

A POLITICAL PROBLEM – LOCAL LIBERAL CANDIDATES AT THE GENERAL ELECTION OF JANUARY 1910

By John Howe

Politics in Edwardian England was a lively and exiting business. Major new issues were emerging, a new political party appeared and elections involved a complex balance of personal factors, local and national issues and party organisation. There was widespread popular interest shown by the extensive coverage of local and national politics in the local press which gave lengthy news reports supported by much comment and gossip on all political issues. The main political meetings attracted packed audiences filling the largest public halls and excitement reached a climax at general elections when the numbers who voted show that virtually every registered elector who was physically able to do so actually voted.

Nationally, the Conservatives had won the 1900 general election during the Boer War but thereafter their fortunes declined. Evidence of incompetence during the war and its mounting cost, Nonconformist anger at the terms of the 1902 Education Act and Joseph Chamberlain's attack on Free Trade in 1903 galvanised Liberals into activity culminating in a landslide Liberal victory in the general election of January 1906. At the same time a growing awareness of social problems—poor housing, ill-health, unemployment and widespread poverty – was leading many Liberals to demand social reform financed by higher taxation. In some respects the new Liberal government proved a disappointment for despite its huge majority in the House of Commons it was unable to get several major policies through the House of Lords which had an overwhelming Conservative majority. However old-age pensions introduced in 1908 were widely welcomed and in 1909 Lloyd George produced a radical budget, the People's budget, to finance pensions and other social reforms. This produced revived Liberal enthusiasm but Conservatives were enraged and in the summer and autumn of 1909 there was much speculation that the House of Lords might reject the budget and thus force a general election.¹

The 1906 election had also brought a small group of independent Labour MPs to the House of Commons. They had much in common with the

Liberals – concern about poor social conditions and willingness to use State action to achieve social reform – although some commentators on the right feared the growth of extremist Socialism and the Labour party itself insisted on its complete independence. Many on the political left indeed saw Liberals and Labour as two parts of the progressive forces and feared that if they competed they would split the progressive vote and let the Conservatives in.

Locally, we are concerned with two constituencies, the borough of Cheltenham and the surrounding county division known as North Gloucestershire or Tewkesbury but extending from Berkeley in the southwest to Chipping Campden in the northeast. Political activity in each seat depended on the local party organisation which by the early 20th century was modelled on that developed by Chamberlain and Schnadhorst in Birmingham in the 1870s. Annual ward meetings of all Liberals elected a constituency council which in turn chose an executive to run the party on a day-to-day basis. Its key duty was to find a parliamentary candidate and in practice the presence of a candidate was vital. For example in Cheltenham there was minimal Liberal activity and declining income following the failure to find a candidate for the 1900 general election. An effective local party needed a full-time professional agent who would organise meetings and propaganda, build up a team of volunteers to work at elections and supervise the vital work of getting voters onto the election register (not until 1918 was there an effective official system of registration). All this cost money, some £400 a year and with an annual income of just over £80 in 1900, falling to £51-10s-0d in 1902,² the Cheltenham Liberals were clearly in a weak position. Then in October 1903, a prospective candidate was found. In December a full-time professional agent was appointed, Mr. C.H. Jones, who proved extremely able and effective.³ Regular ward meetings were addressed by the candidate and extensively reported in the local press and there were several major rallies as well as social activities. Mr. Jones worked hard at the registration and in March 1905 the Cheltenham Women's Liberal Association was set up, being the first local

political organisation for women.

Although there is no direct evidence in the press it seems highly likely that all this activity was financed by the candidate who was also, of course, expected to nurse the constituency,

supporting church bazaars, flower shows, football clubs and local good causes of every sort. When to all this is added the cost of an election, which in Cheltenham was some £700 - £800, it will be seen that candidates had to be rich. Furthermore

TEWKESBURY DIVISION ELECTION

JANUARY 1910



HON. M. H. HICKS-BEACH: "Please may I come in? I want to explain why I voted against your Old Age Pensions"

MR. BROWN: "Come in and welcome, Sir, but we are not going to trust you again, as you promised fair last time, and had there been more like you we should not have had our Old Age Pensions to-day."

Courtesy Gloucestershire Collection 10600(4)

MPs were not paid a salary until 1911 so a successful candidate needed a private income.

There was a widespread preference for local candidates but the Liberals had great difficulty in finding local men with sufficient time and money. Failing a local man the Cheltenham Liberals contacted the Liberal Chief Whip's office in London which acted as a clearing house to put potential candidates in touch with constituencies. It was by this means that after a series of interviews and discussions the Cheltenham Liberals selected as their candidate J.E. Sears.⁴

Born in 1857 and the son of a Baptist minister, Mr. Sears was a staunch non-conformist with a strongly Liberal family background. Trained as an architect he had moved into architectural publishing and lived in London where he had been elected as a county councillor in 1901. He was aroused to take a more political role by 'the iniquitous education act' and campaigned steadily in Cheltenham for the next two years. His hard work and the effective organisation built up by Mr. Jones led to Liberal victory at the general election of January 1906.⁵

However, success brought problems. The heavy parliamentary programme and long sessions kept Mr. Sears in London and there was some local criticism of his absence, although he did visit Cheltenham regularly and the party continued a full programme of meetings and social activities. He was subjected to a particular abusive and in one case slanderous attacks by local Conservatives who bitterly resented their defeat. Nonconformists were disappointed by the government's failure to get legislation to satisfy their grievances through the House of Lords. Finally in May 1908 Mr. Sears announced that he would not stand again 'for family and personal reasons'. The local press provided no fuller explanation although many years later, the writer of his obituary suggested that 'pressure of other business made it impossible for him to continue his parliamentary career'. He continued to visit Cheltenham regularly to speak at meetings and social events but in May 1909, Mr. Jones the agent left for another job and was not replaced, which may suggest that Mr. Sears had reduced his financial support for the local party.⁶

As soon as Mr. Sears withdrew there was speculation that he would be replaced by R.A. Lister. Born in Dursley in 1845, he was the founder of the agricultural machinery business that still bears his name. He was a paternalist

employer, a devout nonconformist and active in local politics. A county councillor from 1899, he was soon spoken of as a possible parliamentary candidate, and was adopted by the Tewkesbury Liberals in December 1903. Despite an energetic campaign run by a good agent, Mr Lister failed by a narrow margin to win the normally safe conservative seat in January 1906.⁷ He did not continue activity in Tewkesbury so he was available to fight Cheltenham when Mr. Sears withdrew. *The Cheltenham Chronicle* reported 'an informal approach' to him in May and he came to speak at several ward meetings. At the party's A.G.M. in March 1909, the agent reported that Mr. Lister had indicated that he would 'seriously consider' a formal invitation, he entertained the Cheltenham Liberals on their summer outing at his home in Dursley when several speakers urged him to accept the candidacy and in September he was at a major rally to support the Budget in the Town Hall, when he was again spoken of as a candidate.⁸

Meanwhile the Tewkesbury Liberals were also without a candidate and there was little party



R.A. Lister's 1910 election address.

Courtesy Gloucestershire Collection (H) E5.

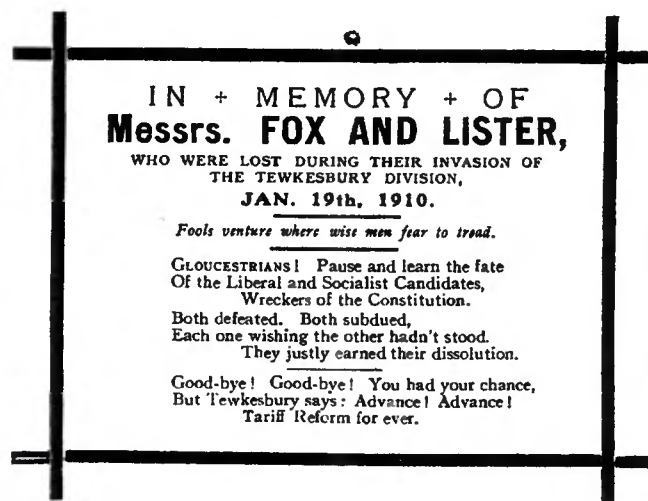
activity until a new agent was appointed in July 1908. There is no direct evidence as to who provided the money for the agent but in February 1909 the divisional association announced that its

chairman, M.P. Price, had agreed to accept the candidacy at an appropriate time.⁹ The Prices were a leading local Liberal family who had already provided two local Liberal MPs and M.P. Price had just come back to Gloucestershire from Cambridge to help run the family business and estates. However there was some confusion over the candidacy though neither the local press nor the Price papers reveal how the confusion arose. The outcome was that in July he withdrew, leaving Tewkesbury with no Liberal candidate, as speculation about an imminent election increased.¹⁰

During the summer a further complication emerged in the form of a Labour candidate. Political activity on behalf of Labour in Gloucestershire had been largely confined to Gloucester and Cheltenham where Trades and Labour Councils and small I.L.P. branches existed, organising propaganda and occasionally putting up candidates in local elections with very little success. Their most prominent local supporter was C.H. Fox, a dentist, who lived in Upton St. Leonards and largely financed the Gloucester I.L.P. In May 1909 the monthly branch meeting discussed the possibility of a parliamentary candidate and Mr. Fox said he was willing to stand and to find the necessary funds.¹¹ He later explained that the local Labour party was keen to fight a parliamentary seat but one 'where they would not be likely to meet opposition from the Progressive forces'. Tewkesbury, the only Conservative seat in the county and with no declared Liberal candidate, was the obvious choice, although as a largely rural seat with no local Labour organisation, it was not very promising. Mr. Fox asked to meet Mr. Lister to discuss the situation and they met probably in July 1909. Mr. Fox then put his views to Mr. Lister in writing on July 29th, and Mr. Lister replied on August 5th enclosing a copy of a letter to the Tewkesbury Liberal Agent, in which he declared 'I am not inclined to avail myself of the invitation to become Liberal candidate for Tewkesbury. Mr. Fox supported me at the last election'.¹²

Thus by September 1909 the local situation as an early election seemed more and more likely was that in Tewkesbury there was no Liberal candidate but Mr. Fox, with Mr. Lister's implied encouragement, was campaigning vigorously. He had held 38 meetings in October – on a programme remarkably similar to that of most

radical Liberals, including strong support of the People's Budget. Mr. Lister himself admitted that he agreed with 9/10ths of Mr. Fox's manifesto. The Cheltenham Liberals confidently expected Mr. Lister to be their candidate with an added advantage as a local man since the Conservative candidate was a carpet-bagger. Early in September however, the *Gloucester Journal* reported that the Tewkesbury Liberal agent had a candidate in view. *The Journal* which consistently urged co-operation between the two progressive parties was alarmed. 'A single candidate, whether Labour or Liberal, would no doubt receive enthusiastic support' but a split would guarantee Conservative success.¹³ By September 25th, the *Cheltenham Chronicle* was reporting threats by the I.L.P. that if the Liberals fought Tewkesbury they would retaliate by voting Conservative in Gloucester and Cheltenham or even fielding candidates there.¹⁴

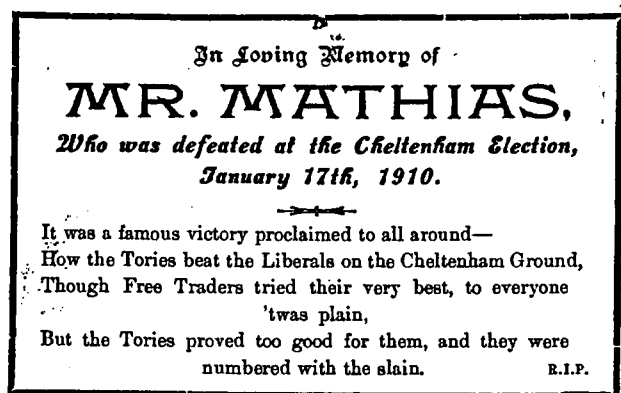


Courtesy Gloucestershire Collection 10600(4)

These threats proved unavailing for on October 1st Mr. Lister wrote to Mr. Fox to say that, having been pressed by supporters not to desert them, he had decided after all to fight Tewkesbury and was adopted as candidate on October 9th. The Liberal press was scathing. The *Gloucester Journal* had already argued 'that there was much to be said for the Liberals standing aside' and of Mr. Lister's adoption it declared 'While it was magnificent it was nor war'. 'Mr. Lister and Mr. Fox ought to be fighting together'. The *Cheltenham Chronicle* reported the general opinion that 'a hash has been made of things', and Cheltenham Liberals left with no candidate had been 'thrown into disarray'.¹⁵ Hasty negotiations with London eventually secured a candidate and Richard Mathias, a Welsh shipowner, was adopted just as

the election campaign officially opened in December.

The outcome of these events was a predictable setback for the Liberals. In Tewkesbury, the three-cornered fight encouraged the Conservatives and depressed the progressives. Despite his hard work Mr. Fox polled only 236 votes while the Conservative increased his majority to nearly 1000. In Cheltenham the Liberal majority of 401 in 1906 was replaced by a Conservative majority of 138. The small size of the majority strongly suggests that, had the Liberals been able to field a well known man instead of an unknown outsider, they would have had a good chance of retaining the seat in January, a conclusion supported by the fact that Mr. Mathias, once he was better known in the town, was himself able to win the seat back for the Liberals at the next election in December 1910.



Courtesy Gloucestershire Collection 10600(4)

In summary, Mr. Lister's decision to fight Tewkesbury rather than Cheltenham damaged his party in three ways. He increased the Conservative majority in Tewkesbury by splitting the progressive vote. He worsened the Liberal performance in Cheltenham and possibly caused the loss of the seat. He damaged relations between Liberals and Labour making future co-operation more difficult.¹⁶ What can explain Mr. Lister's quixotic gesture? His own declaration of loyalty to his Tewkesbury supporters is all very well, but it had not been much in evidence in the previous three years, as Mr. Fox tartly observed, and he simultaneously let down his Cheltenham supporters and went back on what was virtually a commitment to Mr. Fox. He moved from a winnable seat to a hopeless one. The Liberal press gave no convincing explanation. The Conservative *Cheltenham Looker On* said he had received 'peremptory orders from the powers that be in London to step into the breach and prevent

the absorption of the Liberal party by the Socialists'.¹⁷ This is not credible. The party in London was not in a position to order local candidates about this way and it would certainly not want to deprive Liberal-held Cheltenham of its candidate. Moreover party headquarters was generally sympathetic to reasonable Labour claims; a free run for Labour in Tewkesbury was a small price to pay to cement Labour support for Liberal candidates elsewhere in the county. In the end, then, the reasons for Mr. Lister's decision remain a mystery.

References.

- 1 There is an extensive literature on Edwardian politics. A general account can be found in M. Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics*, and a recent more-detailed discussion of the key issues is by D. Tanner.
- 2 See reports of Cheltenham Liberal Annual Meetings in *Cheltenham Examiner (C.E.)*, 30 Jan., 1901, *Cheltenham Free Press (C.F.P.)*, 22 Feb., 1902, 7 Mar., 1903.
- 3 *Gloucestershire Echo*, 3 Dec., 1903.
- 4 The discussions are recorded in the notebooks of the chief whip, Herbert Gladstone, among Herbert Gladstone Papers, British Library, Add.Mss., 46484, interviews of 9 July, 5 Aug., 11 Aug., 13 Aug., 1903.
- 5 For J.E. Sears see *C.F.P.* 10 Oct., 17 Oct., 1903 and his obituary *Cheltenham Chronicle (C.C.)* 22 Jan., 1941, *Who Was Who*, 1941-50.
- 6 *C.F.P.*, 23 May 1908, *C.C.*, 23 May 1908, *C.E.*, 27 May 1909.
- 7 For a full biography of R.A. Lister see "In Memoriam; Sir Robert Ashton Lister", *The Lister Standard*, Vol. IV, 4, 1929; *Gloucester Journal (G.J.)*, 12 Dec., 1903.
- 8 *C.C.*, 23 May 1908, *C.F.P.*, 23 May, 1908, *C.E.*, 4 March, 1909, 1 April, 1909, 8 July, 1909, *C.C.*, 18 Sep., 1909.
- 9 *G.J.*, 25 July, 1908, 20 Feb., 1909.
- 10 *G.J.*, 17 July, 1909 and M.P. Price papers, uncatalogued, boxfile titled "Correspondence 1906-14".
- 11 *G.J.*, 19 June, 1909, Minutes of I.L.P. Branch Meetings, 18 May, 15 June, 1909, Gloucestershire County Record Office, D3128/2/2.
- 12 *G.J.*, 9 and 16 Oct., 1909; *C.E.*, 14 Oct., 1909.
- 13 *G.J.*, 4 Sep., 1909.
- 14 *C.C.*, 25 Sep., 1909.
- 15 *G.J.*, 9 and 16 Oct., 1909, *C.C.*, 16 Oct., 1909, *C.E.*, 14 Oct., 1909.
- 16 These views were expressed at the time by commentators in all the local Liberal papers.
- 17 *Cheltenham Looker On*, 9 Oct., 1909.