The Liberal Empire and British Social Policy: Citizens, Colonials, and Indigenous Peoples, circa 1880-1914

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I. In this paper I shall focus on an unusual moment in the longer history of British Liberalism, when very active support among Liberal statesmen for defence and maintenance of the British Empire came at a time when those same statesmen were also sponsoring a series of social, fiscal, medical, constitutional and ‘citizenship’ reforms whose long-term impact on British society and culture was to outlast the empire itself. Prior to the 1900s both ‘imperial defence’ and state-directed ‘social reform’, while never wholly absent from Liberal concerns, had nonetheless played relatively muted (and to some degree mutually exclusive) roles in the policies of Liberal governments; a fact that makes their simultaneous emergence to the forefront of Liberal politics in the Edwardian decade seem all the more striking. Some historians have interpreted the conjunction of these two themes as a classic case of ‘social imperialism’, whereby wily populist politicians traded ‘bread and circuses’ for guns and battleships; while others have emphasised the rise of a ‘new liberal’ democratic culture based on global mass consumption. But these explanations do not fully account for the emphasis placed by Edwardian Liberals, not just on cheap imports and mass purchasing power, but on large-scale social, administrative and ‘redistributive’ reforms, initiated not by the traditional ‘liberal’ agencies of voluntarism, philanthropy and market choice, but by central departments of the British State. The relations, negative and positive, direct and indirect, between those domestic social reforms and maintenance and defence of the British Empire will be the central focus of this paper.

These themes cannot be adequately addressed without first clarifying a number of background historical and historiographical issues. In the early twentieth-first century, both collective memory and popular histories of the United Kingdom still largely concur in identifying the pre-1914 Conservative Party as the major champions of Empire (symbolised by Benjamin Disraeli’s purchase of the Suez canal and his proclamation of Queen Victoria as ‘Empress of India’); whereas Victorian Liberals often appear both as long-standing critics of Empire, and as active supporters of socio-economic laisser-faire, ‘self-help’ and the ‘night-watchman state’. These thumbnail characterisations contain some grains of truth, but nevertheless

their mythic status tends to obscure certain much more complicated aspects of wider historical reality.

In this instance the wider reality was that, despite the hostility of Liberals under Cobden, Bright, and later Gladstone, to imperial aggrandisement, ‘liberalism’ as a set of ideas had always been the overarching philosophy of the wider British Empire throughout the Victorian era; and in many respects it continued to be so until well into the twentieth century (even during the 1920s and 1930s when Liberalism as an organised movement was fast sinking into oblivion. The core ideology of the Victorian ‘formal’ Empire had been the ‘civilising mission’, classically enunciated by James and John Stuart Mill in relation to India. This was the claim that advanced nations had both a right and a duty to oversee the government of backward or decaying ones, in order to guide their progress into legal and administrative modernity. Victorian Liberals had also supported colonial, and particularly Anglo-Saxon, settlement in what were thought to be the ‘vacant spaces’ of the world, leading to the eventual establishment of new European-style self-governing communities and Dominions. In addition, most Liberals had also favoured various forms of ‘tutelary’ or ‘mandate’ government over backward peoples, in cases where the latter were threatened by internal breakdown or aggression from neighbouring powers. And at a more ‘informal’ level, the liberalism of free trade, the gold standard, and freedom of the seas had underpinned the basic scaffolding of Britain’s imperial economy throughout the nineteenth century, regardless of whether Whig, Liberal, or Conservative governments happened to be in power in the metropolis. Conversely, and no less unexpectedly, there had been a long-standing backbench Tory strain in earlier nineteenth century British politics which, prior to the Disraelian era, had been deeply critical of over-extended imperial and colonial power. This dissident Tory tradition, though never remotely ‘egalitarian’ or ‘democratic’ in aims, had nevertheless been to the forefront on such matters as nosing out colonial bribery and

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corruption, campaigning against slavery and the slave trade, and calling imperial
governors and their officials to account.5

Rather similar points may be about the long-term relation of the Liberal and
Conservative traditions to questions of social welfare. Despite long-standing liberal
concern for maintaining basic working-class living standards, by supporting free
trade and opposing tariffs on food, throughout much of the nineteenth century any
more active support from Liberals for regulatory or ‘redistributive’ social policies had
been grudging and rare. Liberals had been very reluctant, for example, to legislate for
industrial accident compensation, instead advising injured workers to pursue their
claims through the impossibly expensive mechanism of the traditional Common
Law.7 At the end of the eighteenth century it had been middle-ranking Tory
magistrates, not ‘Liberals’ or ‘Whig grandees’, who during the subsistence crises of
the 1790s had brought in more generous application of the traditional Poor Laws,
including family ‘allowances’ for children of low-paid workers, parish pensions for
the elderly, and work-creation schemes for the unemployed.8 Forty years later, a
substantial minority of Tory philanthropists had opposed the re-imposition by a
Whig/Liberal government of a much stricter Poor Law regime, based on provision of
‘deterrent’ institutions for the sick, aged and unemployed, and refusal of all cash
relief to destitute persons living in their own homes.9 This ‘New Poor Law’ system,
rooted in the doctrine that in a competitive labour market no healthy adult male
could ever be ‘genuinely unemployed’ even during an international recession, was to
permeate all aspects of liberal thought on social-policy questions down to the last
quarter of the nineteenth century. Although the 1834 New Poor Law was never fully
implemented in practice, one of its most striking results had been that over much of
the next half-century public support for the poor in real terms was continuously static
or falling (during a period of sustained economic growth and rise in national income
unprecedented in British history).

For purposes of this article, however, three more general points need to be stressed.
One is that the abstract theories (economic, psychological, and organisational) on
which the 1834 Poor Law and its related social policies were based, were undilutedly
‘liberal’ in their character and origins. Another point is that, down to the 1880s, the
vast majority of Victorian critics of the New Poor Law, and campaigners for state
intervention in such spheres as poverty, malnutrition, sickness, bad housing and
unemployment, had been ‘paternalist conservatives’, ‘maverick Tories’ or ‘Tory
socialists’ (e.g., Dickens, Shaftesbury, Ruskin, and Sir John Simon, to name but a

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6 Mark Curthoys, Governments, Labour, and the Law in mid-Victorian Britain: the Trade Union
7 Mark Neuman, The Speenhamland County: Poverty and the Poor Laws in Berkshire, 1782-1834, New
8 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, English Poor Law History, Part. II, The Last Hundred Years, Vol. 1, 1929,
p. 1-103.
few). And a third point is that many Victorian Liberals who responded with horror to the prospect of public spending on social reforms in Great Britain, nevertheless saw little problem about expenditure on famine relief schemes, sanitation programmes, building of schools, and even state endowment of universities, in the non-settler territories of the British Empire, and particularly in India. The difference was that the denizens of Empire were deemed to be in various stages of pre-modern ‘tutelage’, and were therefore legitimate objects of state paternalism; whereas native Britons, however poor, ill-educated, ill-housed and voteless, were deemed to be fully capable of rational choice, voluntary action and self-help.

II. How far, and why, did Liberal attitudes both to the Empire and to state-inspired social policies substantially change at the end of the Victorian era? And how far were more pro-active approaches, both to defence of the Empire and support for social reform, positively linked together? New attitudes were triggered by new circumstances, as liberalism itself came increasingly under attack from the militarism, jingoism and protectionism that erupted at the turn of the century. The events of the war in South Africa caused some Liberals to doubt for the first time whether even a ‘free trade’ Empire was compatible with genuine liberal ideals, whilst others began to fear that all economic relations between ‘advanced’ and ‘native’ peoples might be inherently ‘illiberal’ and exploitative. For many Edwardian New Liberals, however, the older ideal of a ‘civilising mission’ seemed if anything to be re-validated by the unseemly outcome of the ‘Scramble for Africa’ and the disasters of the Boer war (this was a view held by David Lloyd George, himself at this time a prominent pro-Boer, but soon to emerge as a leading champion of the ‘Liberal Empire’). Thus criticism of Empire among Edwardian ‘New Liberals’ at this time was very rarely an attack on what later analysts would see as ‘imperialism’ per se. It was far more often a plea for a return to the principles of ‘internationalism’, respect for native peoples, and extension of ‘civilisation’, that were believed to have characterised Liberal approaches to Empire over the previous hundred years.

What had changed, however, was not so much the perspective of British Liberals on the wider world, but that wider world itself –many aspects of which had evolved out of all recognition since Liberals had last enjoyed any sustained period in government. When the Liberals eventually returned to power at the end of 1905 (for what was to prove the longest term of office in their history), they were faced, not just with the


unsettled aftermath of the South African war, but with an international economy where Britain had become the only remaining non-protectionist trading nation, and where many other states (the USA, France, Italy, Belgium, and above all Imperial Germany) were increasingly engaged both in ‘nation-building’ at home and in programmes of vigorous imperial and colonial expansion. The international recession of 1904-1905 had brought the first serious downturn in real wages in Britain for more than eighty years, together with widespread cyclical unemployment (the latter a phenomenon that orthodox liberal economic theory was wholly unable to account for). Moreover, the set-backs encountered by British forces in South Africa (when 60% of army volunteers had been found physically unfit for active service) had generated a veritable orgy of public recrimination about links between defective social welfare provision, ‘national inefficiency’, and ‘racial deterioration’, together with widespread anxiety about the future of the British nation and Empire. All these factors conspired to confront Edwardian Liberals with a range of socio-economic, international and imperial problems quite different from those that had faced the last great Liberal reforming ministry, headed by Mr. Gladstone, a quarter of a century before.

Liberal responses to these problems occurred on several levels. Most fundamentally, there was never any serious question of Liberal ministers abandoning the large-scale programme of naval reconstruction, already set in train by the previous Conservative ministry, in response to rising fears of German rearmament and a possible German naval attack. Nevertheless, whereas leading Conservatives had planned to finance naval ship-building by tariffs on imports, mitigated by ‘imperial preference’ for the British Dominions and self-governing colonies, the Liberals were to launch instead into a quite different programme. This was to be based on unqualified defence of global ‘free trade’, in conjunction with a series of financial, labour, social welfare, and ‘economic development’ reforms unprecedented in British history. Liberal fiscal and social policies over the next eight years were to include a ‘graduated’ income-tax on higher incomes; graduated death duties and levies on great landed estates; reform of the English, Scottish and Irish Poor Laws; the introduction of old age pensions, national health and national unemployment insurance; state provision of school meals and school milk for poor children; and institutional care and confinement for the mentally ‘unfit’. In addition, economic development plans included national schemes of re-afforestation, a national road-building programme, and a tax-financed national Development Fund for the support of infant industries in periods of

15 Despite what was to prove one of the most inflammatory periods of ‘party’ antagonism in British history, there was nevertheless an extraordinary degree of underlying consensus on this single issue. It meant, however, that whatever the Liberals were able to raise from new sources of public funding was already largely mortgaged in advance to defence expenditure.
recession. In all these spheres—defence spending, domestic social policy, and national economic development schemes—Liberal policies of the later-1900s were seen at the time as fundamental departures from the self-regulatory and non-interventionist British liberal traditions of the nineteenth century. The defeat of Lloyd George’s 1909 Budget in the House of Lords was to cause the most dramatic domestic constitutional crisis of the twentieth century, and was widely perceived by commentators at the time as an impending ‘social revolution’.

This crisis and all its ramifications cannot be discussed in detail here. But the question needs to be posed of how far, and in what ways, were these socio-economic policies integrally related to ideas about ‘Liberal Empire’? Was the major Liberal priority preservation of free trade, social reform, or defence of the Empire, or were all three goals inextricably combined? Where do New Liberal social reforms fit in to the suggestion, made by Frank Trentmann and others, that ‘Liberal Empire’ had become the vehicle of a new mass democratic culture, defined less by work, status, or traditional community ties than by ready access to an unlimited international market in consumer goods? And how plausible is the suggestion, advanced by some earlier historians of the period, that Liberal fiscal and welfare reforms were merely a ‘social imperialist’ sweetmeat, designed to deter lower-class voters from opting for more radical socialist alternatives, and to conceal from them the true costs of imperial defence?17

III. These questions may be addressed in a number of different ways. If we look at patterns of public expenditure, then there can be no doubt that the bulk of the additional revenue raised by the Asquith and Lloyd George budgets of 1908 and 1909 was earmarked for purposes of imperial defence.18 There was nothing particularly remarkable about this, since (apart from interest payments on the national debt) defence spending had always been the largest single item in the national budget since the days of Sir Francis Drake, with ‘social’ expenditure being seen historically as an entirely peripheral and local concern. What is perhaps more interesting, however, is that, even in the very short period between the 1909 Budget and the outbreak of the First World War, there were signs that this long-established pattern was beginning to undergo a seismic shift. Even in 1913-1914 central-government spending on old-age pensions, health, and unemployment relief—stemming directly from New Liberal reforms—were appearing for the first time as significant ‘national’ charges (thus anticipating a pattern that was only fully to emerge in the 1920s and 1930s, when central-government spending on social services was for the first time to equal or


exceed spending on peacetime national defence). If the Liberal social reforms were merely a bribe to win working-class support for Empire, they were therefore potentially a very expensive bribe, with very major implications for the future pattern of British public finance. Such outcomes were, however, entirely compatible with Frank Trentmann’s claim that a major clue to New Liberalism was the role of mass-consumption –an emphasis that could be seen in the priority given in New Liberal social reforms to income-maintenance and spending-power rather than to protection of jobs or provision of public works. (This was in stark contrast to the much greater emphasis on ‘job-protection’ schemes and defence of key industries in both Conservative and Socialist programmes of the same period). This is not to say that New Liberals were indifferent to unemployment problems (their policies included both labour-exchanges and countercyclical spending on economic ‘development’, while Dreadnoughts themselves were major generators of jobs). But nevertheless much New Liberal economic theory tended to reinforce the view that such problems could better be dealt with by expansion of ‘consumer demand’ or by ‘income-maintenance’, rather than by ‘artificial’ creation of work.

There are, however, certain other aspects of the Liberal theory of Empire that are less easy to interpret, and which seem to invite further investigation and research. Given the centrality of the Empire in Liberal economic and commercial thought, and the priority accorded in Liberal budgets to imperial defence, it might have been expected that government ministers of the period who were committed to the notion of a ‘Liberal Empire’ would also have shown a close interest in social conditions, social policies, and economic opportunities for British citizens in the various British imperial territories. Mass anxieties about unemployment, slums, and physical deterioration in the great cities of Britain had been central themes of all the great late-Victorian and Edwardian ‘poverty surveys’; and many contemporary commentators, particularly in Conservative circles, believed that colonial re-settlement could play a major role in dealing with the health, unemployment and overcrowding problems of industrial Britain. There was also much concern about the fact that, of the several hundred thousand Britons who were emigrating annually from United Kingdom in this period, the vast majority were going not to the British Empire but to the United States.

These concerns were surprisingly unmentioned, however, or were touched upon only very superficially, in official ‘social-policy’ documents of the period. In the archives of the British Treasury –where Asquith, Lloyd George, and their henchmen worked out the details of old age pensions, death duties, progressive income tax, national

19 On the major role that was to be played in the British economy by defence spending, and particularly the building of battleships, for much of the twentieth century, see David Edgerton, Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

insurance, etc.– there were many references to foreign precedents and examples, but these were almost exclusively European in origin. Exactly the same was true in the Board of Trade, where the New Liberal ministers Winston Churchill and Sydney Buxton, and their civil servants, planned out detailed schemes for labour exchanges, trade boards, ‘decasualisation of labour’, and insurance against unemployment. In both departments there were numerous references to foreign experiments and even to ‘imperial precedents’; but the ‘precedents’ in question almost invariably referred, not to the far-flung territories of the British Empire, but to the continental Empire of Wilhelmine Germany.21 In the four-hour Budget speech of 1909 in which Lloyd George set out his vision for the future economic development of Britain, there were many resonances of his visits to Germany—including a national infrastructure of main roads, public transport networks, state ownership of development land and of the nation’s woods and forests– but relatively little on the economic development of Britain’s own maritime empire, other than in its traditional role as the medium of universal free trade.22

This ‘Europeanist’ perspective was also shared by many of the outside ‘experts’ on social-policy questions who were brought by Liberal ministers into Whitehall departments. British publishing houses in the 1900s were awash with enthusiastic writings on the cultural unification of the far-flung British Empire, while conferences for promoting closer intercourse with the colonies and a common British imperial identity were a regular feature of life in Edwardian London.23 But social-policy advisors to the Liberal government in this period all appeared to share the view that—as models for British social reform—Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland and Denmark were much more interesting and relevant than anything on offer from Australasia, Canada or South Africa. William Beveridge, for example, who had been brought by Winston Churchill into the Edwardian Board of Trade to advise on unemployment policy, much later in life was to become a leading spokesman for a ‘Federal Union’ of the British Empire; but in 1908 Beveridge was far more interested in promoting post-Bismarckian Germany as a ‘model’ and ‘laboratory’ for social-insurance and labour legislation in Edwardian Britain.24 And the same was true of Seebohm Rowntree, the pioneering analyst of ‘primary’ poverty, who was also a close friend and advisor of Lloyd George. Rowntree’s sociological writings had demonstrated the total inadequacy of market forces to generate an adequate income and decent housing for an unskilled worker in Edwardian Britain (however sober, prudent and rational such a man might be), and his solutions to this problem strongly favoured agricultural revival and ‘back to the land’. Yet Rowntree’s policy proposals

22 D. Lloyd George, The People’s Budget, Explained by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1909.
envisaged—not the open spaces of the British Empire— but the ‘garden cities’ of densely-populated Belgium, as a model for the re-housing, employment, civic revival, and social ‘betterment’ within Britain itself of the nation’s urban poor.25

IV. This surprising indifference among Edwardian Liberal ministers and officials to possible social welfare schemes and economic opportunities within the wider British Empire seems to invite further commentary and research—particularly in view of recent works by James Belich and others, who have portrayed overseas migration and settlement as the British Empire’s driving powerhouse and economic rationale.26 Not all British social investigators of the period, however, were as uninterested in colonial precedents as official and departmental records would seem to suggest. The Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, for example, between 1905 and 1909 had commissioned a series of research papers on the working of recent social and labour legislation in Australia and New Zealand, and there was certainly interest in these experiments among British labour leaders and trades unionists.27 Between 1890 and 1898, Liberal and Progressive governments in New Zealand, and in the states of New South Wales and South Australia, had introduced a long series of pioneering measures that related to many aspects of social policy and domestic and working life. These had included old age pensions, labour exchanges, compulsory arbitration in trade disputes, minimum wage legislation, anti-sweating laws, regulation of hours in factories and workshops, night-refuges for homeless women, and compulsory public works for the unemployed (the latter including ‘fossicking for gold’ in ‘old or deserted goldfields’).28

All these measures were designed to address the social and economic difficulties of daily life in a colonial setting, but their underlying ideology was very different from that of administrators and social reformers in Edwardian London. It was what a French visitor to Australasia had described as ‘le socialisme sans doctrines’, meaning that it was wholly uninhibited either by theoretical socialism or by classical liberal political economy.29 An active participant in the New Zealand schemes was the Liberal Fabian, William Pember Reeves, who had served as Minister for Education and then for Labour in the reforming governments of the 1890s, and later moved to

England as Director of the London School of Economics, where he wrote a detailed and influential account of the Australasian experiments. Pember Reeves’s study, published in 1902, was a highly significant work in a number of ways. Reeves clearly envisaged a much higher degree of pragmatic ‘state-interventionism’ in all aspects of social and economic life than was common at the time among even the most advanced of British Edwardian ‘new Liberals’. And he also treated social and administrative questions not simply as national, or even exclusively imperial themes, but as involving potentially universal problems and patterns of migration through the globe. But at the same time his social-policy ideas were deeply rooted in preconceptions about race. Thus in Australia and New Zealand, Reeves’s ‘universalism’ did not extend to Maoris, Aboriginals, Kanakas, nor to non-European immigrants of any kind; and elsewhere it applied only to racially homogenous peoples (an outlook that, even at the time, seemed peculiarly inconsistent with the empirical reality of a liberal economy based on unlimited international free trade.

The anomalies of Pember Reeves’s work raise the wider question of how far Victorian and Edwardian supporters of ‘liberal Empire’ were able more generally to address the ‘social problems’ of indigenous or subject races. For early-Victorian liberals this had not posed a serious problem, because the veto of orthodox political economy upon ‘paternalist’ and ‘redistributive’ social expenditure had not applied to the governance of ‘backward peoples’. Thus British administrators in India were able to deal with subsistence crises much more readily than their counterparts in rural Ireland or industrial Lancashire. But by the later-nineteenth century this caveat was beginning to fall apart in many quarters, not least because the British Empire itself had permitted, encouraged, and on occasion even enforced a great deal of economic migration across national boundaries and the intermingling of racial groups. In addition, the fact that many supposedly ‘vacant territories’ had not really been vacant at all became increasingly apparent, as colonial economies expanded and colonists increased in numbers over the course of the century (generating increasing tensions over competition for scarce resources and the rights of native peoples). And a further seemingly paradoxical twist came with the great depression of the 1880s and 1890s, when social reformers in Britain began to claim that the ‘outcast poor’ of London, Liverpool and Glasgow were worse off than those of Africa and India, because the latter were beneficiaries of imperial famine relief and other public welfare programmes of a kind unknown in metropolitan Britain (a claim very strikingly made in General William Booth’s best-selling work on Darkest London, and in the comments on Britain of the black American sociologist, William Pember Reeves, New Zealand Fabian, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1965.

Booker T. Washington). Systematic research into this gigantic subject has only recently begun to penetrate beyond biography, anecdote and preconceived ideology; although several recent scholars have drawn unexpectedly favourable conclusions about the impact of British social reformers (particularly women) upon social conditions in India, and about the mediating impact on racial feuds and antagonisms of the English Common Law.

V. What conclusions are to be drawn from this discussion about relations between, on the one hand, defence of the Liberal Empire, and ‘New Liberal’ ideas about social reform on the other; particularly during the decade before the First World War when these two (latently incompatible?) principles were compelled to work closely together? There can be no doubt that defence of the Empire took priority, both in terms of the absorption of material resources and of the seriousness with which defence requirements were regarded by Liberal ministers. This did not mean, however, that social welfare policies were simply a *placebo*, designed to tranquilise recalcitrant voters and to deter them from opting for rival Conservative promises of fiscal protectionism and tariff reform. And nor did it mean that Liberals wanted battleships for their own sake as a medium of expansionism and glory. On the contrary, in the eyes of most Liberals, the Liberal Empire in itself was the nation’s most important medium of social welfare; it was the scaffolding that both protected and made possible global ‘free trade’, without which –so Liberals believed– there would be not enough jobs, not enough to eat, and not enough room for the population to survive in the very restricted territory of the British Isles.

As suggested above, an earlier generation of liberals had believed that Free Trade in itself was all that was needed by way of a public policy to meet these problems for everyone in Britain, except for a tiny minority of those who were physically unable to work. But since the 1880s this situation had radically changed. The rise of cyclical and structural unemployment (together with what was seen as the perverse refusal of other European nations to abide by the rules of ‘free trade’) had forced Liberals to take on board a much more ‘redistributive’ range of state-based social policies, including artificially stimulating the incomes of the very poor. Winston Churchill himself, standing for Parliament in the Dundee by-election of 1908, explicitly called for an end to the long-standing ‘liberal’ notion that it was economically ‘orthodox’ for governments to spend public funds on relieving economic disasters in India, but not

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35 J. Harris, *Unemployment, op. cit.*, chap. 5.
on poverty and unemployment in mainland Britain.\(^{36}\) Another perverse factor was believed to be the persistence of great hereditary landed estates, which Liberals viewed as on a par with protectionist tariffs – as a malign force for obstructing, both the proper working of markets, and of state-induced redistribution through land taxes, inheritance duties, and other strategies of democratic social reform. And a third anomaly in Liberal eyes was the rise, not of the British Empire \textit{per se}, but of the wrong sort of Empire.\(^{37}\) By this they meant, not the peopling of ‘empty territories’ by British emigrants nor the bringing of good government to ‘backward peoples’, but the seizure of scarce resources by violence, the maltreatment of the native workforce, and the creation of cartels and monopolies (of the kind many Liberals believed had usurped power from legitimate government in southern Africa). The ‘right’ sort of Empire, by contrast was that envisaged in the imperial ‘citizenship’ legislation of 1914, which conferred entitlement to ‘British citizenship’ on all persons throughout the globe who had been born within the territories of His Majesty King George V. This was an entitlement that included the potential right of all such citizens to migrate to and settle within the mainland territories of the United Kingdom; although its long-term legal and social implications appeared to go wholly unnoticed at the time, even by the many eminent imperial lawyers and legal theorists who contributed to its framing.\(^{38}\)

VI. In all of this there was doubtless much double-think and delusion: and certainly many British Liberals of the Edwardian period were themselves at least in part complicit in many of the institutions and practices which in theory they condemned. And there were also many gaps and anomalies. There was no clear vision, for example, of what should happen when the ‘tutelage’ period of a subject nation came to an end; nor of how an economy of undiluted global free trade could be sustained, if and when all other nations no longer believed in it. Moreover, what happened at the centre of the Empire was by no means always consistent with what happened at its periphery, and \textit{vice-versa}. British colonial social-welfare legislation, for example, was often much more ‘advanced’, egalitarian, and redistributive than the domestic legislation of Great Britain; whereas colonial and Commonwealth governments were for the most part much more cautious, exclusive, and reactionary than the British Parliament and judiciary on questions of ‘Empire citizenship’ and ‘native rights’. Many Edwardian British Liberals themselves worried about the long-term effects of an economy based on a culture of mass consumption (portrayed by philosophers from Aristotle onwards as inevitably leading to corruption and national decline). And this mistrust of consumerism may perhaps help to explain the admiration of many Edwardian intellectuals for the domestic policies of Imperial Germany, which were


\(^{37}\) A point made by a major Liberal critic of ‘imperialism’, J.A. Hobson, who saw nothing wrong with Empire in the form of settlements of self-governing democratic peoples, as opposed to venture-capitalists exploiting ‘native’ labour.

widely perceived at the time to be much more disciplined, professional, public-spirited, and genuinely 'self-governing' than many of their equivalents in Edwardian Britain.

All these factors meant that the Edwardian ‘Liberal Empire’ was much more precarious than British Liberals themselves imagined at the time; but that, nevertheless, it was much more than just a bundle of paradoxes, or of mere pragmatic trade-offs between conflicting interest-groups. In particular they suggest that the relationship between imperial defence and social reform was very far from being simply a crude exchange between guns for the rulers and butter for the masses. On the contrary, Liberals never forgot that liberalism as a mass movement had been forged in an era of threatened subsistence crisis (which in the case of Ireland had materialised into mass famine). In Edwardian liberal eyes, keeping the seas open for free trade was thus in itself a prime principle both of good government and of collective ‘social welfare’. At a very basic level, it was seen as essential to the feeding of the British people, no less than as a guarantor of the defence and combatant capability of the British state.

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Abstract
In her paper, Jose Harris revisits Edwardian Liberalism and explores the nexus between free trade, Empire and social reforms. Did the New Liberals –against their initial preconceptions– come to see ‘imperial defence’ spending as a substantive form of ‘social welfare’? Was the colonial world an inspiring model for social reforms in the UK? How did Liberal Thought articulate the concepts of citizenship, race and class?
Résumé

Dans son article Jose Harris propose de réinterpréter la pensée libérale edwardienne en liant politique impériale, libre-échange et réformes sociales. Après 1906, les Nouveaux Libéraux, jusqu’alors plutôt critiques, se rallient à la défense de l’Empire, indispensable outil des réformes sociales sans précédent qu’ils mettent en œuvre. Doit-on parler d’impérialisme social ? Y a-t-il eu circulations de modèles entre les colonies de peuplement, véritables laboratoires des politiques sociales, et la métropole ? Comment s’articulent les notions de citoyenneté, de race et de classe dans la pensée libérale ?

Keywords: Liberalism; Empire; Social Thought and Social Policy.

Mots clés : Libéralisme ; Empire ; Pensée et politique sociale.