Challenges to civic governance in post-war England: the Peace Day disturbances of 1919

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the problems encountered by municipal authorities in containing social unrest in the aftermath of World War I. Focusing on the Peace Day disturbances of 1919, the article examines how the civic elite failed to respond to the challenges of the post-war period and instead reverted to a Victorian model of governance that emphasized civic ritual and deference. It will explore how the towns that experienced the most severe disturbances were governed by elites who were unable to appreciate the significance of changing demographics, new political landscapes and the popular dissatisfaction with municipal traditions that the war had ushered in.

It was a strange commentary on the local celebrations of Peace that the evening of the appointed day should have been marked by the outbreak of a local war, for the conditions through which the city has passed were nothing else than war against constituted authority. What occurred made all responsible people feel ashamed for the city. On the three nights of the outburst anarchy reigned for hours.

Coventry Standard, 25 Jul. 1919

Recent discourse on the nature of change in local government during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has shown that urban elites proved remarkably resilient in the face of new social and political challenges. The emphasis on the urban elites’ adaptability has questioned the long-held assumption that their performance and power was in perpetual decline after the 1870s. Indeed, in contesting the ‘decline’ thesis, Trainor has called for studies to focus on how patterns of government were shaped by their interaction with local social systems within the context of national and international forces.¹ This article is concerned with the process

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of how the urban elite handled change during a particularly unstable period that saw national and local government come under increasing strain from popular dissent and protest. In 1919, the government ordered tanks on to the streets of Glasgow in response to ‘Red Clydeside’, race riots broke out in nine sea ports while a police strike threatened to cause anarchy in Britain’s urban areas.2

In the midst of this social and political turmoil, the government encouraged local authorities to organize festivities for the celebration of Peace Day in July 1919 officially to mark the end of the Great War. In a nation that was haunted by the aftermath of a long and brutal war, the 1919 Peace Day celebrations were designed to forge social unity and patriotic loyalty at both a local and national level. Conversely, on the night of the celebrations serious disturbances took place in Coventry, Luton, Wolverhampton, Salisbury, Swindon and Grays in Essex. Of all the incidents of social unrest in 1919, the Peace Day celebrations provide the most compelling insight into the shifting perceptions of power and authority when assessing the process of change in urban governance. Indeed, the locally organized events were the first significant post-war test of the urban elites’ relationship with the people they purported to serve. It will be argued that in Coventry and Luton, the places where the most serious Peace Day disturbances occurred, violence erupted due to long-term socio-economic factors that brought into question the legitimacy and authority of the urban elite. Indeed, the urban elite’s misguided attempts to return to a pre-war vision of ‘Victorian normality’ only succeeded in fermenting an extended challenge into the early 1920s that was not constrained by conventional left-wing politics. Dissatisfaction with civic government surfaced in a variety of forms including strikes, political activism and rioting in the streets. For a short period following war, the social, political and industrial milieu provided a unique and potentially explosive cocktail forcing the urban elite to abandon Victorian assumptions that had underpinned civic governance. After a period of uncertainty in the early 1920s, the urban elite once more regained the initiative in civic affairs, adapting to the changed circumstances and re-grouping to protect their interests. The article will begin by assessing the nature of the urban elites and the socio-economic systems in the key towns in which disturbances erupted. The article will then investigate the character of the disturbances in Coventry and Luton and their longer-term impact on post-war local governance.

Urban elites and the city, 1870–1919

In line with similar research on power and authority in towns during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this study will define urban elites as those individuals, from any social background, who held leadership positions in the key institutions in the town. Trainor has noted that this approach avoids a narrow focus on one particular social class and instead widens the perspective to explore how authority was exercised in Victorian society. Those cited as urban elite, then, will have assumed leadership roles such as councillors, guardians, school board members and JPs. Moreover, both Garrard and Trainor established that there was considerable overlap between municipal representatives and a town’s social leaders in their respective studies of northern and midland industrial towns. Garrard discovered that Rochdale, Bolton and Salford ‘were each municipally presided over by men who substantially combined political, economic and social leadership’, with local manufacturers and merchants comprising the largest occupational group. Likewise, Croll found that those involved in Merthyr’s civic project were almost exclusively drawn from the ranks of the social elite. This is not to assume that the urban elite was a homogeneous social grouping with clear political or ideological positions. While town councils in the late nineteenth century typically exhibited little political divide or clear political mandate, specific civic initiatives did often divide the civic elite into ‘progressives’ and ‘economic’ factions. Furthermore, by the early twentieth century, representatives of labour organizations were joining the ranks of the urban elite through election to councils and local boards. The urban elites’ involvement and response to civic projects was further complicated by the role of the local press which, though often championing the civic cause, was not slow to criticize the town’s population or indeed the urban elite if they failed to embrace the civic ethos. Undoubtedly, then, the press was the main conduit for the dissemination of the civic message. Conversely, during particularly turbulent periods, popular discontent with the urban elite was so strong that newspapers had little option but to carry at least some acknowledgment that there existed a measure of dissatisfaction with a civic initiative.

9 Croll, *Civilizing the Urban*, 43.
Historians have also arrived at a broad consensus on the key periods in which there were significant shifts in the social composition of urban elites between 1830 and 1939. Garrard, Thompson and Read have all noted that the upper middle class, the municipal leaders of the early nineteenth century, took flight from civic responsibilities from around the 1870s. According to Thompson, ‘leadership of the work-town then passed by default to those who lived there at the time: the local builders, traders [and] shopkeepers’.10 From the 1870s through to the inter-war period, British local government was in the stronghold of small businessmen and shopkeepers, who in certain regions after World War I vied for power with an emerging labour movement.11 Where there is less agreement is on the impact on the quality of local governance, with Thompson and Cannadine in particular equating the municipal leaders’ lower social status with inferior civic provision. Trainor, however, convincingly rejects this notion and argues that adaptation and diversification rather than decline best characterizes the shift in the urban elite’s social composition and performance.12 Indeed, rapid social change during the Edwardian period and the impact of World War I represented significant challenges to the small manufacturers and shopocracies that dominated local government.13 Thus, the urban elites’ ability to adapt to new conditions during and after war would determine whether they could continue to influence local government in the face of increasing labour militancy. It is to these specific socio-economic contexts prior to the Peace Day disturbance to which we now turn.

Although Coventry, Luton and Wolverhampton were the largest towns hit by Peace Day disturbances, it was the long-term socio-economic contexts and the character of the unrest of the former two that reveal tensions relating to power and authority in local governance. The Wolverhampton disturbance was, on the other hand, more specifically related to a tradition of distrust between the police and local community rather than an explicit challenge to civic authority. As Table 1 shows, Wolverhampton presented a more stable demographic environment than Coventry and Luton in which the town’s most significant population rise occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Black Country’s core industrial activities such as coalmining and basic iron production saw a rapid expansion from the mid-eighteenth century, tapering off after 1860 when the demand for heavy industry began to fluctuate as

13 Trainor, ‘The “decline” of British urban governance since 1850’, 32.
international competition intensified. Indeed, migration turned from a major problem in the 1830s to a minor one by the early twentieth century, a shift that significantly reduced the difficulties for the urban elites.\textsuperscript{14} Wolverhampton, then, possessed a fairly settled working-class neighbourhood that accommodated well-organized communities who were not adverse to striking or civil disturbances during the first half of the nineteenth century. Although rioting declined after 1850, working-class communities in the Black Country continued to object to a police presence in their neighbourhoods, an indication that these districts were close knit and possessed their own well-established traditions.\textsuperscript{15} In 1880, one newspaper noted 'how frequently the Black Country policeman is made the object of brutal and violent attacks'.\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, in contrast with the Peace Day disturbances in Coventry and Luton, the disorder in Wolverhampton appeared to have been triggered by the arrest and subsequent treatment of a drunken reveller. The Police Station was the target of the protest in which around 2,000 people threw bricks and stones and it was reported that ‘the Police Office and charge room were practically wrecked’.\textsuperscript{17} This incident appears to have been one of a number of flashpoints between the local community and the police as only one week earlier a crowd of men and women had demanded the release of a prisoner from the Police Station after a similar episode.\textsuperscript{18} The more significant Peace Day disturbances, then, occurred in Coventry and Luton where very different industrial and demographic conditions helped nurture a challenge to the legitimacy and authority of the urban elite.

In contrast to Wolverhampton, Table 1 shows that Coventry and Luton’s population underwent an important transformation, approximately doubling between 1891 and 1911. Economic migration was the most important single factor accounting for this rapid demographic expansion

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{The populations of Coventry, Luton and Wolverhampton, 1881–1921}
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
            & 1881 & 1891 & 1901 & 1911 & 1921 \\
\hline
Coventry   & 56,785 & 65,846 & 88,107 & 117,985 & 144,197 \\
Luton      & 23,960 & 30,053 & 36,404 & 49,978 & 57,075 \\
Wolverhampton & 121,537 & 130,868 & 145,645 & 162,098 & 178,068 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}


\textsuperscript{14} Trainor, \textit{Black Country Elites}, 30.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{16} Quoted in ibid., 171.
\textsuperscript{17} The Wolverhampton Chronicle, 23 Jul. 1919.
\textsuperscript{18} Wolverhampton Chronicle, 4 Jun. 1919.
since both Coventry’s and Luton’s industrial structure shifted from the failing traditional industries to the booming ‘new’ light industries. In Coventry, the old staple industries of watch making and silk weaving, which had traditionally relied on skilled labour, gave way to the bicycle and motor industries that drew from predominately young semi-skilled male labour. In 1911, it was calculated that of the 13,000 workers in the motor and bicycle trades 90 per cent were male and 77 per cent were under the age of 35.19 As a consequence of these industrial developments, the city’s boundaries spread to accommodate large concentrations of workers and firms creating distinct working-class districts.20 Likewise by 1910, a number of key light engineering industries, such as Vauxhall, Commercial Cars and Skeffo Ltd, had settled in Luton, proving an ample replacement for the town’s declining hat trade.21 Indeed, the slump in hat manufacture had prompted the Luton Chamber of Commerce and town council to create a ‘New Industries Committee’, charged with the responsibility of attracting new industrial investments.22 Luton also saw a rapid growth in house building and the emergence of identifiable working-class neighbourhoods.23 By 1918, the deputy mayor seemed resigned to these fundamental demographic shifts when he declared that ‘with the influx of the working classes, Luton has become a working-class constituency’.24 The great similarities in industrial and demographic change between Coventry and Luton were not lost on contemporaries. In 1910, J.W. Tomlinson, who had previously been Coventry’s deputy chief engineer, was appointed the borough county surveyor, prompting the Luton Reporter to comment ‘in Coventry he has had experience of a city the growth of which, as is the case of Luton, has been very rapid during recent years’.25 Thus both Coventry and Luton experienced a concentrated influx of semi-skilled workers, unfamiliar with the heritage of their respective town’s traditional industries and adding pressure on already limited housing stocks.

World War I further accentuated these changes as Coventry and Luton became centres for munitions and military vehicle production. Between 1911 and 1921 Coventry’s population increased by 22 per cent, a rise which is even more impressive when it is considered that over 10,000 Coventrians

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enlisted for military service between 1914 and 1916.\textsuperscript{26} Similarly during the same period and despite conscription in 1916, Luton’s population increased by 14 per cent, while Wolverhampton increased by 10 per cent. By 1918, Coventry and Luton had gained something of a Klondike atmosphere, attracting young migrant semi-skilled workers to relatively well-paid jobs. An excited press began to report that Coventry was the home of the first affluent worker, where people ‘spoke of workmen drinking champagne at their ordinary meals’, while others noted that the city was ‘‘Tom Tiddler’s ground’’ where money was to be had for the mere asking.\textsuperscript{27} Likewise in Luton, the local press ran a series of articles advising its new affluent working class on appropriate ways of spending their newfound wealth.\textsuperscript{28}

Although the introduction of new industries during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries altered substantially the social composition of Coventry and Luton, the towns’ political institutions continued to operate along familiar lines. Table 2 demonstrates that in selected years between 1890 and 1918, councillors were consistently drawn from three main areas: traditional industry, professionals and retail. Although councillors connected with the new industries had slightly increased in number by 1918, they seem to have made little impact on council affairs prior to World War I. Significantly, employers within the traditional industries continued to have a strong presence throughout the period. Indeed, it was not until November 1919 that Coventry’s fledging labour movement had any meaningful impact on civic affairs when it captured one third of the elected seats on Coventry council.\textsuperscript{29} Moreover, in line with Trainor’s and Garrard’s findings in other towns, Coventry councillors also had prominent roles in the city’s key institutions. In 1904 a number of prominent socialists used their successful election to the Board of Guardians as a stepping-stone to their election to the council in the following year, while justices of the peace attracted a high proportion of councillors from either traditional industries or professional occupations.\textsuperscript{30} For example, in 1912 over one third of the justices of the peace were or had previously been councillors from a weaving or watch making background. Notably, the\textit{ Coventry Herald} editor John Moir Scott was not only a great champion of civic initiatives but also a JP during this period. Scott’s involvement in social leadership gives further credence to the notion that strong networks operated within Coventry’s urban elite with prominent figures taking a number of key roles in the city.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Coventry Herald}, 24 Mar. 1899.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Luton Reporter}, 9 Aug. 1917; \textit{Luton News}, 15 Nov. 1917.
\textsuperscript{29} J.A. Yates\textit{ Pioneers to Power} (Coventry, 1950), 70; \textit{Coventry Graphic}, 14 Nov. 1919. My thanks to Martin Beaven for help in generating these statistics.
\textsuperscript{31} Spennell’s Annual Directory of Coventry and District, 1912–13 (Coventry, 1913), 5, 47.
Table 2: The occupations of councillors of Coventry city and Luton councils between selected years 1890–1918

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Building %</th>
<th>Trad. industries %</th>
<th>New industries %</th>
<th>Professional %</th>
<th>Retail %</th>
<th>Gentlemen %</th>
<th>Misc. %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Coventry</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>Luton</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>Coventry</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Luton</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>Coventry</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Luton</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Coventry</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Luton</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Coventry Municipal Handbooks, 1892, 1900, 1910, 1918; Kelly’s Warwickshire Trade Directories 1890–1920; K. Richardson, Twentieth Century Coventry (London, 1972), 197; Kelly’s Directory of Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Northamptonshire, 1890, 1902, 1918; Luton Year Book 1912.
Coventry and Luton’s councils, then, entered the post-war period heavily influenced by an urban elite that remained attached to Victorian notions of patronage and deference that did not easily lend itself to consultation or notions of local democracy. In Luton, the clique of liberal hat manufacturers was the driving force behind the town’s strict licensing laws and influential temperance movement. As Dony and Dyer have noted ‘so effective was the temperance movement that it was able to influence the licensing bench to take a firm hold on the granting of licenses to public houses’. Thus, licenses were only granted in a concentrated area of the town centre, despite strong opposition from the brewers and the local people. In Coventry, the city councillors continued in the Victorian tradition of being split between the ‘economic’ factions and the ‘progressives’ rather than along party lines. Indeed, one historian’s analysis of the Coventry’s nineteenth-century council minutes failed to find ‘any marked political allegiance by individual councillors’. While ‘economic’ factions objected to virtually any form of public expenditure, the progressives continued to harbour the Victorian notion of creating the ‘ideal city’. This could be achieved through municipal buildings, parks and events that could instil local patriotism, pride and civic duty into the individual. In the immediate post-war years civic initiatives included the proposed construction of the city’s first town hall and the purchase of land for a war memorial park. The Peace Day celebrations in July gave the city’s elite a further opportunity to celebrate municipal achievements past and present that they believed would advance the population’s engagement with civic affairs.

The pre-war socialist movements, however, were also committed to a progressive municipal ethos. Although they possessed different political objectives to the existing urban elite, they did share the view that municipal initiatives could nurture a civic bond between the people and the city.

Furthermore, the core of Coventry socialists that had entered public life

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34 P. Searby, *Politics in the age of the Chartists* (Coventry Pamphlets, Coventry, n.d.), 1, 30.


since the 1890s were firmly entrenched within a Fabian tradition that saw bureaucratic collectivism as a means of resolving social and economic problems.38 These early socialists were also from skilled craft backgrounds and, like their urban elite peers, were similarly at odds with the new Coventry factory worker.39 The early socialists’ enthusiasm for the creation of a ‘morally uplifting’ popular culture further alienated them from the working people they were endeavouring to ‘save’. Leading members of the pre-war socialist movement either held firm religious convictions or played a key role in Coventry’s small but vocal temperance movement.40 Like their Liberal and Conservative counterparts on Coventry council, the socialists viewed the ‘affluent’ Coventry semi-skilled worker with an air of suspicion.41 Thus although the socialist leaders offered their own particular brand of civic guidance, they shared with the existing urban elite a commitment to a nineteenth-century vision of cultural and spiritual elevation. The situation for socialists in Luton prior to the war was even bleaker as the town’s labour movement made little impact on civic affairs and struggled to forge a relationship with the growing working class. Despite the formation of a Trades Council in 1905, followed by branches of the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party in 1911, one historian has noted that ‘in the years before the Great War Luton Labour party had a struggle to gain the support of the working man’.42 Thus, for a working-class constituency increasingly growing in confidence, both Coventry and Luton’s urban elites were remote bodies lacking engagement with the industries in which they worked or the communities in which they resided. Such a disjuncture between local governance and the towns’ population did not bode well for the Peace Day celebrations that, in both towns, embodied the urban elite’s narrow vision of civic society.

The Peace Day events and disturbances in Coventry and Luton

The ‘Peace Day’ celebrations were held nationally on 19 July 1919. The Times described the public holiday as ‘the greatest ritual day in our history’. Although central government encouraged all towns and cities

38 Yates, Pioneers to Power, 25, 27, 42; K. Richardson, Twentieth Century Coventry (London, 1972), 192; Coventry Record Office (CRO), Acc 135, Roland Barrett, Socialism made plain, c. 1911.
39 Yates, Pioneers to Power, 29.
41 Coventry Herald, 24 Mar. 1899. The Coventry socialists’ disillusionment with the semi-skilled worker was shared by socialists at a national level, see The Clarion, 8 Feb. 1896.
Challenges to civic governance in post-war England

Table 3: The core events organized for the Peace Day celebrations July 1919

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Type</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Military parade</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War veteran parade</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s events</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious service</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic parade</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


to participate, the arrangements and character of the celebrations were left to local authorities. For some towns and cities worried about the significant social changes that war-time conditions had brought to their area, it provided an ideal opportunity to re-state ideals of social citizenship.43 Although the festivities contained similar themes, there were marked differences in the core events that were centre-stage to the celebrations, a plurality that underlined a surprising lack of national unity for such an iconic event. Table 3 indicates the type of event organized to celebrate Peace Day for 42 towns and cities in Britain.

By far the most popular form of celebration was the military or war veteran parade, followed by events that were organized primarily for children. There were surprisingly few religious activities while the civic procession accounted for only four events. To some extent, the character of the core activity reflected a region’s dominant vested interests. For example, in the military stronghold of Colchester celebrations centred on an army parade or ‘March of Triumph’ through the main thoroughfares of the town, while in Portsmouth the Navy dominated proceedings, with warships firing a 21-gun salute, and a military procession through the city. Alternatively, in areas where there had been a tradition of philanthropy and social intervention such as London’s East End, celebrations centred on meals and musical entertainment for the young, old and war veterans.44 Only a minority of towns such as Coventry and Luton opted to construct their Peace Day celebrations around a civic procession or ritual. Moreover, the type of civic culture presented reflected the urban elites’ rather narrow Victorian view of civic culture. Coventry’s urban elite planned the celebrations around the ‘ancient’ Godiva pageant, while their Luton counterparts organized a civic procession and an exclusive civic banquet. Thus, although the government attempted to engender a national purpose and social unity through encouraging Peace Day celebrations, national considerations were marginalized in favour of the local.

Given the composition of the urban elites in Coventry and Luton it is perhaps not surprising that they drew inspiration for the Peace Day celebrations from the previous century’s ‘public procession culture’.

43 Times, 21 Jul. 1919.
As Gunn has argued, the public procession culture was very much a nineteenth-century phenomenon in which ‘social groups and institutions staked their claim for a place in the social body of the town’. The Victorian parade also exuded a sense of social hierarchy with the sequential order of the procession that gave a physical form to the urban elites’ legitimacy and authority. The parade was also designed to engender a sense of inclusiveness by incorporating diverse social identities, though every effort was made to ensure that social hierarchy was not infringed. Moreover, the procession also sent clear signals to onlookers that certain social groups or institutions not included in the procession were deemed to have no significant role in the social body or civic culture of the town. In Luton, the urban elite settled upon a display of public ritual that comprised a well-structured procession throughout the main thoroughfares of the town, followed by a civic banquet. While the parade was designed to be socially inclusive, both events were strictly controlled leaving the public in no doubt as to the identity and role of Luton’s urban elite. The town councillors led the procession with invited groups and societies, in order of importance, following on behind. The banquet was an even more exclusive affair since women were excluded and the price prohibited most middle-class and working-class men from applying. Both events aroused considerable criticism from munitions workers, women’s groups and the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilized Sailors and Soldiers.

Indeed, in the days leading up to the Peace Day celebrations, one complainant at a public meeting claimed that ‘those in authority over the town do not care for the working man’. Such a ham-fisted approach to the celebrations only served to charge an atmosphere of hostility to the urban elite and the whole event, a situation that was mirrored in Coventry.

The Coventry Godiva Pageant was perhaps the most obvious attempt at promoting local patriotism and social harmony through staging a lavish civic spectacle. Local councillors clearly foresaw the event as more than simply civic entertainment and predicted that the pageant would be of ‘a highly educational value as regards costume, armour and heraldry’. The lead figures in the procession were the city’s mayor, aldermen and senior councillors along with their relatives, donning costumes to portray ‘national and civic history’. For example, leading councillors paraded as Charles II, George IV and Nelson. Lady Godiva, the city’s most famous historical figure, led the pageant (heavily attired) and was played by the daughter of a senior councillor.

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49 *Times*, 21 Jul. 1919.
councillors, paraded the city’s ancient guilds that had spawned the artisanal crafts of silk weaving and watch making, two industries that had effectively become deskillled by the late nineteenth century. The pageant’s organizers believed that in evoking the past glories of both city and nation, a sense of civic pride and identity with Coventry could be fostered – particularly for those migrant workers who had little knowledge of the region’s past and were seemingly uninterested in civic affairs. In effect, the civic elite attempted to legitimize its authority through reviving an ‘ancient’ public spectacle. Leading councillors such as the Conservative alderman Wyley defended the pageant’s £5,000 cost by declaring ‘I am a Coventry man, and I swear by the Godiva Procession and support it through thick and thin. Some of them remembered the Godiva procession of their childhood; others had read in history of the Godiva Pageants from time immemorial.’ In short through staging a pageant, the civic leaders attempted to project an imagined image of Coventry and the nation that represented a chivalrous and harmonious society.

However, in the modern city, the pageant was anything but socially unifying. The exclusion of both munitions workers and war veterans provoked angry outburst in the press. On the eve of the celebrations, the Coventry Graphic summed up the pessimistic mood of the city identifying three areas of dissent:

To-morrow’s Peace celebrations are not being anticipated with general interest, for opinion is divided as to whether it is the time or occasion for the spending of public money… A second reason is, that considering the unrest in the industrial world, it is hardly a time for rejoicing. And thirdly, the avowed opposition of the returned service men, many of whom have positively refused to participate in the celebrations, has robbed the programmes of their attractiveness.

Following the parade, one disgruntled correspondent to the local paper complained that ‘I believe that 99 out of every 100 [Coventry people] were disappointed with Saturday’s show. They live for what is happening at the present time; think of what happened yesterday, and hope for what tomorrow has in store.’ The correspondent added that the people who had worked to ‘help Old England’ during the past four years had not received the recognition they deserved. Criticism of the parade had started almost as soon as the events were announced. A series of letters in the local press argued that workers in the motor and bicycle industries should be celebrated in the pageant, while one condemned the whole event as ‘backward looking’. He argued that ‘we are not catering for the middle

52 Midland Daily Telegraph, 21 Mar. 1919.
53 Coventry Graphic, 18 Jul. 1919.
54 Midland Daily Telegraph, 22 Jul. 1919.
ages, but for the pressing needs of modern times. Public money spent on pageants could be put to better use’, concluding that what was needed was ‘more and better dwellings’. Another correspondent, signing himself ‘Citizen’ complained that the pageant belonged to ‘the school of fossils’ and that ‘the Godiva business is played out and is not at all suitable to modern Coventry. And we must live with the times and circumstances.’ The failure to invite trades, industries and workers involved in the war effort was compounded by the council’s neglect of war veterans. Even the supportive press were puzzled at the war veterans’ omission with the Coventry Graphic conceding that they were ‘in the dark as to the part that the demobilized service men will play’.

A clue to the ex-servicemen’s exclusion from the celebrations was their official movement’s close relationship with the city’s radical left. Arthur Bannington, a long-term socialist, led the Coventry branch of the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilized Sailors and Soldiers (NFDDSS). Coventry’s conservative press was in no doubt that the ex-servicemen’s refusal to participate in the Peace Day celebrations was due to the influence of left-wing activists. The Coventry Graphic complained that the left ‘have got hold of the men, and that they are, consequently pulling the strings’. In a clumsy attempt at conciliation, the council invited ex-servicemen to join the parade, don costumes and appear as ‘supernumerary characters – crusaders, archers, pikemen etc.’ Not surprisingly, NFDDSS regarded this as adding insult to injury, with one member describing the day’s arrangements ‘as an absolute farce’. The city council’s decision to persevere with a ‘Historic Pageant’ that excluded large sections of their constituents from any meaningful participation only served to hasten the demise of deferential Victorian social citizenship schemes.

The strong public condemnation of the proposed celebrations in Coventry and Luton left the authorities under no illusion that the Peace Day events could spill over into violence. In Luton the Times noted that the violence ‘had been anticipated and assistance was asked from London sometime beforehand, but on account of the Peace Celebrations no Metropolitan Police could be spared’. The epicentres of the disturbances in Coventry and Luton both took place in the heart of the towns’ civic centre and central business district over three consecutive nights. Moreover in both towns, contemporary estimates at the height of the violence place

55 Ibid., 18 Mar. 1919.
56 Ibid., 17 Mar. 1919.
57 Coventry Graphic, 22 Mar. 1919.
59 Coventry Graphic, 11 Jul. 1919.
60 Midland Daily Telegraph, 28 May 1919.
61 Ibid., 23 Jul. 1919.
the number involved at between 7,000 to 10,000 people. It is difficult to identify from the actions of the crowd and those arrested a discernable group that initiated and led the rioting. In Coventry, the absence of a town hall led to the targeting of councillors’ shops along with retail outlets that had been popularly perceived as profiteering during the war. Indeed, from the 35 properties attacked, the crowd consistently targeted Dunn’s clothes shop in a relatively organized fashion. The *Birmingham Post* reported that ‘there were rumours from the middle of the week at Coventry that an attack might be made on Peace Day on the shop of Messrs Dunn & Co., hatters and oddly enough, the gossip was associated with other towns where the same firm carry on business’. Likewise, the *Coventry Herald* surmised that the riots had been organized due to ‘the precision with which the attacks on property have been made’ and ‘the fact that the intention to carry out the depredations which have been committed was threatened days before’. It had been widely rumoured in Coventry’s factories that ‘after celebrating peace all day the peace would be broken at night’, while intelligence officers reported ‘that there is no popular enthusiasm for the Peace Celebrations on the 19 July’, adding that there was outright ‘disapproval’ of the events. While wartime profiteering may account for the repeated attacks on Dunn & Co., the *Birmingham Post* was probably right to speculate that other grievances also played their part in the eruption of violence:

In a general way, it was said to be only symptomatic of the unrest in the country at large … Another suggestion is that a lot of Coventry people were disappointed that the characters in the Godiva procession were assigned for the most part to well-to-do persons, with the result that working men and boys and girls got no places in the pageant.

In Luton, the disturbance initially centred on the town hall following the civic procession when the mayor attempted to read out the King’s Peace Day Proclamation. The *Luton News* reported that the mayor’s appearance ‘was the signal for a hostile demonstration on the part of the crowd, cheering turned into jeering. The attitude of the crowd a little later assumed a distinctly ugly character.’ This was an under-statement since the crowd eventually stormed the town hall, burning the building to the ground causing, in total, over £200,000 worth of damage to the hall and the surrounding shopping area. An important difference between

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64 *Birmingham Post*, 21 Jul. 1919.
the two disturbances, however, was the intensity of the violence. In Coventry, the riots resulted in injuries to over 100 people, damage to 35 premises and widespread looting. The heavy presence of the police and their forcible intervention seemed to have increased tensions. Indeed, crowds in Coventry appear to be wholly composed of male youths and adults, characterized by calls from the crowd to attack the police and ‘thrust the police through broken [window] pains’. These attacks were met with a series of charges by baton-wielding policemen. Similar scenes were witnessed in Luton where police baton charged the crowd in an unsuccessful attempt to disperse it. However, Luton’s stretched police force might account for the apparent carnivalesque atmosphere that occurred in the under-policed areas of the town centre. The smaller police presence may well have encouraged a larger proportion of women and children to participate in looting as they were described as ‘having great fun’, breaking into shops, playing pianos and dancing in the street.

The identity of the Coventry rioters is difficult to ascertain as court records reveal precious little. Although it was estimated that on the worst night of rioting the crowd numbered 7,000 people, only a handful of arrests were made over the three days. The Coventry Standard reported on the first night that although the police were hailed with stones and bricks ‘it was impossible to detect the throwers in the density of the crowd, therefore no arrests could be made’. Those few arrested were charged with stealing goods from looted shops and were all males of various ages and occupations, though mainly involved in labouring work. Paradoxically, despite the smaller police force, there were 39 arrests in Luton, with the vast majority associated with semi-skilled work. Although such a small number of arrests from a crowd of 10,000 can in no way be taken as a representative sample, as Orr has argued, this evidence suggests that ‘civilians as well as discharged soldiers took part and that they had a range of grievances’.

Following the disturbances, the urban elite and press in both Coventry and Luton immediately placed the blame on ‘outsiders’ or recent immigrants unfamiliar with the civic culture of their respective towns. For the urban elite this was perhaps an understandable response as the alternative suggestion that their governance was at variance with a new working-class electorate was even more unpalatable. The Coventry press consistently blamed the ‘new’ semi-skilled factory worker, a perceived recent migrant who had brought with him undesirable demands alien to a
city that had prided itself on respectable craft traditions. Thus the bishop of Coventry blamed the disturbances on ‘non-local’ workers, whereas the Coventry Standard pointed the finger at the ‘Bolshevik spirit’ imported into the factories during the war. Likewise, the Coventry Herald concluded that the ‘ringleaders of this nasty business, as they doubtless were in the industrial crises that arose in Coventry during the war, belong to the riff-raff who have been imported into this city in the last few years’. The Coventry Graphic had no doubts about the identity of the instigators, ‘the damage has been caused by the men who hid themselves in a munitions factory during the war, drawing big money, and are now discontent because they have lost their positions’. Similarly, in Luton the town clerk blamed the disturbances on ‘Bolshevism, anarchy and rebellion of the very worst type’ that had been imported into the town during World War I. The Times, taking its cue from local soundings, reported that ‘it is also the general belief in the town, that the outbreak was incited by inflammatory agents not belonging to Luton’. Though it was highly unlikely that left-wing activists had a hand in planning the violence, the local press suspected that Bolsheviks were behind the unrest, particularly since a red flag had been waved from the town hall and one man arrested declared himself to be a ‘red hot’ revolutionist. Sentiments such as these only confirmed the urban elites’ conviction that civic and industrial problems were the result of malign forces external to the city and its traditions. Thus even in the immediate aftermath of the disturbances it was the implicit suggestion that the problem lay with ‘the other’, or modern industrial worker, who was unfamiliar with the city’s civic ritual and traditions.

The breakdown of Victorian civic culture: municipal politics in the inter-war period

Although Coventry and Luton’s Peace Day build-up and celebrations followed a similar pattern, the events in Coventry were a symptom of a more sustained challenge to civic and industrial authority. While Luton’s labour movement remained relatively weak throughout the inter-war years, the war had helped foster a powerful shop stewards’ movement in Coventry that, by 1917, had attained national significance. Indeed,

78 Coventry Graphic, 25 Jul. 1919.
80 Times, 22 Jul. 1919.
militant shop stewards were successful in harnessing popular resentment towards the urban elite during and after the war and extended their influence from the factory shop floor to the municipal sphere. The shop stewards took full advantage of a vacuum in left-wing leadership as, along with other regional Labour branches after 1914, Coventry’s Labour movement gave support to the war. Thus Labour councillors aligned themselves with the other municipal parties and avoided campaigning on key issues that may have disrupted the war effort such as high food and rent prices and general housing provision. As a consequence, newly formed radical movements took up these popular issues and became the standard bearer for the opponents of war. The shop stewards’ movement, along with other emerging strands of socialist thought such as Guild Socialism, rejected the traditional Fabian emphasis upon bureaucratic collectivism, preferring to see the workplace as the key area for democracy and control in society. The shop stewards’ movement had begun in Clydeside in 1914, spread to Sheffield in 1916 and, by 1917, was taken up in Coventry where the movement led a successful war-time strike involving 50,000 workers. In 1919, social tensions in the city were further strained by the emergence of soldier and sailor movements that demanded decent work and housing for demobilized men. Indeed, the public’s dissatisfaction with municipal activities enabled a new breed of socialist, more committed to direct action than working within official structures, to make important connections with Coventry’s industrial working class. These socialists caught the tide of popular feeling by providing the rallying point and unofficial opposition to the town council’s Peace Day celebration initiatives.

The tensions between the radical shop stewards and the pioneers of the early Labour movement came to a head during the Peace Celebrations. By 1919, a clear schism had emerged between the Trades Council, which had become dominated by radical shop stewards, and the elected Labour councillors, who largely embraced a more reformist approach to municipal affairs. In one Trades Council meeting, one delegate encapsulated the mutual suspicion between the two bodies when he ‘expressed the view that
the Labour members of the City Council seemed to have become inculcated by the party that had power in the Council. They rarely express themselves except in favour of the ruling powers in the Council. The Trades Council, in a meeting on the eve of the celebrations, overwhelmingly passed a resolution declaring that ‘organised labour declines in any way to associate itself with the organised buffoonery masquerading as the peace celebrations and strongly protest against the wholesale squandering of public money’. Instead the Trades Council organized a 24-hour ‘Hands off Russia’ strike for the Monday following the event to protest at British solders being sent to revolutionary Russia. The strike appears to have been fairly solid with only the printers’ union ignoring calls for industrial action. Observers noted that on the Monday, following the Peace Day celebrations, the streets were crowded all day ‘by men who were absenting themselves from work through the call for a twenty-four hours’ strike’.

The post-war turmoil had at last enabled socialists to tap into and exploit undercurrents of popular discontent and establish an embryonic relationship with the city’s army of semi-skilled, a situation that pre-war socialists had consistently failed to achieve. There is also evidence to suggest that popular discontent with the post-war era enabled those on the left to extend their political influence beyond the workplace. For example, contemporary intelligence reports noted that from 1917 the movement adopted a more radical agenda that revolted ‘against the whole of the accepted system of industry’. In addition, it was reported that ‘it appears to be connected with the appeal to direct action and with the tendency to repudiate action taken by older trade union officials who are unaware of the changes which have taken place in men’s minds’. Significantly, the intelligence officer added that the movement was ‘not confined to the industrial sphere’.

Perhaps the most notable example of the shop stewards’ engagement with the wider community was the pivotal role they played in a successful rent strike in Coventry’s first council housing estate. According to research conducted by the Ministry of Munitions, Coventry topped a list of 28 towns and cities that had experienced acute housing shortages in 1918. A good proportion of the new industrial population was being housed

87 Coventry Standard, 25 Jul. 1919. The ‘Hands off Russia’ campaign was largely unreported in the local press. For the list of speakers see a handbill advertising the rally in University of Warwick, Modern Record Centre MSS 5/6/1/1, Coventry Trades Council, William Buxton scrapbook.
88 NA, MUN 5/53/300/99, the shop stewards movement.
90 NA, MUN 5/53/300/98, Memorandum Showing Areas in which Housing is Most Acute, 22 Feb. 1918.
in municipally funded dwellings that were cheaply ‘put up in barracks style’ and dubbed the ‘new slums’. In early 1919, residents of Stoke Heath, which was densely populated with munitions and car workers, formed the Tenants Defence League to protest over rent prices, conditions and a perceived civic corruption that tainted the housing scheme. The Stoke Heath residents followed the shop stewards’ example by riding roughshod over official bodies with a prolonged rent strike that damaged the credibility of established councillors and the civic process. The leaders of the rent strike were all prominent shop stewards in Coventry factories such as J. Read, A. Doherty and George Morris, leader of the semi-skilled Workers Union. According to Hodgkinson, these leaders were profoundly influenced by the spread of Bolshevik pamphlets and were ‘blatantly left-wingers, proud to carry the label of the Communist Party’. Imbued with this revolutionary fervour, rent strike leaders issued a warning to the civic elite to enlist neither the Police nor Army to evict striking tenants. Indeed, the criticism of the council’s post-war housing policy began to take on more sinister undertones. One correspondent, prior to the disturbances, warned the civic elite that if they did not make housing a priority there was no guarantee that the city’s citizens would remain law abiding:

When the Huns were threatening the property of the wealthy classes in Britain it didn’t take years to prepare plans and build homes to accommodate workers to produce munitions of war… The wealthy classes were scared then and matters moved quickly. What was done then can just as easily – in fact, more easily be done now. However, the owners of slum and brick boxes with slate roofs who, unfortunately, form our local governing body, now imagine the danger to themselves is over now that the Huns are beaten. Therefore they are quite indifferent and do not intend to move in the matter of providing homes, unless compelled to do so. Let them take warning. We homeless ones are a law-abiding class of citizens, but even the worm will turn when trodden upon. We have been trodden upon and slighted in every way by the class who have comfortable villas to live in. We are turning … I advise the municipal authorities to get to work, if only for their own sakes, without delay.

There can be little doubt that the Tenants Defence League capitalized on this popular frustration with the post-war elite. Through bypassing their municipal bodies and their elected representatives, the Tenants Defence League succeeded in having a major impact on the Coventry housing question, attracting over 6,000 people to open air meetings. Revelations

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91 Midland Daily Telegraph, 13 Jan. 1919.
93 Midland Daily Telegraph, 8 Jan. 1919.
94 Midland Daily Telegraph, 20 May 1919.
95 The success of Coventry’s rent strike inspired other munition areas to strike. An intelligence officer interviewed one rent striker in Woolwich who cited Coventry’s success as a principal reason for the Woolwich strike. Significantly, the Woolwich strikers also named their organization ‘The Tenants Defence League’. See NA, MUN 5/96/3462/24, Visit to Woolwich bungalows – rent strike, 22 Feb. 1919; Midland Daily Telegraph, 13 Jan. 1919.
unearthed by the Tenants Defence League forced Liberal and Conservative members of the Housing Committee into resigning en masse after it was revealed that several councillors had sub-contracted the building work to their own construction companies.⁹⁶ Moreover, the uneasy relationship between traditional labour and the shop stewards movement continued, as there was also a suspicion among the strikers that the Labour councillors had withheld the full extent of civic corruption.⁹⁷ For Coventry’s urban elite immediately after World War I, the growth of these more organized dissident movements presented new challenges to their own governance of the city.

Encouraged by the groundswell in post-war radicalism, militant shop stewards continued to synthesize workplace and municipal politics into the 1920s, a situation that further alienated Labour councillors from their factory-based electorate. Furthermore, Coventry’s manufacturers experienced serious difficulties in converting from wartime to domestic production, a situation that resulted in high levels of unemployment in the early 1920s.⁹⁸ Although the Labour Party appeared initially to fare well after the war, securing one third of council seats, their influence on the council and with working-class voters waned considerably during the early 1920s.⁹⁹ Moreover, Labour’s self-confinement to municipal issues left them exposed to the accusation that they lacked solutions to the increasing problem of unemployment in the city. Indeed, as Carr has shown, it was the Communist shop stewards, particularly through the auspices of the Coventry Unemployed Workers Council (CUWC), who capitalized on the post-war industrial unrest and entrenched the divide between the popular politics and the municipal.¹⁰⁰ The CUWC was established in 1920 and organized an alternative form of local democracy that sidestepped municipal elections in favour of mass workplace open-air meetings. In the CUWC’s opening statement it denounced liberal democracies and pledged not to ‘lead the workers into side issues, but insist upon the overthrow of capitalism as the only solution for unemployment’.¹⁰¹ On more day-to-day issues, however, the CUWC continued the work that the Tenants Defence League had pioneered immediately after the war galvanizing much support from Coventry council estates. This led to complaints that Labour councillors had once again neglected their core electorate.¹⁰²

The success of the CUWC convinced the Communist Party that Coventry had the potential to become one of its key centres and sent Jack Leckie,
an infamous orator, to stand as their parliamentary candidate at the next general election. In 1922 one intelligence officer, alarmed by the success of the CUWC at the expense of traditional municipal politics, reported to the cabinet that ‘the large amount of prolonged unemployment amongst the engineering workers of this centre, however, has made fertile soil for the Communist propaganda, and revolutionary doctrines are gaining much support of late’. The left-wing challenge to traditional municipal democracy came to a head in the spring of 1922 when industrial militancy coincided with social and political struggle. In effect, a public battle for the leadership of the Labour movement developed as the CUWC stood against the Labour Party for election to the Board of Guardians and led the engineering workers in a national strike over workshop management. Participation in the Guardians election increased from 12 per cent in 1921 to 50 per cent in 1922 and split the left’s vote that resulted in the failure of any candidates in the CUWC or the Labour Party to gain election. Meanwhile, the local Labour Party had absented itself from the national engineering strike, a situation that left the way clear for the CUWC to assume a leadership role. After an intense 13-week lockout, in which the CUWC employed flying pickets, a national agreement was reached that effectively secured a victory for the employers. This collapse marked the end of radical direct action or shop-floor alternatives to municipal politics. As Price has shown, in other areas such as the Clyde, the defeat of intense industrial militancy during the early 1920s led to a strengthening of the Labour Party at both a local and national level. Indeed, in the context of Coventry the Labour Party, lacking a workplace base of support, continued to reject the synthesis of workshop and municipal politics. Instead, Labour councillors persisted with a programme of municipal reform as a strategy that would lead to socialism.

The immediate years following World War I, then, saw serious challenges to both the traditional urban elite and to the Labour Party’s influence in municipal politics. Nevertheless, although the radical challenge ultimately ended in failure, it did shake the urban elite from a Victorian complacency that had led to the disastrous Peace Day celebrations. Through the inter-war period it appeared very little had changed with one third of councillors derived from retail and at least one fifth from the traditional trades of watch making and silk weaving. However, while the social backgrounds of the councillors remained static, the immediate post-war events appear to have changed their mindset. The highly politicized post-war period had two effects on Coventry’s urban elite. First, the Liberal and Conservative councillors grouped together on

103 NA, CAB GT/24 Reports, 9 Feb. 1922.
106 Yates, Pioneers to Power, 86.
the council to form the ‘Coalition’, a grouping who claimed their aim was to take politics out of local government. Second, the ‘economic’ councillors, who sought to cut expenditure on public works or civic initiatives, began to dominate the Coalition. Thus while Godiva processions were revived in 1929 and 1936, they were shorn of civic symbolism and ceremony and had become commercial enterprises with firms eager to advertise and display their merchandise in the procession. The unconventional left-wing challenge to the urban elite, then, had helped forge the Coalition, which adopted a more defensive approach to municipal affairs. Grand civic spectacles and social citizenship schemes were replaced by retrenchment and a desire to maintain their power base against a perceived radical socialist threat. Within the municipal body, however, the Labour Party did not vigorously challenge this dominant ethos and, in one case, the Coalition did not even stand against a moderate Labour Party candidate. After the failure of the 1922 lockout, political discourse remained firmly in the hands of the urban elite and there is little doubt that throughout the inter-war period the Coalition had regained the initiative. Indeed, only in 1937 did the Labour Party gain power. Thus, although it took a highly politically charged atmosphere and a series of violent episodes, the urban elite did adapt to modern municipal politics and finally jettisoned the Victorian vision they had clung on to immediately after the war.

**Conclusion**

The Peace Day riots of 1919 were symptomatic of a larger pattern of unrest that challenged previously accepted conventions in the industrial, political and municipal spheres. In regions in which a civic elite had failed to appreciate a city’s changing social and political profile, the authority and legitimacy of the municipal body was challenged. The dramatic demographic change in Coventry during the early twentieth century ushered in a new working-class constituency that neither the urban elite nor traditional labour could effectively engage with. However, the civic elites’ inability to engage with a changing society and the shop stewards’ predilection for direct action drew semi-skilled workers into conflict with the authorities both inside and away from the workplace. Coupled with the effective unionization of returning soldiers, Coventry’s traditional urban elite was confronted in 1919 with an exceptionally hostile constituency. Their solution to the problem revealed something of their attachment to a Victorian style of governance that advocated minimal consultation and grand public displays that would generate local patriotism, attachment and civic pride. Indeed, in the face of great demographic change the

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108 Richardson, *Twentieth Century Coventry*, 190.
Historic Pageant’s emphasis on the city’s ancient craft trades and local tradition was an attempt by the urban elite to reassert their own position in the city. The fact that the urban elite was able to survive such a spectacular failure during a period of social crisis does support Trainor’s thesis that urban social leaders adapted to new socio-economic pressures of the twentieth century. However, the process of change outlined in this article also indicates that the urban elites’ adjustment of mindset, if not social composition, was fostered by social and political forces of which they had little understanding.

111 Trainor, ‘The “decline” of British urban governance since 1850’, 32.