a hare lip. On the other hand, I am no more ashamed of it than I would be of being colour-blind'. Crucially then, the decriminalisation activists of the early post-war period did not challenge normative ideas of family values, sexual decorum and privacy. This meant that some in the liberal establishment could sponsor homosexual reform without having to acknowledge its potential challenge to the sexual order.

Despite sympathetic elements the social climate and popular press of the 1950s and early 1960s remained hostile, and the Conservative Government was reluctant to legislate on homosexuality. The obstacle prioritised by campaigners was less changing hearts and minds among the broader public. Instead, they sought to prevent Wolfenden's recommendations from being kicked into the long grass by politicians for whom it was not a priority. The Homosexual Law Reform Society (HLRS) emerged in 1958, aiming to fast-track the enactment of Wolfenden's recommendations. Their campaign opened in traditional fashion, with a letter to *The Times* signed by 33 cultural and intellectual dignitaries. Familiar sites from earlier campaigns for women's suffrage, peace and anti-fascism, such as London's Caxton Hall,

were used for public meetings to agitate for change. There was no strong engagement with homosexual circles within the HLRS. Its goals remained cautious ones of legal reform, to be brought about by public lectures, discreet lobbying and cultivation of influence among elites such as peers and MPs. The HLRS did however sponsor the work of The Albany Trust, a counselling service which provided research support for campaigning, as well as therapy for individuals.

However, the political and campaigning landscape was changing, as civil rights, grassroots-oriented methods of spectacle and direct action began to influence British campaigners. An expanding repertoire of techniques ranged from continuing use of the respectable campaigning of letter writing and petitions to more innovative use of satire and engagement of the mass media, as well as the politicisation of everyday life. To the dismay of establishment figures hoping to discretely sponsor legislative change, a movement emerged seeking open social networking and community building among homosexual men. The North-West Homosexual Reform Committee was founded in 1964 by a Labour councillor, Allan Horsfall (1927-2012). It offered opportunities for homosexual men to meet socially, and in 1969 it was transformed into the Committee for Homosexual Equality (CHE).

It was not until 1971 that CHE was rebranded as the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, and moved beyond social networking to adopt more assertive campaigning formats. Like the HLRS, CHE retained the trappings of a formal single-issue pressure group, sponsoring talks, hosting an annual conference. CHE activists networked with other pressure groups, and remained 'respectable': CHE's focus was the relatively narrow question of law reform in relation to gay men; it did not reach out to lesbian women, or engage with wider questions of changing social attitudes. Nonetheless, it also provided a significant and visible presence in communities outside the major cities, where many homosexual men had faced great stigma and isolation. Its local groups flourished, although national membership was always below 5,000.



*Partial success*

The Labour Government elected in 1964 began to introduce a series of reforms in criminal justice and social policy, in relation to the death penalty, divorce, youth justice, and abortion. There was clearly an appetite for change, sponsored by the enthusiastic Home Secretary Roy Jenkins, whose contact in his earlier years with the Bloomsbury set had given him a permissive attitude to social and sexual morality. A decriminalisation bill was introduced by elite sponsors Lord Arran and Leo Abse MP in 1965. It fell because of the 1966 general election, but was swiftly reintroduced and passed into law as the 1967 Sexual Offences Act. Lord Arran immediately asked homosexual men 'to show their thanks by comporting themselves quietly and with dignity'. However, neither Wolfenden nor the sponsors of the Sexual Offences Act advocated full equality between heterosexual and homosexual adults. The legislation that partly decriminalised homosexuality in 1967 had important exemptions: sexual acts between men involving more than two individuals were still illegal, as were public displays of homosexuality; men in the armed forces and merchant navy were excluded from decriminalisation. Legal change was much slower in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where homosexual acts between consenting males were not decriminalised until the 1980s, prompted by a ruling from the European Court of Human Rights. John Wolfenden (1906-85), whose son was homosexual, continued to regard homosexuality as a medical condition that if possible, should be reversed. He had recommended oestrogen treatment for male homosexuals, despite the tragic suicide of Alan Turing in 1954 following oestrogen injections.

**Methods II**

The partial nature of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act and the persistence of public hostility motivated further campaigning from some in the gay community. In 1971 Gay Liberation activists penned a manifesto calling for a new sexual order in which monogamy, the nuclear family, psychiatry and patriarchy would

**SOME  
GUYS  
MARRY  
GUYS.  
GET  
OVER  
IT!**



Protesters gather outside the Houses of Parliament in central London on June 3, 2013, in support of same-sex marriage.



all be discarded: 'gay liberation does not just mean reforms. It means a revolutionary change in our whole society'. London-based Gay Liberation, and other groups around the country such as the Scottish Minorities Group (founded in 1969), operated through intense public meetings, public parades such as Gay Pride, discos, gay telephone helplines, and grassroots periodical publications such as *Gay News*. Gay Liberation activists also satirised their opponents by organising 'zaps' at rallies of the religious right. The zap combined camp performance with disruption, and helped subvert the Festival of Light Christian rallies of the early 1970s. Small consciousness-raising groups also played a part in promoting change at the level of individual lives.

The short-lived period of gay liberation in the early 1970s was marked by attempts build coalitions between men and women. This proved controversial as lesbians grew frustrated with misogynist behaviour and opted for autonomy. Nonetheless, strategies of coalition building proved productive; gay activists helped support the Trade Union Congress in its campaign against Ted Heath's restrictive union legislation in 1971, and later allied with striking miners in 1984-85. However, campaigners and their publications were still highly vulnerable to legal challenge; Mary Whitehouse successfully prosecuted *Gay News* for blasphemy in 1977.

### **Outcomes**

Warmer cultural depictions continued to help sponsor change in public attitudes to homosexuality after the partial decriminalisation of 1967. Gay or androgynous icons abounded in popular music from the 1970s, including Tom Robinson, David Bowie, Boy George, and Bronski Beat, although Labour MP Maureen Colquhoun still found her political career to be unsustainable after she was outed as a lesbian in 1976. By the 1980s the association between homosexuality and paedophilia had been broken, and the paedophile had become a folk devil of quite a different order from the homosexual man. Gay male characters emerged in British soap operas in the mid 1980s, although their presence was still greeted with controversy. In 1984 Chris Smith, Britain's first

openly gay MP, voluntarily came out. A flourishing social scene of clubs, pubs and shops created new communities and visible gay spaces.

The AIDS crisis from 1984 prompted deep, openly-expressed homophobia, and suggested that neither decriminalisation nor gay liberation had successfully destigmatised men who had sex with men. AIDS posed a new set of challenges to the gay community, and helped bring together lesbian women and gay men in providing counselling and practical support to people affected by the disease. The hostility of the Thatcher governments also sparked renewed activism. The enactment of Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988 made the so-called 'promotion' of homosexuality within schools and local government an offence. The campaigning group Stonewall was established in response. Its tactics represented a revisiting of campaigning tactics similar to those of the respectable, insider legal reform sought by the Homosexual Law Reform Society of the late 1950s. Stonewall offered a credible, professional lobby movement. It also created a more secure alliance between gay men and lesbian women who were equally threatened by Section 28.

This was not the only campaigning model available. The pressure group Outrage!, established by activists including Peter Tatchell after the murder of gay actor Michael Boothe in 1990, drew more directly on the tactics of gay liberation. It organised camp performances, such as the 'kiss-in' in Piccadilly Circus in 1990. Outrage! activists also controversially adopted public outings – a tactic already experimented with in the United States, and long used indiscriminately by the press. In contrast, Outrage! outings were strategically aimed at gay figures in public life who were actively working against gay equality or homophobic. In November 1994, Outrage! named 10 bishops of the Church of England as gay, and later wrote to gay MPs urging them to come out in public.

The campaigning towards the end of the 20th century shifted from the definite identity of 'gay' towards the more vaguely drawn 'queer' – a more dissident category that refused easy definition.

This shift was also reflected in popular culture. The Channel 4 series *Queer as Folk* (1999) depicted confident, attractive gay and bisexual characters, contributing to the normalisation of sexual minorities. Gay quarters developed in cities, with vibrant and affluent rather than seedy connotations. There were new depictions of successful gay parenting after 2000, which helped the campaign to achieve further goals of legal equality in age of consent, child custody and marital rights in the 21st century.

In sum, campaigning around gay rights has seen a complex interaction between wider changes in popular culture and interventions by campaigners. Key to the pace of change has been the cultural, intellectual and political climate; there has been no simple trajectory of progress; rather there have been periods of setback and backlash (particularly in the 1940s, 1950s and 1980s) prompted by external factors such as war, demographics and disease. Opposition has never been monolithic, with the establishment (medical, parliamentary, religious, and media institutions) always providing leverage and resources for change as well as homophobic responses. Change has been promoted less by charismatic figures (though Peter Tatchell emerged as a key inspirational figure in the 1980s and 1990s). Instead, the campaign has seen a combination of quiet insider lobbying (HLRS and Stonewall), alongside innovative grassroots campaigns such as those of gay liberation and Outrage!

## Further Reading

Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures of the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (2005)

Alison Oram, *'Her Husband Was a Woman!' Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (2007)

Stephen Jeffery-Poulter, *Peers, Queers and Commons: the struggle for Gay Law Reform from 1950 to the present* (1991)

Matt Cook, *A Gay History of Britain: love and sex between men since the middle ages* (2007)

Timothy Jones, *Sexual Politics in the Church of England* (2013)

Porter and Weeks, *Between the Acts: Lives of Homosexual Men, 1885-1967* (1991)



Mrs Mary Whitehouse hands to James Dance, Conservative MP for Bromsgrove, bundles containing 366,355 signatures in support of a petition praying "that the BBC be asked to make a radical change of policy and produce programmes which build character... instead of destroying it".



# Mary Whitehouse, the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association and social movement campaigning

*Lawrence Black, University of York*

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## **Focus**

'Clean-up TV' started with a public meeting, organised by school-teacher Mary Whitehouse and rector's wife Norah Buckland, at Birmingham Town Hall in May 1964, to promote a national petition. Whitehouse's motivation came from the BBC show *Meeting Point* (8 March 1963) in which the discussion between a headmistress, clergyman and bishop's wife had led her students to deduce pre-marital sex was acceptable. The petition won such attention – supportive and hostile – that her campaign established

the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA) in 1965. Launched in Fleet Street by Whitehouse, moral campaigners, MPs, police, military and clergy, it claimed to represent the broadcast media's consumers.

The NVALA was a product of multiple developments in the 1960s. The emergent permissive pop culture and openness about sexuality of the 1960s seemed to go hand-in-hand with what historian Callum Brown has termed 'the death of Christian Britain'. The publication of *Honest to God* (1963), by the Bishop of Woolwich, upset those seeking stricter moral teaching. A more affluent, consumerist society seemed to incubate the sort of hedonism and loss of self-control the NVALA abhorred. It was the pluralism of values that unnerved the NVALA, with the church reluctant to teach certain values. Nor was the Conservative Party under Edward Heath – having promoted consumerism under Harold Macmillan – willing to enter the fray of moral politics. Like other social movements, the NVALA was extra-parliamentary and enjoyed a fraught relationship with formal politics, questioning party authority. NVALA's focus on culture and values rather than material aims, meant its politics were characteristic of the 'post-materialism' Ronald Inglehart has attributed to this period. Like the peace, consumer, environmental, and nationalist movements, it called for widening public participation. Like other identity politics, notably feminism, its focus was the private sphere – although it saw this more as necessity than virtue, one caused by TV's entry (90% of households had a TV by 1970) into the domestic space.

From a single-issue campaign, Clean-up TV expanded to be more of a broadcasting non-governmental organisation (NGO) and by the later 1970s was censoriously policing all aspects of society. The initial goal was to induce the BBC to be true to its Reithian origins to inform, educate and to commission more christian programming and less violent, sexual content. As the petition put it, 'the propaganda of disbelief, doubt and dirt that the BBC pours into millions of homes... present promiscuity, infidelity and drinking as normal'; what was needed were programmes which 'encourage and sustain faith in God' as 'the heart

of our family and national life'. The focus was the BBC, a public body, not commercial ITV. If viewers could not exercise control over BBC content, NVALA charged this was taxation without representation. The aim was not, as with most 1960s single-issue campaigns, to repeal or enact legislation, but to enforce existing laws, especially the 1964 Television Act which prohibited broadcasting that 'offends against good taste or decency or is likely to encourage... disorder or to be offensive to public feelings'.

This evolved into the idea of a viewers' council that would consult with the BBC, informing programming decisions – to move, as Whitehouse's 1967 book *From Protest to Participation* put it. This participatory model was always tempered by the NVALA's vision of the appropriate values. It gained little traction with government ministers, who held to the principle of arm's length control over the BBC. And even less with the BBC, which regarded NVALA as cultural vigilantes (if privately fearing its audience might side with them). Whitehouse and the NVALA moved rapidly from specific instances to their global implications; action was everyone's responsibility in everyday life. By the 1970s, whilst broadcasting remained the focus, she had broadened her campaigning remit to include all forms of blasphemy entering the public sphere, from pornography to gay rights. Whitehouse's ultimate vision has been described as a 'theocratic state' and 'cultural fundamentalism'.

### **Contention**

The NVALA principally challenged the new norm of permissiveness, as Britain progressively shed its Victorian cultural shackles and became a more secular, plural society. However, the NVALA also exhibited many of the values and practices of the permissive society: a focus on culture and media, DIY activism, female leadership, appeals to popular sovereignty; the personal as political. Indeed, the NVALA should be understood as anti-establishment protest since whilst its leaders respected authority, they were decidedly un-deferential. Conservatives shunned the Association because of its aggressive rhetoric as much as the awkwardness of

TV as a political issue. Like many other aspirant social movements, it operated by contrast with the emerging professionalisation of televised party politics – more amateurish and apparently authentic in voice. The NVALA was in a permanent moral panic about the media, but also apt to deploy a sensational soundbite to win publicity.

In other ways it was at odds with this characteristic 1960s spirit. NVALA was decidedly non-metropolitan – pitched against the corruptions of ‘swinging London’. It claimed to be the ‘voice of the silent millions’ – a language resonant with President Nixon’s ‘silent majority’ and the US christian right’s ‘moral majority’. It was noisy, like youth culture, but aged in its membership: Whitehouse was 53 when she started the Clean-up. Few members had university degrees, compared with the younger (if equally middle-class, religious, moralist) cohorts of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Whitehouse saw the personal-domestic as best insulated from the public-political, but fused the two as TV invaded the home and challenged traditional notions of motherhood, housewifery and parenting. There was, she felt, a ‘chronic shortage [on TV] of those qualities of sensitivity, understanding and gentleness which are part of the female psyche’.

NVALA reinforced the widespread idea of a British nation in decline – its moral diagnosis was a remedy. Some wartime fortitude was in order – a leitmotiv of personal letters to Whitehouse – even its title was pronounced ‘national valour’. That the NVALA was formed as the destabilisation of sexual, racial and imperial identities threw Britishness into question was not coincidental – it added to that destabilisation.

Like the New Left, NVALA had no doubt that TV helped form opinions and behaviour. The orthodoxy was that it was a reflection of the world, a window on it, but the NVALA agreed with Raymond Williams that ‘culture teaches’. NVALA wanted broadcasting included in the 1968 Race Relations Act, arguing it could incite, where broadcasters held they were reporting. It was ‘common sense’ to the NVALA that ‘children (and the rest of us) copy what they see and hear’.

Like most social movements, NVALA cast itself as a grassroots movement of everyday citizens ignored, abused and exploited by un-accountable bastions of power – in its case, the liberal establishment, chiefly the professional broadcasters at the BBC. Whitehouse lived in the suburban West Midlands (a sometime neighbour of Enoch Powell) and viewed London, through provincial eyes. They lacked the material resources of their opponents – the campaign was run from a spartan office in Whitehouse's home and when she campaigned in the 1983 general election, she used a caravan to tour the nation. Being excluded and marginalised (censored by liberal intolerance, NVALA alleged) by the BBC for much of the 1960s, was self-fulfilling of NVALA's case that the BBC privileged certain voices and was not accountable to viewers. As much as NVALA took faith from the belief Britons were Christian, they were ultimately fighting the popularity of TV among Europe's most avid viewers. So *Til' Death us do part* – in one episode (27 February 1967) the fictional satirical sexist Alf Garnett praised Whitehouse's *Clean-up TV* book, before tossing it into the fire – was a real foe for NVALA. Its writer Johnny Speight charged that Whitehouse was a fascist, and she charged for libel (and won). So too the David Frost-fronted *That Was The Week That Was* (*TW3*) and the kitchen-sink dramas of the BBC's *Wednesday Play* (notably *Up The Junction* and *Cathy Come Home*).

Whitehouse's background was in Moral Re-Armament (MRA), a global organisation whose members committed directly to God (not via the church) to live purely. MRA had campaigned against the Edinburgh Festival, and its militant, clandestine cold war methods of fighting communism were apparent in NVALA. For Whitehouse, the enemies were the (lack of) values and moral relativism of the British Humanist Association; a church too irreligious to give moral guidance; and above all the complacency and indulgences of liberalism. All threatened to let communism and godlessness seep into Britons. The epitome of decadent, carefree liberalism was Hugh Carleton Greene's regime as BBC Director General (1961-69), which saw satire like *TW3* and gritty plays prominent in BBC programming.

Artists, writers and performers were almost universally opposed to what they saw as Whitehouse's moral absolutism and censorship. Various pressure groups formed to counter the NVALA from within the cultural industries, with figures such as Richard Hoggart, Roy Shaw (later Chair of the Arts Council) and Ted Willis to the fore. Whitehouse relished the hostility she provoked. She recalls the heckling, jostling, and abuse on numerous University campuses in the 1970s as a rite of passage in tackling liberal culture. Equally, she forged some ironic, unholy alliances. Feminist anti-pornography campaigners chanted 'Right on, Mary' (others punned 'Carry on, Mrs Whitehouse'), as she debated with the head of *Playboy* UK, Victor Lownes. She was willing to confront the enemy head on, as much as its liberal indulgers.

## Methods

If doctrinally rigid, the NVALA was tactically flexible. Any means were legitimate, in part because the group met considerable resistance and limited success. The petition was its strategic centerpiece – enabling it to seek and claim mass support beyond its members, and organise nationally. The clean-up petition, presented to Parliament in May 1965, had 366,655 signatures. A petition for public decency amassed 1.35 million signatures in 1973; another against child pornography led to the 1978 Protection of Children Act. Petitions were popular among people resisting liberalising legislation – for example by capital punishment retentionists – as they appeared to demonstrate public opinion pitted against expert opinion and modernising elites.

Letter and telegram writing was no less prolific. Members were supplied with templates and BBC contact details. This played to the demographic of its elderly, female membership – although were capable of heckling too. The aim was to have *The Viewer* available in newsagents, doctors' waiting rooms, schools and libraries. Local NVALA branches monitored TV output – research that relied on 'common sense' instincts to rival more protracted academic results. Whitehouse worked a stretch as the *Daily Sketch* TV critic in 1967 and, keen to deny it was only crit-

ical, the NVALA made TV awards – police drama *Dixon of Dock Green* was the first winner.

Alongside this popular grassroots approach it turned to litigation and the state (suggesting limits to its populist faith in Britons' Christianity). Whitehouse deluged the Prime Minister and Postmaster General (the minister responsible for the BBC) with missives. The Director of Public Prosecutions was likewise swamped with appeals to apply the Obscene Publications Act, which he invariably refused. She tried to ally with PM Harold Wilson's grievances with the BBC. In 1965 a note within No.10 concluded: 'Mrs Whitehouse is clearly a most tiresome woman'.

The NVALA submitted evidence to official committees: the Annan Committee on Broadcasting (1977); the Home Office Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship (1979); the Arts Council's working party on obscenity laws (1969). Private prosecutions were pursued, notably, in 1976 (successfully) against *Gay News* under the 17th-century blasphemy law, for publishing James Kirkup's poem 'The Love that Dares Speak its Name'; and against the National Theatre's 1982 production of *The Romans in Britain* under the Sexual Offences Act.

The NVALA's tone was militant, vitriolic even. There was no indulgence of turning the TV off or over. Whitehouse routinely cited Edmund Burke ('all it takes for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing') or Thomas More ('Silence means assent'). Its own slogans included 'Don't moan, phone!'. Civil disobedience was discussed – a women's march on London in 1964 and the non-payment of the licence fee (proposed by John Barnett, the Chief Constable of Lincolnshire). But generally it was law abiding, arguing for the law's more stringent enforcement.

Given its limited success in reforming the BBC, the NVALA increasingly spread campaigning to what it saw as the host of threats to Christian values: film, theatre, homosexuality, drugs, satire, abortion, soccer hooliganism, and paedophilia were now in its crosshairs. The commercial exploitation of sex, in films like *Deep Throat* and in local sex shops, increasingly occupied Whitehouse in the 1970s. Her interest extended beyond the UK

to Denmark which had de-criminalised pornography and to the United States, where she admired the efforts of the Atlanta Solicitor General in closing sex shops. *Mightier Than The Sword* (1985), which cast Whitehouse as the William Wilberforce and Elizabeth Fry 'of the television age', made a case to combat 'video nasties'. Its most remarkable chapter told how since 1978 school principal Charles Oxley, the Vice (sic) President of NVALA, had spied on the Paedophile Information Exchange (PIE) by joining it under the pseudonym Dave Charlton.

These wider aims echoed a global turn to religious zealotry in the 1970s. Whitehouse backed the evangelical Festival of Light. The Festival's demos-cum-rallies-pop festivals, attracted a younger crowd than NVALA. Its pamphlets detailed confiscations and prosecutions of retailers who sold porn. The church's organisational decline explained the festival's appeal – it was more pro-active, with some 150,000 UK members, including anti-apartheid campaigner Bishop Trevor Huddleston. But that Amy Whipple suggests the festival was 'too Christian' to generate popular political momentum on the scale of the Moral Majority in the United States in 1979, tells us much about Whitehouse's fortunes too.

Whitehouse was NVALA's key asset – a heroine of the (new) right and 'an iron lady before Thatcher', as Beatrix Campbell dubbed her. Whitehouse was a charismatic leader who sacrificed her domestic idyll for the cause. Her status was also something of a liability, since the NVALA was very much a one-woman show and lacked strong internal governance.

Whitehouse's celebrity supporters were few. Pop star Cliff Richard won the NVALA's TV award and joined her in the Festival of Light. Malcolm Muggeridge (the 1967 convention keynote) and Lord Longford shared her call for moral revolt against the tyranny of TV and crusade against pornography, respectively. Both had rescinded on more left-wing pasts. Longford having helped decriminalise homosexuality, became a staunch opponent of it. NVALA patrons in 1966 included Tory MP Cyril Black (President of the London Baptist Association) a former Secretary of the World Methodist Council, three Lord Bishops and the Air



Chief Marshall. Amongst NVALA leaders, Major James Dance (Tory MP for Bromsgrove, 1955-71), and Chief Constable John Barnett were her enduring supporters. John Court, an Australian sexual psychologist involved in the Festival of Light (author of *In Defence of Censorship – A Christian View*, 1971) provided expert legal witness.

NVALA was sensitive about membership numbers. In 1968 there were 7,000 formal members, but they claimed the support of over 1 million through petition signatories. In 1975, with membership dues of 25 pence, Whitehouse claimed 15,000 members (one biographer puts the figure as high as 31,000) and 30 branches, of which the biggest was in the West Midlands. There was something to these claims judging by the volume of letters Whitehouse received. A sample of these from the NVALA archives reveals the writers to have similar sentiments and backgrounds to those who wrote to Powell in 1968: the elderly, retired military, nonconformist and Celtic fringes were mobilised – offering small donations and a sense that at last someone had spoken up. The Scottish Housewives Association was a consistent supporter. Rotary International, the Mothers' Union and Catholic Teachers Federation offered more contingent, brief support – wary of NVALA's critical, politicising tones.

Whitehouse emoted and appealed to a visceral conservatism. Her confrontational tone put her beyond the pale of official conservatism, but squarely among the grassroots middle class, small retailer, taxpayer revolts of 1970s' 'respectable rebels'. Here it is worth noting how the NVALA's mistrust of liberalism above all, identify it as part of the neo-conservative part of the emergent new right in the 1960s. Six Tory MPs were involved in discussions to form the NVALA. Some were characters like Neil Hamilton or Gerald Nabarro, but a good number of local Conservative Party members worked with the NVALA. Bill Deedes, who spoke at NVALA's first convention in 1966, was a consistent friend. Keith Joseph lauded Whitehouse in an infamous 1974 speech and Thatcher made her a CBE in 1980; yet, despite such recognition and affinities, differences remained.

Whitehouse and Margaret Thatcher were close, regularly corresponding on broadcasting appointments, pornography, the age of consent, video nasties, children's TV, football violence, Channel 4, the Albany Trust and PIE. Thatcher was no fan of the BBC establishment. Kindred spirits they might have been, but this did not prevent Whitehouse opining in 1983 for a 'moral Falklands – if only she would give the lead'. In 1984 Thatcher penned (and performed in) a sketch for the BBC comedy *Yes, Minister* on the occasion of it winning NVALA's TV award, and on NVALA's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Thatcher spoke of how Whitehouse's campaign 'to halt the slide into what she believed was decadence... has forced broadcasters to think twice about what they offer the public. Let no-one ever again say "What can one person do?"'

Thatcherism was torn between market ideology and morality. Thatcher lamented the same demise of christian morality, but with less faith that it could be restored (certainly not by the state). The NVALA had blind faith that Britons were Christian, but its faith in the state was quite conventional. And the NVALA did not favour the commercial ITV model, since it was not subject to public control in the same way. NVALA members criticised pirate radio and in 1970 when the advertising journal *Campaign* asked what she thought of advertising Whitehouse found herself alongside paragons of the left like Raymond Williams, arguing it 'degraded women'.

### **Outcome**

There were legislative achievements which NVALA influenced or welcomed: the 1978 Protection of Children Act and under Thatcher the 1981 Indecent Displays Act and establishment in 1988 of a Broadcasting Standards Commission (OfCom after 2003). If weaker than the NVALA would have liked, the Commission put in place the structures NVALA wanted. The 1982 Local Government Act tightened the local authority licensing procedure for sex shops that was omitted from the 1981 Act. The 1984 Video Recordings Act controlled video nasties. The 1987 Conservative manifesto committed to remove broadcast-

ers' exemption from Obscene Publications Act. Clause 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act restricted the dissemination of information about homosexuality in schools. The tension within conservatism between freeing up markets (it licensed Britain's first cable and satellite TV, to further challenge the BBC's position) and its Victorian values, and urge to regulate, was apparent in media policy in this period.

Acknowledging Whitehouse and the NVALA's resonance with cultural and political contexts is not to overstate their significance or impact. But we can learn from their marginalisation, their campaigning difficulties and from why they failed. In their own time and terms, despite the 1980s legislation, the NVALA did fail: the liberalisation of culture continued, not unabated, but with little cheer for the group's successor, Mediawatch. NVALA's homophobia and Christianity left it in the cultural dust, whatever the potency of its questions about TV's role in society. Whitehouse's main cultural legacy was as a stereotype, Mrs Grundy, or in the ironic titles of a 1975 pornographic magazine or the 1990s alternative comedy show *The Mary Whitehouse Experience*. *The Goodies* mocked her as Desiree Carthorse in the 1970s, and in the 1960s a BBC radio play, *Mrs Smallgood*, parodied her family life. Whitehouse stepped down in 1994. She died in 2001, the same year that the NVALA morphed into Mediawatch.

Whilst its reactionary politics put it at odds with many other single-issue campaigns and social movements, in form and style it was recognisably one of these. Contemporaries explained the NVALA by comparison with Poujadism (populist, crypto-fascist, petit-bourgeois opposition to taxes), McCarthyism (communists ensconced in the BBC) and the US temperance movement. But the strongest parallel was Phyllis Schlafly, who emerged as a US public figure in 1964 with a critique of mainstream republicanism in *A Choice, Not an Echo*. Schlafly was more ostensibly political, in attacking the equal rights amendment, but her mid-West family tones and campaigns against abortion, porn and homosexuality, alongside Whitehouse, remind historians of a less male, less economic dimension to the burgeoning new right.

They also tell something of the NVALA's comparative failure: how Whitehouse would have loved the size of Christian audience US campaigners had.

The NVALA might feel its suspicion of the liberal biases in the establishment are confirmed by the fact that many historians have either ignored the NVALA or seen fit to regard it with amused disdain, rather than analysing it alongside Amnesty, the Consumers' Association or environmental groups. Like such groups the NVALA is best understood in terms of cultural politics, but unlike many social movement campaigns, it involves more than the young, educated and progressive politics. Thus it challenges some norms of social movement history and analysis. The US christian right is the firmest example; in the UK, the Countryside Alliance in the 1990s.

In a spirit of controversy, we might conclude with the awkward question – wasn't NVALA right to raise suspicions of BBC culture, given revelations of some of the activities of its leading radio and TV stars? Not that Whitehouse was wise to Jimmy Savile – indeed in 1977 *Jim'll Fix It* won the NVALA's TV award. David Cameron talks of regulating the internet to protect children from pornography. Ben Thompson has recently highlighted the modern and ancient parallels to NVALA techniques – how petitions were like internet campaigns, or Neighbourhood Watch. Even critics tended to at least wonder – Hoggart's obituary of Whitehouse in *The Guardian* is a case in point – against their long and hard-held instincts, whether there was something about Mary?

## Further Reading:

Lawrence Black, *Redefining British Politics* (Basingstoke, 2010), ch.5.

Ben Thompson, *Ban this Filth!* (London, 2012).

Michael Tracey, David Morrison, *Whitehouse* (Basingstoke, 1979).

Mary Whitehouse, *Cleaning-up TV* (London, 1967) and *Mightier than the Sword* (Eastbourne, 1985).



Miners' wives and their supporters arrive in London for a rally and mass lobby of MPs, more than 8000 miners from all over Britain are involved.

# The Miners' Strike in Britain, 1984-85

*Jim Phillips, University of Glasgow*

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## **Focus**

In the miners' strike of 1984-85 in Britain a complicated welter of issues were involved: energy and environmental politics; coal industry finances; the position of women in the strike and gender politics in the coalfields; policing, public order and civil liberties; the role of the Labour Party; and the contested strategy and tactics of the strikers. 'In the cutting of coal there is noise and dust and unwanted stone', wrote Raymond Williams in the late 1980s. 'Similarly,' he continued, 'in the coal strike there are central issues of great importance to the society, but around them, and often obscuring them, the noise and dust and stone of confused, short-term or malignant argument.' The key obscured issues were the class divisions which formed the heart of the strike, and the

ideological nature of the struggle between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Conservative government.

Confronted by neo-liberalism, authoritarian management and deindustrialisation, the strikers' defence of their jobs and pits involved a campaign for communal economic security, workplace rights and trade union voice in public policy-making. Their campaign was defeated by the overwhelming power of the state, mobilised by the Government. Various forces and resources – the police, the courts and anti-trade union allies in business and the media – were deployed to neuter, impoverish, intimidate and victimise the strikers. The strike was perhaps the last major campaign pursued in Britain by industrial workers with an explicitly class perspective. This class focus was a strength but also a weakness, dividing the miners from potential supporters. Later campaigns of the left would be more successful when working-class interests were defended within a broader cross-class mobilisation.

The miners' campaign emerged in the winter of 1980-81. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government, elected in 1979, pressed the National Coal Board (NCB), which managed the industry on behalf of the state, to lower costs and become entirely self-financing by 1984. This was ambitious. Recession and business closures – illustrated by the 1979-82 doubling of unemployment to 3 million – substantially lowered demand for coal-fired electricity. Adjusting supply to fit demand implied closing pits where production was most expensive. The threat to jobs was clear, particularly in Scotland, Northumberland, Durham, South Wales, parts of Yorkshire, and Kent, where challenging geological conditions elevated costs. In February 1981 miners in these areas joined an unofficial strike against NCB plans to reduce production by 10%. Still heavily reliant on NCB coal, the Government ended this strike by relaxing cash limits, but the retreat was temporary: the NCB stockpiled coal and the trend to alternatives – nuclear, oil- and gas-fired plant – was accelerated. The miners' temper was reflected in 1982, when Arthur Scargill, campaigning to defend pits, was elected President of the NUM with 70% of the vote.



The campaign continued in 1983. The Monopolies and Mergers Commission, appointed to investigate NCB finances, recommended a 10% cut in capacity. The NUM claimed there was a secret hit list, to close 75 pits with the loss over three years of 64,000 of the industry's 200,000 jobs. Documents released under the 30-year rule in 2014 demonstrated that Thatcher discussed this list on 15 September 1983 with Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Peter Walker, Secretary of State for Energy, and Norman Tebbit, Secretary of State for Employment. But at the time both Government and NCB obfuscated, conceding only that perhaps 20 pits might be lost. The NCB was under new management, Thatcher appointing Ian MacGregor as Chairman. MacGregor was a Scots-American businessman, outgoing Chairman of the British Steel Corporation (BSC), where costs and union influence had been radically reduced through closures with employment cut from 166,000 in 1980 to 71,000 in 1983. Literature on the miners' strike often relates its origins to MacGregor's appointment, but anti-union methods were already being pioneered by NCB managers, notably Albert Wheeler, Scottish Area Director, who closed several pits in 1982-83 and instructed pit managers to abandon workplace agreements with unions.

The trigger for the strike is usually identified as the announcement in the first week of March 1984 that Cortonwood near Rotherham would close. Yorkshire union representatives pledged to resist this through strike action, infuriated too by the proposed closure of Bullcliffe Wood in Wakefield, and emboldened by news that Snowdon in Kent, Herrington in Durham and Polmaise in Scotland would also shut. At Polmaise, near Stirling, miners were on strike *before* the Cortonwood announcement, and 50% of Scotland's miners were already in dispute with their managers, fighting closures and Wheeler's incursions on their workplace rights.

### **Contention**

The miners' campaign challenged two major tenets of Thatcherite political economy: first, that the value of economic activity should be measured by financial criteria alone; and second, that

union voice should not compromise managerial powers of decision-making.

Campaigners rejected the contention that mines should close on economic grounds. This countered prevailing thinking in the 1980s, as 'viability' – to paraphrase Andrew Glyn – was incrementally associated with 'profitability'. Pits not making money for the NCB should be closed, argued the Government. Yet NCB performance data was highly problematic, including expenditure arising from past activities, such as compensation for subsidence, pensions to retired employees and payments to redundant miners. Pit-level performance itself was highly subjective, and varied according to investment. The social costs of non-production were also emphasised by campaigners, with redundancy payments followed by unemployment maintenance, coupled with lost tax revenues and multiplier effects in coalfield areas, including reduced consumer expenditure. The industry provided vital glue that would be lost with the pits: employment, income and a varied social infrastructure of welfare and sports clubs, educational resources, musical bands, and activities for youth and pensioners.

The strikers and their supporters defended also the value of trade union voice in the making of important business decisions. On the Cabinet Ministerial Group on Coal (CMGC), which she chaired twice weekly in the first six months of the strike, Thatcher recurrently emphasised that the NCB could not agree to any settlement compromising its power to decide whether pits should be closed or remain open. This was the fundamental question of the campaign, which duly represented a barrier to the Government's broader economic ambitions, including the erosion of union rights and the privatisation of utilities, services and industries. Privatisation was opposed by unions, fearing the consequences of stronger managerial and shareholder control: redundancy and an ever-lowering of wages and employment security.

This challenge posed by strikers has sometimes been characterised as conservative as well as radical. They were resisting authority, but only to preserve an unaltered coalfield order. Miners

were not, in fact, atavistically opposed to change, although they resented the imposition of closures by a hostile employer and Government. The strikers recognised that mining was essentially a dynamic industry. From the 1950s to the 1970s miners had accepted many adjustments to their economic and social order on the basis of negotiation and agreement. In the 1960s NCB employment more than halved, from 700,000 to 300,000. Smaller and older pits closed with redundancies accepted partly because the NCB invested in a new generation of larger pits, with prospects of greater viability and sustainability. Wider economic and social policies were also important to the acceptance of this restructuring, with the 1964-70 Labour governments substantially increasing incentives to manufacturing industry to locate in the coalfields, particularly in Scotland, South Wales, Northumberland, and Durham. This might be termed the 'moral economy' of coalfield restructuring. Miners accepted pit closures if changes were negotiated and agreed, and where their individual and communal economic security was protected through the availability of meaningful and comparably-paid employment. Neither of these criteria applied in the 1980s, where closures were pursued unilaterally by management, against workforce opposition, amid deindustrialisation and rising unemployment.

So the campaign had to be fought, but it could not be won. The nature and scale of the opposition marshalled by the Government is demonstrated by four key strands of evidence. First, NCB-NUM so-called peace talks, seeking an agreed formula for pit closures, were routinely sabotaged by the Government, insisting upon conditions that consolidated managerial sovereignty on the central issue and could not be accepted by the strikers. The CMGC minutes of 30 May, 11 July, and 12 September amply illustrate this vital point. NUM leaders have been criticised for their inflexible approach to negotiations: conceding the economic case for some closures might have slowed the rate of deindustrialisation. But the NUM could not agree that management should always have the final say: this would certainly have been rejected by many if not the majority of the strikers. Second,

throughout the strike Thatcher personally intervened in policing matters, ensuring that pickets were prevented from mustering at power stations, steel works, and other pressure points, as well as at collieries – especially in Nottinghamshire – where miners were working. Third, the Government urged the NCB to institute and then accelerate a back-to-work movement, providing additional financial incentives to strike breakers, and safe transport to and from their workplace. Fourth, the Government was involved, albeit tangentially, in a complex set of legal manoeuvres against the NUM. A key figure was David Hart, businessman and occasional adviser to Thatcher and MacGregor, who encouraged working miners to sue the NUM over the legality of the strike. In September the High Court in London restrained the NUM from characterising the strike as official. The NUM leaders felt obliged to defy this restraint, leading in October to the sequestration of union assets in England and Wales, although not in Scotland, where separate legal jurisdiction ruled the strike lawful. Thatcher's papers show she followed closely the anti-strike litigation, which exacerbated the NUM's difficulties.

The Government's strike-breaking effort was expensive. Estimates coalesce around £6 billion – about £14 billion in 2015 values – in disappearing production and tax revenues, replacement coal stocks and additional oil burn charges, along with reduced economic activity more generally plus the huge expense of policing. This outweighed the NCB's projected financial losses for producing coal in the financial year of 1984-85, some £100 million, by a factor of *60 to one*. This 'worthwhile investment', in Nigel Lawson's words, was central to the Government's larger ambition of redistributing resources and authority from employees to employers, to liberate business interests and strengthen market forces.

## Methods

The legal moves against the strike illustrated divisions that weakened the campaign. NUM strategy and tactics arguably widened these divisions. The strategic goal was to impose economic costs

on the Government, and so force a U-turn on closures. This required a complete stoppage of coal production through strike action but there was no national ballot of members. Instead the federal structure of the union was deployed so that its discrete areas – Yorkshire, Scotland and so on – could initiate area strikes. These areas encouraged others to join by picketing pits where miners continued working. There was a rationale for this approach. Miners in Yorkshire and Scotland already on strike would probably not have returned had a ballot gone against them. A national ballot *might* have secured a strike majority and a complete cessation of production *could* have followed. Victory would probably still have evaded the campaigners, however, given the Government's willingness to expend huge economic premiums in pursuit of its anti-trade union goals. Power cuts and the bill for a massive increase in imports would surely have been added to Lawson's tally of a 'worthwhile investment'. Without a ballot the campaign was in any case damaged, notably in Nottinghamshire, where all but 3,000 of the area's 40,000 miners worked throughout the strike. Economically, working miners believed – mistakenly, it would transpire – that closures were a remote or non-existent threat. Politically, many viewed the absent national ballot as breaking union rules, and were offended when miners from Yorkshire, Scotland and elsewhere picketed their pits.

Mass picketing of working mines, and similar actions at power stations and steel works, was accompanied by disorder and violence. Physical violence by strikers was concentrated mainly on working miners, their motor vehicles and homes. The small number of assaults on NCB property is notable but explicable in terms of the moral economy position that collieries belonged to the communities which depended upon them. These assets were rarely attacked by campaigners who were struggling to preserve them. The Government's willingness to absorb the economic losses of strike has been noted. The true costs of the crowd actions were therefore borne by the strikers themselves. A thousand miners were sacked by the NCB for strike-related activities, 206 of them in Scotland. Many of those dismissed had

been charged by the police, but were then neither convicted nor even prosecuted. Despite this, a powerful narrative of union-instigated public disorder developed, bolstered by unsympathetic or hostile media coverage, notably the notorious BBC television news coverage of mass picketing in June 1984 at the BSC coke works at Orgreave in South Yorkshire. This first showed pickets hurling missiles at police lines, and then mounted officers charging through the strikers. The actual sequence of events was in reverse: the miners' missiles followed the mounted police charge.

The narrative of public disorder constrained the campaigners' capacity to build an anti-Government alliance. The Labour Party national leadership was defensive, distancing itself from the NUM and criticising the picketing of working miners, while expressing opposition to closures and sympathy with the generality of strikers. Outside of the labour movement there was limited support from Church leaders, but otherwise the strikers established meaningful contacts only with groups that were already marginalised and excoriated by the Government and its political and media supporters, notably the Greenham women campaigning against nuclear weapons, and gay and lesbian activists. An alternative course of action, particularly in the early months of the strike, might have involved campaigning instead of picketing in Nottinghamshire, persuading working miners that their jobs and communities were also in jeopardy. Explicit emphasis on political education, peaceful protest and cross-class action might have enabled the construction and mobilisation of a broader anti-Government compact. There was certainly scope for stronger labour movement mobilisation in defence of trade union voice, had the NUM leadership been more adroit in identifying this as a key issue. But this would have risked alienating support among non-union and non-working class groups, such was the ascendancy in the 1980s of arguments about the right of management to manage.

The strike ended in March 1985. The focus of the campaign had gradually changed. By February, realising there could be no agreement on closures, some NUM officials and activists – notably in Scotland – sought an end to the strike in return for the rein-

statement of all those sacked. But even this was not secured, after an NUM delegate conference voted to end the strike without any settlement. Deindustrialisation accelerated with damaging long-term consequences: there were limited alternatives for redundant miners. In the 2010s unemployment in all ex-coalfield communities remained well above the national UK average, accompanied by engrained social deprivation.

The campaign nevertheless had important positive outcomes. In mining communities it was led by men and women who found their experiences empowering and liberating as well as difficult and heart-breaking. The extent to which gender relations and politics in the coalfields were transformed can be exaggerated. Pre-strike miners were not an amorphous mass of macho cavemen, and coalfield women – certainly exploited in gender as well as class terms – were hardly downtrodden. Economic and social restructuring from the 1950s had provided coalfield women with wider employment opportunities, in assembly goods manufacturing as well as public services, which were an asset in 1984-85 as female wages lowered the household and community costs of striking. Generational changes were also important in narrowing gender inequalities before 1984. Sexism remained a regrettable feature of social relations in the coalfields both during and after the strike, but the campaign nevertheless increased the personal and collective confidence of the tens of thousands of women who fought for the pits and jobs that provided the basic economic substance of their communities. Women were especially vital in establishing contacts with supporters beyond the coalfields, speaking at trade union, workplace and community meetings and rallies, often in distant towns and cities, including events held by their national organisation, Women Against Pit Closures. Many women remained active politically after the strike, becoming elected councillors or trade union officers, and acquired formal educational qualifications or training that enabled them to secure more attractive jobs and careers.

The campaign had other tangible and lasting effects. Miners' support groups outside the coalfields established networks of

activists who formed the basis in many communities of the successful anti-poll tax campaign of 1989-91. This resistance to the Conservative Government's reform of socially-regressive local government financing, with the flat-rate Community Charge absorbing a greater proportion of low incomes, contributed to Thatcher's resignation as Prime Minister in November 1990. In Scotland the miners' campaign and the anti-poll tax struggle substantially weakened electoral support for the Conservative Party and public confidence in the unreformed constitutional structures of the UK. In this connection the results of the September 2014 Independence Referendum are highly significant: overall 44.7% of voters cast their ballots for Yes to Scottish Independence. The Yes vote exceeded this in all but one of the ex-coalfield local authority areas. Across the UK there were other important campaigns in the 2010s, connecting in different ways with 1984-85. Notable here is the call for a judicial investigation of policing during the strike. Particular attention focuses on South Yorkshire Police, where the organisation of fabricated evidence by officers in relation to the 1989 Hillsborough football stadium disaster was apparently prefaced by similar malpractice in 1984-85, especially at Orgreave. A related campaign is being fought by those who were sacked in 1984-85, who found it even more difficult than other ex-miners to gain alternative work. Many of the victimised were secretly black-listed by anti-trade union employers because of their strike activism, often on the basis of intelligence supplied by police officers. These campaigns keep alive the memory of 1984-85, and its lessons about the importance of protecting and advancing the legal-political rights of trade unionists and the interests of the workers they represent.



## Key Readings

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# CONCLUSIONS

A group of protesters create a 'die-in' in West London, 2014, in support of protests in the US over the killings of black suspects by white police officers.



# Conclusion and lessons

*Mike Childs, Friends of the Earth*

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We can draw many lessons on strategy and tactics from the historical case studies in this volume. But, as Andrew Purkis of Action Aid has said, perhaps most importantly these campaigns are ‘a source of inspiration, encouragement and legitimacy for today’s campaigners. It’s a long slog, but with the right conviction, evidence, and determination even the most unlikely citadels can be brought down and the world can be changed for the better’. This inspiration is welcome at a time when campaigning itself is under attack in the UK through restrictions on campaigning during election periods, political pressure on the Charity Commission to silence charities’ ability to speak out on contentious political matters, and media attacks on charity fundraising.

But in reading these case studies it is also important to remember

that Britain today is very different from 19th or, indeed, much of 20th century Britain. There are enormous differences between the way people live, work, and spend their social time today and how they did during the time of most of the historical case studies considered. Drawing lessons is not straightforward.

The most obvious difference is in communications. I write these words on a computer, saved on the cloud and they will be shared via social media. Most people in the UK would be able to read them unmediated, if they choose, because today literacy is almost 100%, 90% of people have access to the internet, and of these 60% use social media every day or almost every day. These words will also be accessible to billions of people around the world.

In the early 19th century, while fast improving, literacy levels were still low (around 50% in 1800 climbing to around 90% by 1900). Most news was garnered by word of mouth, from the pulpit, shared newspapers and leafleting. Even during the miners' strike in the 1980s, the internet and social media simply did not exist, and this gave media outlets enormous power in shaping the narrative (since television was by then in 80% of households, although with just four channels).

The influence of religion has also changed. Attendance at weekly Church of England services has fallen to less than 1 million. Although according to polling data (notoriously unreliable) much higher proportions of people affiliated to other religions regularly attend religious services (28% of Roman Catholic, 29% other Christian and 40% non-Christian). Yet in the 19th century regular church going was the norm for around half the population, and much higher in some areas.

There are also obvious differences when it comes to levels of hunger and poverty, consumption, education, working hours, women's status and rights, voting, family size, housing, heating, transport, life expectancy, and social norms.

The 19th century was a period of enormous change. Duncan Green of Oxfam suggested, at the seminar where these historical case studies were discussed, that the dynamism in social activism

in 19th century Britain was in part a result of huge demographic changes the country was undergoing. In the UK right now, with improved living conditions and relatively stable demographics, it could be argued that the appetite for campaigning may have waned. It could also be argued that people are also so saturated with 24-hour communications that modern campaigns have little chance of being noticed and replicating the landmark struggles of the past.

People's sense of identity has also changed through time. Social identity in the 21st century is now as much or more connected to possessions – car, house, consumer fashions – as it is to where people live and their occupation. While middle-class consumerism, and the power of material goods, existed in the 19th century, occupation and religion were more important to identity than they are today to most people. Indeed religion during these periods provided not only an organising structure to campaigns but an underpinning moral code (as it still does today for some groups such as Muslim Climate Action and Christian Aid).

In other words, the world is very different now. Given this, can 21st-century campaigners really learn anything from the campaigns of the past? In November 2015 we set about exploring these case studies with campaigners across civil society and with the historian authors at a seminar held in Friends of the Earth's office. We have grouped the lessons we drew into four areas.

## **Four areas of learning**

### **1. Big game-plan and proxy campaigns**

Alexandra Runswick from Unlock Democracy observed that often modern campaigners feel as though 'they are not only required to identify the problem and call for change but also specify exactly what that would look like'. Benedict Southworth, from the Ramblers, argues that this leads to 'managerial campaigns' focused on long lists of detailed policy recommendations each of which would make incremental changes to the world we live in but not lead to great transformations in the way some of these historical

campaigns did. The charge is that many modern-day campaigns simply do not have a bigger game plan, as the campaigns of the past seemingly had (abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, etc). In other words there seems to be a contemporary lack of ambition around changing values, norms and social contexts; and instead there is contentment with short-term tweaks to policy, behaviours, regulation and so on.

It was Liz Hutchins from Friends of the Earth who identified that many if not all of our case studies were in fact proxy campaigns. The issues were 'presented as one thing but they were fundamentally about something else'. In other words while the campaigns themselves were focused on a single clear objective they were also vehicles for moving towards more profound social, economic or political change. The Anti-Corn Law League had the objective of scrapping protectionist trade policy. Trade barriers harmed working class consumers – particularly through the price of bread, which was a staple part of the diet – and favoured wealthy land- and farm-owning elites above the interests of the newly wealthy. But scrapping the Corn Laws was really a campaign about the power of the newly wealthy and their ability to influence institutions such as Westminster. Certainly, many of the leaders of that campaign did not struggle to afford higher-priced bread and their empathy for the working class was limited. Appealing to the material interests of the many was a tactic which brought the campaign to life and gave a rationale for their economic preferences, but ultimately the campaign was much bigger.

Similarly the miners' strike, although clearly concerned with jobs and pit communities, was also about the broader influence of trade unions and the working class in politics and society. The miners unsuccessfully resisted the transfer of resources from the public to the private sector, the marked widening of inequality, and the erosion of trade union and working-class voice. And the campaigns around women's votes and against the Contagious Diseases Act were as much about women's equality more broadly in society as they were about achieving victories for the individual campaigns.



Strong support from non-conformist religious communities for many of the campaigns in the 19th-century was also important. Unitarians and Quakers, for example, were heavily involved in the Anti-Corn Law League and the campaign to abolish the Contagious Diseases Act. Religious communities, with a broader distaste for a social order which they saw as corrupt and self-serving, joined individual campaigns to correct particular wrongs as part of their wider concerns. In other words, many of the leaders of these campaigns and probably many of the participants, had a bigger game plan in hand and the campaigns they ran were those that gave the greatest opportunity for advancement.

Of course the reality of day-to-day campaigning may have been more ad hoc than historical hindsight suggests. Certainly, it would be good to understand, as Benedict Southworth from the Ramblers said, the hidden context for the focus and timing of the campaign (Why then? Why that demand? Why that scale?). Although historical inquisition can help us to see campaigns in larger perspective – not as ends in themselves but as proxies for bigger changes in political, economic or social thinking – history also poses challenges to today's campaigners; for example, will our campaigns be remembered as game-changers in future historical texts or will they be, at best, footnotes?

### *Win once*

If some campaigns can be seen as proxies for greater change it is also easier to understand the benefit of campaigns that are 'win once' campaigns as they make progress towards further desired change easier or indeed inevitable.

Some campaigns were definitively looking to win once. For example, the fight to abolish slavery, or the unsuccessful campaign for home rule for the whole of Ireland were widely perceived as changes that once made would be permanent. This helps explain the fierce opposition to them; for example the escalation of unionist tactics to include violence. Similarly, the striking miners knew that conceding the right to management to close collieries on economic grounds would permanently weaken

the National Union of Mineworkers, which also perhaps explains the Government's willingness to absorb huge economic losses in pursuit of this political goal. In other words, win-once campaigns are fiercely opposed.

The campaigns for the vote appear to be win-once campaigns; once a group is enfranchised, it is hard to withdraw that right, although further equalities for marginalised groups might remain. Legislative changes in the mid-1800s did disenfranchise the small number of women who were entitled to vote at that time, and today changes to voter registration are resulting in the disenfranchising of many people.

Modern day win-once campaigns do exist. The UK's Climate Change Act, which requires the UK to make continual reductions in territorial greenhouse gas emissions, has institutionalised independent advice and reporting to Parliament on progress. But perhaps more importantly the Act itself has resulted in successive governments of different political stripes using it as a badge of honour in international circles. The ability (or desire) to annul it is therefore limited. The same is true of the legislative commitment to donate 0.7% of GDP to international aid, despite continued fierce opposition from some quarters.

But the reality is that not many campaigns today are win-once campaigns. Instead, they need to change conditions enough for progress to be cemented. As Craig Bennett from Friends of the Earth has said, campaigning is like waves on a beach: you go forwards and then you go back, but the real challenge is to ensure that next wave is larger and goes further. Win-once campaigns reduce the possibility of retreat, and therefore lead to greater forward momentum. Likewise Andrew Simms of the New Weather Institute, whilst noting that campaigns can 'luck out at the right historical moment', identified the importance of recognising that campaigning was not a linear progression.

A good example of a historical and current campaign that has made progress but has suffered numerous set-backs is the campaign for equality for gay and lesbian men and women. Good progress has been made over the last century, but set-backs occurred

during the war years when people opposed to homosexuality tried to link it to treason, and in 1988 when the Government introduced legislation forbidding schools and libraries to promote ‘the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’ (Clause 28). Despite these set-backs, sporadic progress has been made, including a win-once cultural breakthrough with the first lesbian kiss on television before the 9pm watershed on Channel 4’s *Brookside* in 1994. The lesbian and gay movement was adept at using set-backs as opportunities to re-galvanise the movement and innovate with new tactics (such as outing politicians following the introduction of Clause 28).

Examples of current campaigns that had hard fought victories but which continually need defending are the campaigns for freedom of information and human rights. Legislation secured in these areas over recent decades represent huge victories, but from day one they have both been under attack and have needed vigorous defending. So while remembering the importance of win-once campaigns, we need to bear in mind that setbacks will materialise and these need to be used as opportunities to innovate and galvanise.

*Lessons:*

- Look for the campaign which is the best vehicle for greater change in the future rather than deciding which campaign to run on its own merits alone. Campaigning is a multi-decadal journey. Viewing campaigning in this light may result in smarter strategies.
- Avoid managerial campaigns with numerous detailed policy asks and instead focus on campaigns with a clear objective which contributes to a bigger game-plan of changing values, norms and social contexts.
- Seek win-once campaigns or campaigns that are resilient to backsliding, but also be prepared for campaigning in waves, with forward momentum following by set-backs. Be prepared to use set-backs to build strength and re-invent tactics and approaches.

## 2. Approaches

Friends of the Earth has a working theory that, particularly for entrenched positions held by powerful people, meaningful change will not happen unless the status quo becomes untenable. Essential preconditions are a broad movement demanding change and viable solutions. The historical case studies collected here add weight to this thinking.

Certainly, the scale of support described in some of the historical case studies cases seemingly made the status quo difficult if not impossible to manage, particularly in the context of a ruling elite nervously watching revolutions in mainland Europe. The mass petitioning of the 19th century by the anti-slavery movement, anti-corn law campaign and the Chartists left those in power with a clear sense that the masses were unhappy. While the immediate response may have been to attempt to suppress protest, they were nonetheless deeply sensitive to indicators of widespread disquiet. The campaign against Irish Home Rule raised the fear of militias emerging causing significant concerns among the ruling elite.

In more modern times, the status quo becomes untenable for incumbent politicians once they see that opposition to it might cost them political power. A tactic widely used by the suffragettes, Anti-Corn Law League, and Anti-Contagious Diseases Acts campaign was to stand for or support candidates in key seats; the recently-formed Women's Equality Party has stated that it is using the same approach. Although the tactic creates interest, it is only probably only a credible threat if situated within a much larger campaign and if seen to indicate strength of feeling across the country.

### *Moral arguments*

The use of moral arguments and powerful images and symbols that provoke empathy and speak to deep values about right and wrong also helped make some of the campaigns studied here effective. Examples include the image 'Am I not a man?' used in the anti-slavery campaign. The moral and empathy-based approach reached across society, and was particularly appealing to those with religious faith.

Economic arguments were, of course, part of these campaigns. The economic case against ending slavery was made by opponents to the anti-slavery movement, and in the end many of these voices had to be bought off through eye-wateringly high compensation to slave owners, not the enslaved. The Anti-Corn Law League was in large part motivated by economic interests, although the moral case for 'peace through trade' was also powerfully deployed. The combination of moral suasion and the material impact on food prices and fear of hunger made for a powerful impact. It was important for the campaigns of the time to be able to address economic arguments, but many of the successful campaigns (anti-slavery, Anti-Corn Law League, Anti-Contagious Diseases Acts, and homosexual equality) chose to fight on the moral battlefield, enabling them to build large broad-based campaigns.

Arguably, today's campaigners have too often vacated the moral territory and chosen to fight on the economic battle-field occupied by their opponents. By doing so, they are likely to become involved in often technical debates that might be a barrier to wider support. Furthermore, important moral and empathetic arguments which touch on people's values are left unsaid. Abandoning moral arguments reduces the opportunity to build a broad movement. Embracing the economic battlefield may be a symptom of Thatcherism's lasting influence: economic criteria are so dominant that even campaigners leading intrinsically moral or cultural campaigns now feel they must frame the campaigns in economic terms if they are to be taken seriously by the media and politicians. But we suggest the evidence from these case studies shows this is a mistake. Sarah Wooten from Dignity in Dying pointed out that what is morally right is often contested. A key role of campaigners must surely be to engage in these debates, alongside those they claim to represent, in order to shape the world views and values of others and the context within which decision-making occurs.

Some campaigners may argue that moral and values based campaigns will be constrained by only reaching a smaller set of ethically-driven people because they do not touch on material

interests and are not aspirational. Yet such campaigns can also reach out to aspirational and material interests. For example, women's suffrage campaigns enjoyed celebrity endorsement – including the cultivation of celebrity by Emmeline Pankhurst and the use by the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) of society ladies, to great advantage. This brought aspirational elements to the campaigns. Richard Huzzey explained that the successful anti-slavery campaigns deliberately deployed moral arguments to trump material ones, saying that the system of slavery prevented the attainment of human happiness as it was based on a system of tyranny. Andrew Simms pointed to the success of Republican campaigners in the United States in mobilising poorer communities against Democrat-led Health Care Reform using a values based argument of freedom from 'big government', even though the reforms themselves would materially benefit the poorer communities.

### *The role of elites*

History suggests that locating campaigns on moral territories enables larger and more powerful coalitions to be built. But the role of elites is also important even in mass campaigning. From the case studies offered here, those that refused to reach out to elites to create a broader movement of change struggled (eg Chartists, miners). The miners' strike had a powerful class-based focus of 'us and them'. This inhibited the capacity of the strikers to articulate goals that might have been supported by some elite groups (and indeed a large aspirational middle-class). The 'us and them' approach more easily enabled the BBC's false construction of the Orgreave disturbances, although it is important to recognise that was not an isolated incident in the media, which was itself in conflict with its unionised employees.

Campaigns that also encompassed elites were more successful (eg homosexuality, suffragists, and opponents of slavery). The campaign for homosexual equality, although it suffered backlashes, was probably in part protected because it had powerful friends in the elite (even if all were not openly supportive). As

Tom Baker from Bond suggested at our workshop, a good relationship with the elite can also usefully provide insider knowledge to inform strategy and tactics.

The use of language so as not to alienate potential allies in the elite, while at the same time strongly motivating the base of support, is important. Christian moral campaigner Mary Whitehouse created the National Viewers and Listeners Association (NVALA) in 1965 to oppose a supposedly liberal governing elite. The NVALA balanced an outsider style of campaigning with the need to accommodate sympathetic conservative elites. Yet, as Black's chapter points out, its aggressive language led many Conservatives to shun the NVALA.

Meanwhile, the reframing of homosexuality away from sex and towards a positive and optimistic narrative of love broadened this campaign's appeal and supporter base, as well as making it more difficult for attacks based on fear.

### *Coalitions*

Building broad-based movements for change creates challenges other than around language, particularly when working with unusual or fractious bed-fellows. From the historical case studies, we can see that many campaigns were not unified with a single strategy but were more like a flotilla of ships all heading toward the same destination. Strong differences of opinion on campaigning approach and tactics, as well as even the ultimate goal, can be discerned. The alliance of feminists and social purists against the Contagious Diseases Acts must have been an uncomfortable coalition. Women's suffrage campaigners did not make up one campaign, as they are commonly remembered. Instead, they worked through a number of different groups with different views on goals and tactics (the use of violence against property was particularly contentious). The outing of homosexual MPs was not an approach shared by all the campaign groups involved in gay rights campaigning, although as Lucy Delap from Cambridge University pointed out, the different factions had a symbiotic relationship even if they would not admit this publically.

In the fight against slavery many campaigners focused on the damage colonial oppression did to Britons' values and reputation. Despite maintaining a broad coalition, abolitionists differed in their radicalism and especially the extent to which they welcomed revolutionary change. In 1824 Elizabeth Heyrick successfully argued for the movement to adopt demands for immediate emancipation, criticising anti-slavery MPs for seeking simply to ameliorate the worst abuses of slavery.

These coalitions of the willing are therefore themselves open to contest, campaigning and disagreement. But, as the case studies illustrate, they probably are necessary. It would probably weaken a campaign to seek to get all elements of a campaign fully on message, and in many cases would anyway be impossible.

*Lessons:*

- The use of moral and empathy-based approaches which reaches people emotionally and touches on values may be critical in building large and broad-based coalitions; and these will be better able to create profound change, and more powerful than rational or economic arguments alone.
- Support from within the political or economic elite facilitates effective campaigning and/or hinders the ability of an elite driven backlash, as does broader-based support from wider society. For this the use of language is critical. It is not enough to use language which motivates only existing support; it is necessary to find language that facilitates participation by the elite and wider society as well.
- It is necessary to be open to a plethora of campaigns and coalitions that use widely different tactics and approaches. Homogenisation is unlikely to be successful, and certainly uncomfortable for those involved. Nonetheless a shared moral position can provide common impetus and aid cooperation and trust.
- To make the status quo untenable, and in current contexts where truly mass participation activism on the scale seen in the 19th-century does not exist, the deployment of moral



arguments coupled with the use of tactical approaches such as targeting key political constituencies may be of added importance.

### 3. Tactics

Petitioning was a popular tactic deployed in many of the case studies, but what is most striking is the sheer scale. Many of today's petitions are deemed a success if they garner tens of thousands of signatures. The aggregate figure of all the Anti-Corn Law League was more than six million signatures within the context of a much smaller population (although this needs treating with caution as many people would have signed more than once over the seven-year period the League was active). In 1842 the Chartists' second national petition had more than 3 million signatures: as delivered to Parliament petition it was six miles long. Remarkably, despite the size of these petitions, the campaigners of the time did not see that the petitions themselves would necessarily lead to change.

Petitioning was a tactic that allowed people to have a voice in a time when the majority of the population did not have a vote. Perhaps even more important, signing a petition contributed to participants' sense of identity, was a means for people to express that identity within their community, and to be part of something bigger. Mary Whitehouse's 1.35 million NVALA petition is an example of a mass petition in recent times, at a time when universal adult suffrage existed. People signing the petition probably did think change would result, but it was a means to assert their own moral position and reinforce their own sense of identity.

Recognising the need for people to express and act on the basis of a strong identity can help build connections for future campaigning, and resilience when setbacks occur. As Craig Bennett argued, the telephone helplines provided by campaigners for homosexual equality not only represented important services but also deepened the relationship between the individual and the movement, increasing the individual sense of identity with the movement. This deeper relationship is very different from an

approach adopted by campaigns that use individual supporters instrumentally rather than building relationships with them.

Petitioning today, however, can have a political impact, for example in the constituency-based voting system in the UK when individual MPs are directly targeted or when a petition goes viral (eg the 38 Degrees petition against forest sell-off proposals in 2010 rapidly achieved more than 500,000 signatures – testament to the place of forests in what is personally meaningful to Britons). But many petitions will have little or no political impact, despite the claims of the originators. Their real role may be to help crystallise identities and loyalties through public expressions of support – as well as harvesting names for further campaign work.

Beyond petitioning, the role of grassroots campaigning and loyalties to place were important historical dimensions of campaigning. The miners' strike was rooted in communities and places threatened by pit closures. The importance of community and place was not well understood by all politicians at the time. Famously, in another context, the Conservative Norman Tebbit had championed a 'get on your bike' approach to look for work if local work was not available. Conversely, many campaigns in the past tapped into the connection people feel with community; many huge national campaigns were in reality amalgamations of hundreds or thousands of local ones.

Today it is possible that the connection to localities have weakened and virtual communities are increasing in importance; even if this is true, campaigners would be wise to understand and tap into the loyalties people have to place, and how these places can shape views.

Of the many tactics of the past deployed widely today, one area particularly worth consideration is the use of direct action, both non-violent and violent. For example, in the campaign against the Anti-Contagious Diseases Act campaigners occupied the Ladies' Gallery in the House of Commons; some suffragettes broke windows, attacked houses, took part in hunger strikes when imprisoned, and most famously Emily Davison martyred

herself (deliberately or accidentally) by stepping in front of the King's horse. The threat of violence was writ large in the campaign against Irish home rule.

There was and is debate about whether direct action has hindered or helped individual campaigns. It certainly caused lively debate within the media of the time, as well as within the movements themselves, sometimes resulting in splits. Interestingly in the suffragettes' case, membership of the moderate groups quadrupled as a result of the actions of the more militant suffragettes (although direct action can also act as a recruitment tool for the opposition). It can also be argued that such tactics particularly worried the establishment, especially if so-called respectable people carried them out, and if they seemed to illustrate a depth of feeling that might extend across a larger and wider movement.

It is not for this publication to argue for or against direct action, but it is clear that direct action in the past has contributed to positive outcomes in some cases when certain conditions were met. Direct action needed to be perceived as a last resort, and to involve 'respectable figures' who could morally legitimise breaking the law. To be effective, it also requires a tipping point of numbers willing to be involved. But for each and every example of success in this area it would also be possible to identify a much larger number of failures. The reality is the state does not easily bend to such direct threats.

Of course, impact can be achieved through means other than direct action, particularly economic damage. The anti-slavery movement for example, used sugar boycotts. Boycotts have been widely used in campaigning since that date, perhaps most effectively in the anti-apartheid campaigns. The anti-slavery sugar boycott was particularly interesting in that it was initiated by women to assert their views through the domestic setting, which was one of the limited spheres where they were allowed to make decision. As Sarah Richardson's article in Friends of the Earth's book *Why Women Will Save the Planet* (2015) illustrates, women have been historically adept at exploiting and extending their socially-identified sphere of influence.

*Lessons*

- Campaigns will benefit from greater and deeper engagement if they recognise the importance of strong individual and group identities through enabling people to strengthen and display their involvement, and build relationships with others who have done likewise.
- People have relationships with the place they live in and the people who live there, even if this may be weakening in the age of social media. Grassroots place-based campaigning has been and will continue to be an essential element of much campaigning.
- Direct action has contributed to successful campaigns in the past. Conditions such as it being a last resort, the involvement of respectable figures, and that it points to a deeper and widespread discontent are probably necessary for it to succeed.
- Women have through the ages exploited and extended their sphere of influence and this has led to novel and successful tactics. For today's campaigns looking beyond formal power relationships may also offer new approaches and tactics.

**4. The backlash**

Since campaigns are designed to change the status quo it is not surprising that they create a reaction, particularly when the campaigns have the potential to be win-once campaigns. Understanding the likely backlash, whose ferocity may or may not correlate with the potential scale of losses for the opposition, is a critical part of developing a smart campaign strategy. Losses are not solely financial, if financial at all, but also relate to real or imagined impacts on status, world-view, and rights.

The backlash has often included trying to convince others and build opposition to change through the use of fear. For example, in the campaign against Irish Home Rule it was argued that the Irish should not get the vote because they were too ill-educated to participate in politics (a slur also used against working class

people in the Chartists campaign) and that losing Ireland would end in the UK losing the Empire. Opponents of homosexual rights and equality suggested that homosexuality was linked to treason, would corrupt young minds and would contribute to what were thought to be worryingly low birth rates. The fear of economic harm was deployed in trying to maintain the slavery trade. Likewise, as Donna Hume from Friends of the Earth identified, fear can also be used as an opportunity, saying that ‘the tragic events in Paris in 2015 will be used to advance the snoopers’ charter agenda and the Government’s project of dismantling people’s means to oppose them’.

Broadly speaking opponents of change in these case studies were not overly concerned about the facts and, as today, the media that supported their position were similarly unconcerned (clearly illustrated in coverage of case of the miners’ strike). The press in the 19th century was largely controlled by the wealthy and was a powerful force. The advent of the BBC in the 20th century changed this dynamic to a limited degree, although the press barons still had a significant influence on public opinion. Today the internet makes it more difficult for the state and wealthy to control the narrative – hence an increasing number of states attempting to control the digital commons. But the influence of traditional media is still large. Fear based on fantasy rather than fact continues to be widely deployed to oppose change. For example, George Osborne argues against the UK taking a lead on climate change because, he says, it will negatively affect on our economy, whereas the reverse is likely to be true. *The Sun* newspaper argues against multiculturalism and welcoming of Muslim refugees with unfounded scare stories that ‘1 in 5 Muslims sympathise with jihadis’ (brilliantly ridiculed in social media).

The battle to control the narrative has been a long-standing one but despite their resources the state and the wealthy face an uphill struggle when maintaining the status quo runs counter to deeper values and moral positioning. As Alexandra Runswick from Unlock Democracy said, a campaign based on vision and values rather than a technocratic campaign ‘will counteract the

fear narrative'. For example, in slavery the phrase and image 'Am I not a man and brother?' powerfully overcame the economic scare-mongering by opponents, and in campaigns for the legalisation of homosexuality a narrative of love worked powerfully (including against the socially conservative NVALA).

Andrew Purkis suggested that too often campaigns are designed 'not to frighten the horses' and become too 'reformist and emollient' because of unnecessary and/or unfounded fear of backlash. In fact Joanna Watson from Friends of the Earth suggested that, at times, deliberately provoking a backlash may be a valid tactic to regain attention and re-galvanise a movement.

### *Lessons*

- Prepare for and understand what backlashes may emerge and from where, and prepare how to use them for the benefit of the campaign.
- Recognise that the powerful cannot always control the narrative. Set out to control or change the narrative through reaching deeper values through the use of vision, frames and images.

### **Final thoughts**

We have suggested 13 lessons from these case studies. But just as historians will continue to argue about the interpretations of the different case studies, so campaigners will continue to argue about the veracity of these lessons. The success of this exercise in exploring history is not about whether the lessons are agreed on or not; it is whether readers have engaged in exploring history and drawn their own conclusions. As Andrew Simms said, quoting 19th-century Russian historian Vasily Klyuchevsky 'History teaches us nothing, but only punishes [us] for not learning its lessons.'



