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TARIFF REFORM: AN IMPERIAL STRATEGY, 1903–1913*

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ABSTRACT. *Historians of the Edwardian tariff reform movement have disagreed about its aims. This article examines the motivations of the leadership of the Tariff Reform League, which was by far the most influential organization in the tariff lobby. It argues that the League's leaders were more empire-minded than often allowed, and that it was the preferential tariff which they were most determined to promulgate and defend. Indeed, attempts by the Balfourite wing of the Unionist party to twist tariff reform away from its imperial origins were strongly resisted by the League, and the forces of protection within the organization were also carefully controlled. When the Tariff Reform League finally gave way on the issue of imperial preference in January 1913, it was not because it had suddenly ceased to be concerned about the unity of the empire. Rather, the widespread public hostility to the imposition of food duties showed no sign of diminishing, thus making it difficult to persuade a critical mass within the Unionist party that tariff reform was a politically viable strategy of imperial federation.*

Historians have sometimes been inclined to see the Edwardian tariff reform movement in an insular fashion, thereby implying that tariff reform was more a domestic strategy than it was an imperial one. Indeed a common picture of tariff reform is one of a domestic political cocktail, the ingredients of which vary from interpretation to interpretation but usually include three items. First, tariff reform is seen as a form of anti-socialism, a way of raising revenue for welfare reforms without resorting to progressive taxation.[1] Second, tariff reform is understood to be a response to anxieties about British economic decline. In this guise it takes two forms: protection for the home market and a retaliatory tariff to prise open markets overseas.[2] Finally, tariff reform is presented as a party political programme, either an attempt by Joseph

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[1] D. Judd, *Radical Joe. A life of Joseph Chamberlain* (London, 1977), pp. 241–2. Judd claims that Chamberlain was converted to tariff reform because of the Unionist government's need to improve its record in the field of social legislation and to raise extra revenue for spending on projects such as old age pensions.

[2] For the view that protectionism steadily assumed greater significance in the tariff reform campaign see, P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British imperialism. Innovation and expansion, 1688–1914* (Harlow, 1993), pp. 212, 218; B. Semmel, *Imperialism and social reform. English social imperial thought, 1895–1914* (London, 1960), p. 124.

Chamberlain to breathe new life into Liberal Unionism,[3] or an attack by Chamberlain on the old leadership of the Tory party.[4]

This paper is concerned with the structure of the tariff reform programme. Focusing on the activities of the Tariff Reform League, it seeks to analyse the role of the empire in the tariff reform campaign and to assess the relative importance of the different types of tariff: protective; retaliatory; revenue-raising; and preferential too.[5] Each of these tariffs implied a different agenda, and, to grasp what tariff reformers were about, it is vital to examine closely what kind of tariff they favoured and why.

E. H. H. Green's recent study of the motives behind the tariff reform campaign portrays the programme as a form of 'radical conservatism', the purpose of which was to adapt the Unionist party to an age of democratic politics by consolidating its support amongst the working class.[6] According to this view, tariff reform was first and foremost an electoral strategy. Some sensitivity is shown to the imperial issues that were involved,[7] but the importance of those issues is thought to have diminished as time went on, so that what began as an argument for uniting the English-speaking empire gradually broadened out into a multi-faceted policy designed to defend the interests of British industry, to provide funding for social reforms and to regenerate British agriculture.[8] In this way, the shape of the campaign is supposed to have changed dramatically during the decade 1903–13.[9]

The argument advanced in this paper differs from that of Green, and from the many other domestically-focused interpretations of tariff reform, in so far as it maintains that the essential aim of the tariff reform movement did not change after 1903, when Chamberlain fastened upon the preferential tariff as the most attractive and plausible form of imperial union. Of course, Chamberlain's passionate desire for imperial unity has long been acknowledged by historians, most notably P. J. Cain.[10] What remains to be established is whether other

[3] A. J. P. Taylor, '"Joe" at his zenith', *Essays in English history* (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 189.

[4] P. Fraser, 'Unionism and tariff reform: the crisis of 1906', *Historical Journal*, v, 2 (1962), pp. 150, 155; P. Fraser, *Joseph Chamberlain. Radicalism and empire, 1868–1914* (London, 1966), p. 246. Fraser believes Chamberlain's aim was to democratize the party and to subvert its traditional base by eliminating all those who disagreed with him. For the view that Chamberlain had his sights set upon the party leadership see D. Dutton, 'Unionist politics and the aftermath of the general election of 1906: a reassessment', *Historical Journal*, xii, 4 (1979), esp. pp. 870, 875–6.

[5] The policy of imperial preference was designed to strengthen the economic links between the different parts of the English-speaking empire by giving British manufactures preferential access to dominion markets and dominion farmers preferential access to the British market. The policy is discussed in greater detail below, see pp. 15–19.

[6] Green's interpretation of the tariff reform movement was outlined in an article in this journal in 1985 and elaborated in his recent book on late-Victorian and Edwardian Conservatism. See E. H. H. Green, *The crisis of Conservatism. The politics, economics and ideology of the British Conservative party, 1880–1914* (London, 1995); Green, 'Radical Conservatism: the electoral genesis of tariff reform', *Historical Journal*, xxviii, 3 (1985), pp. 674–87.

[7] Green, *The crisis of Conservatism*, chs. 2,7.

[8] Ibid. pp. 317–19.

[9] Ibid. pp. 20–1, 184.

[10] P. J. Cain, 'Political economy in Edwardian England: the tariff reform controversy,' in A. O'Day, ed., *The Edwardian age: conflict and stability, 1900–1914* (London, 1979), esp. pp. 40–1; Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism. Innovation and Expansion*, pp. 204, 211.

leading figures of the tariff reform movement were equally committed to this goal, particularly in the period after July 1906 when Chamberlain was removed from active politics by a stroke. Cain believes that the commitment to imperial preference was still a matter of dispute amongst the wholehogger faction of the tariff reform movement in 1906,[11] whilst Sykes claims that during 1907 wholehoggers, many of whom were protectionists, came to see revenue as the first and most important purpose of tariff reform.[12] This paper presents a different view of tariff reform, arguing that it was the preferential tariff which the wholehogger leadership of Chamberlain's movement was most determined to promulgate and defend. It shows how attempts to relegate or remove preference from the tariff reform programme were continuously opposed, and how demands for protection (industrial and agricultural) were forcibly suppressed for fear that the electorate might lose sight of the wider purpose of the campaign. Thus Balfour's strategy of 'twisting tariff reform away from its imperialist origins' met with little sympathy from leading tariff reformers, who remained faithful to Chamberlain's intentions until the crisis that produced the Bonar Law memorial in January 1913.[13]

This does not mean that the presentation of tariff reform was unchanging: as we shall see, the emphasis on imperial preference varied according to the prevailing political climate, being most pronounced during the colonial conference of 1907[14] and the period when Canada was conducting trade negotiations with the United States.[15] Neither does it imply that the domestic and imperial sides of tariff reform were disconnected. For whilst some elements of the tariff reform programme were clearly fashioned with a metropolitan audience in mind, there is little doubt that Chamberlain himself believed that imperial unity offered the best solution to the major social and economic problems of the day. Nevertheless, the imperial side of the tariff reform programme – which involved the introduction of a tax on imported corn – met with widespread hostility from a domestic British audience. That the leadership of the tariff reform movement persisted with a preference in the face of such opposition is a strong indication that it was the integrity of the empire and the preservation of Britain's great power status which continued to be its primary concern.

I

A study of the leadership of the tariff reform movement cannot be conducted without reference to the activities of the Tariff Reform League. Although the Tariff Reform League has not received much attention from historians, it was

[11] Cain, 'Political economy in Edwardian England', p. 55.

[12] A. Sykes, *Tariff reform in British politics, 1903–13* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 139, 142–4, 288.

[13] Whilst Sykes is right to argue that Balfour endeavoured to transform tariff reform into an essentially domestic policy, he is wrong to suggest that wholehoggers were prepared to acquiesce in this strategy. Ibid. pp. 144, 164, 195.

[14] Letter from Ridley to the branch officers of the T.R.L, 12/10/1906, reprinted in *Monthly Notes on Tariff Reform* (hereafter *Monthly Notes*) (Nov. 1906), p. 288.

[15] See the T.R.L's imperial preference campaign of 1911, *Monthly Notes* (Mar. 1911), p. 243; *Monthly Notes* (Apr., 1911), p. 351.

by far the most influential organization in the tariff reform movement, and thus provides important insights into the aims and motivations of Chamberlain's most ardent supporters. Apart from Porter's work on the origins of the tariff reform movement,[16] and Coetzee's analysis of right-wing pressure groups and their relationship to the Edwardian Unionist party,[17] there are no detailed studies of the League. This is partly explained by the absence of an official archive.[18] There are, however, a number of useful sources relating to its activities which remain largely overlooked. These include the private papers of the family of its long-serving chairman, Matthew White Ridley, deposited in the Northumberland Record Office; a cash book and minute book, which survive for the end of our period and are kept with the papers of the Tariff Commission at the L.S.E.;[19] and voluminous printed matter, particularly the League's journal *Monthly Notes on Tariff Reform*[20] and the informative handbook compiled for speakers.[21] This paper uses the above sources in conjunction with private papers of politicians who sat on the executive committee of the League and were actively involved in its affairs.

The Tariff Reform League originated in the failure of Chamberlain to persuade his cabinet colleagues to retain the temporary advantage given to imported colonial corn during the Boer war. Frustrated by the cabinet, Chamberlain made public his views on political economy in a speech to his constituents in Birmingham in May 1903. The League was established two months later in July. Its mandate was 'to advocate the employment of the tariff with a view to its use to consolidate and develop the resources of the Empire, and to defend the Industries of the United Kingdom'.[22] Chamberlain was initially cautious about the League, relying instead on the Birmingham (later

[16] D. Porter, 'Joseph Chamberlain and the origins of the tariff reform movement', *Moirae*, III, (1978), pp. 1–7; D. Porter, 'A newspaper owner in politics: Arthur Pearson and the Tariff Reform League, 1903–05', *Moirae*, V (1990).

[17] F. Coetze, *For party or country. Nationalism and the dilemmas of popular conservatism in Edwardian England* (Oxford, 1990).

[18] After an extensive search, Porter failed to find official records of the T.R.L. and was informed by its lawyers (Messrs Bull & Bull of Lincoln's Inn, London) that all papers in connection with the organization had been destroyed. I myself contacted many county record offices in England and Scotland and was unable to uncover any significant deposits by local branches of the organization.

[19] Minute book of the executive committee of the T.R.L. covering the period 15/10/1912 to 21/4/1914, Tariff Commission papers, TC 11 1/1; T.R.L. Cash book, 1909–13, Tariff Commission papers, TC 11 2/1. The Tariff Commission papers are held at the London School of Economics.

[20] The journal was designed for the use of 'speakers and debaters who desired to study the fiscal controversy in some detail'. It was also intended to be a means of communication between tariff reformers in different parts of the country. See *Monthly Notes* (July 1904), editorial. The distribution of *Monthly Notes* increased from 60,000 copies per annum in 1906 to 120,500 copies in 1908. See the fifth annual report of the T.R.L., *Monthly Notes* (Apr. 1909), p. 247.

[21] The Tariff Reform League's *Speakers' handbook* was intended for 'speakers and students of the policy of preferential tariffs', *Speakers' handbook* (London, 1903). There were three editions of the publication – in 1903, 1908 and 1910 – and the text changed between editions. Complete references are therefore given in the footnotes to avoid confusion.

[22] Constitution of the T.R.L, undated, Milner papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, dep. 216, fos. 398–9.

Imperial) Tariff Committee, which was based in his home city and staffed by Liberal Unionist officials.[23] He did not begin to take a more active interest in its proceedings until after resigning as colonial secretary in September. But it was not long before a number of gifted and influential Unionist politicians were recruited to the ranks of the League's executive, including Leo Amery, Henry Chaplin, Henry Page Croft, Edward Goulding, Arthur Griffiths Boscawen, Sir Joseph Lawrence, Gilbert Parker, Lord Selborne, and George Wyndham. Following his father's stroke in 1906, Austen Chamberlain also became involved in the proceedings of the League, regularly attending its executive and occasionally bringing together its more senior members for private consultations.[24] In this way, the deliberations of the leadership of the tariff reform movement were to become centred around the structures and personnel of the Tariff Reform League, and Joseph Chamberlain's influence over events was preserved.[25]

The Tariff Reform League soon established itself as the driving force behind the tariff reform campaign. Although its total membership is difficult to determine with precision, there were over six hundred branches of the League by 1910, the largest of which had well over a thousand members.[26] These branches were grouped together into nineteen regional federations which oversaw the work of organizing lectures, canvassing constituents and distributing literature. The League also enjoyed unprecedented levels of financial support, the beneficiary of wealthy benefactors to an extent only dreamed of by other extra-parliamentary organizations. Whilst the majority of Edwardian pressure groups lived a hand-to-mouth existence, surviving on a budget of a few thousand pounds per annum, the Tariff Reform League's estimated annual income was substantial: nearly £23,000 was collected in 1907, and over £42,000 in 1909. These remarkable sums helped to raise the profile of the League throughout the country and ensured that it enjoyed a predominant position in the tariff lobby.[27]

In founding the Tariff Reform League, the issue of imperial unity had weighed heavily on the mind of Chamberlain. Speaking at the first annual meeting of the League in July 1904, Chamberlain told those present that they had to rise above the level of domestic controversies to address the salient subject of the day:

[23] Coetzee, *For party or country*, p. 47.

[24] Mrs. Chamberlain to Ridley, 10/10/1906, in J. L. Garvin and J. Amery, *The life of Joseph Chamberlain* (6 vols., London, 1935–69), VI, pp. 911–12.

[25] Austen Chamberlain's involvement in the T.R.L. is documented in his letters to Mrs Joseph Chamberlain: see A. Chamberlain, *Politics from inside. An epistolary chronicle 1906–1914* (London, 1936).

[26] The growth of the Lancashire, Cheshire, Westmorland and Cumberland branch of the T.R.L. was particularly impressive. It expanded from 18,000 members in 1910 to over 50,000 members in 1913. See H. Page Croft, *My life of strife* (Watford, 1949), p. 66.

[27] The T.R.L.'s secretary, T. W. A. Bagley, estimated that nearly £160,000 had been received in subscriptions and donations over the period 1903–10, and that £45,000 had been spent on meetings alone. See Bagley to Ridley, 23/11/1910, Ridley (Blagdon) papers, Northumberland Record Office, ZRI 25/99.

There is a growing appreciation on the part of every Briton that it is given to this generation to solve the great problem of a United Empire – (cheers) – that if we do not solve it disaster is certain; that what not I, but every statesman who deals with the subject, sees true – that the time has come when we must either draw closer to our kinsfolk, or we shall certainly drift apart (Hear. Hear.)[28]

It was the preferential aspect of tariff reform which most moved Chamberlain, and the consolidation of the British race upon which he placed greatest emphasis.[29]

Why should Chamberlain have been so concerned for the future of the English-speaking empire? What was the urgency of this issue? It should be remembered that this was a period when the attachment of the white colonies to the mother country became more conditional with each passing year.[30] This trend worried many members of the Tariff Reform League, who were convinced that something had to be done to stop the dominions spinning out of the imperial orbit. At the same time, it was difficult, if not dangerous, to deny the developing sense of dominion identity. George Wyndham, president of the Lancashire, Cheshire and N. W. Counties division of the League, thought the position of the British Empire analogous to that of the Roman empire.[31] In both cases there existed a risk of a narrow interpretation of the 'race idea' destroying the culture of 'colonial' communities and so weakening the idea of local allegiance.[32] Stated simply, therefore, the problem was how to reconcile local nationalisms with wider participation in the empire.

The importance of reorganizing the empire was underlined by accelerating competition from other nation-states. The growth of Germany and America was of particular concern to the Tariff Reform League. The League believed these continental states, with huge resource bases and growing populations, represented a direct challenge to British power. As the *Speakers*' *Handbook* observed, the industrial future seemed to lie with great aggregations of states, which were economically integrated and which had the largest and richest area at their disposal.[33] Britain's economic supremacy was, therefore, under threat, and members of the League were particularly anxious about the rise of monopolistic foreign trusts, and the possibility of trade reciprocity between Canada and America eventually paving the way towards the political incorporation of Canada within the United States.[34] In this era of new world

[28] *Monthly Notes* (August, 1904), p. 86. See also Austen Chamberlain's explanation of his father's commitment to tariff reform in A. Chamberlain to J. Chamberlain, 13/11/1904, A. Chamberlain papers, Birmingham University Library, 17/3/34.

[29] This point was emphasized by T.R.L. literature. See *Speakers*' *handbook* (London, 1903), p. 7. It is also emphasised by the classic biography of Chamberlain, begun by Garvin and completed by Amery. See Garvin and Amery, *The life of Joseph Chamberlain*, III, 21; IV, 515.

[30] J. Eddy and D. Schreuder, *The rise of colonial nationalism. Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa first assert their national identities, 1880–1914* (Sydney, 1988), pp. 31–8.

[31] Wyndham's obituary in *Monthly Notes* described him as the 'life and soul of the tariff reform movement in Lancashire', and 'an earnest and eloquent advocate of their cause'. See *Monthly Notes* (July 1913), p. 21.

[32] G. Wyndham, *The development of the state* (London, 1904), pp. 35–7.

[33] *Speakers*' *handbook* (London, 1903), p. 10.

[34] *Speakers*' *handbook* (London, 1903), pp. 11, 14; Chamberlain, *Politics from inside*, p. 321; Amery, *The life of Chamberlain*, V, 288.

units the empire was thought to be the only practical framework for British planning; the only way of preserving Britain's status as a great power.[35]

The Tariff Reform League's concern about the integrity of the empire was also a product of the Boer war. The war exposed the military weaknesses of the empire and the inadequacies of the training and organization of its army. Yet if the war marked a crisis point in Britain's imperial policy, it presented an opportunity as well. The spontaneous demonstration of dominion loyalty afforded by the convergence of colonial troops upon South Africa was seized upon by Chamberlain as a highly symbolic example of imperial co-operation. It was a sign that Britain and the dominions had now entered into a critical stage in their relations when the future of the empire would be decided: 'Make a mistake in your Imperial policy – it is irretrievable. You have an opportunity; you will never have it again'.[36]

One cannot assume that the views of the leadership of the Tariff Reform League corresponded with its members, and it is possible that rank-and-file tariff reformers were motivated by other concerns. Thus Semmel presents the tariff reform movement as an uneasy alliance of distinct interest groups, including imperialists, manufacturers, and farmers, where a significant amount of support was fed into the programme by people who were only interested in one particular aspect of it.[37] This, in turn, is taken to be the greatest strength and weakness of tariff reform: it appealed across a range of enthusiasms, but was vulnerable to the conflicts of interest inherent in such a combination. However, it could be argued that Semmel's anatomy of the tariff reform movement is too schematic.[38] Even allowing for differences between the leadership and membership of the Tariff Reform League – the latter being more hybrid in character – grass roots support for a protective or retaliatory tariff was by no means incompatible with support for a preferential one. An analysis of the membership of the League reveals that there were manufacturers interested in colonial as well as foreign and home markets;[39] farmers who thought preference held out the promise of some measure of agricultural protection;[40] middle class taxpayers who desired closer union between Britain and the colonies;[41] and imperialists enthusiastic about limited measures of social reform. [42] Of course, it is difficult to give proper weighting to these

[35] L. S. Amery, *My political life* (3 vols., London, 1953), I, 196; A. L. Friedberg, *The weary titan. Britain and the experience of relative decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton, 1988), pp. 21–2, 60; A. Gamble, *Britain in decline. Economic policy, political strategy and the British state* (London, 1990), pp. 3–5.

[36] Chamberlain's speech in Birmingham, 15/5/1903, quoted in Amery, *My political life*, I, 235; Garvin and Amery, *The life of Chamberlain*, III, 26.

[37] Semmel, *Imperialism and social reform*, p. 124.

[38] For other and more extensive critiques of this aspect of Semmel's study, see Coetzee, *For party or country*, pp. 65–9; and A. J. Marrison, 'Businessmen, industries and tariff reform in Great Britain, 1903–30', *Business History*, XXV (1983), pp. 151–7.

[39] Three manufacturers who were executive members of the T.R.L. – Sir Joseph Lawrence, Sir Thomas Dalgleish, and S. F. Edge – supported a combination of retaliatory and preferential tariffs. See their evidence to the Tariff Commission, Tariff Commission papers, TC/6.

[40] See for example, Henry Chaplin, whose views are discussed below on pp. 1044, 1052.

[41] Many of the local branches of the T.R.L. were predominantly middle class outfits and actively supported the imperial campaigns organized in the period 1910–12.

[42] George Wyndham would be a good example. After 1908, George Wyndham increasingly

different elements of the tariff reform movement. But what is significant is that the leadership of the League stood firmly behind the policy of imperial preference, and even though this caused some tension (more towards the beginning of our period than the end) there is no evidence of mass defections from the organization.

The most turbulent period in the history of the Tariff Reform League came immediately after its foundation when Ratcliffe Cousins was appointed secretary instead of Halford MacKinder. MacKinder was the candidate of the more imperially-minded members of the League, and the choice of Cousins drove a wedge between supporters of industrial protection and imperial preference.[43] Some of the latter formed the Compatriots Club in March 1904.[44] The Club was founded to advance the ideal of a united British Empire and to advocate those principles of constructive policy which would help towards the fulfilment of this goal.[45] It was a propagandist body which publicized the empire-side of the tariff reform programme and worked within the League to prevent its message from degenerating into a series of separate appeals to sectional interests. It seems that Compatriots had identified a real difficulty here. In seeking to interpret what was a national programme to the region in which they were speaking, lecturers on tariff reform naturally paid attention to local conditions and tried to relate the fiscal question to the needs of particular communities. In the same way, the Tariff Reform League's pamphlet literature targeted many individual trades and interest groups.[46] It is not always appreciated that tariff reform was able to reach out to locality and community in this way,[47] but in doing so it worried Compatriots. The more the League directed its appeals towards specific groups, the more parochial and sectional it appeared, and the easier it was for audiences to lose sight of the goal of imperial union.[48] Chamberlain, too, was anxious to bring the activities of protectionists under control and to prevent the imperial side to tariff reform

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talked of tariff reform as a species of social reform which would provide the necessary revenue to improve the welfare of the working class. See Wyndham to P. Hanson, *Letters of George Wyndham, 1877–1913. Compiled by Guy Wyndham* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1915), II, 265. Earlier in his career Wyndham had been sceptical of the value of tariff reform in raising revenue for dubious projects of 'socialistic reform'. See Wyndham to Balfour, 8/12/1905, in J. W. MacKail and G. Wyndham, *Life and letters of George Wyndham* (2 vols., London, 1924), II, 517–20. The spectre of progressive taxation probably changed his mind.

[43] D. Porter, 'A newspaper owner in politics', pp. 113–15.

[44] They included: Amery, Garvin, Gwynne, Hewins, Maxse, Parker, Ridley and F. E. Smith. See Amery, *My political life*, I, 264–71.

[45] Garvin, *Compatriots club lectures*, prefatory note, v; Amery, *My political life*, pp. 264–5.

[46] F. G. Shaw recommended this strategy to Joseph Chamberlain, see Shaw to Chamberlain, 29/8/1903, J. Chamberlain papers, 18/18/112. For a list of the different interest groups targeted see 'Leaflets in circulation', the T.R.L., *Specimen pamphlets* (London, 1909).

[47] Elsewhere it is suggested that tariff reformers abdicated the terrain of locality and community, see J. Lawrence, 'Class and gender in the making of urban toryism, 1880–1914', *English Historical Review*, CVIII (1993), pp. 650–1.

[48] Sykes maintains that the Compatriots' fears were well-founded and that the association of protection with vested interests was very damaging to tariff reform, see Sykes, *Tariff reform in British politics*, p. 288.

from being undermined. The most striking instance of his intervention in League affairs was to replace Pearson with Matthew White Ridley as chairman.[49] Ridley was a shrewd choice; a passionate advocate of tariff reform, with no stomach for protection without preference.[50] Under his direction, the League campaigned vigorously for imperial preference until the Bonar Law memorial.

Not only did the Tariff Reform League oppose pure protectionism, it sought to establish tariff reform as the principal scheme of imperial federation, firm in the belief that 'the strongest links between states were those arising from commerce and trade'.[51] According to the *Speakers' handbook*, Chamberlain, unlike Rosebery, had gone straight to the heart of the problem of imperial unity: fiscal union and commercial reciprocity.[52] It was Chamberlain who had realized that there was little alternative to a system of preferential tariffs if the empire was to be held together.[53] Moreover, Chamberlain, more than any other British statesman, had appreciated that the initiative in this sphere could be shown to have originated with the colonies.[54] It is worth considering why the Tariff Reform League thought this to have been the case. With the cessation of commercial treaties with Belgium and Germany in 1897 the dominions had, for the first time, been able to offer a tariff preference to British industry. As long as these treaties had been effective Belgian and German produce could not be subjected to higher import duties than the produce of the U.K.[55] After their termination, the Canadian premier, Wilfrid Laurier, took the first definite step in the direction of preferential trade within the empire. A new Canadian tariff was introduced giving a preference of twenty-five per cent (later raised to thirty-three percent) on products exported from the United Kingdom. At the colonial conference of 1902 Laurier then put further pressure upon the imperial government to adopt the policy of reciprocal preference, having suggested beforehand that Canada was in a position to make offers to Britain, which could not have been made at the previous gathering in 1897. This was the so-called 'colonial offer' which Chamberlain and the Tariff Reform League seized upon as evidence of a mutual desire for closer economic relations within the empire to be achieved by a system of preferential tariff arrangements.[56]

[49] J. Chamberlain to Ridley, 18/2/1905, Ridley papers, ZRI 25/99.

[50] Ridley to A. Chamberlain, 3/1/1913, A. Chamberlain papers, 9/5/72.

[51] The phrase can be found in *Monthly Notes* (Nov. 1904), p. 205.

[52] *Speakers' handbook* (London, 1903), p. 9.

[53] Citing Germany, the U.S. and Australia, the T.R.L. claimed that there was no example of federation having been achieved where a preferential trade policy was not in operation. See *Speakers' handbook* (London, 1903), p. 19.

[54] Chamberlain had initially been eager to establish an imperial council to deal with such issues. G.Martin, 'The idea of imperial federation', in R. Hyam and G. Martin, eds., *Reappraisals in British Imperial History* (London, 1975), pp. 131–2. For examples of T.R.L. propaganda that emphasised this point see *Speakers' handbook* (London, 1903), pp. 5–10, 92; 'The voice of Greater Britain', ch. 5, *Speakers' handbook* (London, 1908).

[55] W. A. S. Hewins, *The apologia of an imperialist. Forty years of empire policy* (2 vols., London, 1929), I, 45.

[56] The necessity of responding promptly to the 'colonial offer' was emphasized at many of the meetings of local branches of the T.R.L. See the speech of the chairman of the Leicester branch, Samuel Faire, 'Mr Chamberlain and the Empire', 30/1/1905, *Monthly Notes* (Feb. 1905),

Chamberlain's views on the importance of economic co-operation were widely shared by the leadership of the Tariff Reform League. Austen dutifully followed his father in the importance he attached to commercial co-operation, suggesting that:

> by this mutual trade we can strengthen our common interests, we can spin a web, ever increasing in strength, between every portion of the Empire, and we can make our interests so inseparable that when days of stress and trial come no man can think of separation and no man can dream of breaking bonds so intimate and so advantageous to all those whom it concerns.[57]

The chairman of the League's organization committee, Edward Goulding, reasoned that the ties of blood and sentiment would be materially strengthened by the bonds of commercial interest.[58] And W. A. S. Hewins, one of the League's most effective lecturers, was convinced that the consolidation of the empire required considerable changes in the commercial policy of Britain.[59] According to Hewins, the material wealth of the empire was the basis of its power, and the fabric of sentiment might not survive without it.[60]

Yet the Tariff Reform League did not seek to secure imperial markets for British industry, whilst confining the colonies to agrarian production. On the contrary, the League was at pains to distance itself from the idea that tariff reformers were merely trying to capture colonial markets for the benefit of British producers.[61] One must beware, therefore, of exaggerating the influence of the German *Zollverein* (customs union) upon the thinking of leading tariff reformers.[62] It is true that many Tariff Reform Leaguers were impressed by the economic performance of Germany. It is also well known that Hewins was interested in the close relationship between German industry and the German state.[63] But the significance of the *Zollverein* was that it offered further evidence

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p.107; speech of L. S. Amery at Woolwich Town Hall, 3/4/1911, *Monthly Notes* (May 1911), p. 401; speech of W. A. S. Hewins at Manchester, 12/10/1911, *Monthly Notes* (Nov. 1911), p. 289. Prior to the colonial conference of 1907, the chairman of the T.R.L. sent a letter to all of its branches warning of the dangers of sending dominion delegates away without having responded to their offer, *Monthly Notes* (Nov. 1906), p. 288.

[57] Speech of A. Chamberlain at Newcastle, 9/3/1911, *Monthly Notes* (Apr. 1911), p. 297.

[58] Presentation by members of the executive and members of the central office staff to Mr Edward Goulding M. P. on his retirement from chairmanship of the organization committee of the T.R.L., 11/7/1911, *Wargrave papers*, House of Lords record office, 6/9. The organization committee presented monthly reports to the executive. By the beginning of 1905, Goulding's responsibilities had increased so considerably that he had to devote 'some hours every day to the work of the League', *Monthly Notes* (Mar. 1905), p. 171.

[59] Hewins was also involved with the T.R.L.'s agriculture and literature committees.

[60] Typed transcript of a lecture by Hewins at the St.Peters institute, Buckingham Palace road, to the women's branch of the T.R.L., 22/2/1904, Hewins papers, University of Sheffield Library, box 10, section 19; Hewins, *The apologia of an imperialist*, p. 5.

[61] *Speakers' handbook* (London, 1908), pp. xvii–xviii.

[62] See Semmel, *Imperialism and social reform*, p. 118, which describes Germany as 'a nation in which the system advocated by Chamberlain was in effective and successful operation'.

[63] A. J. Marrison, 'The development of a tariff reform policy during Joseph Chamberlain's first campaign, May 1903 – February 1904', in W. H. Chaloner and B. M. Ratcliffe, eds., *Trade and transport. Essays in economic history in honour of T. S. Willan* (Manchester, 1977), p. 232.

of the strength of commercial and economic association.[64] It was not thought that it provided a model for the development of Britain's imperial trade: the dominions were not yet fully developed, their industrial sectors were still growing, and they wanted freedom to adjust their tariffs for revenue purposes.[65] The main advantage of imperial preference was that it did not, in the least degree, interfere with their fiscal autonomy.[66]

Given that imperial preference was not the same thing as imperial free trade, what did it offer producers and consumers in Britain? According to the Tariff Reform League, there was plenty of potential for increasing imperial trade by allowing British industry to supply those products which the colonies could not produce for themselves.[67] The League maintained that a substantial part of this market was presently being won by foreign competitors.[68] Liberals, meanwhile, accused tariff reformers of abandoning Britain's best markets in Europe and America for comparatively small colonial markets, rightly stressing that, although imperial trade was valuable, it was no substitute for effective participation in the world economy.[69] More damagingly, Liberals charged tariff reformers with the intention of increasing the prices for British consumers in the hope of strengthening the empire.

Giving a preference to agricultural produce from the colonies meant one of two things. Either agricultural tariffs would be graduated, with a high duty on foreign imports and a lower duty on colonial imports, or colonial goods would enter free from duty altogether. The Tariff Reform League was vague about which option it favoured. Even Mary Maxse, the chairman of the Women's Unionist and Tariff Reform Association, was unsure as to whether colonial corn was to come in free or on a 1/- duty. As late as April 1910 she wrote to Bonar Law seeking clarification, meanwhile registering her opposition to a duty on imported colonial corn on the grounds that it was almost impossible to persuade the electorate that price increases would not follow.[70] Mary Maxse's concern was shared by some members of the Tariff Reform League's executive, particularly Austen Chamberlain, Joseph Lawrence and Gilbert Parker.

[64] Tariff commission memorandum (MM46) 'The problems of the imperial conference and the policy of preference', 18 May 1911, Tariff Commission papers, TC1 8/2, p. 10.

[65] Lecture on tariff reform by W. A. S. Hewins at a meeting of the canvassing committee of the Primrose League, 17/06/1907, Milner papers, dep. 129, fo. 78.

[66] *Monthly Notes* (May 1911), p. 376.

[67] According to *Monthly Notes*, it was not necessary to injure nascent colonial industries in order to give British manufacturers an advantage since the market British manufacturers were trying to penetrate was that being won by foreign competitors. See *Monthly Notes* (Oct. 1904), p. 189; 'The Canadian preference', *Monthly Notes* (June 1906). The *Speakers' handbook* listed three categories of preference available to British manufacturers: the 'empire free list' (goods free from duty altogether); goods from Britain charged at a lower rate than goods from foreign countries; and goods designed to assist colonial development. See *Speakers' handbook* (London, 1908), p. 20.

[68] The increase of German and American exports to the colonies was of particular concern to the T.R.L. See 'The invasion of the colonies', *Speakers' handbook* (London, 1908), p. 20; 'A short-sighted argument', *Monthly Notes* (Oct. 1904), p. 189; Speech of J. Chamberlain at Gainsborough, 1/2/1905, *Monthly Notes* (Mar. 1905), p. 138.

[69] Cain, 'Political economy in Edwardian England'.

[70] Mary Maxse to Bonar Law, 3/4/1910, Bonar Law papers, House of Lords Record Office, 18/6/119.

Austen maintained that a majority of tariff reformers had already pledged themselves to admit colonial wheat free. He also doubted whether the agricultural community would suffer from this course of action: 'We grow so little wheat in these days that even the farmer in most parts of the country is to be reckoned a consumer rather than a producer of wheat'.[71] Lawrence and Parker sought to reduce the price of bread in the home market by increasing the supply of colonial corn, thus necessitating its exemption from duty.[72] But Brassey, Hewins and Chaplin, also executive members of the League, took the opposite view. They thought that a duty on colonial corn was imperative in order to attract farmers to the tariff reform movement. The advantage of such a duty, they argued, was that it would provide some incidental protection to agriculture and raise revenue for non-fiscal agricultural reforms, particularly the reduction of rural rates.[73]

It was not until 1910 that an official position on imperial preference was finally agreed by the League: colonial wheat was to be free of duty whilst other agricultural products from the colonies would be taxed.[74] This surely brings into question the idea that tariff reformers persisted with food taxes because of their importance to the agricultural interest in Britain.[75] If this were true, the debate on the taxation of colonial corn would have been resolved in a quite different fashion. That is not to say that there was not a lobby *within* the League that wished to make a positive appeal to British agriculture, but in this instance it is clear that the arguments of that lobby failed to win the day.[76]

More importantly, one should be careful not to exaggerate the importance of the debate on agriculture: for the leaders of the Tariff Reform League, food duties were meant for *preference* rather than *protection*, and the debate on how such duties might be adjusted to soften the impact on the farming community was considered to be a valid but ancillary issue.[77]

[71] Memorandum, 9/3/1910, quoted in A. Chamberlain, *Politics from inside*, pp. 227–8.

[72] Lawrence to Hewins, 21/2/1908, Tariff Commission papers, TC6 4/18; Marrison, 'The development of a tariff reform policy' in Chaloner and Ratcliffe, eds., *Trade and transport*, p. 223.

[73] Lecture on tariff reform to canvassing committee of the Primrose League by W. A. S. Hewins, Milner papers, dep. 129, fo. 78.

[74] *Speakers' handbook* (London, 1910), p. 72.

[75] Green, *The crisis of Conservatism*, pp. 187–9.

[76] The agricultural lobby had more success in the case of other products such as meat; fruit; dairy produce; and flour. Here the imposition of a small duty on colonial produce was intended to make the cultivation of these products profitable for small farmers, but only in the case of flour was it envisaged that all milling would be done in Britain. Indeed, the whole point of extending preference to these products was that they were 'competitive imports' which were produced in the U.K. as well as abroad. Thus, the effect of preference was not intended to be wholly protectionist; rather tariff reformers sought to force foreign producers to pay duty in return for access to the British market. Moreover, the extension of preferential duties to these products was likely to be of considerable benefit to the colonies: Canada was an importer of fruit; Australia and New Zealand were importers of meat. Hence the confidence of tariff reformers that beef, mutton, bacon, fruit and wine could be supplied from Australasia and Canada as easily as from the U.S. and Argentina. See *The annual statement of the trade of the U.K. with foreign countries and British possessions*; *Speakers' handbook* (London 1903), p. 23.

[77] The executive of the T.R.L. did not appoint an agricultural sub-committee until the spring of 1913, some months after imperial preference had effectively been shelved by the Bonar Law Memorial. See minutes of the executive committee of the T.R.L, 6/5/1913, Tariff Commission

Nonetheless, the Tariff Reform League was bound to suffer from the failure to make clear its position on the taxation of colonial corn. The onus of proof was always on tariff reformers to show they had a policy that was superior to free trade, but the complex and confusing nature of much tariff reform propaganda meant audiences were unlikely to be convinced this was the case.[78] Take, for example, the issue of the remission and rearrangement of duties. The League stressed that imperial preference involved a rearrangement rather than an increase of duties, insisting that tariff reform would not increase the cost of living of the working man. How was this explained? First, it was argued that increases in the price of bread would be compensated by the remission of duties on other items. Chamberlain first gave details of this part of the programme at a speech in Glasgow in 1903, claiming that a sizeable portion of tariff revenue would be used to lower existing duties on tea, coffee, cocoa and sugar. Tariff reformers, he declared, intended to tax one kind of food so that they could untax another.[79] Second, it was argued that tariff reform would lower duties on products where there was no alternative source of domestic supply and hence no competition between foreign and home producers.[80] By restricting duties to articles that could be partly supplied by home producers, it was claimed that foreigners would have to forgo a certain amount of profit if they wished to retain a foothold in the British market.[81] The Tariff Reform League even suggested that the British consumer would be better off as a result of the fiscal changes being proposed. In practice, the complex web of arguments surrounding food duties was difficult both for the general public to follow and for the rank-and-file of the movement to explain.

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papers, TC 11 1/1. Other leading tariff reformers were more tough-minded when it came to the question of what they could offer the agricultural community. For example, Austen Chamberlain pointed out that tariff reform was not a protectionist policy and would not make wheat-growing profitable where it was not at present. See A. Chamberlain to Rev. C. J. Rolfe, reprinted in *Monthly Notes* (Jan. 1910), p. 24. If Amery is to be believed, it would seem that Austen was not deviating from his father's policy. When Chamberlain dealt with the agricultural side to the tariff question, the programme described was a modest one and did not attempt to raise extravagant hopes of direct protection. See Amery, *My political life*, I, 274.

[78] Marrison, 'The development of a tariff reform policy' in Chaloner and Ratcliffe, eds., *Trade and transport*, p. 230.

[79] Chamberlain, *Imperial union and tariff reform. Speeches delivered from May 15 to Nov. 4, 1903* (London, 1903), pp. 19–44.

[80] *Speakers' handbook* (1910), p. 25; Speech by Wyndham to the Liverpool branch of the T.R.L., 10/12/1908, *Monthly Notes* (Jan. 1909), p. 31.

[81] *Speakers' handbook* (London, 1903), p. 30; *Speakers' handbook* (1908), p. 11. *Monthly Notes* termed this the 'midway theory' of taxation: the duty on competing imports, the journal maintained, divided itself between the foreign producer and the consumer in proportion to the stress of competition. See *Monthly Notes* (Sept. 1904), pp. 118–19.

II

The issue of the dear loaf caused problems within the Unionist party as well. As we know, some of the most uncompromising opponents of tariff reform were the Unionist free fooders. What is not always recognized in the existing literature on tariff reform is that many of the more serious challenges to wholehoggers came from the Balfourite wing of the party, which struck a number of blows at imperial preference well before the referendum pledge of 1910.[82] The Tariff Reform League managed to parry these challenges to preference, and it is important to know how. Part of the reason must lie in the fact that there were at least one and a half times as many wholehoggers as there were Balfourites and free fooders in the 1906 parliament.[83] For the sake of party unity it was therefore essential to keep wholehoggers on board.[84] The result was a classic Balfourite fudge contained in the 'Valentine' letters of 1906, which recognized tariff reform as 'the first constructive work of the Unionist party',[85] but in reality fell far short of a full-blown commitment to imperial preference.[86]

But Balfour's efforts to shelve preference as an active policy were sometimes more aggressive than this, and although it has been overlooked, there is evidence to show that the Tariff Reform League was justified in its suspicion that it was the Unionist leader who was behind a number of attempts to damp down and destroy the movement. Balfour's first target was Hewins. At the beginning of 1907, as the League was stepping up the tempo of its campaign,[87] plans were also being made to entice Hewins to Whittingehame for a weekend.[88] Hewins agreed to the meeting, hoping to demonstrate to Balfour that Chamberlain's policy was practicable from a business and parliamentary point of view.[89] Balfour's intentions are less clear. Sykes claims that Hewins was valuable to Balfour as an adviser on economic affairs, providing material for attacks upon the Liberal government and helping to draft his own policy statements.[90] But the leadership of the Tariff Reform League took a less charit-

[82] Indeed, Rempel shows that free fooders were in no position to challenge the wholehoggers after 1906. R. A. Rempel, *Unionists divided. Arthur Balfour, Joseph Chamberlain and the Unionist free traders* (Newton Abbot, 1972), esp. chs. 8–10.

[83] This calculation takes the mean of the two indicators that Blewett used to assess the strength of the Unionist factions – the *Times* classification and the list in the A. Chamberlain papers. See N. Blewett, 'Free fooders, Balfourites, Whole Hoggers. Factionalism within the Unionist party, 1906–10', *Historical Journal*, xi (1968), 95–9.

[84] For Balfour's commitment to party unity see Rempel, *Unionists divided*, pp. 116–17, 143.

[85] A. Gollin, *Balfour's burden. Arthur Balfour and Imperial Preference* (London, 1965), p. 278.

[86] Balfour's fiscal opinions are discussed at greater length by Sykes in *Tariff reform in British politics* and by D. Dutton in '*His Majesty's loyal opposition*' *: the Unionist party in opposition, 1905–15* (Liverpool, 1992).

[87] See the letter from Ridley to officers of the branches of the T.R.L, 12/10/1906, *Monthly Notes*, (Nov. 1906), p. 288.

[88] Hewins to A. Chamberlain, 16/1/1907, Hewins papers, box 26, section 50/90. It was probably no coincidence that Balfour was hatching these plans at the same time that Amery was attempting to persuade Milner to take up the charge of the T.R.L. Whittingehame was Balfour's country estate in the Scottish lowlands.

[89] Hewins to A. Chamberlain, 18/1/1907, A. Chamberlain papers, 7/6/4.

[90] Sykes, *Tariff reform in British politics*, pp. 129–30.

able view of events, fearing the Unionist leader might pressure Hewins into divulging specific fiscal proposals, clearly with the intention of then publicly pulling them apart. Moreover, Balfour's refusal to embrace the entire tariff reform programme made League leaders suspicious that he might be testing the waters to see whether the League would consent to a compromise of a five or ten per cent general tariff on manufactures leaving other aspects of the programme, particularly preference, to follow. Thus, Austen Chamberlain was unenthusiastic about the meeting, and after discussing the matter with his father and Ridley, warned Hewins that nothing in the nature of a compromise should be volunteered at Whittingehame and that any practical suggestions should come from Balfour himself.[91]

It may also have been Balfour who was behind Imbert Tery's approach to the Tariff Reform League in January 1907. This episode has not been properly documented, most of the evidence being contained in the Ridley papers.[92] It seems likely that Tery was acting for Acland Hood, the Unionist chief whip, and, as such, Balfour's right-hand man.[93] Tery was a well-known Balfourite, and secretary to the Western division of the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations. In a series of letters to Ridley he proposed a preferential tariff on foodstuffs,[94] to exclude duties on meat and corn,[95] and suggested putting this compromise before the council of the National Union in February. Ridley and Austen Chamberlain were of one mind that these proposals were out of the question and that no fiscal policy would be acceptable which restricted preference in this way.[96] Only two months previously, a report submitted to the executive of the League had stressed that its task was to keep the attention of the public focused on the subject of tariff reform, 'especially in its preferential aspect'.[97] Moreover, as Austen remarked to Ridley, the concession Tery offered was no concession: the duties on corn and meat were of tremendous importance to the colonies; and duties on other items, such as fruit and dairy produce, were open to exactly the same objections. To drop the duty on corn was to admit failure and pave the way for the rejection of the rest of the fiscal programme: 'Your friends will be discouraged; your enemies elated; and all the waverers will leave you.'[98] Finally, the corn duty was administratively the easiest part of the policy to carry out. These objections were difficult to discount.

[91] A. Chamberlain to Hewins, 17/1/1907, Hewins papers, box 26, section 50/92–5. Austen kept Ridley fully informed of events, and copies of his correspondence with Hewins can be found in the Ridley papers.

[92] There is a brief reference to the episode in Sykes, *Tariff reform in British politics*, p. 126, but it relies entirely upon material in the Austen Chamberlain papers.

[93] Ridley to A. Chamberlain, 22/1/1907, A. Chamberlain papers, 7/6/10: 'Of course Tery is a meddling donkey: but I am sure A-Hood is at the back of it'.

[94] Tery to Ridley, 17/1/1907, Ridley papers, ZRI 25/99.

[95] Tery to Ridley, 24/1/1907, Ridley papers, ZRI 25/99.

[96] A. Chamberlain to Ridley, 21/1/1907, Ridley papers, ZRI 25/99.

[97] 'Suggestions as to the organisation of the Tariff Reform League', signed V. Caillard, Blagdon, 1/10/1906, Ridley papers, ZRI 25/99.

[98] A. Chamberlain to Ridley, 20/1/1907, Ridley papers, ZRI 25/99.

In the end, Balfour's machinations came to nothing and in the four years following the election defeat of January 1906 the Tariff Reform League's executive stood firm behind the policy of imperial preference. The League was never convinced, as Sykes suggests, that Balfour had been 'captured' for tariff reform,[99] but it was not until the Unionist leader dropped the bombshell of the referendum pledge in the autumn of 1910 that its resolve was tested again. Balfour offered to submit tariff reform to a referendum on the condition that the Liberal party did the same for home rule. Not surprisingly, this pledge caused much anxiety amongst the leadership of the League.[100] Joseph Chamberlain was in no doubt that it was an attempt to sidetrack tariff reform and advised against anything in the nature of a compromise.[101] Ridley told Bonar Law that the situation was full of difficulties since the adoption of the referendum proposal would lose the League a great deal of support and subscriptions.[102] Maxse saw the situation in characteristically black and white terms: 'I calculate that Balfour's Albert Hall speech … cost us 40 or 50 seats. It is unpardonable. Balfour must go, or Tariff Reform will go – that is the alternative'.[103]

The imperial dimension to tariff reform was under threat again, only this time an Imperial Conference was approaching and there was a risk of Canada signing a commercial treaty with the United States.[104] The Tariff Reform League was quick to respond. The leaders of the League refused to 'expunge' the imperial side of the programme, insisting that without preference the whole programme fell to the ground.[105] An imperial preference campaign was launched in London and the provinces, designed to re-establish tariff reform as an imperial policy and to demonstrate the grave dangers involved in the refusal of the government to reciprocate colonial preferences. Amery was appointed chairman of the sub-committee that organized the campaign, and under his direction about forty meetings were staged, culminating in large demonstrations in London and Manchester.[106] The idea was revived the following year by Amery and Wyndham in the form of the 'Chamberlain Birthday

[99] Sykes, *Tariff reform in British politics*, pp. 142–4, 164.

[100] A leading member of the executive of the Scottish T.R.L. was convinced that the referendum decision had weakened the organization in Scotland. See Hugh Elliot to A. Chamberlain, A. Chamberlain papers, 7/1/1911.

[101] J. Chamberlain to Hewins, 13/12/1910, Hewins papers, box 29, section 55/41–2.

[102] Ridley to Bonar Law, 27/12/1910, Bonar Law papers, 18/6/150.

[103] Maxse to Goulding, 10/12/1910, Wargrave papers, 2/74.

[104] A trade agreement between Canada and the United States was concluded in January 1911. Tariff reformers were worried that the agreement would result in a considerable increase in American imports into Canada and thereby jeopardize the preference given to British goods. They were therefore greatly relieved when Laurier and the Liberal party were defeated by Robert Borden and the Conservatives in the election of Sept. 1911. Borden had campaigned on the slogan 'No truck or trade with the Yankees' and soon brought the Canadian-American reciprocity agreement to an end. Tariff reformers declared this to be a triumph of imperial sentiment over American expansionism. See here R. A. Shields, 'Imperial policy and Canadian-American reciprocity, 1909–1911', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, v (1977), pp. 151–69.

[105] *Monthly Notes* (Mar. 1911), p. 154.

[106] *Monthly Notes* (Mar. 1911), p. 243; *Monthly Notes* (Apr. 1911), pp. 251, 289.

Fund'.[107] The purpose of the fund was to ensure that preference was kept at the forefront of tariff reform propaganda and to expand the work of the League in those parts of the country where preference had not been satisfactorily explained.[108] The duke of Westminster consented to act as president of these appeals,[109] and Amery hoped to raise a sum of £100,000.[110]

III

The status of the referendum pledge was still unclear, when Bonar Law became Unionist leader in November 1911. Indeed, it was not until March 1912 that the shadow cabinet decided to abandon the pledge; even then, the decision was not made public until November. Although the events leading from November 1912 to the memorial of January 1913 have been narrated elsewhere, it is worth relating Bonar Law's actions during this period to his previous involvement in the Tariff Reform League. It is not clear whether Bonar Law had ever attended meetings of the League's executive, but he had certainly spoken on its platforms[111] and belonged to an elite category of only eight vice-presidents.[112] Moreover, there is no indication of Bonar Law having entertained serious doubts about preference in the opening years of Chamberlain's campaign, despite the fact that Amery and Hewins were later to accuse him of being a closet protectionist.[113] Thus as late as 1907 Law told Long that tariff reform without food duties was worthless, and there seems no good reason to doubt the sincerity of his claim.[114] However, it is evident from the existing literature that Bonar Law began to lose faith in a preferential tariff well before 1913, and that this must in part have been due to his experience of fighting the seat of north-west Manchester in December 1910. Bonar Law lost the contest, during which many of the local party leaders had put pressure upon him to play down preference. Yet little did they know that possible compromises on food duties had been explored with Goulding almost two years earlier in January 1909 when Goulding circulated proposals amongst editors of the press (Garvin and

[107] *Monthly Notes* (July 1912), pp. 1–3.

[108] Memo by G.Wyndham, J.Chamberlain papers, 22/153. The campaign concentrated on Lancashire and Cheshire.

[109] Wyndham to Joseph Chamberlain, 31/7/1912, J.Chamberlain papers, 22/152. The dinner was held in July 1912 and raised £21,250.

[110] This was the figure targeted by Amery, see Amery to Bonar Law, 7/10/1912, Bonar Law Papers 27/3/14. The sum eventually raised was in the region of £60,000. See Amery, *My political life*, I, 413.

[111] Speeches given by Bonar law under the aegis of the T.R.L. were reported in the following issues of *Monthly Notes*: (Feb. 1908), p. 177; (May 1909), p. 347; report of the sixth annual conference of the T.R.L. held at Manchester (Dec. 1910), pp. 377–80.

[112] There was another category of vice-presidents numbering about 4,000 who were members of the council of the T.R.L. See *Monthly Notes* (Apr. 1914), p. 235.

[113] Amery claimed that Law saw tariff reform as a matter of trade. See Amery, *My political life*, I, 387. Similarly, Hewins claimed that Bonar Law's interest was akin to that of an eighteenth century protectionist manufacturer. See Hewins, *Apologia of an imperialist*, I, 11.

[114] Bonar Law to Walter Long, 3/12/1907, Bonar Law papers, 18/8/5.

Ware) and Unionist free fooders (Cecil and Bowles), and offered to set up a meeting between the latter and Bonar Law.[115]

It is important to remember that at this moment Goulding was still acting as the chairman of the Tariff Reform League's organization committee and thus occupied one of the organization's most senior offices. However, Goulding's views were not shared by the rest of the executive, and he failed to convince Bonar Law that a retreat on preference could be staged without splitting the party. It was not until the end of 1912 that Bonar Law changed his mind. His remark to Chaplin is familiar but worth repeating: 'Politicians are not the most stable of people, but the change which has taken place is really remarkable – even for politicians. The strongest Tariff Reformers are all coming to me saying that it is impossible to fight with food taxes'.[116] It is not clear which tariff reformers Bonar Law had in mind, but earlier that month the League's chairman, Matthew Ridley, had told Austen that the 'free fooders and funkers' had scuttled and no amount of whistling would bring them back.[117] Bonar Law was quick to seize the moment. Having already announced that food duties would only be introduced if requested by the dominions at an imperial conference,[118] he then assured the electorate that a corn tax would have to await the verdict of a second general election. How did the Tariff Reform League react?

The majority of backbenchers who belonged to the League, and who had stood firm behind the policy of imperial preference, accepted the decision and signed the Bonar Law memorial.[119] What changed their mind? It is possible they were pressurized by Derby's move against food duties and opposition from the Lancashire caucus and Northcliffe's Unionist press. Yet it is more likely that these were triggers for the memorial than its underlying causes. The collapse of the tariff reform movement has also been explained in terms of political priorities, not least the re-emergence of the Irish question and the spectre of home rule.[120] But the memorial could conceivably have been precipitated by another issue. Indeed, the ease with which imperial preference was displaced by the Irish question suggests that the real problem lay with the structure of the tariff reform programme itself. For, as Ridley recognized, most tariff reformers had accepted preference more because they were organized into it than because they were convinced by it.[121] In effect, what the chairman of the Tariff Reform League was confessing was that its work of political education had failed to bear fruit.

Whilst the League may not have won the confidence of Unionist M.P.s and

[115] Goulding to Bonar Law, 9/1/1909 and 30/1/1909, Bonar Law papers, 18/5/84 and 18/5/88.
[116] Bonar Law to Chaplin, 31/12/1912, Bonar Law papers, 33/4/86.
[117] Ridley to A. Chamberlain, 29/12/1912, A. Chamberlain papers, 10/3/48.
[118] This was announced by Bonar Law in a speech at Ashton-under-Lyne in December.
[119] Copies of the memorial can be found in the Hewins papers, box 30, section 57/54–5, and the Ridley papers, ZRI 25/101b. By 9 Jan. 1913 some 216 Unionist M.P.s had signed the document which was presented to Bonar Law the following day.
[120] Sykes, *Tariff reform in British politics*, p. 258.
[121] Ridley to A. Chamberlain, 3/1/1913, A. Chamberlain papers, 9/5/72.

activists, it was not for want of trying. Masses of literature had been produced to assist speakers in explaining food duties, including leaflets like *The truth about taxes on food*, over one million copies of which had been distributed by June 1904.[122] Nevertheless, rank-and-file tariff reformers seem to have fought shy of a preferential tariff, much to the frustration of the leaders of the League. Austen lamented the unwillingness of many candidates to tackle preference, and suggested that it had left them exposed to every kind of misrepresentation.[123] Wyndham attributed the defeat at the polls in January 1910 to the fact that most speakers had not yet studied tariff reform, and concluded that it would take at least another two years before constituents could be taught the elements of the controversy.[124] Similarly, *Monthly Notes* confessed that the cry of 'food taxes' had produced its desired effect in many constituencies and added that tariff reformers would only kill this lie if they frankly and fearlessly faced the question on every possible occasion.[125] This was not to happen. Even Amery, who had organized the League's imperial preference campaign, admitted in 1913,

> There has always been a large element in the party of members who, while in a general way in favour of the whole policy of Imperial Preference, have through laziness or timidity never had the courage to argue the case properly to their constituents, and with whom the disinclination to do so has increased rather than diminished.[126]

Amery blamed the character of the party rather than the policy of the League, suggesting that Unionists needed a good 'dressing down' for the way they had apologized for preference.[127] But Amery failed to appreciate that the attachment to free trade was so strong that particularly powerful arguments were needed to overturn it. Evidently, the rank-and-file of the Tariff Reform League had not been persuaded these arguments were to hand.

By the beginning of 1913, the Unionist leadership had given the Tariff Reform League ten years of political rope with which to hang itself. The party was still out of power, and it was time for tariff reform to give way to other elements of the Unionist programme. Significantly, most of the League's executive accepted the logic of this situation and backed down. Austen released Bonar Law from his promise not to reinstate the referendum pledge; an acknowledgement that the general, and perhaps his army, were unprepared to fight.[128] Some of the League's stalwarts even joined the search for a fiscal compromise. Goulding acted as one of Bonar Law's henchmen, offering to

[122] D. Porter, 'The Unionist tariff reformers, 1903–1914' (University of Manchester PhD. thesis, 1976), p. 262.
[123] Chamberlain, *Politics from inside*, p. 197.
[124] Wyndham to his father, 16/1/1910, *Letters from George Wyndham*, p. 375.
[125] 'How to deal with the "food duties"', *Monthly Notes* (Mar. 1910), p. 218.
[126] Amery to Borden, 6/1/1913, *Leo Amery diaries*, 1, p. 89.
[127] Amery, *My political life*, pp. 416–17.
[128] See A. Chamberlain to H. Chaplin, 15/1/1913, A. Chamberlain papers, 9/5/9. Initially Austen attempted to persuade Bonar Law to undertake a six week campaign to deal with food duties in order once and for all to lay the 'bogey' to rest. But he was soon forced to acknowledge the immense pressures upon Law from within the party to abandon preference. See Chamberlain, *Politics from inside*, p. 503.

recruit the rank-and-file behind the idea of a referendum and then pressurizing his colleagues to sign the memorial.[129] Hewins was also involved in the drafting of the memorial. Hewins had only recently taken up his seat for Hereford City as the result of a by-election in March 1912. He probably succumbed to pressure from Balcarres, the chief whip, who later described Hewins as one of a group of six of 'our men' who had all worked hard to bring about mutual co-operation.[130]

Despite the climb down, the Tariff Reform League put on a brave face and pretended that the party had not abandoned its goals, merely adopted a new method of procedure.[131] And yet only a handful of executive members stood their ground.[132] Amery decided to have no truck with the drafting of a document which only paid lip service to the principle of imperial preference, whilst Wyndham thought that abandoning or postponing the wheat duty was a tragedy[133] and told Ridley that whatever happened they must remain true to the whole policy of tariff reform.[134] Ridley was equally adamant that the party had made a mistake, reiterating in *Monthly Notes* the view that tariff reform was worthless without a wide scheme of preference to the dominions.[135] Meanwhile, Henry Chaplin was indignant that the interests of farmers had been so readily brushed aside, and regretted that the smaller of the two imperial issues, namely home rule, had prevailed.[136] These final acts of defiance may have helped to salve some consciences, but it soon became clear that the League was in trouble. Its income, once buoyant, was already in rapid decline; a number of local branches faced severe financial difficulties; production runs of *Monthly Notes* fell off; and Conservative central office, local associations and the provincial press became increasingly unco-operative.[137]

IV

This paper began by suggesting that the existing historiography on tariff reform places too much emphasis upon the domestic aspects of Chamberlain's programme. An examination of the activities of the Tariff Reform League makes it clear that the leadership of the tariff reform movement was much more empire-minded than many historians have allowed. Thus, when the attraction of protection (industrial or agricultural) threatened to undermine imperial

[129] Goulding to Bonar Law, 20/12/1912 (copy), A. Chamberlain papers, 10/3/33.

[130] Balcarres wrote to Hewins to thank him for helping to settle party differences. See Balcarres to Hewins, 10/1/1913, Hewins papers, Box 30/57.

[131] *Monthly Notes* (Apr. 1913), p. 222.

[132] Minutes of the executive of the T.R.L, 11/3/1913 and 17/12/1913, Tariff Commission papers, TC11 1/1.

[133] Wyndham to Ridley, 4/1/1913, Ridley papers, ZRI 25/97.

[134] Wyndham to Ridley, 4/1/1913 and 8/1/1913, Ridley papers, ZRI 25/97. Wyndham was in a particularly difficult position since he had helped to raise the money for the Chamberlain Birthday Fund some of which had later been transferred to the accounts of the T.R.L. See minutes of the executive of the T.R.L., 12/11/1912 and 4/2/1913, Tariff Commission papers, TC 11 1/1.

[135] *Monthly Notes* (Feb. 1913), pp. 113–14.

[136] Chaplin to Hewins, 13/1/1913 and 21/1/1913, Hewins papers, box 30, section 57/58–62.

[137] Minutes of the executive of the T.R.L., 11/3/1913 and 8/4/1913 and 17/12/1913, Tariff Commission papers, TC 11 1/1.

preference, full use was made of the machinery of the League to give greater publicity to this part of the programme. And when the Balfourite faction in the Unionist party attempted to twist tariff reform away from its imperial origins, it always met with opposition from the League. Had the leadership of the Tariff Reform League not been committed to the 'magnificent conception of a federated Empire', it is likely that the preferential tariff would have been abandoned well before 1913.[138] This would have paved the way for a complete reformulation of the tariff reform programme based upon the essentially domestic applications of protectionist, retaliatory and revenue-raising tariffs. But the leadership of the League *was* committed to a preferential tariff and firmly believed that without it the driving force of the movement would be gone.

Moreover, the issue of imperial unity did not suddenly cease to be of concern to the leadership of the League in January 1913. Rather, in signing or acquiescing in the Bonar Law memorial, it reluctantly accepted what other Unionists thought to have been evident all along, namely that imperial preference was not politically viable. For whilst the vision of a more united empire might sometimes strike a sentimental chord with the electorate, it clearly had not overcome the widespread public hostility to food duties. Indeed, the Tariff Reform League did not even try to convince its audiences that the urgency of imperial union outweighed any injury to their economic interests. Joseph Chamberlain privately maintained that a small loss in material wealth would be amply compensated for by the union of the empire,[139] but in public most members of the League's executive were quick to deny this was the case:

> It is often said by our opponents that the policy of Tariff Reform is one which demands of each unit of the Empire a sacrifice in the interests of the whole … But here in this case I say again there is no sacrifice; there is the greatest opportunity that was ever offered to a great trading and manufacturing nation.[140]

Should we conclude, then, that tariff reform had failed as an imperial movement? Clearly, the Tariff Reform League had not managed to persuade a critical mass within the Edwardian Unionist party that tariff reform was the right strategy for consolidating the empire. It would seem that imperial discourse thrived when it remained detached from matters of policy and required no practical commitment from its audience. As soon as the League appeared to require such a commitment, it ran into difficulties. This was not something of which it was unaware. Realizing that it was the *idea* of imperial union rather than specific schemes of federation which had political purchase, the League's propaganda favoured more general attacks upon the Liberal

[138] *Monthly Notes* (Mar. 1911), p. 154.

[139] See J. Chamberlain to R. Giffen, 2/11/1903, Joseph Chamberlain papers, 18/18/66.

[140] A. Chamberlain in *Monthly Notes* (Apr. 1911), pp. 297–8. See also *Speakers' handbook* (London, 1903), p. 5. A few tariff reformers gloried in the material sacrifice they asked audiences to make for a 'Greater Britain', but the League's literature insisted that no such sacrifice was required.

conception of empire, attempting to undermine the case for free trade by identifying it with indifference to the future of the self-governing dominions.[141]

How sensitive were free trade organisations to such charges?[142] The Tariff Reform League's greatest rival, the Free Trade Union, seems to have felt vulnerable on this score. The Union endeavoured to provide an imperial defence of free trade, acknowledging the importance of foreign *and* colonial markets, whilst insisting that trade should not be diverted from its natural channels. It stressed that free traders were just as loyal to the colonies as tariff reformers, only they believed the empire would continue to rest most safely on the bonds of sentiment and kinship. It also warned that an economic union would interfere with the fiscal autonomy of the dominions and create jealousies and tensions between different parts of the empire. To this extent, the Tariff Reform League had some success in throwing free traders on the defensive and establishing the contest between free trade and tariff reform as an imperial one. Nevertheless, its basic difficulty did not go away: tariff reformers were always more vulnerable to the accusation that preference was a sacrifice to be made in the wider interests of the empire than were free traders to charges of 'anti-imperialism'. It seems that opinion in Britain was prepared to do almost anything for imperial union except to pay a price for it.

[141] Examples of such speeches include: Bonar Law (London), *Monthly Notes* (Mar. 1908), p. 177; Goulding (Leeds), *Monthly Notes* (May 1909), p. 353; G. Parker (Grimsby), *Monthly Notes* (Nov. 1911), p. 291.

[142] The rest of the paragraph draws on a collection of Free Trade Union pamphlets including: Sir Swire Smith, *Tariff reform and the textile industries. Wool and cotton* (1909); *Both sides of the question* leaflet no. 5; *Colonial preference. Who are our best customers?*, leaflet No. 83; *Colonial preference. Its meaning and its aims*, leaflet no. 91.