Lord Kelvin and Liberal Unionism

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Abstract. Kelvin had been a staunch Liberal until Gladstone’s Irish Home Rule Bill of 1886 made him a Liberal Unionist. He believed the measure would damage Ireland’s best interests and would create economic and social instability. He also rejected it on constitutional grounds. Concern for the position of Ulster’s Protestants was, however, not a major issue for Kelvin. Between 1886 and 1890 he was the most prominent Liberal Unionist in the West of Scotland, and under his leadership, the party was highly effective in the region. It is likely that, to a certain extent, his peerage was a reward for his political work. After 1890, Kelvin became more of a party figurehead, while his views on many political issues drew him closer to those of the Conservatives.

1. The background to the 1886 Irish Home Rule Bill crisis
On 8 April 1886, the Liberal Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone (figures 1 and 2), revealed his proposed legislation to grant Home Rule to Ireland. The main elements of this legislative package were that an Irish parliament would be established in Dublin, and as a consequence no Irish constituencies would be represented in the Westminster Parliament. The Dublin parliament would have responsibility for domestic legislation relating to Ireland, while Westminster retained control of foreign and Imperial policy, along with the armed services, and certain fiscal matters. Additionally, an ambitious scheme to buy out Irish landowners and transfer ownership to tenant-farmers was brought forward as an integral part of the scheme.

Gladstone had a number of motives in proposing Home Rule for Ireland, and, as was quite common with him, they were a blend of high-minded principle and low political cunning [1]. The problems of Ireland had preoccupied British statesmen at regular intervals since 1800; Gladstone calculated in 1886 that for 42 of his 54 years in politics, Irish matters had been at the forefront. As he wryly remarked to Alfred, Lord Tennyson about his political career, ‘Ireland has had a rather dominant influence over it’. For nearly twenty years before 1886, Gladstone had been actively engaged in seeking to definitively settle the question. He famously announced when forming his first ministry after winning the 1868 general election, “My mission is to pacify Ireland.” Yet since then the urgency of the Irish crisis had intensified, not diminished, despite his various legislative initiatives over the next two decades. His second administration, lasting from 1880 to 1885, had been bedevilled by the political demands of Irish nationalism, the problems of Irish agrarian discontent, and the obstruction of parliamentary business by Parnellite MPs (figures 3 and 4). As he ruefully remarked, this ministry had found Irish issues “especially (and rather unexpectedly) prominent.”
Figure 1. William Ewart Gladstone (1809-98), British Prime Minister from 1868-74, 1880-85, Feb to July 1886 and 1892-94. From 1885, he was convinced that Home Rule was the solution to the Irish question.

Figure 2. William Gladstone in the 1880s, as drawn by the artist Phil May.

Until the early 1880s he had been adamant that there could be no constitutional dilution of the full union of 1800 between Britain and Ireland: self-government was not for him a political option. This position he had stated explicitly and fully in various public forums on many occasions from the mid-1860s. His mind, however, had been moving to Home Rule from some point in 1882, and by the first half of 1885 he seems to have definitely decided that this was the only solution. He concluded, after thorough study, that the union had been harmful to Irish development and stability, so drastic remedies

Figure 3. Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-91), founder and leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party and, as such, ‘uncrowned King of Ireland’. A crisis developed in 1890 when his relationship with Mrs Katherine O’Shea became known and the party split. In September 1891 he gave a crucial speech in pouring rain, but caught pneumonia and died.

Figure 4. The Irish Parliamentary Party in April 1886. Parnell is standing in front at left of centre.
were now inevitable. Nothing but a broad, generous measure of self-determination would yield a lasting solution. The general election of 1885 added significantly to Gladstone’s resolve to introduce Home Rule. Parnell’s party increased its numbers at Westminster from 59 to 86 MPs, wiping out all Irish Liberal MPs. The nationalists now represented fully five-sixths (85 [2] out of 103) of Irish constituencies – a democratically achieved majority which could not easily be ignored by politicians in the rest of Britain. Gladstone claimed that after this verdict at the ballot box, there was a very real danger that Irish nationalists might turn to violence if their demands were not met. As Ireland had been racked for nearly a decade by agrarian unrest, and Fenian “outrages” were a contemporary reality, this was a compelling argument for many.

But there were other factors behind his decision. Gladstone, a vain man, regarded the solution of the Irish question as the last and greatest task in his distinguished political career, and he believed that he alone was capable of tackling it successfully. It has also been argued that he feared that the Liberal party would split if he was succeeded by the Radical contender for the leadership, Joseph Chamberlain (figure 5). Chamberlain’s advocacy of radical policies, such as the disestablishment of state churches, was viewed with extreme hostility by the moderate, or Whig, wing of the party, and a large number
threatened to secede if the Chamberlain programme were introduced – including, as shown below, many in Scotland. One successful device adopted over the years by Gladstone to maintain Liberal unity was to get the party to focus on one over-riding issue, so sidelining the demand for divisive policies advocated by sections. Irish Home Rule was a further instance of this strategy. But there was an added dimension: Gladstone disliked Chamberlain, the more so because of what the Prime Minister saw as his lieutenant’s disruptive conduct while a member of the 1880-85 government. Gladstone sought to stop Chamberlain replacing him, and so hoped to diminish his stature. Chamberlain had advocated a fairly diluted version of Home Rule, known as the “Central Boards” proposal, which involved conferring greater powers on Irish local government. Gladstone calculated that Chamberlain would be humiliated by having to jettison his pet scheme, and instead follow Gladstone’s policy.

Gladstone had made two assumptions which did not materialise, and as a result he had to introduce his proposals in less propitious circumstances than he had envisaged, and with catastrophic consequences. Firstly, he anticipated that the Liberals would win the general election of 1885 with a commanding majority. This would enable him to draft Home Rule legislation without seeming to be acting under pressure from the Irish nationalists. It would also permit him to contemplate a certain degree of dissidence within his party with equanimity, as the rebels were not likely to be numerous enough to defeat his scheme. Secondly, he recognised the need for a period of time in which the party could be brought round to appreciate why he had opted for Home Rule, and a large majority would mean that he did not have to rush precipitately to legislate. The 1885 general election, however, did not produce the result which Gladstone expected. Instead, the balance of power in the Commons lay with the Parnellites: there were 335 Liberal MPs, 249 Conservatives and 86 Home Rulers. This meant that Irish Home Rule would have to be dealt with very early in the life of a Liberal government, in order both to appease the Irish nationalists, who could now block all other legislation, and also to remove them expeditiously from Westminster. When Lord Salisbury’s short-lived minority Conservative administration, formed after the election, collapsed early in 1886, Gladstone took office
aware that there could be no protracted period in which to educate his party on the case for Home Rule.

The reception of the Prime Minister’s scheme among his party at all levels was deeply divided. A large proportion – perhaps one-third – refused to accept this radical switch. At the top echelon of the Liberal party, the response was devastating. The two main contenders for the succession to Gladstone, viz., Lord Hartington (the Whig leader, figure 6) and Chamberlain both declined to follow Gladstone. Lower down the ladder, MPs and constituency activists also opposed the Home Rule proposals. These dissident Liberals were termed Liberal Unionists, and almost immediately organised to defeat Gladstone’s scheme. It is important to stress that they still – initially, at least – regarded themselves as Liberals, and emphasised that they had no ideological truck with the Conservatives, even if for tactical reasons they felt obliged to co-operate with the Tories to defeat Irish Home Rule. Liberal Unionists believed that the strength of their opposition to the measure would compel Gladstone to abandon it, whereupon the reunion of the Liberal party would take place. In fact, Gladstone and all subsequent Liberal leaders remained committed to the policy. As a result, Liberal Unionists supported the Conservatives governments of 1886-92 and 1895-1905, with several, notably Hartington and Chamberlain, latterly holding ministerial office under the Tory Prime Ministers, Lord Salisbury (figure 8) and Arthur Balfour (figure 9). Gladstone’s second Home Rule, introduced when he returned to office in 1892, reinforced Liberal Unionists’ hostility to their old party.

In Glasgow, as elsewhere across Britain, a solid body of Liberal Unionists quickly emerged [3]. Within a month or so, a formal entity had been created, subsequently called the West of Scotland Liberal Unionist Association [WSLUA], to propagandise and organise in support of the unity of Britain and Ireland, and to resist Gladstonian Home Rule. At the centre of this movement was Lord Kelvin [4]. He was involved in the cause from the outset; he exploded to Charles Darwin’s son, George (figure 10), soon after the bills were revealed, “Was such madly mischievous legislation ever proposed in the history of England [sic] before?” He was equally scathing about Gladstone’s second Home Rule bill of 1892, damning it as “the most monstrous of all bills that ever were put before any...
legislative assembly in the world.” His untiring commitment was acknowledged by a Glasgow periodical in 1892. There he was acclaimed as:

“the most prominent Unionist in the West of Scotland. For the past five years no Unionist meeting in Glasgow has been complete without Sir William’s [i.e., Kelvin] presence. Whoever has flagged, whoever has fallen by the way, Sir William has known no abatement of enthusiasm. To-day he is as eager in his opposition to the dismemberment of the Empire as he was on the famous 8th of April 1886 [5].”

Kelvin became the first chair of the WSLUA Executive Committee, serving until 1890. Thereafter he held the honorific position of President of the association until his death in 1907. There are several themes which the rest of this paper will explore: firstly, why Kelvin became a Liberal Unionist; secondly, why he was chosen to hold such important positions; thirdly, what contribution he made to the growth of Liberal Unionism; and fourthly, how far his political position changed over two decades

2. Kelvin: from Liberal to Liberal Unionist
By 1886, Kelvin was a long-standing and quite active Liberal. His name appeared in the lists of supporters of party candidates at every general election from 1865 until 1885. Indeed, in the 1874 contest, his brother-in-law, Alexander Crum of Thornliebank (figure 11), unsuccessfully stood for the city as a Liberal. In 1874 and 1880, Kelvin was part of the platform party at the Liberal candidates’ eve of poll rallies. His wife reported that he was “in great spirits” at the outcome of the 1880 general election, which resulted in a heavy win for the Liberals [6].

Moreover, Kelvin considered standing for the Liberals at the 1869 election in the newly-created constituency of Aberdeen and Glasgow Universities. The electorate consisted solely of graduates of these two institutions, and as Glasgow was substantially the larger, he would have stood a very good chance of victory – indeed, the Liberals had won the seat in 1868. However, Kelvin declined, stating that he had consulted a sitting Glasgow MP, and concluded that the time and work which would be required meant that he would not be able to continue his teaching and research activities. Cynics might also wonder if he was unwilling to contemplate the substantial loss of income which would arise from abandoning his very lucrative private work, since MPs were then unpaid. Within a decade of deciding against a parliamentary career, he was able to buy a 2,000 acre estate in north Ayrshire, a quite expensive part of the country [7].
Instead, in 1868, along with a clutch of Glasgow professors, he energetically promoted the candidacy for the Universities seat of Archibald Smith (figure 12). A distinguished mathematician, Smith had been Senior Wrangler in 1836 at Cambridge, a co-founder of the highly prestigious Cambridge Mathematical Journal and was an FRS. The two men had been friends since they had met at Cambridge when Kelvin was a student; Smith was already a Fellow of Trinity College. Moreover, in 1851 Kelvin had proposed marriage on three separate occasions to Smith’s sister, Sabina, who rejected him. Smith’s son, James Parker-Smith (figure 13), was also to work closely with Kelvin in the cause of Liberal Unionism. Whereas in the city seats Kelvin was only a middle rank Liberal, he took a pivotal role in the universities seat. He acted as the chair of Smith’s campaign committee, while the Principal [i.e., Vice-Chancellor] of Glasgow University and the city’s most renowned Church of Scotland minister were merely vice-chairs, along with a clutch of professors[8].

Smith was, however, shunted aside to allow a machine politician to have a safe seat. But when the representation fell vacant in 1869, he was selected as the Liberal candidate. Kelvin again played a very prominent role in his campaign. In the midst of the contest, Archie Smith informed his wife that Kelvin was sitting beside him, writing to his many contacts, urging them to support Smith. Despite Kelvin’s exertions, Smith lost, and from then until its abolition in 1918, the seat was never again held by a Liberal. Nevertheless, it appears that in 1884 Kelvin was again being mooted as a possible candidate [9].

From the very first intimation of Gladstone’s Home Rule plans, Kelvin was in the Liberal Unionist front-line in Glasgow. He was among a small group of dissidents – probably no more initially than nine or ten - who met several times a week in April and May in the offices of A.B. McGrigor (figure 14), the senior partner in one of Glasgow’s top legal firms. Here they planned the organisational and propaganda responses to prevent Home Rule. Many of these men, including Kelvin, were voters in Glasgow College constituency, which contained – besides, obviously, the university quarter - some of the most socially exclusive city districts, such as Park and Kelvinside. Six of the original nine plotters were members of the Chamber of Commerce, while McGrigor sat on Glasgow University Court. Hence this mix of academics, prominent businessmen and professional men had pre-existing personal, business and political contacts, so smoothing the way forward.

Figure 14
Alexander B McGrigor, a leading city lawyer and staunch opponent of disestablishment. The initial meeting of the Glasgow Liberal Unionists were held in his offices and he remained very powerful in the party.

Figure 15
David Murray, like McGrigor, was a prominent Glasgow lawyer and extremely active in opposing disestablishment. He participated with Kelvin, McGrigor and Ramsay in the formation of the Liberal Unionist party in Glasgow.
In his first public address as a Liberal Unionist, delivered at the formal launch of the movement in Glasgow, Kelvin defined his main argument in a cry of rage and pain:

“As an Irishman, I protest with my whole heart and soul [loud cheers] at this insulting proposal of degradation…. We Irish have every reason to demand that you shall not cut us adrift …[Great Britain] is bound in all honour and duty to listen to us…”

Several themes emerge here, and they can be reinforced and amplified by his later speeches. It is very significant that Kelvin defined himself as an Irishman, something he did repeatedly in subsequent years, indicating a careful choice of terms. He never, so far as I have detected, called himself an Ulsterman in his speeches on the topic; in other words, he did not see the issue of the province’s position under Home Rule as a major reason for rejection. Linked to this, he did not particularly emphasise religion as a factor. There were, of course, extremely close links between Ulster and Scottish Presbyterians, and delegations representing the former came to Scotland in the early summer of 1886 to put the religious - or, more correctly, sectarian - case against Home Rule. Next to Ulster itself, Scotland had the greatest number of Orange lodges in the world, and most of these were concentrated in Glasgow and the western area, so it might be expected that this would also be a factor used in Liberal Unionist propaganda. On the whole, however, the Orange or Protestant card was little played by the dissident Liberals, and it was rather the Scottish Conservatives who pushed this line. Orangeism was not seen in Scotland as very respectable, as its membership was overwhelmingly working-class [10].

His more specific arguments can be classified into five categories. Firstly, Home Rule, so far from being beneficial to Ireland, would in reality prove very detrimental. Kelvin contended that the pursuit of independence was a “chimera”, and the Irish should instead concentrate on working to improve the whole United Kingdom, and to promote Irish interests within that framework. He believed that “my beloved Ireland shall be happy and prosperous in its natural position as a member of the United Kingdom.” Furthermore he commented that the measure would do grave damage to Ireland, somewhat less to Scotland, and considerably less to England [11].

Secondly, Kelvin argued that the economic prosperity of Ireland would be harmed, not increased, by Home Rule. The counterpart to this was the view that the economy of the Glasgow region would be gravely damaged by Home Rule, for there were numerous manufacturing, commercial and financial connections between the west of Scotland and Ireland – and particularly, not exclusively, Ulster. Within a fortnight of the publication of the bills, the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce met and passed resolutions condemning the proposals as inimical to trade, investment and industry in both Ireland and Scotland. The chamber, the oldest in Britain, contained virtually all the city’s leading businessmen, and Kelvin was himself a member. The main proposition was put by A.B. McGrigor, and although it is not clear whether Kelvin attended, it is virtually certain that he would be in agreement with this analysis [12].

Thirdly, social stability and maintenance of law and order throughout Ireland would be seriously endangered by self-government. This threat arose from two different factors. On the one hand, as he stated in 1892, the impossibility of Belfast accepting Home Rule was “manifest” to all, and the bloodshed in the city in 1886 when the mere threat of it being imposed indicated that civil war would break out if it were ever carried into law. On the other hand, an Irish parliament could not be relied on to suppress criminality and violence. Clearly Kelvin was implying collusion between nationalist politicians and the agrarian and Fenian violence. He claimed that the collapse of civil authority would mean that “the law-abiding industrious people who had made the prosperity of Ireland could not accept the position” [13].

Fourthly, Home Rule would provoke a profound constitutional crisis. It would prove impossible to stop an Irish parliament from extending its powers, as effective supervision from Westminster would be difficult. This, of course, would destroy the sovereignty of the UK parliament. Somewhat contradictorily, he claimed that the MPs sitting in Dublin would be impotent to influence legislation in
the British parliament, merely “being allowed to play at parliamentary debating in a Parliament House of [their] own.” Further friction would arise because the Irish people, with no presence in Westminster, would be unable to influence imperial, foreign and defence policy matters, although they would be contributing through taxation to the costs of these. It would also be wrong if Westminster were to ignore the demand of one-sixth of the Irish people to retain the union. But there was for Kelvin another defect in a separate Dublin parliament. Scotland and England would thereby be deprived of the positive gains which Irish MPs had made in Westminster to the better governance of Britain. They had done “a great deal of good” there. Furthermore, the rest of the United Kingdom was right to seek the help of the best Irishmen to run the united country, as there was a need for all available men of ability to participate in this task [14].

Lastly, at least initially, Kelvin deplored Gladstone’s land purchase scheme as a burden on Scottish and English taxpayers. He felt that the “only remedy possible, and all the remedy that is needed” to solve the land question was for the government to offer “moderate encouragement and help towards business habits and arrangements” between landowners and the tenantry [15].

Of course, such complete rejection of Gladstone’s proposals required that Kelvin should offer an alternative approach to resolving the Irish problem. Over the decade or so after 1886, he did put forward a sort of coherent vision. The constitutional difficulty was to be overcome by offering the fullest degree of local self-government consistent with retaining the overriding sovereignty of Westminster. This was really akin to the relationship which colonies such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand had with Britain. Soon after 1886, he became an ardent champion of land purchase, now seeing this as a key stage in pacifying agrarian protest. He also insisted on the restoration of law and order throughout Ireland as essential to create the groundwork for economic and social development. But he emphasised in 1886 that the whole process would be gradual and long-term: “Let us persevere - persevere even with small hope of seeing the fruits…”, in the expectation that ‘perseverance in well-doing …shall bear fruit in the happiness and prosperity of those that come after us, although we may not live to see it.’ A few years later, he claimed that the policies of the Conservative government, with Liberal Unionist backing, had rescued Ireland from anarchy and were setting the island on the road to prosperity, so completely vindicating the stance taken by Liberal Unionists [16].

**Figure 16**

Professor George Gilbert Ramsay, who succeeded his uncle as professor of Humanity [Latin] at Glasgow University, and occupied the chair for 43 years – he was Dean of Faculties in his 80s! He was the most active university Liberal before 1886, and thereafter a staunch Liberal Unionist

**Figure 17**

Ramsay was a very eminent classical scholar, his most important work being his edition of Juvenal and Persius
3. The choice of Kelvin as the leader of Liberal Unionism in the West of Scotland

The choice of Kelvin to be the first chair of the WSLUA Executive Committee was probably the outcome of a number of factors. Partly it was who he was, but perhaps equally important, it was who he was not. \textit{Prima facie}, he was not the most obvious or natural candidate for the post. Although, as noted above, a long-standing Liberal, he had not been in the city party’s front rank, neither serving on any candidate’s central (i.e., executive) committee, nor holding any position in the Glasgow Liberal Association itself. In the College constituency, he was not the head of the Liberal party, and even among the professoriate he was not the foremost Liberal. That honour belonged to G. G. Ramsay (figures 16 and 17), as was evidenced in the 1880 election. At a Liberal rally at which both Kelvin and Ramsay sat on the platform, the end of the meeting was delayed by repeated shouts from the audience for the latter to speak, and it was only after he had addressed them that they left.

But Kelvin had important positive qualities. Firstly, he was arguably Glasgow’s only citizen with an international reputation, so he added lustre and renown to the Liberal Unionists. Secondly, his acclaimed status as one of, if not the, foremost British scientists of the day imparted an aura of rationalism and dispassionate analysis, rather than mere prejudice and partisan adherence, to the cause. His long career – some forty years – at the university meant that a very large number of students had been taught by him (Physics was then a central component of the Scottish degree curriculum), and others would have certainly heard of him. Additionally, his career as a highly successful entrepreneur would have made him acceptable to hard-headed businessmen, who might otherwise have regarded him as a typical academic inhabitant of an ivory tower.

As implied above, it was also very useful that he had not been a leading local activist, because he was not closely identified with different camps and hotly disputed causes, in the way that more prominent Liberals were. One obvious choice would have been to put an aristocrat at the head: late 19th century Britain was still a highly deferential society, and someone like the Duke of Argyll, a former Liberal cabinet minister and owner of vast estates in the nearby eponymous county, was a clear option. But two intersecting forces had to be borne in mind by the WSLUA leadership. One was that two specifically Scottish questions had dominated the 1885 general election, fomenting much internal Liberal feuding. The other was the paramount need to retain within the Liberal Unionist embrace both the moderate Whig and the radical Chamberlainite wings [17].

One of these Scottish issues in 1885 was the plight of Highland crofters [18]. This class, the equivalent of the small-holding peasantry of the west and south of Ireland, faced a major threat to their existence in the middle of the 1880s. Changes in land use strategies by the great estates, which involved ending sheep-farming and moving instead to developing sporting pursuits, threatened the marginal subsistence regime of the crofters. Their customary practice of putting livestock on to higher land for summer grazing was in conflict with deer-stalking and grouse-shooting, which maximised estate revenues. With no paper legal rights, many crofters faced eviction or emigration. Unlike the earlier phase of Highland clearances between c1815 and c1850, the crofters resisted with violence in the so-called “Crofters’ War” (Figures 18 and 19) which began in 1881-2. An ensuing Royal Commission into their grievances gathered eloquent testimony to the sense of injustice and maltreatment experienced by the Highland peasantry.

The public perception of landowners as a grasping and brutal class created a spirit of great hostility which was not just confined to the Highland region, but was felt across all of Scotland. This sentiment was particularly forcefully voiced in Glasgow, and the nearby western Lowland area. Partly this was because large numbers of Highlanders had settled in these places: Glasgow itself had a sizeable Highland community. Additionally, many Lowland radicals were opposed to single ownership of large landed estates as a form of monopoly which affronted their free trade ideology. When the Third Reform Act of 1884 gave the vote for the first time to the Highland peasantry, they formed the Crofters’ party, and in the 1885 election contested all the Highland seats, opposing landowner candidates, whether Conservative or Liberal. The Crofters’ case aroused great demonstrations of sympathy in cities like Glasgow; mass meetings were held, funds were raised, and Lowland radical Liberal candidates pledged to support the crofters’ campaign for legislation on the
lines of the Irish Land Act of 1881. The result of the elections was a clean sweep in the Highlands for the Crofters’ candidates.

Most Whiggish Liberal Unionists felt very little identification with the crofters, and the more rigorously ideological among them were alarmed at the breach of private property rights which the crofters’ demands required. But the absolute necessity of maintaining the broadest possible phalanx of anti-Home Rule Liberal support suggested that anyone identified with landownership, such as the Duke of Argyll (who had been a vociferous opponent of land reform in both Ireland and the Highlands), would be unpalatable to Radical Liberal Unionists.

The second controversy to plague Scottish Liberals in the 1885 election was the campaign to disestablish the Church of Scotland [19]. It should be borne in mind that, unlike England, Wales and Ireland, the established church in Scotland was – and still is – Presbyterian, not Episcopal. The main advocates of Scottish church disestablishment were two other Scottish Presbyterian churches, viz., the Free Church of Scotland (which Kelvin attended when at his Largs estate) and the United Presbyterian Church. The combined membership of these two denominations comfortably exceeded that of the state Church of Scotland – hence the bitterness of the debate. The Radicals strove to have this plank endorsed by Liberal candidates, but a significant body within the party, named the Church Liberals, opposed this. Many Whigs who became Liberal Unionists were very closely identified with the latter. A.B. McGrigor, Professor Ramsay and David Murray (figure 15), a partner in a large city legal firm, formed a local Church Defence Society to counter the disestablishers, who were gaining control of the whole Glasgow party. This society held a major rally in Glasgow at the height of the 1885 election campaign, at which ten university professors were either present or sent apologies - but Kelvin was not among their number. Three future prominent Liberal Unionists, McGrigor, Ramsay and W.V. Jackson, spoke at the meeting. The state church issue was the cause of bitter internal feuding in a number of seats, and the selection of anti-state church candidates very nearly broke the Liberal party in two constituencies which became Liberal Unionist strongholds. In College, the President of the constituency Liberal Association announced that he would not vote for the pro-disestablishment candidate, and he was supported by McGrigor and Ramsay. In Central, W.V. Jackson temporarily resigned his party membership in protest at the choice of a disestablisher as candidate. The Radical faction retaliated by denouncing the Church Defence Society as a covert Tory body, and there were calls for its members to be expelled. The dispute did not subside after the election, rather it was intensified, since all seven Glasgow Liberal MPs were hostile to the state-church link. At the start of 1886, the Church Liberals were plotting to form a permanent organisation to fight the disestablishment wing in the constituencies. McGrigor, Ramsay and Murray spearheaded this movement in Glasgow, and they were in communication with the Edinburgh Church Liberals [20].
The question of Irish Home Rule, however, cut horizontally across the two camps. Prominent disestablishers like Alexander Cross and A. Craig Sellar, MP for Partick, advocated retention of the union, as did McGrigor and Ramsay. Hence to choose any of these men, who had a far more prominent profile in the Liberal party than Kelvin, might have resulted in the other side declining to remain in the Liberal Unionist big tent, thereby enhancing the prospect of Gladstonian Home Rule triumphing. Kelvin’s ecclesiastical commitments can be described as flexible. His father had been a Presbyterian, but as a student at Cambridge University, Kelvin worshipped as an Anglican, yet when at his professorial house in Glasgow University, he attended the university chapel, which was attached to the Church of Scotland. However, when staying at his Largs estate, he went to the local Free Church. Although in theological terms, there was little to differentiate these two Presbyterian sects, there was then a profound enmity between them, so Kelvin’s latitudinarianism is quite striking. He seemingly went to Largs Free Church mainly because the minister was the brother-in-law of his first wife. However, he stopped going there over Home Rule, and instead attended the town’s Episcopalian church, so that there was the delicious paradox of Kelvin being a Presbyterian in Glasgow, but, thirty miles down the coast, he was an Anglican [21].

But for whatever reason Kelvin was chosen, his appointment proved immensely beneficial to the Liberal Unionists. He evidently had the inestimable quality of being exceptionally adept at chairing meetings in a manner which prevented differences of opinion from escalating into serious rows or splits. This was a vital element in a body with many fissiparous proclivities. No doubt his gravitas and eminence contributed substantially to ensuring a degree of harmony, but he also seems to have had a naturally emollient style, and an instinct for finding consensual ground. These facets were most clearly displayed when he chaired the association’s three annual general meetings from 1903 to 1905. The party across Britain was deeply split over Chamberlain’s tariff reform (i.e., protectionist) proposals. The Duke of Devonshire (as Hartington had now become) resigned as president of the party in protest, and in the Glasgow area, too, there were many resignations and even departures to the Liberals. Kelvin managed to conduct the business of the meetings in such a way that completely opposing resolutions relating to tariff reform were dealt with without provoking a schism, for which he received fulsome praise from sympathetic newspapers. This even-handedness on Kelvin’s part, which was acknowledged by all sides, was the more remarkable because, as discussed later, he was an early and ardent advocate of tariff reform [22].

4. The West of Scotland Liberal Unionist Party under Kelvin

The West of Scotland Liberal Unionist Association rapidly earned the reputation of being one of the two most efficient regions of the party, along with Durham [23]. Three days after the First Reading of the bill, a public meeting was called, and this rapid response was well ahead of any other part of Britain. Once the association acquired a formal structure in early May, the Executive Committee became almost hyperactive, with several meetings a week taking place throughout that month. Sub-committees were promptly established to ensure speed of action in areas of priority action.

One urgent objective was to set up a rival organisation to the Home Rule Liberal party. Branches were established in constituencies across the region, and by mid-June all seven Glasgow seats had Liberal Unionist associations. Recruitment of members was prosecuted vigorously from the start, and by July, over 2,000 had joined the breakaway party. £400 was raised locally within two months, so facilitating the funding of activities. At the end of June, the association acquired office premises in central Glasgow, and administrative staff were appointed. The WSLUA also immediately established links with the national party organisation, based in London, and it sent six delegates to that body’s earliest meetings. Kelvin served as a WSLUA representative on the national (British) Liberal Unionist Council for many years, often arranging Royal Society business trips to coincide with the council’s meetings. A further stage in organisation was the formation in 1889 of the WSLUA women’s section, whose inaugural meeting both Kelvin and his wife attended [24]. A second central preoccupation was to keep Liberal Unionists committed to the cause, and to recruit new adherents. As the first leaflet produced by the association put it, a key objective was to
bring together all anti-Home Rule Liberalism, and to “create, inform and express” this opinion in the constituencies. A great deal of effort was put into these propaganda aspects. Both Chamberlain and Hartington, as well as many second tier Liberal Unionist politicians, came to speak at mass rallies. This reinforced the sense that Liberal Unionists in Gladstonian strongholds were not isolated or impotent in the face of the local prevailing current of Liberalism. Meetings were also held across the region to initiate and sustain local branches. Pamphlets advocating the Liberal Unionist standpoint were written and published for distribution.

A third area of concern was to form an understanding with the Conservatives in order to avoid the duplication of candidates in a seat standing at elections as Unionists, lest a Gladstonian Liberal slip in on a minority vote. This issue was addressed from the very start, and by the 1886 election, all local difficulties had been resolved, so that only one Unionist candidate came forward in every seat in the association’s area. This sub-committee continued to be very active throughout the WSLUA’s existence, as local disputes between the two parties were a recurring event.

The best gauge of the efficacy of the WSLUA is probably to be found in general election results, as shown in Table 1. Clearly, compared to England and Wales, the West of Scotland section performed significantly more successfully. The general election of 1900 was the high-water mark for the Unionists in Scotland, especially in Glasgow itself, where all seven seats were won, three of them by the Liberal Unionists, their highest tally for the city. While, strictly speaking, only the first general election in 1886 fell within Kelvin’s term as chair of the WSLUA Executive Committee, it is not unreasonable to surmise that the foundations for the party’s continuing strong performance were laid in the early phase. This poses the question as to how far Kelvin should be personally credited with these achievements.

| Election | England & Wales | West Scotland |
|----------|-----------------|---------------|
|          | No | % | No | % |
| 1886     | 59 | 12 | 8 | 28 |
| 1892     | 30 | 6 | 6 | 21 |
| 1895     | 52 | 11 | 6 | 21 |
| 1900     | 51 | 11 | 7 | 24 |

**Note:** The percentages relate to the total number of seats in each area.

It is quite interesting to look at the results in the Glasgow College constituency, where Kelvin voted. In 1886 and 1892, Charles Cameron (figure 20) was returned. He was born in Dublin and had qualified as a doctor, but ran a Glasgow newspaper. He had been elected as a radical Liberal MP for Glasgow in 1874, was a keen advocate of both disestablishment and the Crofters’ campaign, and supported Gladstone over Home Rule. In 1892, Sir John Stirling-Maxwell (figure 21), a wealthy landowner with estates near Glasgow and in Inverness-shire, was the beaten Conservative candidate, Kelvin having proposed his adoption. Sir John returned in 1895 to take the seat.

Kelvin took a leading part in a number of aspects of organisation, notably speaking at meetings and electioneering. In June 1886, he travelled to Greenock to put the Liberal Unionist case, and in October he attended a Belfast rally addressed by Chamberlain. In April, he went to Edinburgh with fellow Glasgow Liberal Unionists to hear Hartington and G.J. Goschen (figure 22), another major anti-Home Rule minister, speak at huge meetings. In the 1886 contest, he spoke regularly on behalf of Unionist (both Conservative and Liberal) candidates across the west of Scotland, including going on his beloved yacht, the Lalla Rookh, to Oban to support the Tory candidate for Argyll. He was again active in the 1892 election, and also participated in by-elections, including speaking in 1890 at the
Partick contest, where the Liberal Unionist candidate was James Parker-Smith. Even after he stopped being chair of the Executive Committee and assumed the less active position of President, he retained an interest in the detail of party machinery. In autumn 1890 he invited an influential executive member to come down to Largs to discuss organisational matters [25].

On the other hand, Kelvin was absent from a considerable number of Executive meetings during his period as chair; out of a total of about 35, he attended only 13, or just over one-third. It must be remembered that there were extenuating circumstances. He was, after all, a very busy individual. He was frequently away in London, attending Royal Society meetings and committees. Furthermore, his business affairs, scientific research and teaching duties took up a great deal of his time. He continued to hold the chair of Natural Philosophy (i.e., Physics) until 1899. At the height of the Home Rule crisis, in May 1886, he was receiving a veritable stream of letters from colleagues and research assistants on various scientific topics: one particularly pressing matter concerned problems with compasses. All of this diverse range of activities – plus travelling to and from his Largs home, some thirty miles from Glasgow - is quite remarkable for a man entering his 62nd year in 1886.

Figure 22. George Goschen (1831-1907), who joined the Liberal Unionists in 1886, and served under Lord Salisbury as Chancellor of the Exchequer. He could not work with Chamberlain and joined the Conservative party in 1893. The cartoon shows him “ascertaining which way the wind blows”.
It is pretty clear that most of the regular work of the WSLUA was conducted in his absence by others, who were all highly competent. A.B. McGrigor normally chaired Executive Committee meetings when Kelvin was away, and he was undoubtedly the *eminence grise* of the association, sitting on most of the key sub-committees. He was especially active on the committee which liaised with the Conservatives over the selection of mutually acceptable candidates, the most delicate and important of tasks. When Kelvin gave up the chair, McGrigor succeeded him, but resigned within a year, possibly due to ill-health. The day to day running of the association was the responsibility of the secretary, Robert Bird. Bird was evidently highly proficient in his job, and seems to have initiated many of the organisational techniques adopted by the WSLUA. This is seen in two accounts he wrote in 1887 and 1889 for the national party’s journal, wherein he outlined the methods which he had used to build up the association’s effectiveness [26].

It may be appropriate here to discuss the reasons why a peerage was conferred on Kelvin in 1892. At the time it was acclaimed widely as a fully justified acknowledgement of his massive and wide-ranging contributions to both theoretical and practical science. But the authors of the weightiest modern study of Kelvin’s life argue that the title was at least in part a recognition of his political services to the cause of Unionism, and there are very good grounds for agreeing with this verdict. Firstly, giving peerages to scientists was virtually unknown before then, and it was many years before the next case. Secondly, awarding honours was part of the means by which the Liberal Unionist leadership (like the other parties’ leaders) rewarded supporters, and in this the Conservative governments collaborated out of obvious self-interest. So successful were the Liberal Unionists that prominent Scottish Conservatives complained about what they viewed as excessive preferential treatment accorded to the former. Indeed, in the same year as Kelvin’s ennoblement, a peerage was also bestowed on a prominent Glasgow Conservative, presumably to appease the disgruntled Scottish Tories. It is highly significant that Kelvin’s next but one successor as chair of the WSLUA Executive Committee was made a baronet in 1903. Mathew Arthur was a wealthy businessman, but not otherwise a particularly significant figure, so it should best be seen as at least in part a political award [27].

It seems clear, however, that Kelvin did not acquire his peerage in return for substantial financial donations to the party. In a letter of 1892 sent by Hartington to Lord Salisbury, some men identified as candidates for an honour were listed as having contributed generously to the Liberal Unionist coffers, including a Glasgow businessman who had “collected” £20,000. Kelvin by contrast made only quite small donations. At the launch of the WSLUA, he gave £20 to its guarantee fund, which raised £400 from some 25 individuals. Again, the association’s special election fund for the 1895 general election totalled £27,375. Kelvin was one of eight who gave £100, while seven contributed higher amounts, with £2,000 being the largest donation [28].

It is highly unlikely that Kelvin threw himself so strenuously into the Liberal Unionist cause with the calculation in mind that a title might eventually be forthcoming. Six months after the crisis began, he expressed very clearly the sense of public obligation which had impelled him to be active: “Much as any of them disliked leaving their own affairs and entering upon a political contest, none of them would shirk so long as there was any idea of breaking up the legislative union of the United Kingdom.” At the same time, moreover, he confidently predicted that: ‘the disruption was a temporary disease...he had not the slightest doubt that there would be a reunion of the Liberal party [Hear, hear]’. He persisted for some years with this line of argument, stating that reunion was perfectly possible if only the Gladstonian Liberals would abandon Irish Home Rule. Furthermore, the rowdy reception which he sometimes endured at meetings in the fevered atmosphere of 1886 strongly suggests that Kelvin was acting out of true conviction, rather than seeking a title. For instance, in June he chaired an election meeting in a mainly Gladstonian working class district of the College seat. As Kelvin rose to make some introductory remarks, he was met with “a storm of hisses and groans which lasted for some time.” He then claimed that Home Rule would be bad for England and Scotland, to which there were cries of “no, no”, and “sit down”, and he was heckled persistently [29].
5. Kelvin's shifting political opinions, 1886-1908

The rupture of 1886 and subsequent developments led Kelvin to reappraise his political views in a number of areas over the last twenty years of his life. As noted above, initially he highlighted his continuing Liberal beliefs, and his expectation that the rift would be temporary. However, about two years after the schism, his position became more ambiguous. One aspect of this equivocation was to assert that the Gladstonian Liberals were not true Liberals. In 1896 he referred to the “ex-Liberal party” and the “so-called Liberal” party. The following year he returned to this: “All good and true Liberals ought to belong to that organisation [the Liberal Unionists], and he believed that all good and true liberals did belong to it.” [30]

If he was indeed a Liberal, clearly Kelvin needed to justify his unstinting support for the Conservative governments of 1886-92 and 1895-1905. He did this by asserting that, thanks to the influence of his party, Liberalism had suffused Conservative policies. In October 1888, he proudly acclaimed the work of the Tory administration:

“What government at any time in the last thirty years had brought forward more truly Liberal measures and had carried into law more truly Liberal acts of parliament than the present government?... They had acted in harmony with the Liberal [i.e., Liberal Unionist] party, and they had produced Liberal measures (Cheers).”

He maintained this viewpoint for the rest of his life, contending in 1903 that “there was a strong force of Liberalism in the [Unionist] government” [31].

Virtually simultaneously, Kelvin elaborated a quite different, and rather contradictory, analysis. He became wedded to the idea that government by party was disappearing, to be replaced by a kind of consensus of technocrats and well-disposed individuals. Intriguingly, here he often invoked Darwinian evolutionary concepts to justify his thesis that politics and society were advancing to a new, higher stage of development. So, in 1888, he asserted:

“Darwin, in stating his doctrine of natural selection, spoke of permanent and non-permanent species. Did anyone imagine that government by party was a permanent species? It had served its term and was played out. We were living under a government not by party... The political millennium, he was satisfied, had come. We had reached the fourth stage – government by common sense.”

Given that Kelvin harboured doubts about the overall validity of Darwin’s theory, his invocation of part at least of it is fascinating [32].

A further twist to this post-party argument was posited from 1900. He began to propose that parliament should operate on the lines of “a well-conducted limited liability company”, with a broad base of supportive MPs giving virtually uniform endorsement to the actions of the government of the day, just as shareholders would stand behind the directors. Dissidence would be confined to a small minority, and would be only occasional, rather than organised and systematic. Politicians, he explained, had an ideal of parliament as consisting of 350 MPs on one side and 300 on the other, whereas 650 MPs all on one side was the ideal of “those who, like himself, were not practical politicians.” Again, he invoked Darwin: “Natural progress, natural selection, evolution seemed to him more likely to produce a rational system...” [33]

His efforts to defend the Liberal Unionists’ support for the Conservatives led him to become increasingly sympathetic to the latter’s policies in areas other than Ireland. By around 1900, Kelvin seemed on the key political issues of the times to be increasingly detached from the Liberal tradition. During the Boer War of 1899-1902, he was an unstinting champion of the Conservative government’s assault on the Boers, although most Liberals regarded the war as a flagrant breach of their party’s most cherished foreign and imperial policy principles, especially disliking the atmosphere of hysterical jingoism which surrounded it. Kelvin’s old Liberal Unionist comrade, Professor Edward Caird (figure
23), now Master of Balliol College, was one who opposed the war. By contrast, Kelvin espoused the cause with imperialistic fervour, insisting in 1901 that the government was: “bent on one object, to do good work in South Africa by establishing firmly and forever the British regime there, and all the good things that British regime meant.” It is doubtful whether Kelvin meant that the concentration camps, a British innovation in this war, were part of the “good things” [34].

Figure 23. Edward Caird, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow from 1866 to 1893, in which year he became Master of Balliol College Oxford. Caird was a Liberal Unionist with Kelvin, but, unlike Kelvin, strongly opposed the Boer War. Figure 24. Andrew Bonar Law, Leader of the Conservative party from 1911-21, and then briefly, both party leader and Prime Minister from October 1922 to May 1923.

In 1903, as noted above, Joseph Chamberlain launched his Tariff Reform agitation. Free trade had for over seventy years been the shibboleth of the Liberal party, and to most even the mildest infringement was to breach the ultimate taboo. While a considerable number of Glasgow Liberal Unionists – both Whig and radical – vehemently opposed Chamberlain’s initiative, Kelvin quickly emerged as a passionately committed protectionist. He may have been influenced by James Parker-Smith, who was the foremost spokesman for the cause in Glasgow. In November 1903, he agreed to become a Vice-President of the Tariff Reform League, remarking that “Now I am more and more convinced that Chamberlain is right.” He aligned himself with the most hard-line protectionist stance by insisting that food imports should be not exempt from tariffs. It seems indicative of Kelvin’s journey across the political landscape in the two decades from the first Home Rule bill that one of his last public political occasions was to speak at a Protectionist rally held in April 1907 in support of Andrew Bonar Law (figure 24), the future leader of the Tory party [35].

Figure 25. The spectre of Home Rule caused great divisions – and not just in Ireland!
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[1] For this and the next four paragraphs, see:

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[2] One of the 86 Home Rule MPs sat for an English seat – T.P. O’Connor held the ironically named Liverpool Scotland constituency as an Irish Nationalist.

[3] For the Scottish and Glasgow position, see:

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Hutchison I G C 1986 *A Political History of Scotland, 1832-1924* (Edinburgh: John Donald) pp 162-7, 207-12, 225-7

McCaffrey J 1971 The Origins of Liberal Unionism in the West of Scotland *Scottish Historical Review* 50 (1)

[4] At this point, of course, he was still Sir William Thomson, and did not become Lord Kelvin until 1892, but it has seemed simplest to refer to him by the latter name throughout.

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[6] E.g. *Glasgow Herald* 4 Jul. 1865, 2 Feb. 1874; Thompson *Kelvin* vol. 2, p. 758

[7] Thompson *Kelvin* vol. 2, pp. 553-8

[8] Smith C & Wise M N 1989 *Energy & Empire. A Biographical Study of Lord Kelvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp 174-6, 69-70, 141-4

[9] Glasgow Council Archives, TD 1/918 A. Smith to Mrs Smith 13 Oct. 1869; Smith & Wise *Industry and Empire* pp. 803-4

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[11] *Glasgow Herald* 22 Apr. 1886

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[14] WSLUA MB 27 Jan. 1892, 30 Dec. 1889; *Glasgow Herald* 22 Apr. 1886; Thompson *Kelvin* Vol. 2, p 920; WSLUA MB 29 June 1886

[15] Thompson *Kelvin* Vol. 2, pp. 855-6

[16] WSLUA MB 26 Nov. 1896; *Glasgow Herald* 22 Apr. 1886; WSLUA MB 3 Dec. 1889, 18 Nov. 1890

[17] E.g. Thompson *Kelvin* p. 861 (Kelvin to Lord Rayleigh 18 Jul. 1886); The *Liberal Unionist* 1 (12) (15 June 1887); WSLUA MB 1 May 1893

[18] For the background, see:

Devine T M 1994 *Clanship to Crofters’ War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press)

Fry M 2005 *Wild Scots* (London: John Murray)

[19] The context is to be found in Hutchison *Political History* and McCaffrey Origins of Liberal Unionism (see [3])

[20] *The Church of Scotland. Report of a Meeting of Scottish Laymen of Different Denominations opposed to the Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church of Scotland*. Glasgow 20 October 1885; Glasgow University Library Special Collections Department, Mu44.e20 – correspondence between L. Mackersy and D. Murray, Jan.1886; (RVC) c. Apr 1886

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[21] Thompson Kelvin Vol 2 pp 1087ff.
[22] WSLUA MB 3 Dec. 1903, 23 Nov. 1904, 29 Nov. 1905; Scotsman 3 Dec. 1903
[23] For more information on this and the following three paragraphs, see the works cited in [3]
[24] WSLUA MB 8 Dec. 1891; The Liberal Unionist 6 (Feb. 1892)
[25] WSLUA MB 7 June 1886; Thompson Kelvin Vol 2 p. 862; Glasgow Herald 1 May 1886;
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      Council Archives TD1/357 Kelvin to J.P. Smith 19 Sep. 1890
[26] The Liberal Unionist, 1 (12) (15 June 1887), 3 (38) (Mar. 1889)
[27] Smith & Wise Energy & Empire pp 799-807
[28] Jenkins TA 1990 The funding of the Liberal Unionist party and the honours system English
      Historical Review 105 (5); WSLUA MB 10 May 1886, 8 Aug. 1900
[29] WSLUA MB 2 Nov. 1886; Glasgow Herald 29 June 1886
[30] WSLUA MB 26 Nov. 1896, 10 Nov. 1897, also 1 Oct. 1888
[31] WSLUA MB 1 Oct. 1888, 2 Nov. 1903, also 23 Mar. 1888, 16 Apr. 1890, 26 Nov. 1896, 19 Oct.
      1898; Glasgow Herald 3 Dec. 1889
[32] WSLUA MB 1 Oct. 1888, also 21 Nov. 1900; Smith & Wise Kelvin pp. 636-41
[33] WSLUA MB 21 Nov. 1900, 26 Nov. 1901
[34] WSLUA MB 24 Nov. 1899
[35] Glasgow Council Archives TD 1/144 Kelvin to J.P. Smith, 25 Nov. 1903; Thompson Kelvin Vol
      2, pp 1129-30, 1198