

# Elections, Leaflets and Whist Drives: Constituency Party Members in Britain between the Wars

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The social-political landscape of Britain changed dramatically in the wake of the Great War (1914–18). Alongside the experience of war itself, the relationship between the three principal mainland political parties shifted notably during and in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, with the formation of a coalition government, the split in the Liberal Party, and the emergence of a nationally organised Labour Party each helping to redraw pre-war configurations. The remit of the state, already expanding before 1914, had extended dramatically over the war years and, despite the best efforts of many, was not reduced back to its pre-war level thereafter. Industrial tensions were briefly exacerbated, and social relations were arguably changed irrevocably. Finally, of course, the 1918 Representation of the People Act conferred the franchise to all men over 21 and to most women over the age of 30, thereby facilitating what could for the first time be called a popular democratic system in Britain, a fact confirmed by the further granting of suffrage to women aged 21 and over in 1928.<sup>1</sup>

One obvious and important consequence of all this was the need for Britain's political parties to broaden their appeal and present a social and political vision that attracted and related to the widened electorate. To this effect, all three parties sought to interest, include and mobilise larger numbers of members from 1918, as (most) Conservative, Labour and Liberal organisations across the country endeavoured to 'open their doors' and offer a political home to those wishing to participate in the new age of popular politics. Membership campaigns, canvassing and social events designed to galvanise existing members and attract new ones became a constant part of many a local party or association's calendar; party organisation became more extensive and disciplined; the pressures and expectations applied to party officers became more intensive. Of course, the results and the extent of such change varied from place to place and from organisation to organisation. Yet, political parties and associations undoubtedly became a site of much activity during the interwar years, and they did so for a greater number of people than in any previous period of British history.

This article is based on a survey of local party archives in five British counties – Devon, Durham, Leicestershire, Midlothian-Peebles and Monmouthshire.<sup>2</sup> The five counties were chosen for their broadly representative character, with each comprising rural and urban constituencies, and to ensure that records relating to all

three principal parties could be assessed. Although the party records consulted are not evenly dispersed, the five counties as a whole encompass solidly Conservative, Labour and (to a lesser extent) Liberal seats; safe-ish seats; as well as marginal constituencies. In terms of social background, the regions include divisions dominated by a single industry (coal mining), mixed industrial areas, farming communities, suburban and middle class constituencies. The objective was to consider differences and similarities in party membership activity, and to record the experience of what it meant to be a party activist in the interwar period. As such, this is not an exercise in measuring regional variations or explaining the whys and wherefores of Britain's political development, though its findings may feed into such debate. Rather, it is an attempt to detail the context in which party members functioned and to document the activities in which those members took part.

Local party records have long been the Cinderella of modern British political archives. Public records, politicians' papers and the national-level archives of the main political parties have been, and continue to be, pored over by eager researchers; and yet those records which, in many ways, bring the political historian closer than any others to 'ordinary people' tend, for a variety of reasons, to be neglected. This is not to say that no use has been made of such sources: indeed, the last 25 years have seen much important work in this area.<sup>3</sup> Yet, for very good reasons, such work often remains at the level of the single party, or the single geographical area, or even the single party *in* the single geographical area.<sup>4</sup> This article attempts to help broaden the agenda by focussing on the three major parties in five separate counties.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it aims to offer a broader comparison than has been generally available thus far, and, crucially, to offer a wider context within which the essays in this volume – which focus on *Labour's* grass roots – can be interpreted.

### **Structure and Composition**

Before examining the activities of the party memberships, it is necessary first to outline briefly the structure and composition of local political organisation. To a certain extent, those divisional Conservative and Liberal associations established by the twentieth century had developed in tandem following the second reform act of 1867. During the interwar period they remained voluntary, self-financing organisations headed by committed activists organised in an executive committee or council. Within this, the position of president and, additionally for the Conservatives, chairman held the greatest status. The presidency was normally an honorific position within a Conservative Association, granted usually to a local dignitary or former parliamentary member for the constituency. So, for example, Lord Londonderry, Viscount Astor and Viscount Churchill each served respectively as presidents of the Stockton, Plymouth and Harborough Conservative associations during the interwar period.<sup>6</sup> The president of a Liberal Party was more akin to the position of Tory chairman, thereby serving as the party officer charged with running the association between election contests. Again, both the Liberal

president and the Tory chairman tended to be of notable social standing, be they a professional, military man, businessman, local worthy or long-serving member of the association. In most instances, the Liberal and Conservative executives met irregularly, primarily at election times, on occasion to appoint a prospective parliamentary candidate, or to confirm arrangements for the annual general meeting. Quite often, therefore, the annual meeting merely ratified decisions and positions already decided within the association hierarchy. In addition, both parties appointed a number of vice-presidents, a position that was again associated with social status or the size of an individual's rate of subscription. The rest of the executive, aside from the treasurer, was allotted on a federal basis, comprising men and women from local branches and sections. As associations grew in size, moreover, so a series of sub-committees were appointed to oversee the management of the party, social events, education, finance and so on. These tended to meet more regularly so as to sustain party activity, raise funds and instigate propaganda. To this effect, much of the wider association work was undertaken by an 'autonomous periphery' of local branches, women's sections and, in the case of the Conservatives, the Junior Imperial League.<sup>7</sup> Finally, where finances allowed, Liberal and Conservative associations aspired to the appointment of a full-time party agent responsible for registration work and the administration of electoral affairs.

Given their contrasting political fortunes, the experience of the local Liberal and Conservative associations differed greatly over the interwar period, with the former seeing much of its organisation fall into disrepair while local Conservative associations continued in the main to function regularly and to expand. Across the five counties surveyed, records relating to the Liberal Party were both sparse and, where available, revealing of local associations struggling for survival. Between 1918 and 1922, disagreement over the party's relationship with the Conservatives, nationally and locally, caused splits within the Liberal organisation, as in Leicestershire and Edinburgh, while declining support and revenue over the period as a whole soon jeopardised the very existence of many a local association.<sup>8</sup> In Torquay, despite electoral success in 1923 and the lack of a substantial Labour challenge, the Liberal Association was reporting by late 1925 that its Liberal club could not be sustained with a membership of under 100. By the mid-1930s, the association was meeting evermore irregularly, with its already precarious financial position undermined further by the death of its patron and mainstay Sir Francis Layland-Barratt.<sup>9</sup> There were exceptions, such as the active and committedly independent Totnes Liberal Association, or the South Edinburgh Liberal Association with its evidently dynamic women's section that was able to report in 1930 that 'contrary to most constituencies throughout Scotland, South Edinburgh has not dropped its organisation, and has tried in this difficult period of Liberalism to keep going'.<sup>10</sup> Generally, however, where Conservative organisation continued to grow at a local and divisional level, so Liberal organisation became less widespread and often inactive, particularly by the 1930s. Although Lloyd George had helped finance a brief party revival in 1927–29, the failure to sustain such investment contributed to the precarious financial position of the Liberal organisation in the subsequent decade.<sup>11</sup>

Prior to 1918, the Labour Party was organised as a federation of affiliated trade unions and socialist societies with no provision for individual members. This changed with the adoption of the new party constitution in 1918, instigating the formation of constituency parties to which trade unions, socialist societies and individuals could each subscribe. Authority lay with the general committee, which appointed an executive to oversee the day-to-day business of the divisional party. This comprised a chairman, vice-chairman, treasurer, secretary and representatives of the local party branches, unions, women's sections and societies affiliated to the divisional party. Such a structure was then reproduced at a local (and county) level, with various sub-committees appointed to direct areas of particular interest such as socials and finance. Where possible, the party secretary doubled as secretary-agent, or organiser, working full or, more usually, part-time for the party to oversee its electoral administration and general organisation across the division. Trades councils often formed the basis for this arrangement, as in Edinburgh, where the Edinburgh and District Trades and Labour Council oversaw six constituency parties (including Leith) and a number of local party branches.

Elsewhere, divisional Labour parties were formed on the initiative of trade union branches or local Labour sympathisers, many of whom came to Labour via the Independent Labour Party (ILP). As this would suggest, affiliated trade union members often made up the bulk of the paper membership, and trade union officials tended to dominate the party leadership in many instances. A classic example of this was County Durham, where the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) overwhelmingly dominated the membership, leadership and political character of the divisional parties based in the coalfield. Thus, when the Durham Divisional Labour Party was inaugurated on 9 February 1918, the event was hosted by the DMA at the Miners' Hall. Leaders included men such as Jack Lawson, the MP for Chester-le-Street from 1919, whose position was connected to his holding a variety of offices within the community; Lawson's 'curriculum vitae' could list him as miner, checkweighman, county councillor, DMA executive officer, ILPer and chapel member. Will Whiteley, miners' agent and Methodist, was elected president, while other Methodist miners and checkweighmen such as Jack Swan and Joe Batey dominated the party executive and candidate list.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, the DMA did not always get its way – the Seaham Labour Party deliberately sought non-mining candidates, snubbing the DMA to win the services of Sidney Webb in 1922<sup>13</sup> – but the union and its representatives undoubtedly shaped the party's character and perspective throughout the region. In Monmouthshire, parties such as that in Ebbw Vale had a similar relationship with the South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF). The strong ties between union lodges, party and community led the SWMF to nominate candidates, print badges, photos and posters, and employ agents such as John Panes in Bedwellty. By 1929, despite unemployment reducing the miners' political fund, the union was contributing £300 towards the election expenses of each constituency in the region.<sup>14</sup> Three of the seven parliamentary constituencies in Monmouthshire had miner-sponsored MPs throughout the interwar period: Abertillery, Bedwellty and Ebbw Vale.

Matters were less clear-cut in localities with a more 'mixed' or less industrial economy. In 'mixed' economic areas, such as Newport, Edinburgh and Leicester,

tensions sometimes existed between the different trade unions, while the influence of the ILP and certain middle class members could be more readily detected. Although the unions and their members formed the basis of all three of the aforementioned parties, many trade union branches remained aloof – in Newport, attempts formally to merge the party and trades council were not acceptable to many local union branches between the wars<sup>15</sup> – and the party's outlook was generally less determined by specifically industrial concerns. In such areas, too, women's sections – initiated by the party during its reorganisation in 1918 – were likely to become an integral part of Labour's organisation (see below). Though women's sections were formed in single-industry constituencies, as throughout Durham, female members in these areas tended to be less visible and wielded even less influence than in the more occupationally and socially diverse divisional parties.

Over the interwar period as a whole, Labour undoubtedly emerged as the most centralised and disciplined of the three parties. Not only did the national party centre develop widely effective and overreaching mechanisms of control, but the divisional party executives tended also to meet on a more regular basis, overseeing and directing their local branches and auxiliaries to a greater extent than either the Liberals or Conservatives. As such, a comparison of divisional Labour parties could give the impression of a relatively uniform political organisation; meetings followed very similar patterns of agenda (model standing orders were circulated though not invariably adopted), correspondence to and from Eccleston Square and, later, Transport House was consistent and extensive, and the booking of 'name' speakers from outside the locality was common. Most importantly, Labour's centrally appointed regional organisers made regular visits to the constituency parties and proved integral to the maintenance of the party organisation during the interwar period. Yet, to overstate such factors would in turn be misleading. The party centre's willingness to intervene decisively into local affairs was rare and usually consultative, while centre-periphery communication more commonly took the form of circulating party literature and information. Furthermore, the varied compositions of Labour's divisional parties and branches preclude any overly generalised assumptions. Divisional Labour parties saw themselves as a part of the national organisation, but they retained a degree of autonomy within a somewhat loosely defined political and organisational paradigm. By contrast, Liberal associations tended to zealously safeguard their 'independence', both political and organisational, though sometimes to the detriment of political consistency or coherency.

Conservative associations were linked to a central organisation which was better resourced and – especially in basic orientation – more united than the Liberals. However, possibly in part because of this, they were equally vigorous defenders of the principle of local autonomy. In practice, whilst the well-funded seats could go their own way with relative impunity, the marginal and weak constituencies inevitably were more dependent upon assistance from outside. Such needs encouraged co-operation and responsiveness to the national organisation, which in its turn maintained a tactful observance of the principle of autonomy, not only in form but also normally in substance.

In terms of membership numbers, the divisional organisations obviously varied in accord with the size of their respective constituencies and, initially at least, with respect to pre-existing social-political cultures and traditions. Taken generally, the Conservative associations boasted the largest and most active memberships, although the sparsity, fluidity and unreliability of membership figures, combined with the scope of the research sample, makes any detailed examination difficult. To take two admittedly arbitrary examples, the Harborough Conservative Association claimed an individual membership of over 3,000 for much of the interwar period, compared to a Labour Party that peaked at just over 1,000 in 1937. In Edinburgh, the North Edinburgh Unionist Association had 1,049 members by the end of 1933, compared to just 258 individual members in the Labour equivalent.<sup>16</sup> Conservative women's sections, too, could often attract memberships in their thousands, compared to tens and hundreds in the Labour Party. In many places, of course, Labour's core membership was bolstered by large numbers of trade union affiliates, something that could provide an electoral base if not an especially active party organisation. Indeed, any attempt to correlate membership and electoral performance is prone to misrepresentation; many of Labour's safest seats, such as Ebbw Vale or Bishop Auckland, had barely functioning party organisations, relying on the local miners' lodges to maintain support. Conversely, divisions such as Plymouth Devonport and Newport could build up memberships of over 1,500 and 3,000 respectively by mid-1930s, yet still fail to overcome the respective constituencies' Liberal and Conservative hegemony. Not surprisingly, Liberal support often dissipated with the party's wider political presence, though strongholds continued to exist, at least over the 1920s, especially in parts of Devon (Plymouth Devonport) and Durham (South Shields). Generally, however, reference to apathy, inactivity and the need to recruit greater numbers of active party members formed a mantra heard across all three political organisations over the interwar period.

Throughout all the parties, men dominated the organisational and political hierarchy. Though each party and association sought, or claimed, to welcome and provide for the new female electorate, women consistently formed but a small minority of the party executive and generally remained detached from the main decision-making organs. As we shall see, this did not mean that women were necessarily without influence; nor should it suggest that women were somehow irrelevant to the party or associations' development and identity. Ironically, perhaps, many local and divisional women's sections proved to be among the most active sites for party members, with female membership sometimes outnumbering that of the men. We have already noted the South Edinburgh Liberal Women's Association, which provided the funds and organised the social activities that proved integral to the divisional association's survival. In Newport, the Labour Party women's section soon outnumbered its male counterpart, and thereby proved able to ensure party support and discussion of 'non-traditional' male concerns, such as the benefits of linoleum for houses on the newly built Maesglas and Somerton estates.<sup>17</sup> In Harborough, meanwhile, where several of the smaller rural villages became mini-fiefdoms of the local Conservative Association over the

1920s, there existed Tory women's branches that counted over half of the local female electorate among their membership.<sup>18</sup>

In class terms, the Labour Party membership was, not surprisingly, overwhelmingly working class, with many party activists coming from the trade union movement. Equally, however, Labour officers were generally skilled workers, and not thereby representative of the majority of workers in their respective constituencies. By contrast, members of the middle and upper middle classes held the key positions and provided much of the membership of the Conservative and Liberal associations, with additional aristocratic flavour added in the form of wealthy patrons, presidents and, in some instances, the parliamentary candidate. Though there were working class members, those who organised the socials or represented the party were overwhelmingly from the middle classes and generally catered for middle class tastes. Garden parties in manor houses and hotel teas for those specially invited were not the standard fare of most British people between the wars, despite talk of 'good work' being done to remove 'class distinction, prejudice and misunderstanding'.<sup>19</sup> Yet, Conservative associations (especially the women's sections) located in working class areas did endeavour to court their working class constituents. In Stockton, for example, Conservative women visited (and recruited) working class women in their homes, arguably providing a sense of 'class' based on prestige, influence, superiority and taste rather than social position.<sup>20</sup> By 1929, the section boasted nearly 3,000 members and ran regular socials, teas and bazaars that were the envy of its male counterpart and, no doubt, its Labour equivalent.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, as in Harborough and Stockton, Conservative Labour Advisory Committees were established to organise and liaise with Tory trade unionists.<sup>22</sup>

Looked at generally, local parties and associations in the interwar period endeavoured to transform themselves from small groups of men supervising electoral work at particular times to larger and more continuous organisations of men and women with an array of campaigning, political and social functions. Nevertheless, parties and associations continued to rely on a committed core of activists to sustain political and associated activity between election times, the success and extent of which varied from place to place. Social and gender differences were apparent across all three parties, with distinct spheres of influence and political identities often being clearly marked. In such a way, the parties reflected the wider society of which they were part. Across all three parties, too, claims of local autonomy contested with national determinants: a problem with which the respective party organisations wrestled to varying degrees of success. That said, in a changed and changing political world, the improvement of party organisation and the extension of a party's appeal became a central objective that informed the mounting expectations demanded upon Labour, Liberal and Conservative party activists during the 1920s and 1930s. It is to the activities of the party members that we shall now turn.

**Electioneering**

Political organisations are formed to perform a specific function; that is, to elect representatives to positions of political power. Despite their usually very different political aims, the Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties were all committed to constitutional politics, with each seeking to achieve their objectives through parliament and municipal government. As such, the bulk of a local party member's politically active time was dedicated to preparing for and fighting elections, be they national or local. In particular, this involved the selection of party candidates, the registration of voters, the funding and carrying out of electoral campaigns and contests, and the propagation of a political programme relevant to the needs, fears and aspirations of their respective constituency.

The selection of parliamentary and municipal election candidates was perhaps the most important function of a local political organisation. In all three parties, the divisional associations retained a considerable degree of autonomy over this process. In the Conservative and Liberal parties, whilst the selection process might be influenced from outside, the final decision was taken entirely and exclusively by the constituency association, from which there was no appeal. The Labour Party's National Executive Committee (NEC) had the power to intervene in local party affairs if an unsuitable candidate was adopted (usually meaning a communist), but this was relatively rare, and the NEC endorsed the vast majority of selected parliamentary nominees. There were circumstances in which local parties themselves invited an element of national involvement. The most obvious of these was when there was difficulty in finding a willing standard-bearer from within the constituency, and by default the party headquarters would be approached to publicise the vacancy or recommend names. Finding – and keeping – a candidate was a continual problem for seats where the chance of victory was remote, and assurances of financial support were often necessary to induce a candidate to stand. By definition, such seats could offer little from their own pockets, and subventions had to be looked for from the national party coffers. In some cases, divisions aroused by a particular local claimant – or rival claimants – could be avoided by seeking names from outside. Some of the safest Conservative seats regularly sought outside candidates because of their very attractiveness. Most frequently, the aim was to secure a wealthy candidate who would not only meet all of his (as this was never a woman) own costs but also pay a substantial annual subscription to the association. Some such constituencies also considered themselves – merit a prestigious candidate, either a leading figure or a younger rising star.

As the fortunes of the Liberal Party waned during the interwar period, finding a willing candidate became increasingly difficult. In Torquay, for example, the divisional Liberal Association struggled consistently to find a 'suitable man' to represent the constituency following the general election of 1918. Although the Liberal chief whip and national headquarters were consulted in 1919, no progress was made until 1922, when Captain Piers Gilchrist Thompson was adopted. All seemed well, temporarily at least, with Thompson winning the seat in 1923, only to lose it in 1924 and resign his candidacy. Once again, the search to 'sound' a local man was undertaken and a list from headquarters procured. Over the course of



1926–27, however, a series of potential nominees were approached to no effect. Eventually, Richard Acland showed willing and was duly adopted in 1927, before he too resigned his candidature following defeat in 1929. The search then began once more, with Thompson declining to stand again and various other potential nominees being approached to no avail. Although the problem was alleviated somewhat by the association's willingness to support the Conservative candidate in 1931, it was to re-emerge soon after the election of the National government. This time, H. Samways agreed to be adopted just months before the 1935 general election in the event of another candidate not being found and despite warnings from his doctor that he should not stand.<sup>23</sup> Not dissimilarly, the South Edinburgh Liberal Association received regular rebuffs from those it approached to replace Dr. Laurie, the former candidate who was moving from the area in 1930.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, different methods were applied across the parties with regard to how the candidate was selected. In the case of a parliamentary nominee, both Conservative and Liberal associations approached people deemed to be a suitable representative for the respective constituency.<sup>25</sup> So, when Sir Charles Yate retired as the Conservative MP for Melton in 1924, an association select committee contacted and met with W. L. Everard, landowner and chairman of the county's largest brewers, who was then recommended to become the prospective candidate at the subsequent general election. Following an appearance at some 79 socials and meetings, Everard was finally adopted officially at a 'special' meeting of Melton Conservatives in October and remained the constituency member throughout the rest of the interwar period.<sup>26</sup> In such a way, the choice of candidate was made by the inner caucus of leading association members, who then 'recommended' their nomination to a general meeting that unfailingly sanctioned the executive option. In coming to such a decision, a prospective Tory or Liberal member's credentials necessarily comprised a mixture of local or national prestige, social status, political belief and, often crucially, a sizeable bank balance. In Harborough, for instance, the defeated Liberal candidate at the 1918 election, P. A. Harris, was deselected by the divisional association for not offering a large enough contribution to his election costs, despite promising £276 per annum to pay for an agent. His replacement, J. W. Black, was soon commended for his large contribution to the party finances.<sup>27</sup> In the same constituency, the Conservative MP for Harborough, Ronald Tree, was donating £500 per annum to his divisional association by 1936, a tidy sum considering an MP's annual salary stood at £400 per annum at this time.<sup>28</sup>

By contrast, potential Labour candidates tended to be nominated by affiliated bodies (trade union or ILP, for example) and selected at a 'special' or general committee party meeting, often within days of a preceding election. Accordingly, parties sometimes had a choice of candidate, with each one presenting the party members with details of their labour or socialist credentials. Thus, in Newport, three potential candidates put their case to the party in 1925. Reverend Lang, who stood as a socialist and a pacifist, claimed war to be 'fundamentally wrong', opposed the Sunday opening of public houses, and defined his socialism as 'an inherent right of equal opportunities [sic]'. Councillor James Walker then followed, underlining his twenty years service to socialism and his experience as a leader of the steelworkers' union, before speaking 'strongly' on women's interests

in the movement. Finally, P. C. Hoffman, an organiser in the shop assistants' union, spoke on unemployment, land, nationalisation and sugar beat. Not surprisingly, perhaps, 'Big Jimmy' Walker was duly selected, so beginning a prestigious parliamentary career.<sup>29</sup> Even so, the matter of financial support was often paramount in determining the eventual adoption of a Labour candidate, thereby allowing a dominant trade union to ensure representation, or paving the way for a wealthy aspirant promising to meet the agent's salary to gain nomination.

Labour also spent much time and effort on the selection of its municipal representatives. The Labour Party had led the way in politicising local government, and the divisional party executive and general committee took far greater interest in the adoption of local election candidates than either the Liberals or Conservatives. Although the latter two parties often co-operated at a local level as a bulwark against socialism, the selecting of candidates or the defining of a specifically municipal programme were rarely if ever discussed within the association committees beyond ward level. Conversely, divisional Labour parties oversaw and helped appoint local candidates, drew up and co-ordinated political programmes and campaigns, and discussed both council policy and the performance of party representatives on the council. Local (ward) Labour parties, meanwhile, could often concentrate primarily on municipal issues, from candidate selection to poster campaigns to the drawing up of election addresses and party programmes.<sup>30</sup>

Looked at from a broader perspective, we can nevertheless pinpoint certain similarities between the parties. First, financial considerations were often integral to the adoption of a parliamentary candidate, whether it came from the candidate him or herself or from a sponsoring organisation, such as a trade union. Second, the social position or status of a candidate was deemed important in all instances, although this was obviously interpreted differently across the parties. For the Conservative and Liberal associations, in particular, a sense of social hierarchy was overt in their choice of parliamentary representative. By contrast, for a Labour Party in a working class or highly unionised area, the trade union, political, workplace and occasionally religious credentials of a candidate were deemed integral to a candidate's appeal and so highlighted. Even so, in more 'mixed' economic or middle class areas, such as in Edinburgh, Labour would often appoint a professional as its prospective candidate, thereby focusing to some extent on social status to challenge the sitting Liberal or Conservative member. Third, parliamentary and municipal candidates were overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, male. Women were more likely to represent their political organisation at municipal level, but even then remained in the minority.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the candidate's location within the party's spectrum of acceptable political views was generally the least important consideration of all; only open rejection of its leaders or of central planks in its platform would rule out a potential nominee who scored highly in other respects. There were, of course, conventions to be followed, and most of the statements offered to selection committees and at public adoption meetings were bland and broadly orthodox.

Beyond the appointment of suitable parliamentary or municipal candidates, the maintenance of the electoral register and the canvassing of support became the

next set of tasks for the party activist. The first of these was the responsibility of the secretary or agent, and although registration procedures were simplified from 1918, the updating of the electoral register retained an importance for party organisers, with most associations and parties aspiring to appoint a full-time paid party officer to undertake the necessary work. Of course, financial limitations could preclude this, especially for smaller parties and associations. For Labour, sponsoring trade unions could sometimes provide the funds and appointee, while wealthy candidates would often enable the party to make either a full-time, part-time or temporary appointment. Within both the Conservative and Liberal Party, fund-raising and donations from wealthy patrons provided the means for such an appointment. In the main, Labour agents had cut their political teeth in the trade union movement or ILP, while Conservative and Liberal agents tended to be upper-middle or middle class members, often a former serviceman or professional.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, both the central Labour and Conservative Party sought to provide training for their agents, with the Tories arguably proving the more successful in this, certainly in terms of quantity.

Election work, meanwhile, meant a round of door-to-door canvassing, filling and sealing envelopes, organising and attending open-air and public meetings, and distributing party literature. In this, all three parties sought to mobilise as much of their party machine as possible, and it was in the immediate build-up to an election that parties were at their most active. Women's sections and children were rallied to help canvass the constituency and plans were drawn up to ensure the maximum success. In Edinburgh, Unionists were instructed to 'prepare well' before canvassing, to appoint approximately one party worker per 20 voters, and to always keep election expenses in mind.<sup>33</sup> Such instructions became evermore systematic over time, as the distribution of literature and personal appeals took priority over more traditional soapbox politics. Thus, by 1930, the Loughborough Borough Labour Party unanimously agreed 'that no useful purpose would be served' by open-air meetings; that it would be better to concentrate on 'canvassing and getting personal contact with the electors'.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the Harborough Conservative Association's policy sub-committee concluded in 1927 that open-air meetings were of 'no particular value', while fetes and garden parties were 'very valuable', and indoor meetings were good if held with a social attraction. As for the 'indiscriminate distribution of literature', this was to be replaced by 'judicious selection and distribution'.<sup>35</sup> The Conservatives' mobile cinema vans were particularly effective means of propaganda, especially in rural areas.<sup>36</sup>

But proficient canvassing did not ensure success; candidates had to present and personify a set of policies applicable to their varied constituents. There is not space here to examine the parties' effectiveness in this respect. Even so, it may be noted that each varied greatly in terms of political priorities. While Labour focused increasingly on social and welfare issues such as housing, social services (healthcare), unemployment and education, the Conservatives concentrated on broader issues of national interest, be they proactive (imperial preference) or negative (anti-socialism). So, to take two examples of Conservative Party election literature, Major Jack Herbert fought the Monmouth parliamentary by-election of 14 June 1934 under the slogan of 'British First', proclaiming the National

government's achievement of turning 'the socialist party's defeat ... into credit' and restoring most economy cuts. Alongside 'practical assistance' to the 'agriculturalist, small holder and market gardener', Herbert stood for world peace, an increase in trade and commerce, better housing, the development of the empire's resources, and 'local needs'. In Tiverton, campaigning in the aftermath of the widespread industrial unrest that followed the war, Mr. H. Weston-Sparkes asked his constituents 'Electors, Which Will You Have?' – 'A parliament elected on the most representative and democratic basis, and which can be altered at any general election if it loses the confidence of the people', or 'A soviet with industrial conscription under socialist officials, which only a revolution can remove once they get into power'.<sup>37</sup>

Conversely, Labour election material often focused on the social circumstances of its constituents, particularly in those areas hit hardest by the economic uncertainties of the 1920s and 1930s. Will Lawther's electoral programme to South Shields in 1924 began with a commitment to peace, before listing his priorities as housing (low rents, slum clearance, separate dwellings for all), equal educational opportunities, schemes for the unemployed and better pensions.<sup>38</sup> Terms such as socialism were often used sparsely (if at all), though more regularly after 1931, with attention placed instead on the party's efficiency, morality and even-handedness. So, in Edinburgh South in 1929, Labour put forward the economics lecturer Arthur Woodburn with a 'constructive policy' centred on the abolition of war, solutions for unemployment, the prevention of disease, and care for public health. Details were vague, but support for the League of Nations and nationalisation with compensation were envisaged as the means by which to achieve peace and better 'efficiency in production and distribution'.<sup>39</sup> The Liberals, meanwhile, combined their traditional policies with a defensive anti-socialism. Thus, the Liberal appeal to the voters of Sunderland in 1924 led with a reaffirmation of 'Liberalism' and 'free trade', before praising Labour's foreign policy but criticising its plans 'at home'. The important associated questions, from a Liberal point of view, were unemployment, housing, land, and Ireland.<sup>40</sup> All parties, it should be noted, began to make direct appeals to the newly enfranchised women, some of the connotations of which will be discussed below.

At the risk of oversimplification, it may be concluded that Labour tended to appeal to the electorate from a moral perspective that endeavoured, simultaneously, to be relevant to the everyday concerns of its constituents. The Conservatives, meanwhile, regularly alluded to the 'nation' and the 'national interest'; a relatively flexible premise from which to develop policy. Though arriving at different conclusions and starting from a different set of premises, Labour and Conservative members often displayed opinions derived from general assumption or instinct rather than fixed theoretical constructs or debate. This would change over the 1930s, as Labour began to articulate its socialism through the concept of economic 'planning'. Somewhat differently, the Liberals aimed, for the most part, to remain fixed on a set of 'traditional' policies deemed to have formed the basis for Britain's on-going social and economic progress. As noticeably, however, all three parties presented their opponents as an archetypal 'other', be they the officious

revolutionary socialist, the representatives of 'vested interest', or the uncaring and greedy capitalist.

### **Maintaining the Party**

As the interwar period progressed, party and association activity increasingly extended beyond purely electoral work. Attempts to recruit (and maintain) members began to concentrate the minds of the leading divisional activists, while educational schemes were sometimes programmed to foster a political consciousness amongst the wider membership. More popularly, social meetings and outings were arranged, with outdoor fetes or garden parties organised in the summer, often on the initiative of the local women's sections. In so doing, parties and associations hoped to integrate themselves within the wider community, so heightening their profile and raising necessary funds and support in the process. As importantly, they served to bolster party morale and sustain the party organisation between elections.

Most divisional parties and associations hoped to develop as large a membership base as possible. With the extension of the franchise, all three parties had necessarily to widen their electoral appeal, a fact to which they were acutely aware. Bonar Law, speaking in 1917, requested that his party adopt franchise reform and 'make the best of the situation that has arisen and to see that everything is done to make our party what Disraeli called it – and what, if it is to have any existence, it must be – a truly national party'.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, the Labour Party's reorganisation in 1918 was prompted, in part, by the extension of the franchise. In particular, the newly enfranchised female electorate was given much attention, with the formation of women's sections and specific appeals to women voters becoming an essential part of any election campaign. Thus, the Bedwellty Labour Party decided by as early as September 1918 to send a 'personal invitation signed by the secretary of the women's group' to prospective members and voters.<sup>42</sup> In Seaham, Beatrice Webb sent regular letters to Labour women and 'the women electors' in the 1920s, while the national Labour Party issued pamphlets outlining 'why women should vote Labour'.<sup>43</sup> The Conservative and Liberal parties made similar appeals, endeavouring to ensure that the organisation of women was a task to be 'taken seriously in hand'.<sup>44</sup> Often, the wife of a prospective parliamentary candidate was brought into the spotlight to woo potential electors. Lieutenant Colonel Cuthbert Headlam's election campaigns in the 1930s were accompanied by a leaflet featuring him and his wife, with Beatrice Headlam appealing to local women to 'vote for my husband'. The Liberal candidate in Houghton-le-Spring, T. E. Spring, did the same, with Elizabeth Wing declaring that 'Like yourselves, I have to look after a house, and politics affects us even there'.<sup>45</sup> Of course, recruiting and accommodating women members was not the same as ensuring equal representation and influence within the party, something none of the three parties attempted seriously during the interwar period. More broadly, membership drives were organised intermittently and where necessary by divisional and local

organisations. In between times, local parties and associations sought to organise the regular collection of subscriptions to maintain both numbers and finance.

The principal exception to such ambition were certain Labour parties in the mining villages of Durham and South Wales, where the influence of the miners' lodge effectively ensured Labour's domination. A classic example was the Bishop Auckland Labour Party, where its MP in 1929–31 and from 1935, Hugh Dalton, claimed that a 'healthy party is an inactive one'. 'Too many members might upset the applecart', he once said, 'and bring in militants.'<sup>46</sup> Here, the guaranteed vote of an overwhelmingly working class mining community was assured by the DMA, while the rudimentary party organisation was overseen by Will Davies, the party secretary, and 'uncle' Bob Middlewood, the leader of Bishop Auckland council. In such a way, Labour retained its dominance in the constituency through networks of individuals whose position largely relied on the patronage of – and the support mobilised by – the DMA. In such circumstances, a constituency party was hardly deemed necessary. Indeed, Davies sometimes managed to allow a whole year to pass without a single executive meeting, claiming there was simply nothing for the party to discuss.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the Ebbw Vale Labour Party regularly recorded the party minimum individual membership from 1928, yet it remained one of Labour's safest seats.<sup>48</sup>

Whatever the size of the party membership, the aim that all divisional and local organisations should be self-financing meant that fund raising was another key component of a party member's experience. An array of methods were devised, although Conservative, Liberal and Labour members all showed a particular penchant for the whist drive. Weekly, monthly, divisional, ward and regional drives were frequently organised by local associations and parties to raise money, despite the fact that whist was also played habitually at socials, dances, after meetings and sometimes instead of meetings all year round. In addition, bazaars, raffles, jumble sales, sweepstakes and dances became standard and often profitable points of party activity. Accordingly, most parties and associations had formed social committees by the 1920s. Yet, although these committees generally comprised men and women, it was more often than not the women's sections that organised, supplied and staffed such public events. As a result of all this, political and social activity began to coalesce across the three parties, as social gatherings doubled as fund-raising schemes that further included political speeches and dissemination of propaganda. Not only did such activity help attract members to the party, both for social and political reasons, but they also attracted publicity and gave the party or association a public profile that extended beyond its offices, clubs or rooms.

Of course, individuals and trade unions could also help solve financial worries. Conservative and Liberal associations, in particular, benefited from wealthy patrons willing to pay off overdrafts or finance party premises and activities. The Pease family regularly helped keep the financial wolf from the door of the Darlington Conservative Association, with Captain E. H. Pease donating £325 in March 1927 for the expressed purpose of clearing the association overdraft. The Conservatives particularly relied upon the candidate or MP to subsidise the local party, with sums equivalent to the entire parliamentary salary of

£400 per annum not unusual. The safer the seat, the larger the sum expected – and for this reason, being without a candidate was a double disadvantage. In Stockton, the generosity of Harold Macmillan regularly cut the overspending Conservative Association's overdraft and ensured that it was able to acquire permanent premises to act as a 'rallying place for our party'.<sup>49</sup> Whilst Macmillan remained, all was well, but the situation was much gloomier during the period after the 1929 defeat when he gave up the candidacy in search of a safer berth elsewhere, and only his return in 1931 restored the association to health and vigour. For Labour, the trade unions were the principal benefactors. In 1922, DMA-sponsored candidates filled six of Durham's eleven county seats, with the union financing both the election campaign and the political agents. The union's political fund for 1922–23 spread its services widely, spending £1,018/9/4 on agents' salaries and contributing to the expenses of eight divisional parties.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond their financial *raison d'être*, the rounds of socials, outings and dances were held to maintain the party organisation and sustain morale. Popular among the divisional Conservative and, to a dwindling but still notable extent, Liberal associations were garden parties, dinners and summer fetes. These were often held at the home of a local dignitary, and became regular features of both the association and the wider social calendar. For example, the Bosworth Conservative Association held its annual fete at the home of Lord Waring, while the countless social events organised by the Harborough Conservative Association, particularly its women's branch, included a Christmas fair in 1930 that comprised bridge, whist, various stalls, and a tea and buffet followed by a further round of whist and a dance.<sup>51</sup> Later, in 1938, the Darlington Conservative Association held a 'sunshine bazaar' (opened by the Marchioness of Zetland and Lady Bradford), a garden party, and organised outings to Holland, Glasgow, Blackpool and the Newcastle pantomime.<sup>52</sup> For the Labour Party, May Day processions (and the miners' gala in Durham) proved important rallying points for its members. Less dramatically, yearly day trips and children's picnics were often arranged.<sup>53</sup>

As suggested above, women's sections frequently took the lead in such activity. Indeed, the minutes of all three parties' women's sections show how the 'space' occupied by women was circumscribed by their male counterparts, but was nevertheless very active and not without some wider import. On the one hand, the party minute books suggest that women rarely featured in the executive meetings of the organisation, only occasionally intervening in debates of what could be called 'traditional' political matters.<sup>54</sup> This occasionally brought some protest, as in Stockton, where the Conservative women's section debated how women 'liked to manage their own affairs' but would like to be invited to discuss matters occasionally with the men; or in Harborough where simmering tensions between the men's and the (larger) women's association caused an almighty row in 1935.<sup>55</sup> Yet, the adoption of separate men's and women's sections was largely accepted, with the Tiverton Liberal Association reporting typically that 'women do not seem to take as much interest in a combined one [section] as they do when they have a separate association of their own'.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, functioning women's sections often combined social activity with political discussion that, while not decisive in terms of becoming official party policy, was often wide ranging and

more inclusive than debate within the party hierarchy. The aforementioned Stockton Conservative women's section regularly invited speakers on an array of topics to address its members. It also organised frequent and well-attended whist drives, dances and bazaars, and put on a number of association day trips, such as one to Norwich to visit the Colman family's mustard business. By 1929, it boasted nearly 3,000 members.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, though with a far smaller membership, the Loughborough Labour Party women's section's activities for 1934–35 included the regular round of whist drives combined with weekly or fortnightly meetings, jumble sales, socials, talks by party members on proposals for maternity homes, 'the milk question', the importance of female municipal candidates and the possibility of military sanctions over Abyssinia (with a vote of three for and ten against), and trips to Sheffield, Stratford and Derby laundry.<sup>58</sup> In this, women's meetings could sometimes (but by no means always) contrast with the dry and mostly administrative duties of the male-dominated executives and sub-committees. Although women were typically marginalised within their party or association, the activities – social and electoral – carried out by female members suggest that they could be crucial to the sustenance and construction of the public identity of their respective party.

Finally, all the parties sought to encourage political awareness among their members, with speakers' classes, lectures, and education and literature committees becoming standard components of local organisational life. These were not always the most popular of party activities, although the Durham Women's Advisory Council provided scholarships for several enthusiastic Labour members to attend its summer school at Barrow House in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>59</sup> Certainly, social evenings, dances and teas tended to outnumber the more cerebral distractions. Elsewhere, ambitious members could take courses at centrally organised educational facilities, such as the Bonar Law Memorial College, established by the Conservatives at Ashridge in 1930. Closer to home, youth sections tended to concentrate on a mixture of social and education activities. As well as organising dances and socials, Labour Leagues of Youth or the Tory Junior Imperial Leagues (the Imps) took part in speaking competitions and staged debates on topics such as, 'do business girls make good wives'.<sup>60</sup>

Overall, the experience of a party member in the interwar period could be a broad and wide-ranging one. Local and divisional organisations sought to cultivate a political home for people that was both social and political, initiating events and activities beyond the simply electoral. Of course, the extent and success of this varied from place to place. Moreover, the extent to which individuals chose to integrate themselves into such a life varied from person to person. Material circumstances – geographical, sexual and occupational – could also inform the extent of person's political activity. Loosely speaking, however, we can denote three types of party member in the interwar period: the passive, the supportive, and the active. The first of these paid their subscriptions when asked, voted accordingly at election time, but generally remained detached from the party organisation. The supportive member similarly subscribed to and voted for their respective party, attending perhaps the odd social and annual meeting, but only really lending their assistance at election time. Finally, the active members were those men and women



who sustained the party organisation throughout the year, attending a constant round of meetings, helping at the party office, and organising events associated with their respective party or association. Across the parties, the Conservatives arguably succeeded in creating an environment in which the social and political became intangible. Attendance at a Conservative Association dinner, fete, executive or women's meeting was as much a part of the social calendar as it was political; it represented a sense of status for those who wished to see the world in such a way. For Labour, its social activities were unable to compete with attractions beyond the party (sport, cinema, pub, union etc), although they remained an integral and enjoyable part of many an active member's experience. In terms of format, Liberal social activity to some extent mirrored that of the Conservatives, although the dwindling party organisation over the interwar years meant that it was less widespread and less well attended. Thus, fetes and garden parties proved particularly popular. To take one example, a Leicestershire Liberal Association garden party held in September 1919 featured various sports events (organised by men), various stalls and refreshments (organised by women), a band, and a 'short' public meeting addressed by the president, A. E. Sawday.<sup>61</sup> The extent to which such activity impinged on the electoral fortunes of each of the three parties is more debateable, though it is something that perhaps warrants further investigation.

### **Confronting Difficulties**

The existence of political organisations of all persuasions was fraught with difficulties of a political and organisational nature. To a notable extent, the vast majority of party or association members gave their unequivocal support to their national party whether in or out of government, although instances of dissent were of course common, as in the Conservative Party in 1929–31, the Liberal Party in 1918–29, and the Labour Party during the 1930s with regard to the policies (and expulsion) of Sir Stafford Cripps. Even so, loyalty to 'the cause' was held in high esteem, and the bulk of resolutions passed by all sections of a divisional organisation tended to endorse the objectives and position of the central party. Inevitably, there are exceptions to this, but intra-party disagreements were rarely political and, where so, concerned a vociferous minority rather than a substantial challenge to prevailing policies and loyalties. Thus, the divisions that wracked the Jarrow Labour Party in the wake of the 'Jarrow crusade' centred on a handful of 'left' Labour councillors whose criticisms of Ellen Wilkinson were not held by the majority of party members. Nevertheless, their actions caused a furore and threatened Labour's council majority if not the party's dominant position as the political wing of the local labour movement.<sup>62</sup> As such, although political, financial, organisational and personal differences were sometimes likely to cause disruption, local associations and parties can best be described as sites of unified purpose and camaraderie beneath which stifled tensions could sometimes be discerned.

For the Conservatives, the local associations constructed and presented an identity of solidity, continuity, patriotism, unity and caution, with a loyalty to king and country being regularly reaffirmed. 'God Save the King' was frequently sung at the end of annual meetings and even some executive or women's committee meetings. The public AGMs saw little debate, with the unanimous passage of a customary resolution which in general terms supported the party's leadership and mission. Concerns were kept for the private forums of the executive committee, and even here expressed reluctantly and rarely. However, there were common themes – so much so as to be a form of orthodoxy in themselves. In the 1920s these were the reform of the House of Lords, tariffs and the less controversial 'safeguarding' policy, and pressure for economy in government spending (citing the burdens of local and national taxation). In the 1930s, India caused much discussion and some dissent, whilst appeasement almost none of either. As for the Liberals, the divisions of 1916–22 cut deep, with divisional associations demonstrating an array of responses to the party crisis. Some accepted the coalition arrangement after the war and again in 1931, some rejected both (Totnes), while the split damaged others irrevocably.<sup>63</sup> When the chairman of the Scottish Liberal Federation (SLF), Sir William Robertson, resigned his position in 1920, he described the Liberal Party as an organisation traditionally composed of 'men who held advanced views, moderate views, and what may be described as Conservative–Liberal views'.<sup>64</sup> In so doing, however, he left a federation that was nominally opposed to the coalition government but unable to retain a unity with which to confront it. By the time of the 1923 general election, the SLF proved incapable of nominating more than a handful of candidates, often facing difficulties in those constituencies where its representatives did manage to stand. Thus, in Edinburgh East, the Liberal candidate J. M. Hogge was opposed by a former vice-president of the local Liberal Association turned Tory, C. J. M. Mancor, who described his erstwhile friends as having 'a soul ... so dead that they prefer their Association before the interests of their country'.<sup>65</sup> Hogge held his seat, but the following year Labour contested the constituency for the first time and won, putting forward Dr T. Drummond Shiels on a progressive platform that made him an attractive heir to the progressive politics of pre-war Liberalism and the most viable alternative to Conservatism. But despite this, Liberal associations in many areas continued to retain men and women willing to 'reaffirm our belief in the ultimate triumph of the Liberal cause', and keen to believe that ['the] continued existence of an organised Liberal Party is of vital importance to the country'.<sup>66</sup>

Labour Party unity was associated with its trade union roots, although inter-union rivalry could sometimes find its way into a local party organisation, and the historically tense relations between trade unionists and socialists could prompt disagreement. Certainly, many trade unionists in Newport and Edinburgh remained suspicious of the 'socialist' Labour Party, while tensions between Labour and the ILP, the Communist Party, or the Socialist League intermittently challenged party solidarity. Again, however, the majority of Labour members supported the party centre: proscriptions against communists were widely observed, most ILPers continued in the party once the former disaffiliated in 1932, and the Socialist

League remained at best a minor presence in the five counties under review. The minutes of the Gateshead branch, for example, reveal a loyal section of the Labour Party keen to settle down to the usual round of whist drives and discussion.<sup>67</sup> Even at the lowest point of Labour's interwar history, 1931, the vast majority of party activists (though not all party members or voters) remained committed to the Labour Party and, where appropriate, their parliamentary candidate – with Ramsay MacDonald's Seaham constituency proving an obvious exception to this.

Quite clearly, potential sites of tension did exist and occasionally came to the surface. Financial worries threatened the existence of many a political organisation, leading to intra-party accusations over the distribution of effort or funds. In Harborough, where a large, financially solvent and extremely active Conservative women's association contrasted with a dominant if somewhat lacklustre men's association, attempts to solve the division's monetary worries by sharing management and financial responsibilities were fiercely resisted by the self-sufficient women. Threats of resignation met the proposed new rules and accusations flew in both directions, before a settlement was finally, if tenuously reached.<sup>68</sup> But financial concerns were usually felt by the organisation as a whole and, in many ways, helped galvanise party activity towards fund-raising ends.

The relationship between the party or association and their respective MP or parliamentary candidate was also a potential source of tension. In the main, relations were cordial and even congratulatory, as candidates and members of parliament became the 'star turn' at party events such as annual meetings, socials and fetes. Once elected, many MPs regularly 'reported back' to their constituency and were repaid by bolstering resolutions and support. Thus, the Darlington Conservative Association resolved that its MP, Charles Peat, had 'proved himself a first class member having conscientiously attended to his parliamentary duties and kept in close personal contact with his constituency, despite the great amount of work involved by his business responsibilities'.<sup>69</sup> The member for Bedwellty, Charles Edwards, was appreciated in similar ways. As he represented the constituency for Labour throughout the interwar period (and beyond), he gave frequent talks and updates to the divisional party, working closely with the party chairman Lewis Lewis in between times. Come 1931, Edwards was congratulated on his parliamentary work and his refusal to follow MacDonald into the National government, as the division rallied behind him and the wider Labour Party.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, some local organisations retained support for those members who occasionally deviated or challenged official party policy. For instance, Torquay Conservatives and North Edinburgh Unionists backed their respective members' opposition to the National government's India Bill in the early 1930s.<sup>71</sup> As such, disputes were rare. True, powerful local leaders such as Francis Acland did demonstrate a willingness to overturn their association's choice of parliamentary candidate, bemoaning in 1934 that Captain King, the prospective candidate for the Tiverton Liberals, 'was liked enough off the platform, but he could not and never would create a favourable impression on the platform'.<sup>72</sup> King was duly replaced. Furthermore, the Seaham Labour Party executive refused to endorse Ramsay MacDonald in 1931, although many inside and affiliated to the party did retain a (brief) loyalty to the erstwhile Labour prime minister.<sup>73</sup> But such dramas were rare,

with the prospective candidate or sitting parliamentary member acting as a recognisable and popular figurehead for most parties and associations.

Noticeably, however, divisional party minute books suggest that a degree of tension did exist between many Labour parties and the Labour 'groups' representing both the party and their constituents at a local government level. Disputes usually revolved around either a lack of contact between councillors and party, or as a result of decisions taken by councillors deemed antithetical to Labour's programme or ethos. Thus, two Labour councillors in Edinburgh (Paris and Rhind) had the 'whip withdrawn' in 1932 for refusing to leave office in protest against 'the lack of fair play on the part of the other side [the Tory dominated Moderate Party] in refusing to allow Labour at least two Bailieships'. Conversely, any sign that Labour's own representatives were somehow profiting from their position was frowned upon. In Newport, the general committee resolved in December 1920 'that this meeting strongly resents the action taken by certain Labour councillors and other members of the party in attending the Mayor's banquet ...' Not only did the 'spending of public money on Mayoral banquets and similar functions' challenge Labour scruples, but it also raised questions as to Labour's identity. An amendment to the committee's resolution stating that party representatives 'personal or social relationship towards elected representatives of other parties is entirely a matter for the decision of the Labour councillors themselves' was defeated by ten votes to seven. Even so, the problem re-emerged in 1935, this time in the context of the 'unemployment and distress' being experienced by many Labour voters. Consequently, in February 1936, the party discussed whether all municipal candidates should be able to prove they had given three years' service to the party – careerists were evidently not welcome.<sup>74</sup> On occasion, too, affiliated trade unions would protest against decisions or positions taken by Labour councillors.

Looked at generally, personal or organisational rivalries proved to be more common sources of tension than political dispute within most divisional parties and associations. In addition to what has been listed above, individual animosities no doubt existed but failed to find their way into the minute books. Conversely, generational differences, or misunderstandings, are evident in the often irregular attempts made by associations and parties to maintain functioning 'youth' sections. The exuberance of youth, along with fears (sometimes substantiated in the case of the Labour Party) that youth sections would harbour militant attitudes, meant that relations were sometimes terse to say the least. Complaints about the conduct of youth sections or reports of social clubs getting 'out of hand' were not uncommon.<sup>75</sup> Where potential differences did occur, however, a dedication to an agreed common 'cause' generally ensured that unity prevailed, particularly in the Labour parties and Conservative associations. Of course, the particular position of the Liberals in the immediate wake of the Great War ensured that political and, more commonly, strategical disagreements did contrive to split local and regional associations, yet a core of redoubtable activists generally remained to keep the Liberal flag flying in name if not in numbers.

## Conclusion

Research focused on local and divisional political organisation can reveal much about the experiences and activities of party activists in Britain between the wars. Though not always dealing in the cut and thrust of 'high' political debate or action of parliament and central office, it does help us understand just how and to what extent the nationwide network of associations and parties maintained and constructed political identities at a local level. Obviously, the particular histories of each major political party and their respective constituency organisations all differ in a number of ways. At the same time, records of local political organisations reveal that the life of a party activist, be they Labour, Liberal or Conservative, followed similar patterns and comprised similar concerns (mainly financial) and objectives. From a cynical point of view, the often administrative nature of local party or association business may help us understand why the majority of people remained aloof from organised politics in the interwar period, despite the extension of franchise. On the other hand, the reorganised or newly formed parties, women's branches and youth sections did offer a sense of purpose and a range of activities and responsibilities to those who wished to participate. In particular, the tireless effort exerted by party activists deserves due recognition, particularly given the voluntary nature of a political organisation. Alongside the regular rounds of meetings and canvassing, the holding of socials, teas, fetes and bazaars contributed to the evolving social and cultural environment of interwar Britain. Ultimately, too, it was the members and activists of these political organisations who personified the notion of popular democracy advanced from 1918, suggesting that their stories remain an under-researched yet valuable part of Britain's political history.

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## Notes

1. For the 1918 Act, see M. Dawson, 'Money and the Real Impact of the Fourth Reform Act', *Historical Journal*, 35 (1993), pp. 369–82.
2. The research was funded by the Leverhulme Trust and forms part of a 'pilot project' locating and assessing the records of Britain's constituency level political parties in the interwar period.
3. Chief among the pioneering works in the area were J. Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin 1902–40* (London 1978); D. Howell, *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party, 1888–1906* (Manchester, 1983); D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–18* (Cambridge, 1990).
4. More recent works on the Conservatives which incorporate such material include S. Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party: The Crisis of 1929–31* (New Haven & London 1988); S. Ball, 'Local Conservatism and the Evolution of the Party Organisation', in A. Seldon and S. Ball (eds.), *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900* (Oxford 1994); J. Ramsden, *The Age of Churchill and Eden, 1940–57* (London, 1995); S. Ball, 'National Politics and Local History: The Regional and Local Archives of the Conservative Party 1867–1945', *Archives*, 94 (1996); N. J. Crowson, *Facing Fascism: The*

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*Conservative Party and the European Dictators 1935–40* (London, 1997); N. McCrillis, *The British Conservative Party in the Age of Universal Suffrage: Popular Conservatism 1918–29* (Ohio 1998). On Labour, see C. Howard, 'Expectations Born to Death: Local Labour Party Expansion in the 1920s', in J. M. Winter (ed), *The Working Class in Modern British History: Essays in Honour of Henry Pelling* (Cambridge, 1983); J. Reynolds and K. Laybourn, *Labour Heartland: A History of the Labour Party in West Yorkshire During the Interwar Years, 1918–39* (Bradford, 1987); N. Riddell, *Labour in Crisis: The Second Labour Government, 1929–31* (Manchester, 1999); the articles in *Manchester Region History Review* (Vol. 14, 2000); D. Tanner, 'The Pattern of Labour Politics, 1918–39', in D. Tanner, C. Williams and D. Hopkin (eds.), *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900–2000* (Cardiff, 2000); S. Fielding, 'Activists against "Affluence": Labour Party Culture during the "Golden Age", circa 1950–70', *Journal of British Studies*, 40, 1 (2001); L. Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain, 1951–64: Old Labour, New Britain?* (Basingstoke, 2003). There is much less for the Liberals, but see G. Tregidga, *The Liberal Party in South West Britain since 1918* (Exeter, 2000).

5. Important previous work that has sought to look beyond a single party include A. Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931* (Oxford, 1991); D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party*.

6. Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation, 1919–40 (Durham Record Office); Minutes of the Plymouth Sutton Division Conservative and Unionist Association, 1938–71 (West Devon Record Office); Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association, 1912–33 (Leicestershire Record Office). Dignitaries, such as Lord Londonderry, were sometimes president of a number of Conservative associations.

7. S. Ball, 'Local Conservatism', p. 272.

8. Minutes of the Leicestershire Liberal Association, 1903–23 (Leicestershire Record office); Minutes of the Scottish Liberal Federation, 1920–31 (National Library of Scotland).

9. Minutes of the Torquay Liberal Association Financial Committee, 1913–38 (Torbay Liberal Democrats Constituency Office).

10. Minutes of the Totnes Division Liberal Association, 1924–39 (Totnes Liberal Democrats Constituency Office); Minutes of the South Edinburgh Liberal Women's Association, 1924–58 (National Library of Scotland).

11. For examples of worsening Liberal finances, see Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the [Totnes Liberal Association] General Council, 16 February 1935 (Totnes Liberal Democrats Constituency Office); Minutes of the Leicester Liberal Committee, 26 November 1930 and 23 February 1931 (Leicestershire Record Office). On the latter date, the executive resolved to register all telephone calls in detail so as to keep an eye on association expenditure.

12. Minutes of Durham Miners' Association Meeting and Durham Divisional Labour Party Minutes, 1918–47 (Shotton Family papers, Durham Record Office).

13. Such a trend continued; Seaham was later won by Ramsay MacDonald in 1929 and Emanuel Shinwell in 1935. See M. Callcott, 'The Nature and Extent of Political Change in the Inter-War Years: The Example of County Durham', *Northern History*, 16 (1980).

14. Minutes of the Bedwellty Divisional Labour Party, 16, February, 27 April and 27 July 1929 (Gwent Record Office).

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15. *Newport Trades Council Annual Report, 1923*, in 'The Origins and Development of the Labour Party in Britain at Local Level' series (LSE). When Newport trades council members were canvassed on the issue in 1923, only two affiliated branches replied favourably, with the 'large majority' preferring to retain the trades council's 'separate identity'.

16. Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association, 1913–33 (Leicestershire Record Office); Minutes of the North Edinburgh Unionist Association, 23 January 1934 (Edinburgh City Archive); *Report of the Annual Conference of the Labour Party* (London, various years).

17. Minutes of the Newport Labour Party, 14 November 1930 (LSE); D. Tanner, 'The Pattern of Labour Politics', p. 139.

18. Minutes of the Harborough Conservative and Unionist Association Women's Branch (Leicestershire Record Office).

19. Minutes of the Bosworth Women's Unionist Association, 1918–25 (Leicestershire Record Office).

20. P. Lynn, 'The Influence of Class and Gender: Female Political Organisation in County Durham During the Interwar Years', *North East Labour History*, 31 (1997), p. 55.

21. Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Women's Unionist Section, 1923–38 (Durham Record Office).

22. Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association Labour Advisory Committee, 1930–1939 (Leicestershire Record Office); Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation Unionist Labour Advisory Committee, 1925–34 (Durham Record Office).

23. Minutes of the Torquay Division Liberal Association, 1913–38 (Torbay Liberal Democrats Constituency Office).

24. Minutes of the South Edinburgh Liberal Association, 1930–56 (National Library of Scotland).

25. To quote the Darlington Conservative Association executive, the management committee was 'to approach likely gentlemen for consideration as prospective candidates'. See Minutes of the Darlington Conservative Association, 2 November 1939 (A copy of the association minutes are in the possession of Dr. Stuart Ball at the University of Leicester).

26. Minutes of the Melton Conservative and Unionist Association, 1923–46 (Copies of the association minutes are in the possession of Dr. Stuart Ball at the University of Leicester).

27. Minutes of the Harborough Divisional Liberal Association, 15 March 1919 and 22 May 1920. For Harris, who went to have a prestigious career and served as deputy party leader during the Second World War, see P. Harris, *Forty Years In and Out of Parliament* (undated).

28. Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association, 23 May 1936 (Leicestershire Record Office). The salaries for members of parliament varied over the interwar period. Between 1911 and 1931, MP's earned £400 per annum, falling to £360 in 1931–34, before rising to £400 in 1934 and £600 in 1937.

29. Minutes of the Newport Labour Party, 20 November 1925 (LSE).

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30. For an example, see Minutes of the Storer Local Labour Party, 1932–39 (Leicester Record Office).
31. For a wider discussion of this, see M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914–59* (Basingstoke, 1992), pp. 154–208.
32. S. Ball, 'Local Conservatism', pp. 279–80.
33. Minutes of Edinburgh West Division Unionist Association, 30 October 1918 (Edinburgh City Archive).
34. Minutes of the Loughborough Labour Party, 28 March 1930 (Leicester Record Office).
35. Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association, 22 January 1927 (Leicestershire Record Office).
36. J. Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin*; T. J. Hollins, 'The Conservative Party and Film Propaganda between the Wars', *English Historical Review*, 96 (1981).
37. Major Jack Herbert, *The National and Unionist Candidate*, Monmouth Parliamentary By-election, 14 June 1934 (Gwent Record Office); *Electors, Which Will You Have?* Leaflet for Mr. H. Weston-Sparkes, Coalition and Unionist candidate general election 1922 (Devon Record Office, Exeter).
38. *South Shields Parliamentary Election, 29 October 1929*, leaflet for Will Lawther (Tyne & Wear Archive).
39. *Parliamentary General Election, 1929 – South Edinburgh Division*, leaflet for Arthur Woodburn (National Library of Scotland).
40. *The Liberal Candidates*, 1924 general election leaflet for Major L. Andrew Common and I. C. Hannah (Tyne & Wear Archive).
41. Quoted in J. Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin*, p. 119.
42. Minutes of the Bedwelty Divisional Labour Party, 29 September 1918 (Gwent Record Office).
43. 'Letter from Beatrice Webb to the Women Electors', undated (Durham Record Office); *Why Women Should Vote Labour* (London, undated).
44. Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association, 29 March 1919 (Leicestershire Record Office).
45. *Vote for Headlam*, Leaflets for the 1931 and 1935 general elections (Durham Record Office); *To the Electors*, Leaflet for the 1929 general election (Durham Record Office).
46. B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (London, 1995 edition), p. 176–77.
47. H. Beynon and T. Austrin, *Masters and Servants: Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation* (London, 1994), p. 311.
48. The Labour Party did not compile individual membership figures before 1928. Even so, affiliation fees to the party were worked out on the basis that each party division had 180 and, from 1930, 240 members.
49. Minutes of the Darlington Conservative Association, 29 March 1927 (Copies of the association minutes are in the possession of Dr. Stuart Ball at the University of Leicester); Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation, 1923–30 (Durham Record Office).
50. M. Callcott, 'The Nature and Extent of Political Change', p. 218.
51. Minutes of the Harborough Women's Conservative and Unionist Association, 1925–33 (Leicestershire Record Office)



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52. Annual Report of the Darlington Conservative Association, 29 April 1938 (Copies of the association minutes are in the possession of Dr. Stuart Ball at the University of Leicester).

53. For just two examples, see Minutes of the Newport Labour Party, 26 August 1935 (LSE) and Minutes of the Darlington Labour Party, 31 May 1922 (Durham Record Office).

54. The entries of party and association minute books make this something of an assumption. It is based on the fact that women were consistently in the minority on a party or association's decision-making committee.

55. Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association, 12 October 1935 (Leicestershire Record Office); Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Women's Unionist Association, 9 February 1923 (Durham Record Office).

56. Minutes of the Tiverton Liberal Association, 6 December 1929 (Devon Record Office).

57. Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Women's Unionist Association, 1923–38 (Durham Record Office).

58. Minutes of the Loughborough Labour Party Women's Section, 1934–40 (Leicestershire Record Office).

59. Minutes of the Durham Women's Advisory Council, 1920–37 (Durham Record Office).

60. Minutes of the Stockton Branch of the Junior Imperial League, 1937 (Durham Record Office).

61. Minutes of the Leicestershire Liberal Association, 23 July 1919 (Leicestershire Record Office).

62. M. Perry, 'The Jarrow Crusade's Return: The 'New Labour Party' of Jarrow and Ellen Wilkinson MP', *Northern History*, 39 (2002).

63. Minutes of the Totnes Division Liberal Association, 1924–39 (Totnes Liberal Democrats Constituency Office).

64. 'Letter from Sir William Robertson to Mr Anderson' 14 December 1920, in Minutes of the Scottish Liberal Federation (NLS).

65. *Edinburgh Evening News*, 20, 23 and 24 November 1923.

66. Minutes of the Leicester Liberal Committee, 19 December 1935 (Leicestershire Record Office).

67. Minutes of the Socialist League – Gateshead Branch, 1932–36 (Tyne and Wear Archive).

68. Minutes of the Harborough Conservative Association, 1933–56 (Leicestershire Record Office).

69. Annual Report the Darlington Conservative Association, 8 April 1938 (Copies of the association minutes are in the possession of Dr. Stuart Ball at the University of Leicester).

70. Minutes of the Bedwellty Divisional Labour Party, 1918–54 (Gwent Record Office).

71. Minutes of the Torquay Conservative Association, 1932–39 (Notes of the association minutes are in the possession of Dr. Stuart Ball at the University of Leicester); Minutes of the North Edinburgh Unionist Association, 12 April 1933 (Edinburgh City Archive).

72. Minutes of the Tiverton Divisional Liberal Association, 16 November 1934 (Durham Record Office).

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73. The best account remains D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (London, 1977), pp. 651–53 and pp. 668–71. Relevant material is deposited in the Durham Record Office. We should, perhaps, also note the case of Evan Davies in Ebbw Vale, whose ‘shameful neglect’ of his duties in parliament and his constituency eventually led the divisional party to replace him with Aneurin Bevan in 1929. See J. Campbell, *Nye Bevan: A Biography* (London, 1994), pp. 28–29.

74. *Annual Report of the Edinburgh and District Trades and Labour Council for year ending 31 March 1933* (LSE); Minutes of the Newport Labour Party, 2 December 1920, 15 March 1935 and 10 February 1936 (LSE).

75. Minutes of the Newport Labour Party, 14 December 1926 (LSE); Minutes of the Stockton and Thornaby Constitutional Organisation, 23 February 1931 (Durham Record Office).