



## Why We Don't Want Another Joseph Chamberlain

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*Britain should be worried about Theresa May seeking political inspiration from Joseph Chamberlain, writes Richard Allsop.*

Nick Timothy, the former Chief of Staff to UK Prime Minister Theresa May, is a big fan of Joseph Chamberlain, a major British political figure of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Timothy's old boss also got in on the act, praising Chamberlain in a campaign speech for the Conservative Party leadership last year.

Chamberlain has been somewhat overshadowed in the historical memory by his son Neville, who became Prime Minister in the 1930s, something which the father did not achieve. While in the top job, Neville secured 'peace for our time' at Munich in 1938. Hitler quickly proved the son wrong in a manner which was hard to miss; the legacy of the father has for many remained a more open question.

Admirers of Joseph Chamberlain, such as Timothy and seemingly May, are correct to regard him

as a significant figure. However, the thought that they might use him as a role model in the early twenty-first century is a serious concern because he was as wrong as his son on a wide range of issues. One of Joseph Chamberlain's biographers, Richard Jay, neatly summed up his subject:

The central theme which appears to dominate his viewpoint, and which marks him so distinctively as a politician of the twentieth rather than the nineteenth century, is his identification with 'collectivism' and the growth of an interventionist state in reaction to the classical laissez-faire ideology which dominated mid-Victorian public policy.

Chamberlain's desire to move on from the non-interventionist attitude of the previous couple of generations manifested itself in numerous ways, but none more obvious than his call in 1903 for the imposition of protection and imperial preference. Free trade had been an article of faith in British politics since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. This landmark event not only delivered cheaper bread to the poor and contributed to a general rise in economic prosperity, but also became a driving force in creating a more liberal world, one where Britain did not fight a major war from 1815 to 1914.

**CHAMBERLAIN'S SHIFTING POSITION ON IRELAND AND SUDDEN REMOVAL OF HIMSELF AND A LARGE TRANCHE OF OTHER UNIONISTS FROM THE LIBERAL PARTY DID SIGNIFICANT HARM TO THE PARTY'S FORTUNES.**

The key advocate for repeal had been politician Richard Cobden. Once the repeal was achieved, Cobden pushed hard to ensure that Britain developed more open trading arrangements with European countries. Most reform movements in mid-nineteenth century Europe were explicitly liberal, and even nationalist movements in Germany and Italy had a distinctly liberal bent. However, by later in the century, liberalism was being eclipsed by a more authoritarian version of nationalism, most significantly the brand implemented by Bismarck in Germany. British politicians had to decide whether to stick to their liberal principles or try to follow the growing nationalist, statist and imperialist trend. Chamberlain became a leading advocate of the latter position.

One reason for Timothy's attraction to Chamberlain is their shared Birmingham background. Chamberlain's political involvement began in local government, where he built one of the first political machines in Britain. He was a highly-activist mayor who municipalised Birmingham's gas supply and even considered doing the same with the local pubs as part of his support for the Temperance Movement.

Having entered national politics, ostensibly on the radical wing of the Liberal Party, Chamberlain proceeded to split the Liberal Party in 1886 over what were largely semantic differences with Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone over home rule for Ireland. Chamberlain had already shown a remarkable capacity to change his position in a short period of time. When the Egyptian nationalist movement was causing trouble, Chamberlain went from being an advocate of not getting involved to supporting action in the most jingoistic of terms. Chamberlain's shifting position on Ireland and sudden removal of himself and a large tranche of other unionists from the Liberal



Party did significant harm to the party's fortunes over the next two decades. However, it is still hard not to sympathise with Gladstone's comment that 'nothing in this whole affair gave me greater satisfaction than Chamberlain's resignation'.

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Given that Chamberlain and his band of fellow Liberal Unionists kept the Tories in power for most of the next 20 years, it is easy to see why Conservative leaders such as Lord Salisbury and Arthur Balfour felt compelled to accommodate Chamberlain inside their tent, even if this was not always easy. When Salisbury formed a new government in 1895, he made Chamberlain Colonial Secretary, a position in which he stirred up many problems. Chamberlain took up the cause of the Uitlanders, Transvaal's British-expat population in the South African Republic. Chamberlain also promoted the disastrous Jameson Raid, a failed attempt by local British forces to incite a full-scale Uitlander rebellion. Then, his failure to control the militant High Commissioner in South Africa, Alfred Milner, ultimately led to the Boer War. Further, it was only Salisbury's skilled diplomacy that stopped Chamberlain from engineering war with France in 1898-99.

Chamberlain's brand of imperialism in this period was the same type Bismarck had promoted in Germany, with growing state socialism at home designed to build a nationalistic ethos and provide healthy foot soldiers for service in colonial battles. Chamberlain remained a supporter of increased social programs, whether as a Liberal or as a Unionist in a Conservative Government, only changing the arguments to match his new party affiliations.

With more assertive nationalism, and more expansive imperialism, it is hardly a surprise that protectionism and notions of imperial preference raised their ugly heads. Certainly, Chamberlain's declaration in their favour in 1903 did not come out of a vacuum. Increasing volumes of wheat being imported to Britain from North America from the 1870s led to the formation of a Fair Trade League in 1881. Protection had already taken hold in the United States and Germany. Debates between free-traders and protectionists were a feature in British colonies such as Australia and Canada.

In the lead up to the next election, having campaigned for restrictions on the importation of goods, Chamberlain expanded his protectionist views to include immigration. He was a strong advocate of the Aliens Act of 1905, which marked a major shift in British policy. Until then, immigration to Britain had been unrestricted, and this, combined with massive emigration to the United States and British colonies, had produced a degree of mobility which did not return until much later in the twentieth century. A major factor leading to the passage of the Aliens Act was the arrival in Britain of large numbers of destitute Jews fleeing persecution in Tsarist Russia. Many settled in the East End of London and Chamberlain used a speech there to link protection and the Aliens Act as twin means of safeguarding the jobs of British workers.



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In the short term, Chamberlain and the Tories' advocacy of protectionism did not succeed. The Liberal Party won a landslide victory at the 1906 general election, as the majority of working class voters remained loyal to the cause of cheap food. However, it proved something of a pyrrhic victory for free trade, as within a quarter of a century there were massive levels of protection imposed across the world as the Great Depression reached its nadir. The protectionist sentiments were also contributing factors to both World Wars.

Some have drawn links between the campaign for tariff reform initiated by Chamberlain and the fascist movements which sprang up between the wars. Linking of national efficiency with the need for social programs, using an extra-parliamentary movement to apply pressure on politicians, stirring up of nationalism and denouncing traditional liberalism all became elements in the rise of extremism.

The second half of the twentieth century saw a gradual return to a more liberal world culminating in the early 1990s, when Francis Fukuyama famously declared the end of history, the triumph of liberal democracy on a world-wide basis. There is no doubt it was the most cheerful time for liberalism in more than a century. With fascism and communism defeated, the move of China towards a form of crypto-capitalism and many governments embracing concepts like privatisation, there seemed sound grounds for ongoing optimism. However, as the old cliché goes 'those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it'. Just as many mid-Victorians assumed the triumph of liberalism was permanent, the same sentiment in the 1990s has proved similarly illusory.

The contemporary world seems full of Joseph Chamberlains looking for ways to put up barriers rather than embrace an outward-looking and free-trading world. The contest between these competing world views is particularly important as Brexit is implemented. The jury is still out on whether Brexit will be a force towards a freer and more open Britain, providing a shining example to the rest of Europe, or whether it will create a narrower nationalism driven by populist fears about internationalism and open markets. Sadly, if Joseph Chamberlain is providing any of the inspiration, it is unlikely to be a more liberal outcome.