Rep. Trans. Devon. Ass. Advmt Sci., **142**, *237–260*
© *The Devonshire Association, June 2010*
(Figures 1–5)

A Devon By-Election: South Molton, 1891

Sophia Lambert

This paper uses mainly contemporaneous press reports to describe a particularly hard-fought by-election in Devon in 1891 between an official Liberal Home Rule candidate and a Unionist Liberal candidate supported by the Conservatives. It covers the varied social, economic, political and religious issues which aroused the electorate and also the campaigning techniques.

The 1891 election in South Molton was a famous by-election, attracting national attention as a test of strength between the official Liberals who supported Home Rule for Ireland and the breakaway unionist Liberals, allied for electoral purposes with the Tories. It was also a test of support for the Liberals' new radical rural policies. Both parties sent in political heavyweights to support their candidates. The issues were a curious mix of high principle on the future of Ireland and down-to-earth agricultural gripes. The campaigning pitted not just home-rulers against unionists, but Church against Chapel and landowners against tenant farmers. The following account, drawn chiefly from the press cuttings kept by the successful candidate, reveals boisterous electioneering and an enthusiasm among the electorate for the political process that is quite alien to most of us today.

THE CONTEXT

South Molton was a large, straggling constituency of 81 parishes, some 40 miles long, from South Molton and Torrington in the north to Newton St Cyres and Crediton in the south. It was a recent creation,

emerging from the redrawing of constituency boundaries in the 1885 Redistribution Act.[1] Although it was mainly rural, there was a growing industrial minority in places like Crediton, a centre of the boot-making trade.

Lord Lymington, the son of the Earl of Portsmouth, a respected local magnate, had won the seat in 1885 on behalf of the Liberals. He represented the moderate Whiggish tendency of the party and there had been little evidence of the rural radicalism that had appeared in some other constituencies, despite the fact that the franchise had just been extended to include most agricultural labourers.[2] South Molton seemed to confirm John Bright's view in 1884 of the rural polity as a world of 'Country Gentleman and Farmers and ... manageable labourers' (Lynch, 2003).

Another election followed in 1886. By then, there had been a split in the Liberal Party over Home Rule for Ireland, with a small bunch of Liberal MPs who opposed home rule throwing in their lot with the Tories (in the run-up to the 1891 election campaign, the official Liberal candidate was to refer to them as 'simply the aristocratic element of the real Liberal party, who conferred no practical benefit on the country').[3] Lord Lymington was one of these rebels and stood as a Liberal Unionist. An official or 'Gladstonian' Liberal had stood against him[4], but had failed to make much headway, and in 1886 Lymington was returned by the large majority of 1,689 out of some 6,400 votes cast.

THE CANDIDATES

In 1891 the Earl of Portsmouth unexpectedly died. Lord Lymington inherited his father's title, leaving the South Molton seat vacant. The official (i.e. Home Rule) Liberals had already the previous year, in anticipation of a general election, adopted as their candidate George Lambert, an energetic 25-year-old yeoman farmer of radical bent from the village of Spreyton just outside the constituency (Fig. 1). Despite his youth, he had already cut his political teeth during four years on the local Board of Guardians (which administered the Poor Laws) and almost three years as a Devon County Councillor, so he was relatively well known in the county. Although he came from a prosperous yeoman family (he had inherited several farms from his father), his mother was a farm labourer's daughter; his family were

Figure 1. *George Lambert, who was aged 25 years when he stood for the parliamentary constituency of South Molton in 1891.*

chapel rather than church-goers (albeit largely because his father had quarrelled with the local church); and he had become associated with the cause of the working man in local politics. He described himself as "the industrial classes' and tenant farmers' candidate".

The Tories and Liberal Unionists (who by this time had a pact not to oppose each other) needed to find a suitable candidate at short notice. They adopted a man from outside the county, the 44-year-old Charles Buller, a remote relation of the Crediton family of that name, doubtless hoping to reap useful advantage from the connection. But otherwise he had no direct connection with Devon and does not seem

to have been a particularly distinguished figure, despite an education at Eton and Christchurch and a fellowship of All Souls (whereas Lambert had left the local grammar school at 15). Through his wife, Buller owned substantial property in Ireland and in Norfolk. As the wags had it, he had failed in everything except matrimony, having started as a barrister, then dabbled unsuccessfully as a stockbroker and finally married a rich wife. He appears to have managed his estates very much at arm's length and knew little of agricultural concerns; at one meeting he was embarrassed by being unable to say how much land he had under cultivation in Ireland.

Buller may not have been the perfect candidate, but he also seems to have been dealt a duff hand by his predecessor. Lymington apparently took little notice of the constituency and was not personally popular; his support was due chiefly to local respect for his father, the old earl.

It was not cheap being a candidate, as candidates had to bear the expenses not only of all their workers but of the Returning Officers. Lambert spoke of personally spending £1,000 on the contest, although the local Liberal Party organisation did later consider reimbursing him some of his expenses.

SOCIAL AND AGRICULTURAL POLICIES

During the mid-1880s, the Liberal Party had determined to win the support of newly enfranchised voters in the rural areas by developing a radical programme of rural reform, to improve the lot of farm labourers and the rights of tenant farmers. The best-known element of this programme became 'three acres and a cow', the provision of allotments to agricultural labourers. Just before the start of the campaign, the National Liberal Federation, meeting in Newcastle, had passed a series of resolutions that drew the various radical policies together into a comprehensive programme. Elements included parliamentary reform (including the payment of MPs); disestablishment of the Church in Scotland; the establishment of district and parish councils; a popular veto on the licensing of public houses[5]; reform of the land laws; and a just division of rates between landlord and tenant. Lambert made the so-called Newcastle programme very much his own.

In agricultural matters, he pressed for greater security for tenant farmers, including better arrangements for compensation from the

landlord at the end of a tenancy for any improvements that the tenant had made; general permission for tenants to take ground-game such as rabbits on their land; better arrangements for the provision of allotments for farm labourers; and a testing procedure for farmers to ensure the purity of commercially-purchased manure.

He also pressed for one-man-one-vote (but not female suffrage); and for district and parish councils elected by popular vote: 'the farmer and labourer should be placed on a footing of perfect equality with the parson and the squire'[6]. Depopulation of the rural areas of Devon was a matter of considerable concern at the time, and he argued that making labourers feel that they had an interest in parochial matters would help dissuade them from flocking to the towns. He also argued for more popular control over local voluntary (effectively church) schools, seeing the influence of the established church over education as discriminatory against non-conformists. At one meeting,[7] Lambert read from a catechism that he said was circulating among some church schools. It taught that non-conformists were heretics and that it was a wicked thing to go to a meeting-house: in his view publicly-funded schools should not be allowed to teach 'obnoxious catechisms'. He also wanted marriages allowed in non-conformist churches.

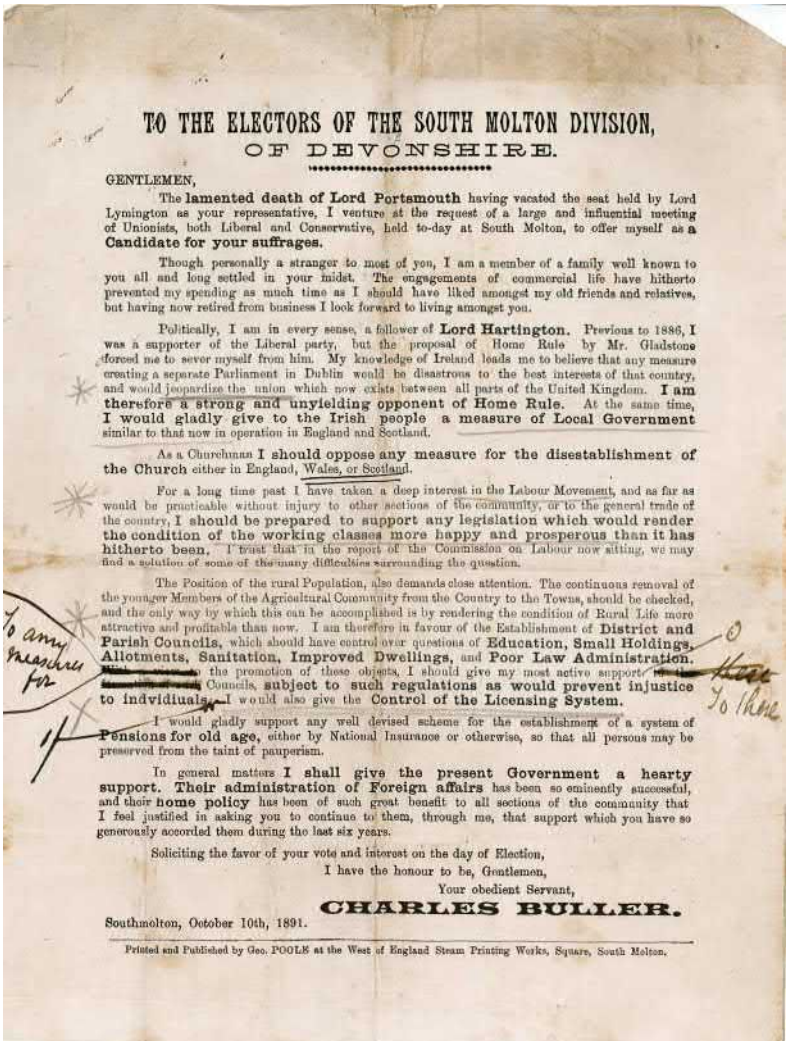
Another radical Liberal policy that featured in his campaign was old age pensions, possibly paid through a national insurance scheme, a cause he seems to have felt particularly strongly about. His experience on the Board of Guardians meant that he must have seen the dread with which farm labourers regarded the Poor Law work-house, often their only future once too old or incapacitated to work. For working people in rural communities, retirement was not usually an option; they went on working as long as they were physically capable, moving to lighter or casual jobs at progressively lower levels of pay, until rendered completely incapable by ill-health, accident or disability (Macnicol, 1998). The 1879s and 1880s had seen concern about the growing number of 'aged and infirm' in the work-houses through no fault of their own (whereas the purpose of the work-houses was to provide an unpleasant environment to deter the work-shy). In 1889, Germany had adopted a 'Law of Insurance against Old Age and Infirmity', to which Lambert referred during the campaign; and in April 1891 Joseph Chamberlain, who had inspired much of the Radical programme, had put forward his own plans for a contributory pension

scheme, which may have inspired Lambert's ideas (although by then Chamberlain had detected to the Unionists). It took until 1908, however, for an Old Age Pension Act to be passed.

These policies were seen by the Tories and even some more traditional Liberals as genuinely subversive stuff. An editorial in the *North Devon Herald*[8] referred to Lambert's 'fondness for sacrilegious loot [a reference to church schools], his pandering to subversive theories, his coquetting with revolutionary schemes'.

Buller had some difficulty in countering Lambert's proposals with any distinct rural or social policies of his own, and to some extent seems to have jumped onto the reform bandwagon. Indeed, Lambert's supporters claimed that Buller (whose election address was published two days after Lambert's) had plagiarised Lambert's own address – like Lambert's, it mentions for instance the establishment of district and parish councils and old age pensions (Figs 2 and 3). However, it became clear that, in practice, Buller took a more narrow view than his opponent of what could be done in these areas. He was muted on the issue of one-man-one-vote; and pronounced himself strongly against any disestablishment of the Church. He opposed popular control of church schools, pointing out that these schools were cheaper to run than the state-financed Board Schools. There had been some recent legislative progress under the Tories (who had been in power since 1886) in matters such as the provision of allotments and reform of the land laws, for which Buller took credit (a sign of how closely he was aligned with his Conservative allies); Lambert predictably argued that the measures taken were insufficient. Free trade also emerged briefly during the campaign as an issue: although there seems to be no evidence of Buller supporting protectionism, the Liberals seem to have tried to scare voters by suggesting that Buller wanted to see a tax on corn, thus increasing the price of bread – 'Vote for Lambert and the cheap loaf' was one of the Liberal slogans.

The Unionists sought to embarrass Lambert on the extent to which he, as a landowner, practised what he preached. They made much of the contradiction between his status and his claim to be the tenants' and labourers' candidate. Lambert liked to present himself as a tenant farmer (Fig. 4) and technically he was one, as part of the 600-acre estate that he farmed in his home village of Spreyton was rented. Buller pointed out, however, that the rented part was a 300-acre farm that lay conveniently for shooting between two parts of



TO THE ELECTORS OF THE SOUTH MOLTON DIVISION,
OF DEVONSHIRE.

GENTLEMEN,

The **lamented death of Lord Portsmouth** having vacated the seat held by Lord Lymington as your representative, I venture at the request of a large and influential meeting of Unionists, both Liberal and Conservative, held to-day at South Molton, to offer myself as a **Candidate for your suffrages.**

Though personally a stranger to most of you, I am a member of a family well known to you all and long settled in your midst. The engagements of commercial life have hitherto prevented my spending as much time as I should have liked amongst my old friends and relatives, but having now retired from business I look forward to living amongst you.

Politically, I am in every sense, a follower of **Lord Hartington.** Previous to 1886, I was a supporter of the Liberal party, but the proposal of Home Rule by Mr. Gladstone forced me to sever myself from him. My knowledge of Ireland leads me to believe that any measure creating a separate Parliament in Dublin would be disastrous to the best interests of that country, and would jeopardize the union which now exists between all parts of the United Kingdom. **I am therefore a strong and unyielding opponent of Home Rule.** At the same time, **I would gladly give to the Irish people a measure of Local Government** similar to that now in operation in England and Scotland.

As a Churchman **I should oppose any measure for the disestablishment of the Church** either in England, Wales, or Scotland.

For a long time past I have taken a deep interest in the Labour Movement, and as far as would be practicable without injury to other sections of the community, or to the general trade of the country, **I should be prepared to support any legislation which would render the condition of the working classes more happy and prosperous than it has hitherto been.** I trust that in the report of the Commission on Labour now sitting, we may find a solution of some of the many difficulties surrounding the question.

The Position of the rural Population, also demands close attention. The continuous removal of the younger Members of the Agricultural Community from the Country to the Towns, should be checked, and the only way by which this can be accomplished is by rendering the condition of Rural Life more attractive and profitable than now. I am therefore in favour of the Establishment of **District and Parish Councils,** which should have control over questions of **Education, Small Holdings, Allotments, Sanitation, Improved Dwellings,** and **Poor Law Administration.** [illegible] the promotion of these objects, I should give my most active support [illegible] Councils, **subject to such regulations as would prevent injustice to individuals.** I would also give the **Control of the Licensing System.**

I would gladly support any well devised scheme for the establishment of a system of **Pensions for old age,** either by National Insurance or otherwise, so that all persons may be preserved from the taint of pauperism.

In general matters **I shall give the present Government a hearty support. Their administration of Foreign affairs** has been so eminently successful, and their **home policy** has been of such great benefit to all sections of the community that I feel justified in asking you to continue to them, through me, that support which you have so generously accorded them during the last six years.

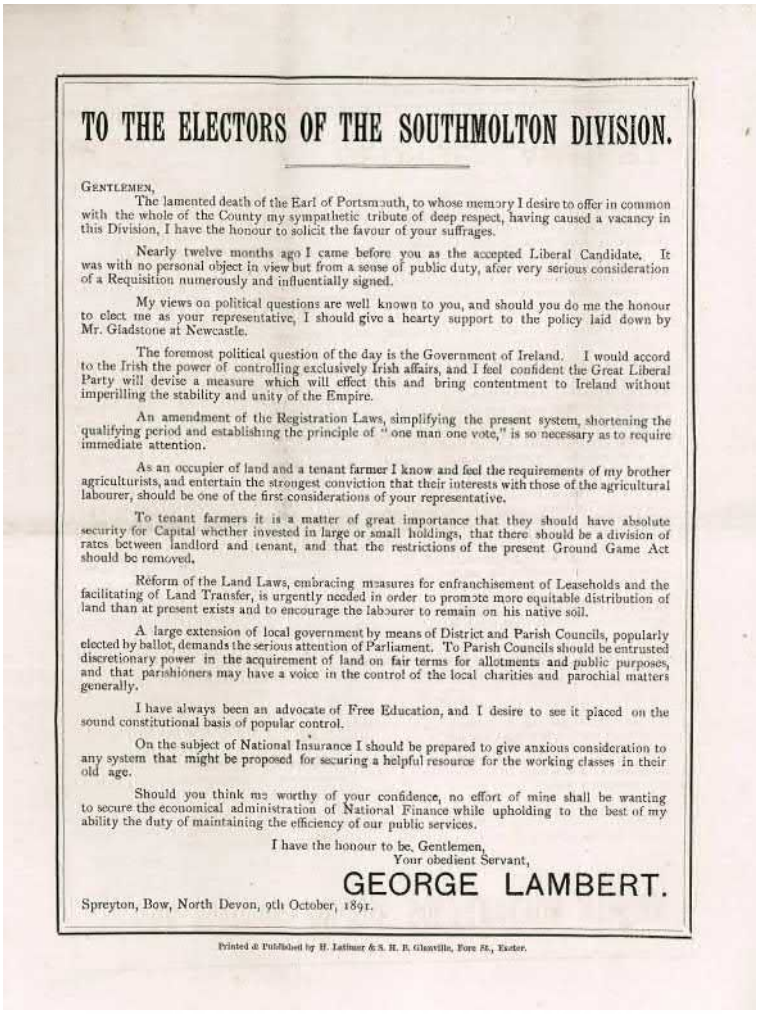
Soliciting the favor of your vote and interest on the day of Election,
I have the honour to be, Gentlemen,
Your obedient Servant,
CHARLES BULLER.

Southmolton, October 10th, 1891.

Printed and Published by Geo. POOLE at the West of England Steam Printing Works, Square, South Molton.

Figure 2. *Charles Buller's election address.*

Lambert's own land. Lambert was also pressed hard on what he had done for his own labourers and seems to have been somewhat economical with the details. He said that he paid his labourers 15s or 16s a week, but was later forced to admit that part of the payment



TO THE ELECTORS OF THE SOUTHMOLTON DIVISION.

GENTLEMEN,

The lamented death of the Earl of Portsmouth, to whose memory I desire to offer in common with the whole of the County my sympathetic tribute of deep respect, having caused a vacancy in this Division, I have the honour to solicit the favour of your suffrages.

Nearly twelve months ago I came before you as the accepted Liberal Candidate. It was with no personal object in view but from a sense of public duty, after very serious consideration of a Requisition numerously and influentially signed.

My views on political questions are well known to you, and should you do me the honour to elect me as your representative, I should give a hearty support to the policy laid down by Mr. Gladstone at Newcastle.

The foremost political question of the day is the Government of Ireland. I would accord to the Irish the power of controlling exclusively Irish affairs, and I feel confident the Great Liberal Party will devise a measure which will effect this and bring contentment to Ireland without imperilling the stability and unity of the Empire.

An amendment of the Registration Laws, simplifying the present system, shortening the qualifying period and establishing the principle of "one man one vote," is so necessary as to require immediate attention.

As an occupier of land and a tenant farmer I know and feel the requirements of my brother agriculturists, and entertain the strongest conviction that their interests with those of the agricultural labourer, should be one of the first considerations of your representative.

To tenant farmers it is a matter of great importance that they should have absolute security for Capital whether invested in large or small holdings, that there should be a division of rates between landlord and tenant, and that the restrictions of the present Ground Game Act should be removed.

Reform of the Land Laws, embracing measures for enfranchisement of Leaseholds and the facilitating of Land Transfer, is urgently needed in order to promote more equitable distribution of land than at present exists and to encourage the labourer to remain on his native soil.

A large extension of local government by means of District and Parish Councils, popularly elected by ballot, demands the serious attention of Parliament. To Parish Councils should be entrusted discretionary power in the acquirement of land on fair terms for allotments and public purposes, and that parishioners may have a voice in the control of the local charities and parochial matters generally.

I have always been an advocate of Free Education, and I desire to see it placed on the sound constitutional basis of popular control.

On the subject of National Insurance I should be prepared to give anxious consideration to any system that might be proposed for securing a helpful resource for the working classes in their old age.

Should you think me worthy of your confidence, no effort of mine shall be wanting to secure the economical administration of National Finance while upholding to the best of my ability the duty of maintaining the efficiency of our public services.

I have the honour to be, Gentlemen,
Your obedient Servant,

GEORGE LAMBERT.

Spreyton, Bow, North Devon, 9th October, 1891.

Printed & Published by H. Latimer & S. H. P. Glanville, Fore St., Exeter.

Figure 3. *George Lambert's election address.*

was in kind: he paid out 12s a week in money to his men; a cottage went with it together with 20 land-yards of ground; he gave them their cider, manured their potatoes and drew all their firewood. Instead of all that he had offered the men 15s a week, but they

Figure 4. *George Lambert in his farmyard with his mother.*

preferred to have things as they were. There was also some debate whether the rents charged by Lambert for the allotments on his land were as low as they might be.

The Liberals made much of the fact that practical farmers (as opposed to large landowners) were at that point unrepresented in parliament. There is some indication that some, normally Tory, farmers supported Lambert because he was seen as someone who really understood their problems. For instance, a group of some 250 farmers "both Conservative and Liberal in politics", including some from outside the constituency, signed a letter supporting him on those grounds[9], and many Tory farmers probably voted for him as they were personally acquainted with him. The Unionists for their part questioned how a practical farmer could find enough time to be a conscientious MP. Lambert did undertake to give up farming if necessary (in the event, he relied increasingly on foremen and bailiffs for the day-to-day running of the farm).

The one element of the Newcastle programme that appears to have embarrassed Lambert was the proposal to pay Members of Parliament (a regular salary for MPs was not introduced until 1911). The Unionists tried to hint at mercenary motives for Lambert. He was forced to make clear that he would not be seeking payment, and pointed out that the £300 per annum proposed was small beer besides the cost of the campaign that had to be met from the candidate's pocket.

IRELAND

Following the Irish famine of 1845–52, there had been almost continual violent protests in Ireland against the largely absentee English landlords. In 1870, the Irish barrister and politician, Isaac Butt, set up the 'Irish Home Government Association', aimed at restoring a separate Irish Parliament. It quickly attracted large numbers of adherents and the Home Rulers became an important political force, with 60 MPs in Parliament after the 1874 election. In 1879, the leadership of the Home Rulers passed from the gentlemanly Butt to the altogether tougher Charles Parnell.

The initial reaction of the Government in Westminster to the Irish protests had been the passage of legislation, usually too little, too late, to meet some of the tenants' grievances, combined with vigorous suppression of violent protestors through a series of time-limited 'Coercion Acts', which gave the Irish Executive special powers, including authority to detain without trial. The Coercion Acts were controversial, however, among sections of the Liberal Party, and Home Rule showed no signs of disappearing as an issue – in 1885 the Nationalists or Home Rulers won 85 out of 101 of the territorial seats in Ireland. Gladstone, who had until then believed in the 'pacification' of Ireland, began to have grave doubts about the policy and, in April 1886, introduced a Home Rule Bill that split the Liberal Party – a split that was effectively to lose the Liberals the general election in 1886, pitting as it did 'Gladstonian' Liberal against Unionist Liberal candidates.

Home Rule was no less a live issue by the time of the 1891 election. For Buller, Home Rule was a politically suicidal scheme of 'giving Ireland to the Irish' and dismembering the Empire. He contrasted the folly of breaking up the United Kingdom with the recent unification

of Germany and Italy as well as the tightening of the Union in America. There was also anti-Catholic prejuduce: in the words of an editorial in the *North Devon Herald*, Lambert would vote for 'placing the necks of two millions of Protestants and loyalists under the iron heel of Papal tyranny and supremacy; to hand over the rule of Ireland to the Romish hierarchy and priesthood, and to a pack of self-seeking political agitators; and to bring back chaos into a land which firm rule and wise legislation has rescued from chronic disturbance and perennial discontent'.

Lambert did not put forward any very precise ideas on the way that Home Rule should be implemented. But he was clear that home rule for Ireland should be within the context of the British Empire. The Empire, however, should be built up on 'liberty, love, concord and freedom', and not upon oppression and tyranny. He seems to have had in mind the self-governing (dominion) status granted in Canada and Australia, and challenged his opponents to name a single instance where the granting of local self-government had lessened the loyalty of those countries.

The Irish question must have seemed a pretty remote issue for the average South Molton voter, but it occupied a surprising amount of time. For Buller, it was the main issue of the campaign and his speeches largely concentrated on it. Both sides imported Irishmen to speak in their support. A contented Presbyterian farmer came to speak for Buller and a discontented one to speak for Lambert. Lambert also had Jeremiah Jordan, MP for West Clare, described as 'a Wesleyan Methodist who had nevertheless been returned by the Roman Catholic constituency of West Clare by the largest majority in the House of Commons'[10]; and an ex-Lord Mayor of Dublin. Buller imported a Presbyterian clergyman and the Liberal Unionist MP for South Londonderry.

What did the Devon tenant farmers and their labourers make of all this? There was no doubt some bemusement, but also some sympathy for what were seen as fellow sufferers under the yoke of large landowners. There was also a Methodist fellow-feeling for members of another non-conformist religion. A group of non-conformist ministers (from Torrington, South Molton, Shebbear, Crediton, North Tawton, Witheridge, Bow and Chulmleigh) even came together to publish an 'appeal' that referred to the 'no popery' cries that had been

raised by the Unionists; and stressed that non-conformists should perceive that to kindle animosity in the minds of their Irish fellow-subjects by use of obnoxious watchwords was injurious to the cause of spiritual Christianity.[11] They expressed the earnest hope that the non-conformists of South Molton would not suffer themselves to be imposed upon by appeals to the spirit of 'unreasoning fanaticism' and would mark their confidence in Mr Lambert, as a supporter of Mr Gladstone's message of conciliation and goodwill. Buller's counter-argument that many Presbyterians, especially in Ulster, supported the Union, made little headway.

ELECTIONEERING

Almost all late-nineteenth century political campaigning had perforce to be done face-to-face. After his adoption as a candidate the previous year, Lambert had made a practice of speaking at 'Ordinaries', the lunches at local hostelries to which the farmers and dealers retired after the morning cattle markets that took place regularly in a number of parishes in the constituency, so he already had a head start on his opponent. When the by-election was declared, both candidates began a gruelling tour of parishes to address the local electorate. Lambert, the more energetic of the two, seems to have set the pace, often managing two or three such sessions an evening, each taking an hour or more. He would travel between villages by pony-trap or similar carriage. A local worthy would chair the meeting, and there would sometimes be a second speaker, usually an MP or other notable from outside the constituency. The speeches were lengthy, particularly Lambert's, which could last up to an hour. In the five-week campaign, each candidate probably addressed some 80 meetings. On election day itself, the energetic Lambert went from South Molton to King's Nympton, Chulmleigh, Lapford and surrounding villages, then by train to Crediton, and on to Morchard Road, Eggesford, Winkleigh, Barrington, Chittlehampton and then home (Buller, who seems to have been exhausted by this time, was less active).

In those pre-television days, election meetings provided rare entertainment for the villagers, who turned out in force. The intensity of the campaigning, moreover, seems to have created a particularly heady atmosphere. As the *North Devon Herald* put it, even after three weeks of campaigning the voters were not yet glutted with

oratory: 'They enjoy it; they positively revel in it. The excitement and speculation on the contest are a break in the monotonous routine of everyday existence. They enter into the spirit of the struggle – they cheer or boo the speakers; and interpolate witty or sarcastic remarks with a zest and earnestness that is absolutely refreshing'.[12]

Youths, women[13] and people from outside the parishes, as well as some of the remaining males not eligible for the franchise, would come along to meetings for the entertainment. A meeting at the beginning of the campaign at Crediton, a radical stronghold with 1,004 registered voters (about a quarter of the electorate), reportedly attracted 1,000 people. At a Liberal meeting in Colebrooke for the parishes of Colebrooke and Coleford, the schoolroom, capable of accommodating 300 people (more than there were voters in the two parishes combined), was 'filled from end to end'. It was an exceptionally wet autumn, and these high attendance figures were reached despite people often having to struggle along ill-made and muddy roads. Those going to a Unionist meeting at Wear Gifford had to contend with flooding from the river Torridge that covered the roads to a considerable depth. The candidate and his entourage only just made it in their carriages after a 'novel and somewhat risky drive through the water', with their feet on the seat to avoid the floodwaters which were flowing through the carriage.[14] At the time the meeting commenced, very few were present but, after a short while, a fair audience had gathered, with people climbing over walls and coming over fields to get there.

The meetings were lively affairs, with the audience keeping up a running commentary throughout and frequently interrupting the speaker with questions. Mostly the heckling was good-natured and tolerable, but at times it got distinctly out-of-hand and degenerated into rowdyism. Buller appears to have had the worst of it, especially when he attempted to speak in towns or villages of a radical tendency like Crediton and North Tawton. One report claimed the Tories failed to canvass at least half the voters in Crediton because popular feeling rendered the approach to certain streets inaccessible to the Buller canvassers. In Lapford, a Unionist meeting 'broke up with lusty cheers for Mr Lambert' and, in Crediton, so many Liberal supporters turned up at one Unionist meeting that the traditional vote of confidence in the Unionist candidate was lost. In South Molton, Buller's meeting was constantly interrupted with cheers for Lambert and Gladstone; and

was marred by disturbances at the back of the hall as Buller supporters tried to eject the Liberal hecklers. Lambert was heckled far less, but even he had difficulty in speaking in some villages where there was a strong Tory tradition.

Accusations flew between the two sides as to how far such rowdy claques were deliberately organised. A lot of the Liberal rowdiness appears to have been spontaneous, but almost certainly not all. Nevertheless, Lambert does seem genuinely to have tapped a well of grassroots rural radicalism. Possibly the existence of a good radical candidate served to bring the labouring classes to a realisation that they could upset the domination of the local landowning class – a realisation that they did not have in 1886. Certainly, Lambert seems to have brought local campaigning to a new pitch of intensity. *The Times* correspondent commented that 'the South Molton election has set an example in electoral tactics and organisation that is sure to become universal in the West of England. Never before has anything like it been attempted south of the Avon; and the result has been the stirring of the constituency to its very depths, with consequent ill-blood and personal animosity'.[15]

Lambert was clearly an enthusiastic and, at times, a rabble-rousing orator, despite speaking at far greater length than a political audience would tolerate today, and he dealt well with questioners and hecklers. But he was far from polished in his language, and the Tory press made fun of him by quoting verbatim his muddled sentences and mangled syntax in much the same way as today's press used to mock John Prescott. His age and lack of experience was an obvious target for his opponents. His use of phrases like 'I have always been an advocate for free education ...', for example, was mocked – 'Mr Lambert writes and speaks as though he had devoted 70 years to the work of promulgating his theories'. The general message conveyed in the Unionist press was that he was 'a nice, bright, smart young fellow, but he has neither knowledge of the world, the acquaintance of men in affairs, nor the wide and diversified experience of agriculture, commerce and politics' possessed by Buller.

Music and singing imparted a carnival atmosphere to the Liberal meetings. A number of 'political songs' were sung with gusto both before and after meetings, in particular a chant entitled *Lambert and Liberty*. The version below, sung to the tune of *Auld Lang Syne*, is from the 1895 election, but is probably the same song:

Ye men of Devon raise the strain,
Sing out the Liberal band,
"Let Lambert represent the cause
Of labour on the land."
From farm and cottage, hill and dale,
Goes up the loyal cry,
"We'll Vote for Lambert, truth and right,
Lambert and Liberty."

Chorus
Ye men of Devon, raise the strain,
Sing out the Liberal Band,
"Let Lambert represent the cause
Of labour on the land."

On Devon's soil in days gone by
Our sires for freedom bled,
And where our fathers marched before,
In those same steps we'll tread.
For liberty of faith and speech
They gave their lives, and we
Will give our Votes for Lambert now,
Lambert and Liberty.

There was a time in Devonshire
When Lords and Labouring men
Worked hand in hand for Liberty,
And won great victories then.
But now the noble Lords have joined
The Tory upper ten,
Ye noble men of nature's mould
Will win the fight again.

George Lambert is the man we want
The farmer's case to mend.
He lives and works on Devon land,
And is the Labourer's Friend.
So let South Molton lead the way
And Crediton combine
With Torrington and all the rest,
We'll lick the Tories fine.[16]

These songs seem to have been very much a Liberal feature, and a fairly novel one at that; one newspaper supporting the Unionist candidate commented disapprovingly: 'Music is ... we learn to be hereafter

an adjunct to the more prosaic speech-making.'[17] Later, however, the Tory Primrose League pronounced it acceptable for songs to be sung at Mr Buller's meetings and the Unionists were reported to have commissioned their own 'stirring battle song'[18], to be sung to the tune of *Men of Harlech*.

The posting of bills and the distribution of leaflets and cards with campaigning messages also played a big part in the campaign. In Crediton, for instance, the Unionists put up posters claiming the Lambert rented land at 7s-6d an acre and then let it out as allotments at 15s. Lambert's supporters immediately reacted by posting their own slips, top and bottom, saying 'This is a Tory Lie'. Just before the poll, both candidates sent out election cards bearing their photographs with final appeals to the electorate, and Buller also sent round a personal letter with a 'cabinet-sized' photograph of himself. Election colours (rosettes and ribbons) were widely worn, including among the women: red, white and blue for Buller, and purple and orange for Lambert.

ARISTOCRACY VERSUS TENANT FARMERS AND FARM LABOURERS

There is little doubt that the contest was increasingly seen as between the aristocracy – and to some extent the Church of England – and the tenant farmers and farm labourers. MPs in rural constituencies, both Liberal and Tory, were traditionally scions of local landowning families, as Lord Lymington had been. Lambert was relatively unusual in coming from a farming family with only somewhat tenuous claims to be gentry, and in being in his words 'a practical farmer'. Buller came from an altogether grander background, although not grand enough for one local Unionist newspaper[19], which expressed regret that the candidate was not the Hon. John Wallop (another scion of the Portsmouth family); or in default of him the Hon. Charles Trefusis (son of Lord Clinton, possibly the largest landowner in the county) or Sir John Shelley of Shobrooke Park (another big local landowner). Buller's campaign was nevertheless heavily supported by the big local landlords (with some exceptions, such as the Acland family). The Fortescue family were particularly active in Buller's support and Earl Fortescue gave him lodging at his seat of Castle Hill. The general view was that Lambert was an unfortunate upstart. The *Exeter Flying*

Post[20], for instance, commented after the poll that it was ridiculous that great imperial interests should be decided on the mere question of the relative popularities of a boy who is known and a man who is not.

There were clearly still doubts in some quarters about the wisdom of the extension of the franchise. The *Western Morning News* probably reflected the views of many of the old landowning class when it said:

> The fact is that we have taken our suffrage from the plough, and we must abide by the consequences. The country has chosen to regard every man who can keep a roof over his head as a modern Cincinnatus called from the stable, the garden and the fields of golden corn to decode all the questions of European politics which baffle our most sagacious statesmen'.[21]

There were also suggestions that gullible rustics were being taken in by Lambert's promises, Unionists recounted anecdotes about workers who believed that, if Lambert won, they would be in a work-free earthly paradise with free allotments.

It seems likely that some landowners intensely resented Lambert's canvassing of their labourers (as late as 1841, in an election in Flintshire, one of the Grosvenor family complained of Gladstone violating the sacred canons of election etiquette by canvassing Lord Westminster's tenants. 'I did think,' the latter said, 'that interference between a landlord with whose opinions you were acquainted and his tenants was not justifiable according to those laws of delicacy and propriety which I considered binding in such cases')(Namier, 1957). Lambert seems anyway to have galvanised the landowners into action. One of the Liberal papers claimed that landlords who had not seen their tenants for many a long day had returned to visit those who laboured on their estates, personally calling at cottages that a short time before they scarcely knew existed, promising to do all sorts of things for the occupiers, 'capping it all with a little firm advice as to how to vote'. This was no doubt a caricature but, as the Liberal press put it, the labourer knew that, if he gave expression to Liberal sentiments, he would run counter to the parson and the squire.

Although the secret ballot had been introduced in 1872, there was still some doubt among the voters, especially those within the sphere of influence of a big landlord, as to how secret the ballot really was. Lambert and his allies went to pains to reassure his supporters on that

point. *The Times* reported that Lambert's supporters had put up big bills counselling the people not to be intimidated by the 'Birmingham roughs' allegedly imported by the Buller campaign, for the ballot was secret.[22] The County Voters Defence Association, which had been formed to protect voters against intimidation, also sent a representative from London to stress the point and keep a watch on proceedings. In fact, their representative seems to have effectively become a campaigner for Lambert, speaking at his meetings and composing the election song *Lambert and Liberty*.[23]

Both sides asked voters to 'pledge' their votes, and it seems that the influence of the landlords was still strong enough to persuade many to make pledges for Buller, even though they had no intention of voting for him. After the election, an editorial in the *North Devon Herald* said that hundreds of tenant farmers and others

> ... broke their pledges and voted for the Radical candidate, their object being in many cases simply and solely to defeat, thwart and humiliate the landlords and to baffle and mortify the clergy of the Church of England. In villages we could name, where territorial influence might have been supposed to reign supreme, the great majority polled for Mr Lambert, although they ostentatiously went to the poll in Unionist carriages and promised their suffrages to Mr Buller.[24]

CHURCH VERSUS CHAPEL

The non-conformist movement, strong among tenant farmers and labourers (there were 115 Chapels in the constituency, according to one press report), was solidly behind Lambert. The clergy of the established church, generally seen as associated with the land-owning interests, mainly supported Buller. At least some clergy came out overtly against Lambert; the incumbents of Rackenford and King's Nympton even refused to let him use the school-room (the only meeting-place in most villages) for his political meetings during the campaign. The Rector of King's Nympton wrote Lambert a letter explaining that he was not prepared to let the school be used as it was for educational principles only, and the 'revolutionary principles broadly hinted at' in George's printed election address were excluded from such principles (Buller *was* allowed to use the schoolroom for his meeting in King's Nympton). In Rackenford, it seems that the vicar's action backfired as it 'had the result of adding several votes' to Lambert.[25] The clergy in

some villages were also somewhat reluctant to allow the eventual Liberal victory be celebrated by the ringing of church bells. Even the Vicar of Spreyton, Lambert's home village, refused to allow the church bells to be rung on the Saturday night when he returned home victorious, causing some high feeling among the villagers. However, many local clergy took an admirably non-partisan view and quite a few of Lambert's meetings were impartially chaired by the local vicar, even in some cases by vicars who admitted to not supporting him.

ELECTION DAY: FRIDAY 13 NOVEMBER 1891

Both sides suffered from the weather. Polling day began with a heavy downpour, although the weather later improved. Some roads were flooded, and most were muddy. There were polling stations in only about every three or four of the smaller parishes, so voters often had three or more miles to travel. Liberal farmers came forward with the loan of market traps and other conveyances to bring the voters to the polling stations. The Tories, in the words of the *Western Times*, had 'superior carrying power' when it came to transporting voters to the polls, even though riding in a Tory carriage was not synonymous with giving a Tory vote.[26] Although most farm labourers had become eligible for the vote in 1885, many had not voted in the previous elections, probably because they were less enthusiastically fought, and the organisation for whipping up the newly enfranchised voters was less developed. The 1886 election was also in the middle of the harvest. So, in 1891, many were voting for the first time in their lives. Polling was particularly heavy over the lunch hour or after 5.00 pm, i.e., at times that the working man could manage.

The police had taken the precaution of deploying significant numbers in possible trouble-spots. Generally, however, the election was conducted in an orderly fashion, with only a few isolated problems reported in the press. In particular, the rowdyism expected at Crediton failed to materialise. In South Molton on election night, however, it was reportedly unsafe for any active Unionist worker to cross the main street without running the risk of being set on by a lot of youngsters and by women screaming 'Go for 'em', and two gentlemen of the town were attacked by having potatoes, turnips and stones thrown at them. In North Tawton, towards the end of polling, some partisans of the two sides at one or two places fell to blows and a policeman

stationed at the polling station is reported to have pointed to a Buller poster by the door and told the working men as they came up to vote 'That's the man you've got to vote for: Mr Lambert voted against us chaps having more than £1 a week'.[27]

THE RESULT

The poll was an exceptionally heavy one, with 7,270 voters out of a total electorate of 7,720 (94 per cent), despite the fact that Friday was a market day when many farmers were making their way to the markets at Barnstaple and Exeter.[28] Lambert received 58 per cent of the vote, a majority of 1,212 – a figure that some ladies of the parish subsequently made into an embroidered picture still in the possession of his descendants (Fig 5). The Liberals had been expecting victory, but only by some 400–600 votes, so the result surprised everybody. The Unionists were particularly shocked as they had calculated on receiving far more votes on the basis of the many 'pledges' of votes that they had obtained before the election.

There were great outbreaks of jubilation all over the constituency after Lambert's election victory was announced on the afternoon of the day following the poll, with brass bands out in force. When he arrived in North Tawton at 7.30 in the evening, on his way back home to Spreyton, Lambert's carriage was met by the North Tawton Brass Band and some hundreds of the inhabitants, who had organised

Figure 5. *George Lambert secured 58 per cent of the vote, giving him a majority of 1,212. Some ladies of the parish subsequently embroidered this total as a picture for the new MP, which is still in the possession of his descendants.*

a grand torchlight procession. The horses were taken from the carriage, which was drawn in triumph by a body of stalwart Liberal supporters to the local hostelry, the Gostwyck Arms, from which the new MP addressed a crowd of several hundred from the balcony, before taking the mail train to Bow, where fog signals were sounded to mark his arrival, and cheering supporters accompanied him for the three miles home to Spreyton. Other torchlight processions took place in Crediton and Torrington.

The election had been closely followed in neighbouring constituencies. At the time of the by-election, only one constituency in the county was held by a Liberal, down from six in 1885. There was no doubt that the victory gave cheer to Liberal candidates all over the county and was seen as the harbinger of the return of Devon to Liberalism. As soon as the result was announced in South Molton, there was a great rush for the telegraph office to pass the news not just to the towns and villages of the constituency, but to towns all over Devon. In Exeter, there were crowds outside the newspaper offices waiting for the news. Lambert's victory was greeted with Liberal celebrations throughout the county. In Barnstaple, for instance, 'cheer after cheer was raised by the hundreds of people assembled in Cross Street' when the telegram arrived announcing the Liberal victory.[29] In Tiverton, a large crowd gathered outside the post office to await the result and when it came through, 'many literally danced for joy'.[30] In Exeter, the Liberals organised a torchlight procession through the town with a brass band as soon as darkness fell, and an impromptu meeting took place at the Devonshire Liberal Club.

Much of Lambert's success was no doubt due to his personal popularity and assiduous work in cultivating the constituency; and to the fact that he was clearly knowledgeable about agricultural matters. He was already being referred to as 'Farmer George' a name (along with 'Our Jarge') by which he was to be commonly known in the constituency for the next 50 years. In particular, Lambert seems to have been successful in motivating far more people to vote than in 1886, when the turnout was less than 70 per cent.[31] His emphasis on the secrecy of the ballot no doubt helped in this respect. When it came to the vote, few in South Molton probably thought of Ireland. But there seems little doubt that the progressive land and social policies espoused by the Liberal candidate struck a strong chord not just among the tenant-farmers and farm labourers but also among the growing number

of workers in small industries. In the words of Lord Ebrington, son of Earl Fortescue and the Liberal Unionist MP for Tavistock, enfranchisement had added not only the agricultural labourer but also 'the bootmakers and factory hands who live in the towns of Crediton and Torrington'.[32]

The result was prominently reported in the national press and was generally interpreted as a serious blow to the Unionist party, and also held up as a result of the new electoral power of the labouring classes. *The Times* pointed out that the Unionists had relied for their village work too much on 'the parson, the doctor, the lawyer and the farmer, and all of these are used to look down on the labourer as of small account. The Gladstonians, on the other hand, rely on the blacksmith, the shoemaker and the tailor, and thus make sure that the party panaceas are duly exhibited to the consumer'.[33]

Only a year later, there came a general election and Lambert found himself again on the hustings. The issues were the same. This time the Tories had found a candidate who lived in the constituency. But he seems to have been a similarly ineffectual opponent, showing little wit or skill in dealing with the heckling and questions that were thrown at him at his meetings, in contrast with Lambert, who clearly enjoyed the repartee of the hustings and had already achieved a reputation as an MP for being always approachable and always obliging. Lambert won convincingly in 1892, increasing his majority. George Lambert was to remain the member for South Molton (with one gap in the 1920s) until 1945, when he was elevated to the peerage as Viscount Lambert of South Molton.

NOTES

1. In 1832, Devon was divided into two constituencies or 'divisions': Northern and Southern, plus a number of borough constituencies. In 1868, the rural part of the county was divided into North, South and East Devon divisions, each returning two members. The 1884 act divided these rural divisions into eight single-member divisions. The South Molton division or constituency disappeared in 1950, when it was largely replaced by the Torrington constituency.
2. The Representation of the People Act 1884 had extended the franchise to all men in rural areas who were householders or rented lodgings to the value of £10 a year. This included many farm labourers, although 40 per cent of men remained ineligible to vote (Hostettler, 2001).
3. Editorial in the *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 17 July 1891: 'Mr Lambert had the impertinence to stamp the Liberal Unionists as men

who had "no record, either good, bad or indifferent," and then, with an attempt at superciliousness, this "superior person" styled them "simply the aristocratic element of the real Liberal party, who conferred no practical benefit on the country".

4. He was a lacemaker from Nottingham who spent only three weeks in the constituency. It seems that the Gladstonians had some difficulty in finding a candidate.
5. Although licensing hardly figured in the campaign.
6. *Western Times*, 5 November 1891, reporting Lambert's speech at Chawleigh on 3 October.
7. At Winkleigh on 13 October, reported in the *Western Times*, 15 October 1891.
8. *ibid.*, 22 October 1891.
9. *ibid.*, 11 November 1891.
10. 1830–1911. An Irish protestant nationalist connected with the Temperance Movement.
11. Published in the *Western Times*, 11 November 1891.
12. 5 November 1891.
13. It is clear from the press reports that a number of women came to the meetings, although they tended to leave if things became too rowdy. Buller's wife also seems to have put in appearances. Lambert was unmarried.
14. *North Devon Herald*, 22 October 1891.
15. *ibid.*,13 November 1891.
16. Song-sheet in the possession of the author.
17. *North Devon Herald*, 29 October 1891.
18. *Western Morning News*, 28 October 1891.
19. *North Devon Herald*, 15 October 1891.
20. Quoted in the *North Devon Journal*, 19 November 1891.
21. *North Devon Herald*, 30 October 1891.
22. *ibid.*, 7 November 1891.
23. The *Western Morning News* of 27 October 1891 described it as composed of high-minded Liberal gentlemen and a whole string of Liberal QCs.
24. 19 November 1891.
25. *Western Times*, 20 November 1891.
26. *ibid.*
27. *ibid.*
28. The electoral register (which had been compiled well over a year previously) contained 8,712 names, but 992 were said to be dead, duplicates or untraceable, leaving potentially active voters of 7,720. Of the 7,270 votes actually cast, 4,222 were for Lambert; 3,010 for Buller; and 38 were spoilt (some apparently writing their own names on the ballot paper).
29. *Western Times*, 20 November 1891.
30. *Western Morning News*, 16 November 1891.
31. In 1886, there was a newly compiled and up-to-date register and the candidates polled between them 6,393 votes or 68 per cent of the electorate.

32. *The Times*, 18 November 1891.
33. *ibid.*, 16 November 1891.

REFERENCES

Douglas, R., **2005**. *Liberals: A History of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat Parties* (Hambledon and London, London and New York).

Hostettler, J. and Block, P. B., **2001**. *Voting in Britain* (Barry Rose, Chichester 2001).

Macnicol, P., **1998**.*The Politics of Retirement* (Cambridge University Press).

Namier, L. B., **1957**. *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, (Macmillan, London), 69.