



Lord Lexden takes a look through the history books to report on the 100th anniversary of the renaming of the Conservative Party

If the Party leadership had had its way in 1912, this year would have marked the centenary of the rebirth of the Conservative Party under a new name, the Unionist Party. Tory representatives from all parts of the country were summoned to a special meeting in London in May 1912 to ratify the change. But things did not go quite as the leadership had planned.

There was nothing in the least surprising about the proposal to change the Party's name. It was widely felt to be the best way of uniting the Conservatives permanently with an invaluable, long-standing ally. For over a quarter of a century the Tories had worked in the closest association with the Liberal

Unionist Party, created by the large body of Liberals in and out of Parliament who repudiated Gladstone's leadership when he brought forward his first Irish Home Rule Bill in 1886.

Not everyone spoke about the Liberal Unionists with deep reverence or respect. "They count as Tories", Lady Bracknell declares dismissively in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "They dine with us. Or come in the evening, at any rate".

The Conservative leadership, however, never regarded the Liberal Unionists as mere appendages. These indispensable allies developed their own organisation throughout the country, which has now been described in detail for the first time in

All in the name



Andrew Bonar Law, who took over a deeply demoralised Party in November 1911, was pivotal in pushing towards a merger

a history of the Party just published by Dr Ian Cawood of Birmingham University. In some places the Liberal Unionists became the dominant political force. They held sway over large parts of Scotland and over the West Midlands where they kept some thirty seats out of Liberal hands. Their ascendancy in this crucial English battleground was sustained by the great Birmingham radical leader, Joe Chamberlain.

As its Liberal Mayor in the 1870s, Chamberlain had famously given England's second city the best municipal services in the country, based on far-reaching principles of social reform through which he made his reputation. He was no less committed to

his principles as a Liberal Unionist. He constantly called on Conservative governments to undertake large measures of reform, such as the introduction of old age pensions and free education, to improve the condition of the working classes. He never allowed himself, or his Party, to be counted loyally among the Tories. He would amalgamate with them only if a new Unionist Party were called into existence.

For their part the Conservatives showed no reluctance to set aside the name conferred on them in Sir Robert Peel's time at the instigation of prominent right-wing journalists in the 1830s. After the Liberal split over Home Rule they were

entirely content to be regarded as one part of a broad Unionist movement, committed to retaining Ireland firmly within the United Kingdom and to defending an ever larger Empire. Chamberlain proposed

“ Joe Chamberlain never allowed himself, or his Party, to be counted loyally among the Tories ”

a full merger on terms designed to attract widespread popular support. In 1906 he called for the creation of “a great democratic and representative organisation” in which rank and file members would elect their leaders and determine policy. It should replace the Tories' traditional “autocratic

and non-representative body” which, as he reminded them, had been roundly denounced by Lord Randolph Churchill in 1883, stirring memories to delight his son Winston who at that point was serving in a Liberal government. The Conservative leaders drew back with horror. Nothing would induce them to share power with members of a new Unionist Party; their task should be to support policies determined by the leadership at Westminster.

When the two allied Parties suffered their third successive election defeat at the end of 1910, demands for the creation of an effective combined organisation became irresistible. Swift progress was made under a new

dynamic and aggressive Conservative leader, Andrew Bonar Law, who took over a deeply demoralised Party in November 1911. With Chamberlain in enforced political retirement, no more was heard about the dreaded spectre of unbridled internal Party democracy.

On 18 April 1912 the Tory Chief Whip, Lord Balfour (later the 27th Earl of Crawford and founder of the BBC) noted in his diary, “We agreed to fuse with the Liberal Unionists. This will strengthen our organisation”. It was, he said, “a great achievement” which would raise morale everywhere. No difficulty was anticipated in securing acceptance of the formal abandonment of the Conservative name. Bonar Law’s papers, now in the Parliamentary Archives, include a memorandum which noted that “many

associations are themselves already joint Unionist Associations”. It was agreed that a new National Unionist Association should be created to provide the central organisation of the combined Parties.

On 9 May 1912 the Conservative Party was expected to vote itself out of existence at a mass meeting held at the Queen’s Hall in London which Sir Henry Wood, who conducted Promenade Concerts there, made available for this political purpose. Hints of impending trouble reached Balfour the day before the meeting took place. “There is undoubtedly regret which might well develop into hostility at the idea of abandoning our historic name”, he recorded in his diary. To forestall it, “we recommended a change in our title which will retain the word ‘Conservative’, at any rate upon our notepaper”. At the

Queen’s Hall rally, the Chairman, Sir William Crump, announced that as a result of “some strong criticism” of the new name “it had been decided to meet the objections—the great objection was the dropping of the word Conservative—by making their name the National Unionist Association of Conservative and Liberal Unionist Organisations”. Resounding cheers greeted the last minute change of heart.

The clumsy long title was soon replaced by a shorter one:

the Conservative and Unionist Party. As Balfour expected it only appeared on notepaper. After all the fuss, the original plan was adopted in practice for some years: Britain had a Unionist Party until 1925 when the Conservative name finally began to be widely used. Two places defied the trend. In Scotland the Unionist

“ There is regret which might develop into hostility at the idea of abandoning our historic name ”

Party remained unchanged until 1965. Birmingham held fast to the Unionist name, on which Joe Chamberlain had insisted, until after the war. Joe’s son, Neville Chamberlain, had no time for the official title of the Party of which he became leader in 1937. He said he hoped that “we may presently develop into a National Party and get rid of that odious title of Conservative which has kept so many from joining us in the past”. He was not alone in regretting that the decision taken in 1912 was ever put in effect.

Those who pressed for the adoption of high ethical standards at the time of the merger with the Liberal Unionists were gravely disappointed. On 11 May 1912 a former Cabinet minister, Lord Selborne, appealed to Bonar Law to ensure that the unified funds of the two Parties were not replenished by “the system of the sale of honours” through which “a man who has done no public work and holds no special position which can fairly be considered to justify it, could receive an honour because, and only because, he has engaged to pay cash for it”. The Party should, he added, extricate itself “from all complicity in this special evil”. It did the opposite, following Lloyd George in using the services of Maundy Gregory. 🏰

Lord Lexden is a Conservative Peer and the Party’s official historian

Neville Chamberlain had hoped to do away with the Conservative title and end up with the Nationalist Party

