

# **Lord Northcliffe and the Fall of the Liberal Party**

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In 1906, after twenty years in opposition, the Liberal Party came to power in a landslide. With a formidable reform agenda, fatigue from seemingly endless Conservative rule, and dynamic young leaders, the Party was well placed for continuing electoral success. Instead, in the next election in 1910, the Liberal's 241-seat majority declined dramatically, leaving the opposition Conservatives just one seat behind.<sup>1</sup> By the following war-delayed election in 1918, the Liberals had been driven from power, never to win it again. The Liberal Party won Downing Street at the same moment that the political press reached the height of its powers. The U.K.'s most prominent newspaper proprietor, Lord Northcliffe, helped the press occupy a key role in British politics. Between 1906 and 1914, the press, monopolized by Northcliffe, laid the foundation for the Liberal Party's demise by offering unified opposition to the Liberal agenda (and talking points to the Conservative opposition) and splintering the Liberal leadership.

This paper focuses on the period between 1906 and 1914, the early stages of the Liberal Party's fall. This focus is controversial: many historians locate the causes of the decline of the Liberal party with the war, beginning in 1914. The war dramatically shifted the political and journalistic climate in Britain; the press lost (or gave up) much of its freedom and the salient political issues changed dramatically. Yet, as I show below, the foundation of the Liberal party's decline was a framework for failure laid in the pre-war period.

### The Press

The Liberal Party took power at a time of rapid transition in the press. The 19<sup>th</sup> century had been dominated by small-circulation newspapers, controlled by political parties, that sought to inform mainly through partisan editorials. By the turn of the century, however, the popular press began to be controlled by cheap, independent dailies that provided hard news in combination with more sensationalist, "fun" stories. This new type of paper— heavy on sales

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<sup>1</sup> David Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 23.

gimmicks and light on opinion—was referred to as “New Journalism.”<sup>2</sup> The success of New Journalism, however, relied on rapidly increasing circulation. As a result, newspaper owners kept prices low, and devoted increasing space to advertisement at the expense of news articles.<sup>3</sup> Soon, the independent dailies outpaced the older, partisan, party-funded, local papers.<sup>4</sup> Newspaper readership soared, increasing from 85 million newspapers sold in 1851 to 5.6 billion in 1920. Newspapers became “part of the normal furniture of life for all classes.”<sup>5</sup>

Alfred Harmsworth, later Lord Northcliffe, both led and profited off of these developments. Through a series of savvy business moves, he went from a poor newspaper writer to the owner of the most powerful papers in Britain in about twenty years. After experiencing some success with an entertainment magazine called *Answers*, Harmsworth expanded into news.<sup>6</sup> His early papers achieved middling success, but he found fame with the *Daily Mail*, which, in just a few years was among the highest circulation papers in the country.<sup>7</sup>

Harmsworth described his successful approach to newspaper writing—which typified the development of New Journalism—as “the quick and accurate presentation of the world’s news in the form of a careful digest” in which journalists, rather than offering opinion, “ascertain[ed] for me [the reader] that which is requisite I should know that I may be able to form a judgement on the ways of the world.”<sup>8</sup> Harmsworth’s efforts are credited by many scholars for the shift to New Journalism and the “general depoliticization of contents.”<sup>9</sup> As *The Daily Mail* succeeded, Lord

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 37.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 96,36.

<sup>4</sup> J. Lee Thompson, *Northcliffe: Press Baron in Politics, 1865-1922* (London: John Murray, 2000), xiii, 35; Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950*, 19, n28.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 8–11, 22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>8</sup> Sir Alfred Harmsworth, “The Daily Newspaper of Today,” in *Newspaper Press Directory, 1905* (London: C. Mitchell and Co., 1905).

<sup>9</sup> Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950*, 40.

Northcliffe (he had been elevated to a peerage in 1905) continued acquiring newspapers.<sup>10</sup> The result of these successful purchases was that Northcliffe became the most powerful and best-circulated newspaper-owner in the country and, perhaps, the world.<sup>11</sup>

Northcliffe political views were notoriously fickle, but on the whole, he toed the Conservative Party line.<sup>12</sup> This endeared him to the Conservative & Liberal Unionist alliance. The Conservative and Liberal Unionists parties were separate entities whose joint opposition to Irish Home Rule caused them to form an enduring political alliance beginning in 1895. From 1912, the parties were merged completely to form the Conservative and Unionist Party, usually referred to as the Conservative Party, but sometimes as the Unionists. Lord Northcliffe also saw alignment with a major party as a way to remain an influential figure—one of his goals.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the rhetoric of the New Journalism, and the population's growing preference for non-partisan papers, the press continued to play a significant role in government policy and elections. News stories often contained significant editorial intervention, and despite the decline of direct party funding, newspapers remained tied to parties.<sup>14</sup> Arguably, these were still opinion papers, but the opinions were implicit, shaping how the news was presented. Although it is difficult to quantify exactly how much influence papers wielded, contemporaries believed it was a tremendous amount. This view is echoed by the statements of prominent politicians. Leading Liberal Lord Rosebery is quoted in a history of Northcliffe as saying that “the power of a great paper to guide and embody public opinion was immeasurably greater than that of any statesman could be.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume Two: The Twentieth Century* (London: Hamish Hamilton LTD, 1984), 52.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume Two: The Twentieth Century*, 157.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 119.

<sup>14</sup> Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume Two: The Twentieth Century*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 168.

The view that the press wielded significant influence is made even clearer in the private letters between political players of the era. Following a meeting with Conservative leader Joseph Chamberlain, *Daily Mail* writer Herbert Wilson wrote to Lord Northcliffe. “Joseph continues very anxious [*sic*] to meet your views, and he will, I think do so... As you have stated to me that you would support him if he did not put up the cost of living, that I should think, would meet your views.”<sup>16</sup> Here Chamberlain made it clear to Northcliffe’s emissary that he was willing to moderate his views on the hot-button issue of tariff reform in order to convince Northcliffe to support him in his papers.<sup>17</sup> Lord Northcliffe’s conservative-oriented papers clearly wielded the most influence, but Liberal papers could also do significant damage. This is evident in letters from Liberal Lord Carrington and Prime Minister Asquith, requesting Asquith to ask the Liberal press to be kinder to Carrington.<sup>18</sup>

Newspapers also influenced the political atmosphere by defining the terms of political rhetoric. The term “public opinion” came to prominence in the early twentieth century and press barons like Lord Northcliffe were given credit for leading and creating it.<sup>19</sup> Contemporary scholars of the press referred to it as “a manifold engine for moulding, controlling, reforming, degrading, cajoling, or coercing the public... politicians are aware that the incessant pattering of ideas upon the heads of the public is like the pattering of rain which wears down the rocks.”<sup>20</sup>

This impressionistic sense of the power of the press cannot be verified with data. No opinion polls, readership surveys, or basic statistics about the press at the time exist.<sup>21</sup> As

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert W. Wilson, “Wilson to Northcliffe on Tariff Reform/Free Food,” October 1, 1903, Add MS 62201, p.1-2, British Library Manuscript Library.

<sup>17</sup> David Lloyd George asked for similar support and advice, writing that “your influence is essential.”

<sup>18</sup> Lord Carrington, “Carrington to Asquith,” May 1911, MSS Asquith 13 f. 10-11, Bodleian Library.

<sup>19</sup> Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950*, 25; Thompson, *Northcliffe*, xiii.

One example of Northcliffe’s ability to define the public debate was in his creation of the diminutive term “suffragette.”

<sup>20</sup> R.A. Scott-James, *Influence of the Press* (London: Partridge and Co., 1913), 12–14.

<sup>21</sup> Alan J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855-1914* (London: Croom Helm etc, 1976), 188.

historian Alan J. Lee writes, “it remains virtually impossible even to gauge the exposure of the electorate to the press at this time, let alone to assess what the effects may have been.”<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, the power accorded to the press by contemporary politicians and writers implies that they were taken seriously, and played a significant role.

The fall of the Liberal party took place when the Liberal press was at the lowest ebb of its power, and when Conservative papers were at the height of their influence.<sup>23</sup> The London press of 1870 had been dominated by Liberal dailies, but by 1906, much of the press leaned conservative.<sup>24</sup> Although the Liberal party maintained strength in the provincial press, the London papers (which had the largest circulations) were controlled by Conservative powerbrokers. The most influential political paper—*The Times*—though historically independent, also adopted a Conservative tilt. The Tory domination of the press is also indicated in messages from prominent Conservatives to Conservative newspaper owners like Lord Northcliffe. One, from party leader Arthur Balfour, read “You have taken the lead in newspaper enterprise, and both you and the party are to be heartily congratulated.”<sup>25</sup> This letter indicates the joy, and anticipation, with which Conservatives met the Conservative takeover of the news industry.

### The Election of 1906

Despite the power of the Conservative press, the Conservative government lost the election of 1906, as the public wearied of twenty-years of continuous rule, and a divisive stance

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 8; Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume Two: The Twentieth Century*, 75.

<sup>24</sup> Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855-1914*, 134.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur Balfour, “Balfour to Harmsworth Congratulations,” May 7, 1896, Northcliffe Papers Vol. I f.1, British Library Manuscript Library.

on tariff reform and protectionism. Two questions determined the election-- what role Britain ought to play in the world, particularly with respect to trade policy, and what sort of social reforms the government ought to carry out.<sup>26</sup> Joseph Chamberlain, a Conservative leader, promoted tariff reform in order to unify the empire economically while raising funds for social reform in Britain.<sup>27</sup> His plan would have raised prices for non-imperial goods, but rewarded colonial trade. Free traders, among his fellow Conservatives and in the Liberal party, opposed his plan. Chamberlain's position thus divided his own party and unified the unruly Liberals around the question of free trade.<sup>28</sup> The tariff reform debate led one prominent Liberal newspaper to proclaim: "A candidate had only to be a Free-trader to get in, whether known or unknown ..."<sup>29</sup>

Lord Northcliffe and Arthur Pierson, another leading newsman, were prominent supporters of tariff reform, and their stance contributed to the schism among the Conservatives. Although Northcliffe had been initially suspect of tariff reform—especially when it seemed likely to increase the cost of food—he came around to the idea, at least in part through conversations with Chamberlain beginning in 1903.<sup>30</sup> Pierson and Northcliffe became major figures in a "Tariff Reform League," which explicitly aimed to increase the prominence of tariff reform in the press and to ensure that arguments against tariff reform were quickly answered.<sup>31</sup> The advocacy for tariff reform in the newspapers decimated the Conservatives (around 140 of whom lost their seats).<sup>32</sup> Although this result did not bring Northcliffe's preferred party success,

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<sup>26</sup> A. K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide: The General Election of 1906*, Elections and Administrations Series (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1939*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 107–8.

<sup>28</sup> Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>30</sup> James D. Startt, "Northcliffe the Imperialist: The Lesser-Known Years, 1902-1914," *The Historian* 51, no. 1 (1988): 19–41; Leo J. Maxse, "Maxse to Harmsworth on Tariff Movement," November 28, 1903, Northcliffe Papers Vol. XXIII. f. 1, British Library Manuscript Library.

<sup>31</sup> Arthur Pearson, "Pearson to Harmsworth on Tariff Reform," November 25, 1903, Northcliffe Papers Vol. XX. f. 2-3, British Library Manuscript Library.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Fraser, "Unionism and Tariff Reform: The Crisis of 1906," *The Historical Journal* 5, no. 2 (1962): 155.

it underscored the power of his papers. He also redoubled his efforts to unite the Conservatives around solutions instead of dividing them, as he had in this case.

The Liberal triumph in 1906 was also predicated on the new government promoting a series of social reforms to benefit the working class that would justify their moniker as the ‘working-class’ party. They proffered plans for old-age pensions and aid for the unemployed, but deemphasized fiscal reform, which working-class voters were less interested in.<sup>33</sup> The party recognized the importance of working-class voters and campaigned extensively in working class areas to ensure their support.<sup>34</sup> The Liberal Party aimed to allay voters concerned about the integrity of the empire by pledging not to pass a Home Rule bill, which would have granted self-government to Ireland.<sup>35</sup> The question of home rule for Ireland had been a dominating political issue since at least the 1880s and had prompted the Conservative and Liberal Unionist alliance.

Although the Liberal Party won big in 1906, many factors suggest that the margin in Commons was not reflective of the facts on the ground. Despite a massive majority in the House of Commons, the Liberal Party ran just six points ahead of the Conservatives in the popular vote.<sup>36</sup> Further, many historians argue that the party’s commitment to the social reform agenda was mainly superficial, intended to help the party into office but a lower priority once they were seated.<sup>37</sup> The party believed it had won primarily on opposition to tariff reform and its leaders were not dedicated to radical social change.<sup>38</sup> In fact, they were concerned that moving quickly on social issues might alienate middle-class supporters.<sup>39</sup> It is widely believed that the Liberal

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<sup>33</sup> Russell, *Liberal Landslide*, 11, 71–73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> G. R. Searle, *The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration, 1886-1929*, 2nd ed., British History in Perspective (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 69.

<sup>36</sup> Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1939*, 98.

<sup>38</sup> Searle, *The Liberal Party*, 69.

<sup>39</sup> Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 19.

Party was simply lucky in its 1906 campaign—helped by Conservative disorganization, alienation of special interests, a good electoral map, the rise of the Labour movement, and a deeply unpopular Conservative platform.

### Northcliffe Acquires *The Times*

Unbowed by the conservative defeat, Northcliffe was hard at work. His significant ambition for years had been to own *The Times*, the most influential political paper of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in 1908 he finally achieved his goal. Prominent leaders of both parties were in frequent correspondence with writers from *The Times*, including the historically press-averse Liberal leader Herbert Asquith, whose archives contain numerous references to *The Times*. Despite the paper's Conservative bent it was read widely by Liberals, and its success even prompted one Liberal to plead for the Liberal *Daily News* to create a similar, albeit Liberal, paper.<sup>40</sup> It was even taken as the voice of government by foreign leaders.<sup>41</sup> Northcliffe's interest in *The Times* was largely due to this influence.<sup>42</sup>

*The Times* had a reputation for independence, and when Lord Northcliffe acquired the paper in 1908, he made several statements to staff at *The Times* reiterating that it would remain neutral. To Moberly Bell, the editor, Lord Northcliffe wrote that he hoped that the paper would be conducted as it had been in its best days, and that he would accede to Bell's demands for political independence.<sup>43</sup> In a letter meant for the King, Northcliffe's view was related by one of the King's advisors, Lord Esher:

My position is merely that of one who wishes to see this country represented to the world by an absolutely independent newspaper, always, I trust, in my lifetime, worthy of its

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<sup>40</sup> Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume Two: The Twentieth Century*, 76.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 146.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>43</sup> Stanley Morison et al., *The History of the Times.*, vol. 3 (London: The Times, 1935), 544.

high traditions; the organ of neither parties, sects nor financiers; its columns open to every shade of politics; a newspaper run not as a profit-making machine at all.<sup>44</sup>

Further, in an effort to allow *The Times* to retain its independent tag, Lord Northcliffe kept his ownership of the paper a secret for months. His fears of bad press were realized when he revealed his ownership, which prompted articles about the ill-effects he would have on the storied *Times*.<sup>45</sup> Although he tried to quash those concerns, the fears that *The Times* would be politicized ultimately came true.

Northcliffe's purchase had given him access to nearly 40% of London newspaper readers and significant influence over elected officials. He intended to use this power. When confronted with a list of demands by Bell while arranging for the purchase, Northcliffe had threatened to pull out unless Bell agreed to carry out his 'absolute instructions.'<sup>46</sup> His efforts to control *The Times*' editorial positions are made clear in letters to, and among, staff at the paper and to significant politicians. In one letter, Northcliffe's manager complained that "there appeared some passages which I considered did not altogether reflect Lord Northcliffe's views," and demanded that future articles on the topic conform to the chief's expectations.<sup>47</sup> Among the clearest examples of Northcliffe's early control over the paper is in *The Times*' treatment of prominent Conservative, and future party leader, Andrew Bonar Law's candidacy for a Commons seat in Manchester in the December 1910 election. Widely expected to lose, Bonar Law wrote to Northcliffe.

If it is not asking too much there is one thing that I should like. From what I can see the result in my division is at least very doubtful, and I think it extremely likely, as it gets near the time, the representative of *The Times* will have good reason to think that I am not

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<sup>44</sup> Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 152.

<sup>45</sup> Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume Two: The Twentieth Century*, 97.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 144.

<sup>47</sup> Arthur Pole Nicholson, "Nicholson to Bates on Running the Times," January 27, 1910, Northcliffe Papers XCIX f. 8, British Library Manuscript Library.

likely to win. I think, however it would do a good deal of harm if that were published before the election; and if you could prevent it, I should be much obliged.<sup>48</sup>

In an article the very same day he sent that letter, *The Times* had written that “the difficulties of the situation must not be overlooked” and that Bonar Law was quite unlikely to succeed.<sup>49</sup> After the letter was received, however, every article on the Manchester race expressed positive views about Bonar Law’s chances, despite pessimism about Conservative candidates in other races. Clearly, then, Northcliffe had impressed upon *The Times* the necessity to carry out Bonar Law’s favor. Northcliffe was even more successful in imposing his will on his other papers, which remained strongly supportive of Bonar Law’s candidacy throughout.<sup>50</sup>

### The “People’s Budget”, the Elections of 1910, and the Parliament Bill

The early years of Liberal government were not very remarkable—notable mostly for the replacement of Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman with Asquith in April 1908. Under Asquith’s leadership, the Liberal social reform agenda was revitalized. In 1909, newly appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George released his “People’s Budget.” This was the centerpiece of the new Asquith government’s efforts at social reform and, after three years of delay, the first bill of true national significance (and controversy) brought up by the Liberal government. The budget’s veto by the Conservative- dominated House of Lords set up the climactic elections and constitutional reforms of 1910-11.

Following the House of Lords’ repeated rejections of the Liberal agenda, Chancellor Lloyd George proposed a way to pass social reform without the Lords. He realized that he could include significant social reforms in his proposed budget which was, by long-standing

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<sup>48</sup> Andrew Bonar Law, “Bonar Law to Northcliffe on Candidacy,” November 22, 1910, Northcliffe Papers Vol. VI. f.1, British Library Manuscript Library.

Northcliffe also arranged to further the careers of his political favorites, as when he instructed Lord Haldane that his speeches would get “sympathetic[] treatment” if sent to him early enough.

<sup>49</sup> (FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT.), “Mr. Bonar Law In Manchester,” *The Times*, November 22, 1910, The Times Digital Archive.

<sup>50</sup> Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume Two: The Twentieth Century*, 157.

convention, free from the Lords' oversight.<sup>51</sup> While there is some disagreement over whether Lloyd George intended for his budget to pass—or whether he was hoping for a veto in the Lords that would set up a reform of that chamber—modern scholars have concluded that he genuinely hoped the budget would succeed.<sup>52</sup> Northcliffe, and his press machine, came out quickly against the proposed budget. Northcliffe's *Daily Mail* chief leader writer, Herbert Wilson wrote to Northcliffe to explain the position he would take, saying:

If the Budget had been a fair and just measure, levying heavy taxes for the Navy and national defence, much could have been said for it. As it is, it is the distribution of soup-tickets provided by super-taxes to the Government supporters. I fear it will profoundly damage the prosperity of the nation and thus put us more behind Germany than ever. The more one looks at it the worse it seems, the more unjust, the more dangerous. The one and only hope now remaining is that the Lords will throw it out...<sup>53</sup>

Northcliffe, too, wrote that he hoped the budget would be rejected: "I was rather sorry to hear that the powers that be in the Unionist Party were against the Peers throwing out the budget, for, if that process be technically correct, I think it would be wise in the interests of the country that the people should have the matter placed before them at a General Election."<sup>54</sup>

Northcliffe's private opposition to the budget was made public through his newspapers and helped lead to the budget's rejection in the House of Lords. Northcliffe mobilized his press machine, ensuring that all his major papers—the *Observer*, *Daily Mail*, and *Times*—followed his anti-budget lead.<sup>55</sup> Northcliffe's public interjection into politics prompted an angry retort from what was left of the Liberal press: "When we remember that 'The Times', the 'Daily Mail', and

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<sup>51</sup> Emily Allyn, *Lords versus Commons; A Century of Conflict and Compromise 1830-1930*. (New York: The Century Co., 1931), 167.

<sup>52</sup> Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1939*, 125. Bruce K. Murray, "The Politics of the 'People's Budget,'" *The Historical Journal*, September 1973, 555–70.

On the other hand, George Dangerfield in *The Strange Death of Liberal England* argued that "it was a wonderful trap to catch the House of Lords in. To humble the House of Lords was the devout, vindictive wish of all Liberals." (30)

<sup>53</sup> Herbert W. Wilson, "Wilson to Northcliffe on the Budget and Other Crises," May 15, 1909, Add MS 62201, p. 35-36, British Library Manuscript Library.

<sup>54</sup> Lord Northcliffe, "Northcliffe to Wilson," May 19, 1909, Add MS 62201, 36-37, British Library Manuscript Library.

<sup>55</sup> Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 166.

the ‘Observer’, not to mention a host of minor organs in London and the provinces, are all controlled by one man, it is easy to realise how vast a political power capital exerts by this means alone.”<sup>56</sup>

In *The Times*, the paper’s parliamentary correspondent, confirmed that the newspaper would push for rejection, while maintaining *The Times* history of impartiality.<sup>57</sup> In private letters to Lord Northcliffe, he wrote, “In the case of the House of Lords and the Budget, as I ventured to contend, news and policy seem to be intrinsically intertwined,” even as he argued “I have nothing to do with policy.”<sup>58</sup> Leading Liberals, such as David Lloyd George, realized that they needed to work the press to try to win public support for the budget, and met with Northcliffe and others.<sup>59</sup> In his meetings with Lloyd George, Northcliffe argued that the budget was strongly opposed by his readers, and in meetings with Balfour he confirmed that his papers would stand behind a rejection in the Lords.<sup>60</sup>

The Budget was rejected by the House of Lords, on November 30, 1909 necessitating a general election. Prime Minister Asquith made clear that the election would be fought over the powers of the House of Lords.<sup>61</sup> The Liberal Party quickly settled on a plan based on earlier proposals by former Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman that would give the Lords a suspensory veto over non-money bills, and no veto at all over money bills.<sup>62</sup> This became known as “The Parliament Bill.”

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<sup>56</sup> “Political,” *London Daily News*, May 3, 1909, sec. p.4.

<sup>57</sup> Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume Two: The Twentieth Century*, 114.

<sup>58</sup> Arthur Pole Nicholson, “Nicholson to Northcliffe on Robert and Hugh Cecil,” June 23, 1909, Northcliffe Papers XCIX f. 4, British Library Manuscript Library.

<sup>59</sup> George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (MacGivvon & Kee LTD, 1966), 32.

<sup>60</sup> Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume Two: The Twentieth Century*, 113–14.

<sup>61</sup> Neal Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People; The British General Election of 1910* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 72.

<sup>62</sup> Harry Jones, *Liberalism and the House of Lords; The Story of the Veto Battle 1832-1911* (London: Methuen and Co., 1912), 192.

The Conservatives, by contrast, were again relatively divided on strategy. Lord Northcliffe took it upon himself to referee that debate, providing his input where necessary. *The Times*' clear role in shaping this debate is made clear in a November, 1910 article.

The forecast given in these columns of Lord Lansdowne's question and Lord Crewe's reply upon the subject of the Government's intentions respecting a declaration of their policy was justified. Lord Rosebery's grave warning was delivered in terms very similar to those used in *The Times* on Monday, under the heading 'A Policy for the Lords'; and with respect to the motion which Lord Lansdowne will move today... it was pointed out in these columns yesterday that the House of Lords has never had an opportunity of expressing an opinion on the Government's policy.<sup>63</sup>

At least in the paper's own view, *The Times* was leading the politicians in both words and ideas. Not only, the article argued, were the very words spoken by Lord Rosebery "very similar," but the motion moved by Lord Lansdowne was directly related to earlier columns. There were remarkable similarities between the articles and the language used by Rosebery.<sup>64</sup> For example, *The Times* wrote, on November 14, "it is felt, now that the election may come so suddenly, that the time is one for swift decisions, and that proposals for constructive reform, to which they are pledged, should be formulated by the Unionist peers and agreed to either this week or the next if Parliament is sitting."<sup>65</sup> Echoing this position, two days later, Lord Rosebery is quoted as saying, in the House of Lords, "I think they [the resolutions for reform] ought to be taken at once—that they ought to be taken to-morrow rather than not at all...I would sit and discuss these resolutions all night rather than run the risk of a dissolution being announced on Friday and leaving the House without having had any opportunity of discussing them at all."<sup>66</sup>

The policies proposed by Nicholson (the parliamentary correspondent) in this article were also shared—or at least approved—by Northcliffe, as evidenced in the correspondence between

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<sup>63</sup> (BY OUR PARLIAMENTARY CORRESPONDENT.), "The Crisis," *The Times*, November 16, 1910, The Times Digital Archive.

<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately, I was not able to access the speeches themselves

<sup>65</sup> (BY OUR PARLIAMENTARY CORRESPONDENT.), "The Crisis: A Policy for the Lords," *The Times*, November 14, 1910, The Times Digital Archive.

<sup>66</sup> "House Of Lords," *The Times*, November 16, 1910, The Times Digital Archive.

the two.<sup>67</sup> *The Times* also floated alternatives to “The Parliament Bill.” These ideas included a referendum system for serious controversies (such as Home Rule), the creation of a joint committee to hash out differences, and even recomposition of the House of Lords.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to its influence on policy, *The Times* played a critical role in elevating the voices of specific politicians. Lord Northcliffe was particularly taken with prominent Conservative, and opponent of the Parliament Bill, Lord Curzon’s speeches, writing, “I am glad you are pleased with *The Times* reports. The speeches have been among your best, which is saying a great deal. I am glad to see that you recognize that the enemy is trying to pin us down to the House of Lords and the Budget, that their only fear is tariff reform.”<sup>69</sup> He followed those compliments by giving Curzon instructions on how to ensure his speeches retained their prominent place in the news. Not only did Northcliffe make clear that *The Times*—supposedly impartial—would be supporting the Conservatives against “the enemy,” but he specifically instructed his favorite speakers on how to outmaneuver the opposition.<sup>70</sup>

As the election campaign of December 1910 drew to a close, it became clear that neither party would win an absolute majority, and that the Irish Republicans would have a pivotal role in forming the next government. It was a foregone conclusion, that a Liberal win would approve not only “the People’s Budget,” but also Home Rule by way of Lords reform, because of promises made to Irish voters. This provided a new route of attack that the Northcliffe press was quick to take up. *The Times* argued, in one 1910 editorial, that the Liberals should not be elected

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<sup>67</sup> Arthur Pole Nicholson, “Nicholson to Northcliffe on the House of Lords,” November 15, 1910, Northcliffe Papers XCIX f. 23, British Library Manuscript Library.

<sup>68</sup> Jones, *Liberalism and the House of Lords; The Story of the Veto Battle 1832-1911*, 192; Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People; The British General Election of 1910*, 174; Corinne Comstock Weston Weston, *The House of Lords and Ideological Politics; Lord Salisbury’s Referendal Theory and the Conservative Party, 1846-1922* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1995), 7.

<sup>69</sup> Lord Northcliffe, “Northcliffe Ot Curzon on Making Good Speeches,” December 18, 1910, Northcliffe Papers Vol. I f. 144-145, British Library Manuscript Library.

<sup>70</sup> Here Northcliffe compliments Churchill. One interesting trend throughout Northcliffe’s papers is his admiration for Churchill’s ability to manipulate the press/use it to his advantage.

because they were being held hostage by MPs who were openly hostile to the very idea of the United Kingdom. They wrote: “the Coalition majority [including Irish Republicans] constituted by the temporary assistance of men who loudly proclaim their contempt for the interests of this country is bent upon destroying at once the Constitution and the unity of the Kingdom.”<sup>71</sup> They argued that the Liberal coalition did not have the “moral sanction” to reform the Lords because it was made up of “his [Asquith’s] proper forces with those of Labour, which on general policy does not trust him or believe in him, and with those of the [Irish] Nationalists, who are avowedly hostile to the great interests of this Empire which it is Mr. Asquith’s primary duty to guard.”<sup>72</sup> The theme, made clear here, that Liberals opposed the very sanctity of the empire was confirmed in articles in the *Daily Mail* that tied the budget to insufficient naval resources, Home Rule, single chamber government, and government imposition into the personal lives of citizens.<sup>73</sup>

Britain’s ability to defend itself, and its empire, were also at issue in this election. Fears of German power, combined with worries over naval preparedness, dominated Northcliffe’s mind. He worked closely with Conservative leaders Balfour and Bonar Law and used his considerable influence in the press to demonstrate Liberal weakness on this issue. The British public had feared German naval parity for generations, but the news that Germany might, by 1913, match the British in number of battleships, brought the issue to the fore.<sup>74</sup> Lord Northcliffe used his newspapers to increase the public outcry over Liberal failures to prepare Britain to safeguard the Empire in the face of the growing dangers of the German military.

Northcliffe’s lead paper in combatting naval unpreparedness was the *Daily Mail* but he used all of his papers to ensure his influence. Dating back to the 1906 general election, the *Daily*

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<sup>71</sup> “The Electoral Situation,” *The Times*, December 13, 1910, The Times Digital Archive.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 185.

<sup>74</sup> Startt, “Northcliffe the Imperialist: The Lesser-Known Years, 1902-1914,” 36.

*Mail* had made supporting the navy a central theme.<sup>75</sup> In 1910, as the fears over the navy gained steam, the *Daily Mail* began to argue that “battleships are cheaper than battles” and that the election was about the choice between “A Weak Navy or Command of the Sea.”<sup>76</sup> Northcliffe’s efforts to raise awareness of the naval issue came at the behest of, and in coordination with, leading Conservative figures like Balfour and Lord Haldane (a significant foreign policy voice.)<sup>77</sup> After Prime Minister Asquith successfully orchestrated a compromise which would purchase four ships immediately and up to four more later, the *Observer*, another Northcliffe organ, instituted a new slogan: “We Want Eight and We Won’t Wait.”<sup>78</sup> This line was echoed by the *Daily Mail*, demonstrating the coordination between Northcliffe’s various holdings.

*The Times* pulled its weight on the subject of naval preparedness, but Northcliffe exerted a significant amount of editorial control with regard to a related issue, The Declaration of London, which defined the rights of neutrals during war and determined which items would count as contraband. *The Times* had come out in favor of the Conservative naval preparedness scheme to the relief of Northcliffe, but they favored the Declaration of London, which Northcliffe stridently opposed.<sup>79</sup> First, he organized his other newspapers in opposition. Then, he pushed Nicholson to change the position of *The Times*. As *The Times*, in its own history, wrote: “Once he [Northcliffe] determined *The Times* would favor ratification, he told them to do the opposite and directed Nicholson that ‘If resignations are offered accept them.’”<sup>80</sup> Northcliffe was willing to sacrifice the staff, which he had taken great pains to retain, in order to ensure unanimity on this issue. He

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<sup>75</sup> Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 135.

<sup>76</sup> Startt, “Northcliffe the Imperialist: The Lesser-Known Years, 1902-1914,” 37. *Daily Mail*. 7 January 1910, 4.,

<sup>77</sup> Arthur Balfour, “Balfour to Northcliffe on Fleet,” January 3, 1910, Northcliffe Papers Vol. I f,39, British Library Manuscript Library; Lord Northcliffe, “Northcliffe to Haldane on Navy,” February 24, 1912, Northcliffe Papers Vol. III. f. 109, British Library Manuscript Library.

<sup>78</sup> Thompson, *Northcliffe*, 162.

<sup>79</sup> Morison et al., *The History of the Times.*, 1935, 3:694.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:747.

followed up further, writing in March 1911 to his editor that “I do not propose to allow one farthing of my fortune to be used in connection with that which would injure this country.” *The Times* acquiesced to his position, and the result of the unanimous opposition was a public protest in London against the Declaration, joined by Conservative leader Balfour, and eventually in the rejection of the Declaration in the House of Lords.<sup>81</sup>

Northcliffe also focused public attention on differences within the Liberal Cabinet. By highlighting the differing goals of Asquith and Lloyd George, Northcliffe divided their supporters. A *Times* leader on August 2, 1909 titled “The Two Voices” wrote that people “must be deeply impressed by the contrast between the utterances of the Prime Minister and those of his most active lieutenants.”<sup>82</sup> That article traced the conflicting messages about the budget proffered by Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George—the architect of that budget—and from Prime Minister Asquith—Lloyd George’s boss. In subsequent articles *The Times* even argued that the highly popular Lloyd George, and the increasingly notable Winston Churchill, “had other aims than those of the Liberal Party proper.”<sup>83</sup>

Northcliffe undertook this task of dividing Liberal support because he saw Asquith as a weak prime minister whose failures he could exploit. Lloyd George and Churchill also appeared to appreciate Northcliffe’s powers more than Asquith did, indicating that he might be able to wield more influence if they were in charge. Northcliffe wrote of Asquith that he “is not nearly strong enough for his job.”<sup>84</sup> In the same letter, he demonstrated his relationship with Churchill, from whom he received assurances that Asquith was a failed leader. Frequent letters between

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<sup>81</sup> Startt, “Northcliffe the Imperialist: The Lesser-Known Years, 1902-1914,” 39.

<sup>82</sup> “The Two Voices,” *The Times*, August 2, 1909, The Times Digital Archive.

<sup>83</sup> Stanley Morison et al., *The History of the Times.*, vol. 4, pt. 1 (London: The Times, 1935), 48.

<sup>84</sup> Lord Northcliffe, “Northcliffe to Grey on the State of the Government and Other Things,” April 1909, Northcliffe Papers Vol. III. f. 203-204, British Library Manuscript Library.

Northcliffe and Lloyd George, as well as Churchill, demonstrate that they valued the power of his paper, and that he enjoyed cultivating their power.<sup>85</sup>

The British political press did not cause the Liberal Party to fall but its contributing role in the Party's failures are clear. The most significant proprietor, Lord Northcliffe, was dedicated to the Conservative cause and used his significant newspaper resources to benefit them. Northcliffe also worked extensively with Conservative leaders to unify opposition to the Liberal agenda throughout the 1906-1914 period. In just four years, the Northcliffe papers had helped destroy the Liberal majority and laid the framework for the party's ultimate failures. Furthermore, his papers focused on the divisions among the Liberals that many historians have charged with causing the fall of the party. *The Daily Mail* and *The Times* helped bring these issues to the fore and amplify them to the electorate and the government. No one man was powerful to destroy the Liberal party on his own, but without Northcliffe, the party might have maintained its earlier success.

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<sup>85</sup> Northcliffe corresponded with Churchill quite frequently, providing advice on how to gain power as well as discussing politics. Churchill, as well seemed to value this relationship, writing to Northcliffe often asking to chat or play golf. Lloyd George seemed a little more distant from Northcliffe, but Northcliffe still sought to warn Lloyd George of potential political dangers. Additionally, Northcliffe specifically instructed his papers to tone down their rhetoric with regard to Lloyd George.

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