

THE SEARCH FOR "A REALLY SMART SHEET": THE CONSERVATIVE EVENING NEWSPAPER PROJECT IN EDWARDIAN MANCHESTER¹

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In the latter part of the nineteenth century electoral politics in North West England, as in the whole of the United Kingdom, were dominated by the Tory party. The Tories never won fewer than 44 of the 70 seats in Lancashire and Cheshire in the four general elections between 1886 and 1900, and at their peak in 1895, they returned 60 members. Thirty-nine seats in the two counties were continuously Tory throughout the period, whilst the Liberals could claim only three similarly faithful constituencies. This picture was dramatically transformed by the landslide of 1906. The Liberals won 38 seats, Labour 13, with three Lib-Lab victories, whilst Unionist representation fell to a mere 15, seven of which came from sectarian Merseyside. Not a single Tory was elected in Manchester and Salford where since 1885 the party had returned eight out of the nine members. The whole of Cheshire failed Unionism equally abysmally. Joyous Liberals agreed with Ivor Guest, who claimed to have witnessed the "Tory Armageddon".²

All the leading Unionists had expected their party's defeat, though none had anticipated its catastrophic dimensions. There was bewilderment, anger and recrimination at first, to be followed by a determination to revive the party and regain power. How this was to be effected, though, proved highly contentious. Unionism since 1903 had been riven by the fiscal controversy and this unresolved dispute continued to cast its shadow over every proposal for recovery, whether relating to the leadership of the party, its reorganisation, or, most of all, policy.

For some, tariff reform was the high road to success. It was a policy which would serve the interests of Britain and her Empire. Employment would be protected — as the slogan had it, "Tariff Reform Means Work For All" — and domestic improvements would be paid for by taxing the foreigner. Its mixture of Imperialistic patriotism and social reform was seen by its protagonists as having especial appeal to working-class voters, particularly when vigorously expounded by its chief advocate, Joseph Chamberlain. Other Conservatives did not agree. For them, tariff reform was radical rather than properly Conservative in its implications. The economic orthodoxy of the time was, after all, free trade, and orthodoxy had a powerful appeal to large numbers of Tories. Moreover, the food taxes which were central to the scheme seemed likely to prove a grave electoral liability. Also highly significant was the fact that, for many traditional Tories, the author of the policy, Chamberlain, was an over-ambitious "alien immigrant" who was plotting to take over their party.³

One thing on which the different party factions could agree was that, if the Tories were to regain power, they must concentrate on winning back their former strongholds. Thus, North West England, with

Manchester at its heart, came to be accepted as the cockpit of electoral struggle, by the Liberals and Labour no less than by the Unionists. It was a region in which the working-class predominated. In Lancashire and Cheshire, 42 out of the 70 constituencies were urban and working-class in character, with another 15 mixed urban middle and working-class seats.⁴ Given the fact that the electorate and the actual number of votes cast in contests were both rising in the early twentieth century, politicians and wirepullers were anxious for their party arguments and slogans to be heard by the working-class voter.⁵ As the *Manchester Courier's* Unionist leader writer put it on Valentine's Day, 1906: "We live in democratic days. The only hope for the party is to be in touch with the great masses of the people".

The Unionists tried to reach working men in several ways. Some were nourished by the many local Conservative Clubs, centres often more social than overtly political, though not for that reason politically ineffectual. If Unionism was not often taught in the Clubs, it was not unusual for it to be caught there, over beer and billiards. Among the wider public the doorstep campaign and the party leaflet were both employed, usually when local elections loomed, or when the new register was being compiled. Local orators exercised their talents on street corners and at factory gates, while campaigns on Blackpool and Morecambe sands were organised in the Wakes holidays. Tours by 'Walter Long Vans', equipped with lantern slides and gramophone records of political speeches, occurred at least once in each campaigning season. The Free Trade Hall and Belle Vue were regularly filled for meetings addressed by party luminaries such as Balfour, Chamberlain, Long and Derby, or coming men of the stamp of F.E. Smith.

The role of newspapers in all this was crucial. They both advertised the events outlined above before they took place, and reported them in detail afterwards. The press was the biggest megaphone of all, reaching out from the confines of public halls to the very hearth and home of the individual voter. This, at any rate was how the press was believed to function, and it was therefore quite natural for Manchester Unionists to see newspapers playing a vital part in their party's recovery in the North West after 1906.

In some ways the Conservatives were well served by the Edwardian press. The bulk of Fleet Street titles were in the Tory camp, and the changes which were taking place in the newspaper industry seemed inimical to Liberalism. The new popular press flattered and distracted its readers rather than educating them as Liberals had hoped. The more it became a truly mass medium, the less suitable a Liberal instrument it became, the problem of making "readable righteousness remunerative" ever more difficult to solve. Commercial considerations were impelling many titles to seek the middle ground; this was

often, in a period of popular imperialism, merely a stepping stone on a rightward journey. The growing "independent but neutral" local press in the provinces tended to favour the Unionists.⁶

The national picture concealed many regional variations, however, and in much of Lancashire south of the Ribble, down into Cheshire — the area of which Manchester was the hub — the Tories were far from confident about the state of their press. This had been true even during their period of electoral supremacy in the late nineteenth century.⁷ This Tory anxiety understandably intensified after the Liberal landslide. It had several components, one of which was the evident strength of the Liberal competition. Although in the country at large, many Liberals viewed the state of their own press with dismay, they had little reason to do so in the North West. The most important local press group in the region was controlled by George Toulmin, who had become a Liberal M.P. in 1902 by taking Bury from the Tories at a by-election. He published the very successful *Lancashire Daily Post*, an evening paper whose circulation grew by 29 per cent between 1900-14, to top 50,000. His *Examiner* group, based on Warrington, also flourished, and he had other bi-weekly titles such as the *Preston Guardian* and the *Blackburn Times*. A second Liberal group, owned by the Tillotson family, dominated the Bolton area. Its flagship, the *Bolton Evening News*, was reputedly read in nine out of ten homes in Bolton, Westhoughton, Leigh and Radcliffe. The Tillotsons also published the *Lancashire Journal* series of weeklies. Blackburn, in addition to Toulmin's title, had the radical *Northern Daily Telegraph*. The *Rochdale Observer* and the *Oldham Chronicle* kept the Liberal standard aloft into the Pennine foothills, the former being the most successful bi-weekly, selling close to 50,000 copies on a Saturday by 1910, while the latter's editors, Rennie and Hirst, were local Liberal councillors. Local editions of the *Catholic Herald* circulated in Bolton, Oldham and Preston, to Liberal advantage. Finally, in Manchester itself, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Manchester Evening News* were joined in 1909 by a northern edition of the *Daily News*. This crop of papers gave the Liberals the edge in numbers. Dr. Grace Jones has calculated that, in the spinning towns, among daily and weekly papers "worthy of consideration", 15 were Liberal, 11 Tory, with only one genuinely independent production, the *Bury Visitor*.⁸

The Tories did not lack titles of their own. In Lancashire and Cheshire in 1906, the party had two staunch morning dailies, the *Manchester Courier* and its Liverpool namesake. Both were aimed at the middle-class and cost one penny on weekdays, twopence on Saturday. The popular market was covered by the northern edition of the *Daily Mail*, which had been started in 1900. There were halfpenny evening papers in Oldham (the *Oldham Standard*, which had a side shoot in Ashton-under-Lyne), Bolton (the *Bolton Evening Chronicle*), Liverpool (the *Liverpool Evening Express*), and Stockport (the *Cheshire Daily Echo*). Bi- or tri-weeklies existed in Barrow, Blackpool, Burnley, Darwen, Preston, Rochdale, St. Helens, Southport and Wigan. Additionally, another 50 or so weeklies, Tory in sympathy, were to be found in the region. Some of these were local branches of main-stem publications, such as the six *Observers* based on Warrington, the five *Heralds* of Ashton-under-Lyne, the five *Telegraphs* of Eccles, and so on. Alan Lee has suggested that the Tory interest was bolstered by the *Guardian* group of Alexander Mackie, based on Chester and in competition with Toulmin's *Examiner* press, but

Conservative Central Office did not claim them as Tory in the Edwardian era. Also problematical was the position of Edward Hulton's Manchester-based *Daily Dispatch*, which sold 250,000 a day and was the region's most popular daily, just as his *Manchester Evening Chronicle* led all the evenings, though both papers inclined to the right as a rule.⁹

The real worries of the Tories were threefold. The Liberal papers were in the main well-established and financially secure, with rising circulations and advertising revenues, while many Tory sheets were in financial trouble. The *Bolton Evening Chronicle* was losing between £1,000 and £1,500 each year. The *Preston Herald* was subsidised by the Derby family, the *St. Helens Reporter* by the Pilkingtons. The *Chester Courant* depended on the city's M.P. Robert Yerburgh, the *Darwen Gazette* similarly on Sir John Rutherford.¹⁰ Further, many Liberal titles possessed a prestige and authority which made them the preferred reading even of those who were unimpressed by their political stance. The *Manchester Guardian* was pre-eminent in this respect.¹¹ No Tory paper could match it: the expensive and vain efforts to do so by building up the *Manchester Courier* only underlined the fact. What came to concern some Unionists most of all, though, was the lack of a strong, popular, halfpenny evening paper which was reliable from a party point of view.

Although many politicians (and journalists) considered the evening provincial papers of no account because of the scant attention they paid to politics in their pages, these popular halfpenny productions did reach out into the working-class.¹² Surveys of reading habits in the early Edwardian North West — by Leigh, on parts of industrial Lancashire, and Haslam, on four working-class areas of Manchester and Salford — confirm that the evenings were the most popular form of daily reading matter among working men. Robert Roberts' much-quoted memories suggest that morning newspapers only began to be bought regularly by working-class households after the First World War: in earlier years, the evening sheet, the Sunday productions and the local weekend rag were their staples. This perhaps suggests why Tories who aimed to influence the working-class drew little comfort from their dominance of the cheap morning market in Manchester, with the *Daily Mail* and the unreliable but generally rightwardly leaning *Daily Dispatch*. The cheap evening seemed the product likely to hit the desired target, even if, as all the sources agree, these papers were bought chiefly for their mixture of crime and sport, with racing information their greatest selling point.¹³

For some time Tory activists had been suggesting that a halfpenny evening paper could be turned to political account. In November 1903, a year before Alfred Harmsworth bought the *Manchester Courier*, he was urged to use the *Daily Mail* plant in Manchester to print an evening paper.¹⁴ After the Harmsworth takeover of the *Courier*, Coningsby Disraeli, Tory M.P. for Altrincham, repeated the request at a celebratory dinner given for Harmsworth and the new editor, Nicol Dunn, at the Manchester Constitutional Club. Disraeli argued that a new evening paper would do more than anything else to improve the health of Unionism in the area.¹⁵ The Manchester Tories had in fact lost an evening paper in 1902 when the *Manchester Evening Mail*, owned, like the *Courier* at that date, by the Sowler family, ceased publication. It had been killed off by Hulton's *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, founded in 1897, a light, bright production. The *Chronicle's* circulation had overtaken that of the other established evening, the *Manchester*

Evening News, stablemate of the *Manchester Guardian*, in 1900, when the *News* was selling in the region of 175,000 copies per day.¹⁶

Although the *Chronicle* was more a Tory product than anything else — its political coverage was not extensive by the standards of the day — a group of increasingly important Unionists considered that, like the Hulton press in general, it was unreliable. Maverick criticisms of the Taff Vale decision in the *Daily Dispatch* had offended some of the more traditionalist figures in the local party, whilst Hulton's anti-Chamberlain stance infuriated the tariff reformers. It was they who were the prime movers in the demand for a new evening paper. Given that the halfpenny evenings were bought by the working-class whose votes were essential to a Unionist recovery in the region, it was perfectly understandable that the tariff reformers should want to use that medium to broadcast their own message, especially in view of their claims about its potential for gaining support in that quarter. Both other evenings, though differing on many matters, were staunch for free trade. W.S. Boddington, brewer and prominent Manchester Tory, admitted the journalistic excellence of the *News* and the *Chronicle*, but considered them "politically pernicious". They had to be counteracted by a tariff reform rival for, as Boddington put it, "Politically speaking, we are helpless and hopeless without our own Organ."¹⁷

Early in 1906, correspondents bombarded the *Manchester Courier* with letters demanding the flotation of a halfpenny local evening, thereby clearly indicating the support of the paper's editor, Nicol Dunn. Several local Conservative Associations passed resolutions strongly commending the idea also. The central strategy of the Manchester Unionists who led this campaign was to enlist Northcliffe's support and persuade him to invest heavily in the project. Harry Sowler, from whose family Northcliffe had bought the *Courier*, wrote to Carmelite House pleading the case urgently. As if anticipating objections, he argued that although a cheap paper might be bought primarily for the racing news, some of its political message would also inevitably rub off on some of its readers. He estimated that the venture would require between £40,000 and £50,000 to launch, and thought in terms of a revival of the old *Manchester Evening Mail*.¹⁸ Boddington was more ambitious still. He set his sights on raising £150,000, and asked Northcliffe to provide one-fifth of this. To raise the rest he called a meeting of the Tory rich and reliable from all over the area in April 1906. These sums, Boddington's the more obviously, seem large compared with the capital necessary in Victorian times to establish newspapers in other provincial centres. However, costs were rising rapidly in the late nineteenth century, and the competition in the second newspaper city in the country made any cheapskate effort suicidal. Sowler, at any rate, had some newspaper experience, and the Manchester tariff reformers were clearly thinking big: they wanted "a really smart sheet", which was to be as well produced as it was ideologically impeccable, and which would circulate throughout the whole of central and southern Lancashire and Cheshire.¹⁹

Boddington wanted the paper to be based in Manchester, with several branch offices — at Chester, Blackburn and Preston initially. This plan bore an uncanny resemblance to one suggested by the former *Courier* journalist, E.B. Iwan-Muller, some years earlier. Iwan-Muller had tried to persuade the then Tory Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, of the advantages of an ambitious provincial evening newspaper, the basic skeleton of which would be

set up centrally, with the blocks then ferried rapidly to smaller towns, where news of parochial interest, and late racing results would be added. Salisbury would not be drawn, but the idea was not forgotten by its author. Iwan-Muller was in Manchester during and after the 1906 election, and wrote a long memorandum to Balfour on the political situation as he observed it, which included advocacy of a new evening paper.²⁰

Despite all this pleading, nothing emerged. There is no evidence that Northcliffe responded other than coolly to these overtures. Two properties in the area, one of which, the *Courier*, was a loss-maker, were more than enough for a man who was not fond of long journeys to Manchester.²¹ Local finance was not forthcoming to encourage him, either. Alfred Stephenson and S.R. Crapnell of the *Courier* were both supporters of the need for an evening paper, but were highly sceptical about the prospects of raising money for it in Lancashire, where rich men, Stephenson wrote, "... want a lot for nothing and won't put their hands down".²² The business elite of the area remained generally faithful to free trade. The general atmosphere of the city was such that even those commercial men who had become sympathetic to "constructive policy" were reluctant to pronounce this publicly. I. Levinstein, who had resigned the Chairmanship of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce before joining the Tariff Commission, wrote in 1907 that Manchester was "... the most difficult place in the United Kingdom to create sympathy for Tariff Reform"; even the converted felt uncomfortable there. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the numbers willing to subscribe financially as well as ideologically to the evening paper plan were small.²³

The project was revived in 1907 and was directly related to the unsatisfactory political nature, from a tariff reform point of view, of Hulton's papers. Correspondents wrote to the *Courier* that both the *Chronicle* and the *Dispatch* were refusing to publish any letters which were at all critical of free trade. The movement of the Conservative leadership nationally towards a firmer endorsement of tariff reform enabled the Manchester reformers to underline the unwillingness of the Hulton press to support the "first constructive policy" of Unionism. The need for a popular evening paper which would put the official policy forcefully before the voters was therefore transparent.²⁴

At this juncture Eddie Stanley, former M.P. for Westhoughton and soon to succeed as 17th Earl of Derby, became involved. It may have been that Stanley acted on his own initiative in his own fiefdom, or perhaps he was alerted by Acland-Hood, the Tory head whip, or Jack Sandars, the party leader Balfour's close confidant, who simply assumed that effective action in the region required Stanley's co-operation, if not his wholehearted approval. Though Stanley said he was keen on the idea of a new evening paper, the conditions he made for involvement suggest otherwise: he would only help if assured of Northcliffe's commitment to the project, along with that of Lord Newton, the Earl of Ellesmere, and his own father. Northcliffe proved initially elusive, partly because of his many convalescent trips, much to Stanley's irritation. Eventually, however, his support was secured. He wrote later that he "... was willing, though not anxious to undertake the venture".²⁵

In the autumn of 1907, a new element entered the situation. Edward Hulton, in poor health for some time, appeared eager to re-enter the Tory fold. His free trade views had led to his expulsion from the Manchester Con-

stitutional Club the previous January, but now he was said to be keen to get back, and keener still to be elected to the Carlton. Stanley was willing to put him up for the latter, in the hope of persuading him to swing his newspapers into line with official Conservative policy. With the approval of Balfour, Acland-Hood and Percival Hughes, the chief Tory agent, Stanley joined the Hulton Board, as did his political mouthpiece in Manchester, Dr. Thomas Eastham. With Stanley and Eastham thus placed, it was argued, there was no need to embark on the risky launch of a new evening paper, for the well-established *Chronicle* had been captured. Northcliffe dropped the idea, probably with relief.²⁶

Stanley had hinted to the meeting of the Lancashire National Union of Conservative Associations in November 1907 that confidential negotiations were in progress aimed at the improvement of the party's newspaper position. When the secret was out, it provoked an outraged reaction in precisely those circles where pressure for a new Tory evening paper had been strongest. The *Courier* praised Stanley's work for Unionism, but described his decision to join the Hulton Board as "... perplexing and, indeed, incomprehensible". Benjamin Carver, a leading Prestwich Unionist, was even more outspoken. He wrote that Stanley should not have touched Hulton with a pair of tongs; he should now resign from Hulton's Board — or from the Lancashire National Union. The *Courier* insisted that the plan for a tariff reform evening was not to be abandoned because of Stanley's actions, for the need still existed, and Stephenson informed Northcliffe that the whole party in Manchester was behind the *Courier* line. Northcliffe would brook no argument, though, and the *Courier* was instructed to put the lid on the controversy. The editor, Nicol Dunn, was furious, believing that either Derby had been duped by Hulton, who had acted cannily to prevent the emergence of a competitor to the *Chronicle*, or that the pair were engaged in an anti-tariff reform conspiracy. He obeyed his Chief, however, and the *Courier* carried no more critical letters.²⁷

Northcliffe himself quietly reopened the evening paper issue in the summer of 1909. He may have got wind of Hulton's impending reversion to out-and-out free trade, or he may have been subjected to more pleadings from tariff reformers. He wrote himself of having been "urged in a new quarter" to look again at the idea. Northcliffe insisted that the project was not secret, though he consulted no-one at the *Courier*, preferring to seek the advice of senior people on the northern edition of the *Daily Mail*. E.H. Curtis warned him that it would mean a long struggle, though Arthur Longworth was a little more sanguine. Northcliffe appears not to have taken any action on their advice.²⁸

By the end of 1909, with Hulton's papers once again in opposition to "constructive policy", Northcliffe wrote that the whole strategy of putting Derby (as Stanley now was) on the Hulton Board was a fiasco, and that the 17th Earl had been badly outmanoeuvred. Jack Sandars concurred, blaming Acland-Hood's enthusiasm for pressing the scheme on Balfour. If Northcliffe and Sandars, who were both hardly tariff reformers *pur sang*, were condemnatory, the apoplexy of the true believers requires little explanation. Despite all the sound and fury, though, the evening paper plan was to all intents and purposes dead. A few whispers were subsequently raised, but with no practical result.

Once Hulton had reverted to free trade type, many Tories were keen to exercise hindsight, after the fashion of

Sandars and Northcliffe, and say that the Derby initiative was doomed from the start. Derby lacked the character or qualifications to pull it off, Sandars said, and others also believed this. Tariff reformers attributed not stupidity to Derby but subtlety, seeing the whole business as a piece of deviousness on the part of one who had never really been a supporter of tariffs, despite his joining the Tariff Reform League in 1909. His aim from the first had been "... to strangle the project for an evening paper about whose principles there would be no doubt".²⁹ In fact, the Derby strategy had much to recommend it from the broad Tory viewpoint. Hulton's papers were proven successes, the *Chronicle* reaching the working man better than any other local title. To win them over was both cheaper and far less risky than starting a totally new enterprise. Derby himself had moved very slowly to a qualified acceptance of tariffs, but he had moved, and was unquestionably loyal to Balfour. He seemed therefore an ideal person to persuade Hulton to keep to a similar path. From Hulton's point of view, the scheme halted the emergence of a competitor, and his vanity was satisfied by entry into the Carlton Club. For over a year, though, he did move his papers into a more conciliatory position, a year which included the celebrated defeat of Winston Churchill in the North West Manchester by-election by Joynson-Hicks, to Tory rejoicing. Balfour wrote in appreciation of Hulton's activity in the summer of 1908.³⁰ Derby had not, in the end, been able to control Hulton, but for 18 months or so the *Dispatch* and the *Chronicle* were far more amenable to orthodox Tory influence than previously. If the real object of the evening paper idea was simply to reach the working-class voter, then Derby's strategy had at least as much to recommend it as that of the tariff reformers.

It is pertinent to note that the tariff reformers themselves were not making much of a fist of the *Manchester Courier* during this period. Founded in 1825, a daily since 1864, the *Courier* had been making losses since the mid-1890s, and its publishers, the Sowers, needed subsidies from Balfour when he was M.P. for East Manchester, until Harmsworth came to the rescue in 1904, an act widely rumoured to have secured his translation a year later to Lord Northcliffe.³¹ Balfour's *eminence grise*, Jack Sandars, claimed that Northcliffe's involvement with the *Courier* was "... business and not pure party service", but the new owner wrote that, "Except for political reasons I have no desire whatever to have the responsibility for the rehabilitation of the 'Manchester Courier' ... from the point of view of a business investment, I would not consider it at all".³² Northcliffe's assumption of control had brought many changes. J. Nicol Dunn was lured to Manchester from the chair of the tariff reform *Morning Post*, and he thoroughly modernised the paper, its offices in Cannon Street being literally electrified. The editorial line became one of gradually increasing support for tariff reform. Every effort was made to match the *Manchester Guardian* in all respects, but especially in the commercial and financial sections. A small profit was made in 1906, but none thereafter. The paper's manager, S.R. Crapnell, wrote in 1907 that people were dropping the *Guardian* to take the *Courier*, but this was a hollow boast.³³ By 1908, Northcliffe was looking for an escape route. Some thought was given to taking the paper downmarket into the fiercely competitive halfpenny field, but this would have cost at least £50,000, according to Nicol Dunn, and the move was in any case opposed by local Tory worthies, headed by Boddington, who were determined to have a penny paper so that the *Guardian* should not have a clear run. Alderman W.T. Rothwell, of the Newton Heath brewery, a man "... willing to pay for his fads", preserved



Although the offices of the Manchester Courier were on Cannon St., rivalry with the Manchester Guardian was such that the newspaper felt the need to buy advertising space on the building adjacent to the Guardian offices on Cross St., opposite the Royal Exchange building. Photo dates from 1902.

the *Courier* in the quality realm by loaning it £20,000 in 1908. This persuaded Northcliffe to stay on as a Director, though he ceased to be Chairman. Between them, Northcliffe and Rothwell met the papers losses thereafter.³⁴

Thus, Manchester Unionists faced the elections of 1910 still lacking a new evening paper, with their quality flagship, the *Manchester Courier*, in a parlous state, and with Hulton's titles having declared themselves "Independent". Nevertheless, the election results did see the Unionists regain ground. They secured 23 of the 70 Lancashire and Cheshire seats in the January 1910 contest, and this rose to 31 at the December election in the same year. This was less than the optimists had hoped for, but the constitutional crisis which had grown out of the Lloyd George budget of 1909 had thrown all calculations awry. In the following years, though, the Unionist position in the North West continued to strengthen. In the region's by-elections between 1911 and the outbreak of war in 1914, they held three seats — Bootle, Chorley and Altrincham — reduced Liberal majorities at Middleton and Bolton, and captured two Manchester seats — North West and South — from the Liberals in straight fights, and Oldham and Crewe as a result of three-cornered contests.³⁵ Whatever the reasons for the continuing recovery — the pendulum belatedly swinging, the increasing unpopularity of an evidently fatigued Liberal administration, reactions against the rise of Labour, or the soft-peddalling of tariff reform by the Unionists after the "Lancashire rebellion" of 1912-13 — it was achieved without the element which earlier had been considered vital, a cheap party evening newspaper.

These events in the Manchester region reveal a number of things about both politicians and the press in the decade or so before the Great War. The evening paper project highlighted the virtues and vices of the tariff reformers particularly sharply. That they were able to originate and sustain pressure for a halfpenny evening demonstrates their energy and confidence; the requests for a new organ from local Conservative parties indicates the deep penetration they had achieved into the organisational fabric of Unionism. Their analysis of the situation in the North West was plausible: electoral success in the area was a prerequisite of their party's resumption of the reins of government. Recovery would not be easy; a large number of working-class votes would have to be won, and a small newspaper would not be equal to this task. Therefore the idea for a bright, well-designed halfpenny sheet which would circulate all over the region had a certain logic. It accorded well with the general ethos of tariff reform — confident, ambitious, aggressive, convinced of its own modernity, that it was the wave of the future, to the point of grandiosity: not for nothing were they called "whole-hoggers". However, all this added up to an operation requiring large sums of money, for which support was simply not forthcoming. The wealthy Unionists kept their purses tightly shut, their distaste for the policy of the new newspaper adding force to a general business caution. Studies of the finance of the press in the late Victorian and Edwardian era suggest that those who invested in newspapers had to wait a very-long time as a rule to see any return on their capital, if any there was. Losses were only too likely, and large losses at that, on a scheme as ambitious as that proposed by the



Manchester Conservative Club, Cross St., (corner St. Ann St.). Erected in 1875 in Italianate style. The entrance hall included an Italian mosaic floor and mural scenes depicting 'monarchy', 'justice', 'peace', 'law', 'fame', and 'mercy'. Upstairs was a 98ft dining room. The building still stands today.

Manchester tariff reformers. More papers were closing than opening at this time: of the score or so of separate newspapers founded in Sunderland after 1830, only one survived in 1906. There was really no rational commercial case for a new halfpenny evening in Manchester. Local investment was therefore only likely for reasons of overwhelming political conviction, or from a desire to be associated with a prestige project. Neither proved sufficiently compelling. The tariff reformers were therefore forced to wait upon Northcliffe, who had insufficient incentive to become involved. Thus, the Manchester tariff reformers conceived of a highly ambitious scheme in an atmosphere which was hostile in two senses: to its fiscal policy, among wealthy Unionists of the region, and to the foundation of new provincial papers generally. Enthusiasm had led them into a double misjudgement.

This story also demonstrates the way in which the relationship between politicians and the press was beginning to change with the arrival of the new journalism. Hulton and Northcliffe represented a new breed of proprietor, independent of political subsidy because highly successful at their own trade, though not without political opinions. Politicians could appeal to them, reason with them, flatter them, cajole them, honour them, but, in the end, they could do as they wished. Therefore Hulton eventually went his own way despite Derby's best efforts. Northcliffe, after securing his barony, did his political duty in the North West but reluctantly, supporting the *Courier* with increasing irritation, and after 1908, largely because Rothwell was

sharing its losses. He showed little desire to risk more money on an evening paper. The impression that he was anxious to set one up, but was prevented by Derby's machinations is not sustainable. Had there been a commercial market for one, Northcliffe would have capitalised on it much earlier.³⁷ As it was, he simply went through the motions of loyalty, whilst trying all the while to extricate himself from everything in Manchester except his own popular productions. He made repeated efforts to sell the *Courier* to Rothwell, but failed. In the end, he stayed with the paper until it ceased publication in 1916, though with ill-grace.³⁸

This vignette also suggests how difficult it is to determine what influence was exercised by the press. The course of events in the area after 1910 could easily lead one to entertain the notion that the partisan press was of little political account. By 1914, the Unionists were poised to recover power, without having gained an evening paper, and with their penny paper, the *Manchester Courier*, in a sorry state. Further, the other major political development in the region, the rise of Labour, was achieved without the support of any significant newspaper, morning or evening, halfpenny or penny.

Some modern commentators, sceptical of press influence, might find this an entirely acceptable picture, nationally as well as locally. Editors and renowned journalists, no less than the great proprietors, existed cheek by jowl with politicians during the week in the little world bounded by Fleet Street, Westminster and the clubland of St. James's. They corresponded and talked, dined and drank

together, but were locked in what was, according to the sceptic, a circle of delusion, centred on their faith in the political influence of the press. Critics who take this stance see the press as at best able only to confirm pre-existing political commitments. Its readers were not agnostics loitering at the church door; they were either believers already ensconced in the pews, or people who enjoyed the litany whilst ignoring the sermon.³⁹

Yet this evaluation would have commanded little assent in Edwardian England. It was an article of faith, right across the political spectrum — free trade and tariff reform Unionists, old and new Liberals, all shades of Labour along with 'single issue' pressure groups such as the various campaigners for women's suffrage — all believed that press support was of enormous importance. Its absence was a cause of universal lamentation and concern, which was itself a tribute to one aspect of press influence, its success in convincing the political classes that it was indeed influential.⁴⁰

To be sure, there were different perceptions as to how the press could assist politically. People's expectations tended to be all of a piece with their general attitudes to the whole political process. On the Unionist side, the tariff reform activists were convinced that, with newspaper support of the right sort, they would sweep all before them: frequently converts themselves, they were optimistic about the conversion of others. Their main Unionist opponents did not believe such a conversion could be effected, but feared that the widespread publication of Chamberlainite propaganda would have the negative effect of alienating many traditional Conservatives in the North West, a position which, of course also acknowledged the power of the press. Less fervently committed Unionists were inclined in a hazy and unspecific way to believe that the state of the party's press indicated the underlying reality of the party's position: a press in trouble indicated a party with problems. They did not accept that people were rapidly converted by newsprint, but suspected that many drops of water could wear away a stone. They also felt that, however great or small press influence was, it was prudent always to match one's opponents: thus one party's efforts in the press field would stimulate a reciprocal reaction. Even sceptics, never thin on the ground in Conservative politics in most eras, reluctantly agreed that, as the electorate widened, the old methods of influence, such as the control of the register, the careful canvass, the set-piece meeting, had to be supplemented by effective use of the press.

Change at the centre of the Tory party after 1910 indicated the continuing high valuation of newspaper support. There was substantial reform of Conservative Central Office in 1911 which placed improvements in propaganda high on the list of necessary developments. The new party chairman, Arthur Steel-Maitland, continued to subsidise friendly papers from party funds,

or persuaded sympathetic tycoons to save titles from disaster. He cultivated proprietors assiduously, and when Northcliffe threatened to withdraw from the *Manchester Courier* again in 1912, he was prevailed upon to continue, with great reluctance, his support for its losses. Steel-Maitland brought Malcolm Fraser, formerly editor of the *Daily Express* and the *Standard*, into Central Office and made him head of a new press bureau. Expenditure on the bureau increase from £422 in 1910-11 to £2,509 in 1913-14. The advice of important editors such as Blumenfeld of the *Express*, or the mercurial Garvin of the *Observer*, was regularly sought and freely given. A new professionalism was urged upon party speakers in their relations with the press: speeches were increasingly sent out in advance, so that late meetings should not miss newspaper deadlines. A new attitude was abroad, which clearly accepted the political value of the press and, though there were pockets of resistance, this eventually bred a form of partnership between Tory politicians and newspapers.⁴¹

A further reason why Unionists might have rejected a low estimate of press influence on their recovery after 1910 may be found in the continuing Conservative lead in national and large circulation newspapers, and in the way local press developments seemed to favour Unionism. If, as is often claimed, politics was becoming more and more centred on national issues in the Edwardian period, then clearly national newspapers would assume an even greater significance. The trend towards an "independent but neutral" local press probably reinforced this. Certainly these local developments were a serious blow to the opponents of Unionism, for they signalled the beginning of the end of the once-powerful local radical press tradition. Moreover, the rise of Labour often produced a similar response in both Liberal and Unionist local sheets, but the Unionists seemed to have gained more from this common anti-socialism.

It is certainly far from easy to show in what way and to what extent newspaper activities affected events.⁴² There are numerous examples which seem to bolster a negative assessment: notoriously, Northcliffe could not persuade the public of the virtues of standard bread, or a new style of male headgear, any more than Beaverbrook at a later date could succeed with Empire Free Trade. Nevertheless, it would be rash to assume that the press had no influence on political consciousness: if anyone entertained such a notion in Edwardian Manchester, he or she kept very quiet about it indeed (or were ignored by the papers!) The usual response was akin to that of the local tariff reform Unionists: those with a message sought to deliver it through what they saw as the most effective medium, and that was invariably the press. With all its faults, and despite the uncertainties which surround its claims it was "... the best available index to popular opinion as well as the single most convenient mechanism for guiding it".⁴³

NOTES

1. The phrase "a really smart sheet" was used by one of the *Manchester Courier's* indefatigable tariff reform correspondents, W. Gatward, in a letter printed in the issue of 28 Feb. 1906. The terms "Conservative", "Tory" and "Unionist" are here used as synonyms, though the formal merger of the Conservative and Liberal Unionist organisations did not take place until 1912.
2. Ivor Guest to W.S. Churchill, 14 Jan. 1906, printed in R.S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill, Vol. Two, Young Statesman, 1901-14, Companion* (1969), p.426. The remaining Lancashire and Cheshire seat was Liverpool Scotland, occupied by the Irish Nationalist fixture, T.P. McKenna. For a detailed examination of the electoral position, see C. Buckley, 'The Unionist Party in North West England, 1906-14, with special reference to the Manchester area' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1985, 2 vols.) (hereafter Buckley, 'Unionist Party'), pp.1-173.
3. See esp. A. Sykes, *Tariff Reform in British Politics, 1903-13* (Oxford, 1979).
4. This follows the categorisation in N. Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties, and the People* (1972), Appendix 2, pp.484-94, but assumes that Blewett's "mining seats" in Lancashire are also predominantly urban.
5. J. Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin* (1978), p.54.
6. For these developments, see A.J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press, 1855-1914* (1976) (hereafter Lee, *Origins*), esp. pp.15-20, 117, 131-80. See also A.J. Lee, 'The Radical Press' in A.J.A. Morris (ed.), *Edwardian Radicalism, 1900-1914* (1974), pp.47-61; S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (2 vols. 1981, 1984) (hereafter Koss I, Koss II), esp. I, Chs. 1, 8, 10; L. Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford, 1985), Ch. 4.

7. The National Union of Conservative Associations, meeting in Manchester in 1876, unanimously urged the strengthening of the local Tory press — a sentiment repeated by the same body ten years later. See Koss, I, pp.207,290.
8. Lee, *Origins*, pp.141, 149-62. There is a most useful account of the press in the spinning towns of Lancashire in G. Jones, 'National and Local Issues in Politics: A Study of East Sussex and the Lancashire Spinning Towns, 1906-10 (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Sussex, 1965) (hereafter Jones, 'National and Local Issues'), esp. pp.122-201. This article's debt to Dr. Jones's work on the Liberal press is considerable.
9. Buckley, 'Unionist Party', pp.244-249; *Constitutional Year Book, 1906* (reprinted Brighton, 1972), pp.360-9; Lee, *Origins*, p.92.
10. Jones, 'National and Local Issues', pp.141-55; R.H. Baldwin, 'A Historical Essay on the Conservative Party in Darwen, 1868-1929' (typescript), Lancashire Record Office (hereafter L.R.O.), PLC 2/2/8.
11. On Tories reading the *Manchester Guardian*, see 'Politics and Party, by A Propagandist', *Manchester Courier*, 28 March 1907; also Lord Derby to P. Woodhouse (copy), 2 Dec. 1914, Derby Papers, Liverpool City Library, 17/1.
12. Lee in Morris (ed.), *Edwardian Radicalism*, p.53.
13. Lee, *Origins*, pp.39-40, 218, 246; R. Roberts, *The Classic Slum* (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp.162-4; A.P. Wadsworth, 'Newspaper Circulations, 1800-1954', *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society* (1955), p.38.
14. Chorlton to Harmsworth, 4 Nov. 1903, Northcliffe Papers (hereafter N.P.), B.L. Add.MS 62, 292A, fos.73-5.
15. *Manchester Courier*, 10 Jan. 1905.
16. Wadsworth, *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society* (1955), p.40, has a graph indicating a daily sale for the *Manchester Evening News* of 175,000 in 1900. J. Nicholson, 'Popular Imperialism and the Provincial Press: Manchester Evening and Weekly Papers, 1895-1902', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 13 (1980), pp.86, 88; on p.96 Nicholson suggests a circulation for the *News* of between 130,000 and 170,000 but gives no source.
17. Boddington to Northcliffe, 10 June 1906, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,293 (unfoliated).
18. Chorley Conservative Association Minutes, 17 Feb. 1906, L.R.O. PLC 3/1; Darwen Conservative Association Minutes, 21 Feb. 1906, L.R.O. PLC 2/1; Bury Conservative Association Minutes, 20 March, 1906 (with the Association); Sowler to Northcliffe, undated, but Jan. 1906, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,275 (unfoliated).
19. Boddington to Northcliffe, 10 June 1906, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,293 (unfoliated). For costs, see Lee, *Origins*, pp.83-4, 164-6; also A.J. Lee, 'The Management of a Victorian Newspaper: the *Manchester City News* 1864-1900', *Business History*, 15 (1973), pp.131-48; M. Milne, 'Survival of the Fittest? Sunderland Newspapers in the Nineteenth Century' in J. Shattock and M. Wolff (eds.), *The Victorian Periodical Press: Samplings and Soundings* (Leicester, 1982), pp.193-223.
20. Iwan-Muller to Balfour, undated but early 1906, Balfour Papers (hereafter B.P.) B.L. Add.MS 49,796, fos.117-54. See also Koss, I, p.311.
21. Northcliffe does not appear to have visited Manchester after his three-day stay early in January 1905, when he formally took over the *Courier*. His letters contain several expressions of displeasure at the thought of having to go there again: see Northcliffe to Bonar Law (copy), 13 Feb. 1912, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,158 (unfoliated); also Northcliffe to Rothwell, 5 March 1915, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,328 (unfoliated).
22. Stephenson to Northcliffe, 31 Jan. 17 Feb, 24 April 1906, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,272 (unfoliated).
23. Levinstein to Hurd, 30 June 1907, Tariff Commission Papers, c-599, quoted in A.J. Marrison, 'British Businessmen and the "Scientific Tariff" A Study of Joseph Chamberlain's Tariff Commission, 1903-1921, with special reference to the period 1903-1913' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Hull, 1980), p.179; see also pp.299, 303-4, for similar points.
24. See letters in the *Manchester Courier*, esp. on 8, 15 March, 15, 20 June 1907.
25. Nicol Dunn to Sutton, 25, 27 June 1907, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,275 (unfoliated); Northcliffe to Sandars (copy, undated, but 1909), N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,153 (unfoliated).
26. Caird to Northcliffe, 31 Jan. 1907, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,188, fo.5; Boddington to Northcliffe, 15 Sep. 1907, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,293, fos.196-8; Boddington to Northcliffe, 12 Dec. 1907, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,296, fos.43-4; Acland-Hood to Sandars, 16 Dec. 1907, J.S. Sandars Papers (hereafter J.S.P.), Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Eng. Hist. c.75, fos.280-3; Sandars to Balfour, 22 Dec. 1909, B.P. B.L. Add.MS 49,766 fo.44.
27. *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Nov. 1907; *Manchester Courier*, letters on 14, 16 Jan. 1908; Stephenson to Northcliffe, 16 Jan. 1908, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,272 (unfoliated); Nicol Dunn to Sutton, 15, 17, 19, 27 Jan. 1908, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,275 (unfoliated); Northcliffe to Sandars (copy, undated, but 1909), N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,153 (unfoliated).
28. Northcliffe's correspondence with Kennedy-Jones, E.H. Curtis and Arthur Longworth in August 1909 is in N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,196, 62,203, and 62,307 (all unfoliated).
29. Sandars to Northcliffe, 22 Dec. 1909, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,153 (unfoliated); Sandars to Balfour, 22 Dec. 1909, B.P. B.L. Add.MS 49,766, fo.44; Stephenson to Eastham (copy), 17 Jan. 1908, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,272 (unfoliated).
30. Balfour to Acland-Hood, 4 Aug. 1908, J.S.P. Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Eng. Hist. c.757, fos.1-6.
31. *Manchester City News*, 3 Dec. 1904, Manchester Central Library, News Cuttings (Journalism), ref.474. For Balfour's investment, see Northcliffe to Bonar Law (copy) 13 Feb. 1912, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,158 (unfoliated). R. Pound and G. Harmsworth, *Northcliffe* (1959), pp.295-6 deny that Northcliffe paid for his barony, but allow that it was a consequence of Balfour's appreciation of his provincial newspaper activities in 1905.
32. Sandars to Short, 1 Jan. 1905, B.P. B.L. Add.MS 49,763, fos.1-2; W.H. Stephenson, *Alfred Frederick Stephenson, Knight Bachelor. A Lancashire Newspaper Man* (Manchester, 1934), pp.94-5.
33. Stephenson, *Alfred Frederick Stephenson*, p.98; Duguid to Sutton, 19 April 1906, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,184A, fos.54-7; Stephenson to Northcliffe, 7 July 1906, and *Manchester Courier* A.G.M. Minutes, both in N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,276 (unfoliated); Crapnell to Sutton, 12 April 1907, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,184A, fos.81-3.
34. Boddington to Northcliffe, 15 Sept. 1907, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,293, fos.196-8; Nicol Dunn to Sutton, 25 April 1908, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,272 (unfoliated); Northcliffe to Balfour (copy), 29 July 1908, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,153 (unfoliated); Stephenson to Northcliffe, 13, 15 July 1908, N.P. B.L. Add.MS 62,272 (unfoliated). See also Buckley, 'Unionist Party', pp.249-56, 551-5, 568-70, for the later history of the *Manchester Courier*.
35. See Buckley, 'Unionist Party', Chs.6-8, for details.
36. See Lee, *Business History*, 15 (1973), pp.131-48, and Milne in Shattock and Wolff (eds.), *The Victorian Periodical Press*, esp. p.194.
37. This impression is given by Nicholson, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 13 (1980), p.88: 'He was prevented from producing an evening by Lord Derby's loyalty to Edward Hulton'. No source is given, but P.F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1971), p.155, has an identical sentence.
38. The *Courier* was losing over £10,000 per annum by 1914; see Northcliffe to Bonar Law, 3 Dec. 1914, Bonar Law Papers, House of Lords Record Office, 35/4/9.
39. Lee, *Popular Press*, pp.187-9. Of course there is a flourishing contemporary school of writers who see the press as a powerful instrument of social control. See, for example, J. Curran and A. Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain* (1981).
40. Koss, II, pp.1-14; D.G. Boyce, 'The Fourth Estate: The Reappraisal of a Concept' in D.G. Boyce, J. Curran and P. Wingate (eds.), *Newspaper History: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day* (1978), p.29; B. Harrison, 'Press and Pressure Group in Modern Britain' in Shattock and Wolff (eds.), *The Victorian Periodical Press*, pp.263, 273-5, 289.
41. The most detailed account of the Unionist reorganisation is in J.A. Ramsden, 'The Organisation of the Conservative and Unionist Party, 1910 to 1930' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1974), esp. pp.231-40.
42. See Lee, in Morris (ed.), *Edwardian Radicalism*, p.55.
43. Koss, II, p.9.