

Reviews

Our Joe: Joseph Chamberlain's Conservative Legacy

By Nick Timothy, Conservative History Group, £7.99



Joe Chamberlain, in Churchill's famous phrase, "made the weather". By denouncing Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bill in 1886 and splitting the Liberal Party, he changed the course of British politics. By advocating imperial unity through the creation of a tariff wall in 1903, he split the Tory Party and changed the course of British politics again. He rarely made the political weather calm or benign.

Before 1886 he was a radical firebrand. "The monarchy, the church, the aristocracy, the House of Lords, London society, the limited franchise, the great vested interests and professions – all in their turn became his targets," as Churchill, who knew him well, later recalled. He was reluctant to share a carriage with the Prince of Wales when the latter visited Birmingham – which Chamberlain had made his impregnable political citadel, having transformed it into a model of good local government in the 1870s. He was widely referred to as "the British Robespierre". Yet after 1886 his life was dominated



by two right-wing causes: the retention of Ireland within the United Kingdom and Britain's imperial destiny with the monarchy as its glittering symbol.

A new life of Chamberlain, drawing on the vast surviving archival sources, is badly needed. The main current biographies provide a large amount of information about him, but leave the great paradoxes of his extraordinary career unexplained. Only one work has successfully tackled them: Richard Jay's *Joseph Chamberlain: A Political Study*, published over thirty years ago and long out of print.

Chamberlain's great problem was that the Liberal Party would not have him as their leader at any price. Gladstone had no time for him long before they fell out over Ireland. He built up no significant following of his own on the Liberal benches in Parliament. In order to wield substantial power, Chamberlain sought to recast party politics

in alliance with Churchill's father, Lord Randolph, whose progressive views and ruthless ambition made him as uncomfortable among the Tories as Chamberlain was among the Liberals.

In December 1885, before the onset of the Home Rule crisis, Chamberlain was reported to have "made up his mind to support the

Tories, so long as they behave themselves, and help them pass Liberal measures". A few months later he became firmly associated with them in the great campaign to stop the break-up of the United Kingdom. This did not bring him to Downing Street, but by 1900 his alliance with the Tories had made him an infinitely more powerful figure in the land than he had ever been as a Liberal.

Nick Timothy has now produced a short, incisive and timely study of Chamberlain's relationship with the Tories. He emphasises Chamberlain's ultimate failure in "his two most famous battles": to defeat Home Rule and unite the British Empire. But, as he rightly stresses, Chamberlain's radicalism, particularly in relation to social reform, never wavered. Though he never joined it (remaining a Liberal Unionist to the end), his impact on the Conservative Party was profound and long-lasting.

"Thanks to Chamberlain," Timothy concludes, "the Conservatives became a party with a positive programme, committed to social reform, and capable of appealing to all classes." That is perhaps pitching it too high: the Tories had already worked out for themselves that they needed a "one nation" appeal and made the dead Disraeli their hero in order to achieve it. Even so, Timothy's valuable work will need to be taken carefully into account by historians of the party, as well as by Chamberlain's future biographers. Free education and the right to compensation for industrial injuries were among the many reforms he induced the Tories to implement.

Mr Timothy is at present a political adviser to Theresa May. It is important to note that this publication was completed before Mrs May set out to make herself better known in the Conservative Party. There is no suggestion here that the mantle of Chamberlain – that great populist politician – has fallen on her. 🇬🇧

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