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Reconsidering the Tariff Reform Controversy in Britain: Joseph Chamberlain's Tariff Reform Versus Arthur Balfour's Plan of Retaliatory Tariffs

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ABSTRACT

The studies on the tariff reform movement from 1903 to 1913 in Britain can be classified into three main approaches, emphasising respectively: 1) a protectionist strategy to revive British industry, 2) an electoral strategy to widen the base of the Unionists or the Conservative Party, and 3) an imperial strategy to unite the British Empire through imperial preference. On the basis of new evidence, this study refutes the first and second views, and supports the third. However, even those scholars upholding the third view have not maintained that the domestic and imperial sides of tariff reform were unrelated. This study demonstrates instead that they were actually disconnected and that in order to achieve the unity of the British Empire, Joseph Chamberlain and leading tariff reformers formed a plan prioritizing the interests of the self-governing colonies or dominions over Britain's own national interests. In their vision, even if their scheme of tariff reform were to strengthen the dominions' economies rather than the home economy, it should be accepted as long as it reinforced the unity of the British Empire. To elucidate this point, we analyse Unionist Prime Minister Arthur Balfour's retaliatory tariff plan in comparison with Chamberlain's tariff reform. A new perspective that refutes the generally accepted view of Balfour's plan as a compromise between tariff reform and free trade will also be suggested.

1. Introduction

The defeat of the tariff reform movement in the early 20th century was a critical moment, which decided the direction of British

trade policy. Studies on the tariff reform movement are abundant, but one major question is still debated. That is, why did Joseph Chamberlain and leading tariff reformers develop and follow an economic and political strategy that ultimately divided the Unionists (the alliance between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Unionist Party before their merger in May 1912) and had disastrous effects on their electoral fortunes? This paper deals with this question from an original perspective.

In his most recent biography of Chamberlain, Travis Crosby observes, "There is little agreement among historians" about what led Chamberlain to take such a controversial course of action.¹ Ian Cawood's recent review of biographies of Chamberlain is also inconclusive on this matter.² Broadly, previous studies can be classified into three groups according to their emphasis, although the groups are not mutually exclusive and indeed quite often overlap.³ First, one regards Chamberlain's sense of impending crisis for Britain's industrial future as the critical factor. According to this view, tariff reform was essentially an industrial protectionist strategy.⁴ If this

¹ Crosby himself emphasises Chamberlain's personal ambition to "maintain and pursue additional avenues of power". T.L. Crosby, *Joseph Chamberlain*, London, 2011, pp. 163-64.

² I. Cawood, "Joseph Chamberlain: His Reputation and Legacy", in I. Cawood and C. Upton (eds.), *Joseph Chamberlain*, London, 2016.

³ John M. Hobson suggests a fourth view, namely that Chamberlain responded to the needs of the Unionists to raise revenue through regressive indirect taxes, although he admits that "it would be incorrect to assume that taxation was central to his project." J.M. Hobson, *The Wealth of States*, Cambridge, UK, 1997, pp. 127-31. See also, J. Tomlinson, *Problems of British Economic Policy 1870-1945*, London, 1981, pp. 58-60. Paul Kennedy suggests another factor behind the tariff reform movement, i.e. the deteriorating relationship between Britain and Germany. P. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914*, London, 1980, pp. 261-65.

⁴ A. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan*, Princeton, 1988, ch. 2; S. Newton and D. Porter, *Modernization Frustrated*, London, 1988, pp. 15-30; S. Pollard, *Britain's Prime and Britain's Decline*, London, 1989, pp. 238-43; A. Gamble, *Britain in Decline*, 4th ed., London, 1994, pp. 158-65; P.T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain*, London, 1994, pp. 594-99; P.J. Cain, "The Economic Philosophy of Constructive Imperialism", in C. Navari (ed.), *British Politics and the Spirit of the Age*, Keele, 1996; A.J. Marrison, *British Business and Protection 1903-1932*, Oxford, 1996; E. Rogers, "The United States and the Fiscal Debate in Britain, 1873-1913", in *Historical Journal*, 50-3, 2007; R. Ward, *The Chamberlains: Joseph, Austen and Neville*,

view is accepted, the fair trade movement of the 1880s should be thought of as the precursor of the tariff reform movement. A second view regards tariff reform as a radical electoral strategy to gain working class support by modernizing the Unionists.⁵ The third view sees tariff reform essentially as an imperial strategy to unite the British Empire through imperial preference.⁶

Tariff reform was a multi-faceted movement, within which one could find protectionists, radicals, and imperialists. They were not necessarily at odds with each other. In that sense, none of the three views is groundless. Joseph Chamberlain was able to appeal to each of the three groups as a former Birmingham manufacturer, a former Radical Liberal, and a driving force in the Boer War. While each group could regard Chamberlain as its own champion, he chose his words according to his audience. This situation makes the question of Chamberlain's true motive a complicated one. However, the focal point is the extent to which each element was prioritized by Cham-

London, 2015, pp. 56-57. S.H. Zebel endorses both the first and the third views: S.H. Zebel, "Joseph Chamberlain and the Genesis of Tariff Reform", in *Journal of British Studies*, 7, 1967. While Julian Amery indicates that Chamberlain's personal concern was mainly imperial preference, he seems to consider that the entire movement was driven by protectionists and retaliationists. J. Amery, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, vol. 5, London, 1969, ch.101, p. 356.

⁵ B. Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform*, London, 1960; P. Fraser, *Joseph Chamberlain*, London, 1966, pp. 252-53, 310; R.J. Scally, *The Origins of the Lloyd George Coalition*, Princeton, 1975, ch. 4; D. Judd, *Radical Joe: A Life of Joseph Chamberlain*, London, 1977, pp. 237-42; A. Sykes, *Tariff Reform in British Politics 1903-1913*, Oxford, 1979; E.H.H. Green, "Radical Conservatism: The Electoral Genesis of Tariff Reform", in *Historical Journal*, 28, 1985; E.H.H. Green, *Crisis of Conservatism*, Oxford, 1995; D. Thackeray, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age*, Manchester, 2013; O. Betts, "'The People's Bread': A Social History of Joseph Chamberlain and the Tariff Reform Campaign", in Cawood and Upton (eds.), *Joseph Chamberlain*, London, 2016. Although Richard Jay emphasizes the electoral strategy aspect, he is sceptical about its progressiveness. R. Jay, *Joseph Chamberlain*, Oxford, 1981, pp. 318-19.

⁶ R. Quinault, "Joseph Chamberlain", in T.R. Gourvish and A. O'Day (eds.), *Later Victorian Britain 1867-1900*, London, 1988, pp. 83-88; F. Coetzee, *For Party or Country*, Oxford, 1990, pp. 55-58; A.S. Thompson, "Tariff Reform", in *Historical Journal*, 40, 1997; A.S. Thompson, *Imperial Britain*, London, 2000, ch. 4; R. Grayson, "Imperialism in Conservative Defence and Foreign Policy", in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 34-4, 2006; L. Witherell, "Sir Henry Page Croft and Conservative Backbench Campaigns for Empire, 1903-1932", in *Parliamentary History*, 25-3, 2006.

berlain and his close associates, and which factor critically motivated them to start the movement. To clarify this point, we need an analysis of the discourse conducted within the inner circles of leading tariff reformers, insofar as public addresses may have been aimed simply at broadening the support base. This article accordingly pays special attention to sources that reveal the manifesto-making processes of Chamberlain and his close associates, which often occurred behind closed doors.

Insofar as we attend to Chamberlain's discourse, he always undeniably prioritized the imperial aspect of tariff reform. For instance, he candidly stated in a letter to the Duke of Devonshire, the leader of the Unionist free traders: "For my own part I care only for the great question of Imperial Unity. Everything else is secondary or consequential."⁷ Andrew Thompson has demonstrated that the same can be said of the entire group of leading tariff reformers.⁸ However, there are some serious puzzles that have not yet been solved. Although Chamberlain proposed only imperial preference when he launched his tariff reform campaign in May 1903, he gradually escalated the protectionist elements and insisted that general industrial tariffs, instead of reciprocal tariffs, should also be introduced. This stands in apparent contradiction to the fact that Chamberlain continued to apply heavy pressure to exclude industrial protectionists from the core groups of tariff reformers. Moreover, after the Unionists' crushing defeat in the 1906 general election, the agricultural committee of the Tariff Commission, which was the economic intelligence of the tariff reform movement, proposed a 1s duty on colonial wheat, which under Chamberlain's original plan was to be duty-free. As will be demonstrated below, Chamberlain and leading tariff reformers strongly backed this new proposal. Considering the unpopularity of the food tax, which contributed to the electoral debacle, it is quite mysterious why they dared to propose a plan that not only raised the unpopular food tax, but also apparently contra-

⁷ Quoted in Green, *Crisis*, p. 186.

⁸ Thompson, "Tariff Reform".

dicted the purpose of imperial unity. On the surface, these facts confer plausibility on the argument that tariff reform was a protectionist movement.

In this study, I offer a coherent interpretation that solves this puzzle. I demonstrate that both industrial protectionists and radical modernizers were sidelined by Chamberlain's inner circle. Consequently I uphold a third view, emphasising the imperial aspect. But Andrew Thompson, who is a representative scholar of the third view, admits that he does not believe that "the domestic and imperial sides of tariff reform were disconnected." He also observes that "there is little doubt that Chamberlain himself believed imperial unity offered the best solution to the major social and economic problems of the day."⁹ This study demonstrates that the domestic and imperial sides of tariff reform actually were disconnected, and that to achieve the unity of the British Empire, Chamberlain and leading tariff reformers formed a plan that prioritized the interests of self-governing colonies or dominions over Britain's national interests. In so doing, they aimed to retain Canada's loyalty to the British Empire, because there was serious apprehension that the Liberal government led by the French Canadian Sir Wilfrid Laurier might strengthen Canada's relationship with the United States rather than the mother country, against the background of the movement for commercial union between the U.S. and Canada since the 1880s.¹⁰ Actually, Laurier persistently pursued a reciprocal trade agreement with the United States, and his government eventually negotiated a reciprocity agreement in 1911.¹¹

Thus, the tariff reform movement was driven by a passion for the British Empire and was not devised as a coherent economic strat-

⁹ Thompson, "Tariff Reform", p. 1035.

¹⁰ See C.C. Tansill, *Canadian-American Relations, 1875-1911*, New Haven, 1943, chap. 13-14; M.W. Palen, *The "Conspiracy" of Free Trade*, Cambridge, 2016, chap. 6.

¹¹ For Laurier's enthusiasm for closer relationship with the United States, see Tansill, *Canadian-American Relations*, p. 444; J.A. Colvin, "Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the British Preferential Tariff System", in *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 34-1, 1955.

egy to further Britain's national economic interests. In other words, tariff reform was certainly an imperialist strategy, but not a nationalist strategy. In order to make this point clear, I also compare and contrast Unionist Prime Minister Arthur Balfour's retaliatory tariff plan with Chamberlain's tariff reform proposals. Balfour's plan was truly a nationalist strategy. A new perspective is suggested here, one that refutes the generally accepted view that Balfour's plan was a compromise between tariff reform and free trade.

2. Joseph Chamberlain and Canadian Interests

When Joseph Chamberlain kicked off his tariff reform campaign in Birmingham on 15 May 1903, his speech focused exclusively on the necessity for imperial preference. For Britain, imperial preference meant the imposition of tariffs on foreign primary products to accord preferential treatment to imports from British colonies. Imperial preference turned out to be an obvious vote loser, given the British people's deep-rooted fear of the "stomach tax." However, as the Birmingham speech stressed, in Chamberlain's vision imperial preference was absolutely necessary in order to prevent the defection of Canada from the British Empire. Roland Quinault and Thompson have already indicated that the Canadian factor had an important influence in the launching of the tariff reform campaign.¹² However, even they do not fully clarify the extremely important place of consideration for Canadian interests within Chamberlain's scheme.

In 1897 Laurier's Liberal government's first budget reduced tariff rates on British goods, introducing "the British preference," although the original intention was to extend the preference to the United States as well.¹³ Early in 1902, the Unionist government headed by Lord Salisbury in Britain revived the old registration duty of 1s. per quarter on imports of wheat as a temporary measure to

¹² Quinault, "Joseph Chamberlain", pp. 84-88; Thompson, *Imperial Britain*, pp. 94-97.

¹³ Colvin, "Sir Wilfrid Laurier"; R.A. Shields, "Imperial Reaction to the Fielding Tariff of 1897", in *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 31-4, 1965.

help finance the Boer War. The Colonial Conference, held from June to August of that year on the occasion of the coronation of Edward VII, was attended by representatives of all the self-governing colonies or dominions. At that time Laurier sent a letter to Chamberlain, who as Colonial Secretary was host of the Conference, requesting exemption of Canadian wheat from the registration duty in return for additional British preference. Laurier wrote: "We think this question of the exemption of Canadian food products from the new duties might be considered as a special one with the view of having action taken in Parliament during this present sitting to grant the proposed exemption."¹⁴

Before the Conference, Chamberlain sent a telegram to the Governor General of Canada, Lord Minto, a close friend of his, saying "The King proposes to offer Laurier peerage on occasion of coronation. Ascertain whether this will be agreeable to him. Matter must be kept strictly private secret."¹⁵ The reply was: "Sir Wilfrid definitely refused peerage."¹⁶ This very exceptional offer of Chamberlain's shows how he valued winning Laurier over to his side.

At the Colonial Conference, Chamberlain was forced to give up his plan of intra-Empire free trade because of its outright rejection by the dominions.¹⁷ Another option was the scheme of imperial defence, in which both Britain and the dominions would contribute men and money to the newly established imperial navy. Although this scheme was strongly backed by Australian Defence Minister John Forrest, Laurier refused even to discuss it.¹⁸ It turned out that the scheme of imperial preference was the only option that all the dominions, including Canada, could accept.

¹⁴ University of Birmingham Library (hereafter UBL), Joseph Chamberlain Papers, JC 17/3/11, Laurier to Chamberlain, 16 July 1902.

¹⁵ UBL, JC 17/3/10, Chamberlain to Minto, 10 June 1902.

¹⁶ UBL, JC 17/3/10, Military Secretary to Chamberlain, 18 June 1902.

¹⁷ *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers* (1902), Cd. 1299, Papers relating to a Colonial Conference, p. 36. See also, A.C. Howe, *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846-1946*, Oxford, 1997, pp. 221-22.

¹⁸ UBL, JC 17/2/3, Minute as to Naval Defence. 15 Mar. 1902.

In August Chamberlain confided to his eldest son Austen, "As you know I do not entirely trust Laurier especially where France is concerned. His ideal is independent Canada and he is certainly not an Imperialist in our sense."¹⁹ In spite of his distrust of Laurier, in the cabinet meeting in October under Balfour, now Prime Minister, Chamberlain proposed that "while retaining the shilling duty on corn, as regards *foreign* importation, our *Colonies* should be allowed to import it free" (underlining by Balfour).²⁰ To the personal inquiry by the Canadian Finance Minister William Fielding about "the fate of our recent proposals,"²¹ Chamberlain replied:

I have not concealed from you my own personal impression that it would be worth while to risk this for the sake of establishing the principle that we intend whenever possible to treat the colonists better than foreigners, but it is impossible to say at present which way the ultimate decision will go. Under these circumstances I suggest for your consideration that you might prepare your Budget on alternative lines, fixing in the first place your tariff as you would propose it should stand in the event of the Corn Tax being entirely repealed, and taking power to alter this tariff and to give certain additional advantages to the mother country provided that His Majesty's Government here find it possible to give you a preference by allowing corn to come in free from the Colonies while maintaining the duty against all others... Please treat this letter as entirely confidential between us, and with kind regards.²²

Thus, there was a secret pact between Chamberlain and the Laurier government. In November the Balfour ministry gave provisional approval to Chamberlain's proposal in spite of harsh criticism from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Charles Ritchie.²³ However, after Chamberlain went on a long tour to South Africa, Ritchie urged his

¹⁹ UBL, JC 17/3/15, Joseph to Austen, 25 Aug. 1902.

²⁰ UBL, JC 17/1/11, Balfour to King, 21 Oct. 1902.

²¹ UBL, JC 17/3/21, Fielding to Chamberlain, 3 Nov. 1902.

²² UBL, JC 17/3/22, Chamberlain to Fielding, 28 Nov. 1902.

²³ UBL, JC 17/1/13, Balfour to King, 19 Nov. 1902; JC 17/1/12, Confidential memo by Charles Ritchie, 15 Nov. 1902.

colleagues to rethink the matter. In March 1903 the Balfour ministry finally decided to abolish the registration duty outright.²⁴

Just before this cabinet's final decision, Fielding wrote a long letter to Chamberlain, threatening that if, as a consequence of British inaction on granting a preference to Canada, "the pressure for the abolition of the British preference should become so strong as to be irresistible, the people of the Mother Country would not be in a position to complain of our action."²⁵ Undoubtedly, this letter decidedly influenced Chamberlain's kick-off speech for the tariff reform campaign in Birmingham on 15 May 1903, where he warned the audience by quoting Fielding's statement: The Canadian Finance Minister "says that if they are told definitely that Great Britain, the mother country, can do nothing for them in the way of reciprocity, they must reconsider their position and reconsider the preference that they have already given."²⁶ However, when Chamberlain read Fielding's confidential letter without his approval at a meeting thereafter, Fielding protested.²⁷

After Chamberlain resigned as Colonial Secretary in September 1903, secret contact between him and the Canadian government was maintained. In August 1905, Canadian Postmaster-General William Mulock, who acted as a messenger between the Laurier government and Chamberlain, sent a letter to the latter to request that "your confidential representative should visit Canada this Fall for the purpose of discussing confidentially with the Government the matter of a mutual trade preference." Mulock carefully added: "For obvious reasons it would be expedient that the object of his visit be treated as confidential. Perhaps it would attract less notice if he came via New York..."²⁸ Consequently, the historical economist W.A.S. Hewins,

²⁴ UBL, JC 18/18/22, Austen Chamberlain's Memorandum on the Origins of the Tariff Reform Movement, 4 Mar. 1931.

²⁵ Fielding to Chamberlain, 11 Mar. 1903, in Amery, *Life*, p. 164.

²⁶ Speech at Birmingham, 15 May 1903, in C.W. Boyd (ed.), *Mr. Chamberlain's Speeches*, London, 1914, p. 137.

²⁷ UBL, JC 19/2/2, Fielding to Chamberlain, 2 July 1904.

²⁸ University of Sheffield Library (hereafter USL), W.A.S. Hewins Papers, Hewins 48/28, 29, Mulock to Chamberlain, 25 Aug. 1905.

who was Chamberlain's closest associate, visited Canada via Boston as a confidential agent from October to November.

In short, we can conclude that the most critical factor in motivating Chamberlain's move was consideration for Canadian interests.

3. The Industrial Strategy of Tariff Reform

Within the tariff reform movement, the strongest political pressure group was the Tariff Reform League, established in July 1903. Industrial protectionists such as George Byng, author of *Protection: The Views of a Manufacturer*, and E.E. Williams, author of the sensational *Made in Germany*, had already founded the Protection League in May; it was soon renamed the Imperial Tariff League, clearly with the intention of jumping on the tariff reform bandwagon. When the Tariff Reform League was founded, the Imperial Tariff League disbanded and entered it.²⁹ However, Chamberlain confided to his private secretary: "I am doubtful about that organisation."³⁰ A deputation from the provisional Tariff Reform League to the Imperial Tariff League urged Byng and two of the latter's other leaders to resign their offices, because the Tariff Reform League feared that the presence of such prominent protectionists in important positions within the new movement would undermine its imperialistic stance.³¹ Members of the Imperial Tariff League were actually excluded from the executive committee of the Tariff Reform League.³²

Thompson has already demonstrated that the League's leadership was dominated by die-hard imperialists loyal to Joseph Chamberlain, such as Lord Ridley, Leopold Amery, Edward Goulting,

²⁹ D. Porter, "Joseph Chamberlain and the Origins of the Tariff Reform Movement", in *Moriae*, 3, 1978, pp. 3-7.

³⁰ Amery, *Life*, p. 305.

³¹ Porter, "Joseph Chamberlain", p. 7.

³² For the list of the members of the executive committee, see *The Times*, 22 July 1903, p. 7.

Hewins, and Austen Chamberlain.³³ However, the League was also characterised by another important point. While industrial protectionists were excluded from the core membership, great landowners were given prestigious positions, albeit that of an ornament without substance. "At Chamberlain's instance," the Duke of Sutherland was elected as president.³⁴ The members of the executive committee included the Duke of Westminster and Lord Willoughby de Eresby.³⁵ According to the record of the League's second annual meeting in July 1905, the places of honour at the Royal Albert Hall meeting were occupied by the Duke of Argyll, the Duke of Sutherland, the Duke of Somerset, the Duke of Rutland, Lord Ridley, Unionist MP Henry Chaplin, and Arthur Pearson, owner of the *Daily Express*, along with Chamberlain and his wife. The opening address was presented by the Duke of Argyll.³⁶ The President of the Women's Association of the Tariff Reform League, which was established in December 1903, was the Countess of Ilchester, and the six vice-presidents included one duchess and four countesses.³⁷ Thus, the Tariff Reform League proudly displayed the presence of great landowners, while it constrained that of industrial protectionists. This situation constitutes evidence against the thesis that tariff reform was driven by radical modernizers. That agricultural interests were given a preferential position compared with industrial protectionists was also demonstrated by the fact that Chaplin, spokesman for the agricultural lobby within the Unionist party, played a central role in the League. Representing tariff reformers, Chaplin was in charge of moving the resolution in favour of tariff reform at every annual conference of the National Union of Conservative Associations from 1907 to 1913.³⁸

³³ Thompson, "Tariff Reform".

³⁴ Amery, *Life*, p. 306.

³⁵ *The Times*, 22 July 1903, p. 7.

³⁶ British Library of Political and Economic Science (hereafter BLPES), Tariff Reform League, Second Annual Meeting on 7 July 1905.

³⁷ UBL, JC 18/18/118, First Report of the Women's Association of the Tariff Reform League.

³⁸ Bodleian Library (hereafter Bod.), Conservative Party Archive, NUA 2/1/27, 2/1/28, 2/1/29, 2/1/30, 2/1/31, 2/1/33, 2/1/34, Minutes of the Conference, in November 1907, 1908, 1909, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913.

Most previous studies have overlooked this favouritism of Chamberlain's to agricultural interests.

Meanwhile, the Tariff Commission was the most important economic intelligence within the tariff reform movement. The Commission was established in January 1904, for the official purpose of proposing a plan of "scientific tariff". Five key men played central roles in its establishment, namely Chamberlain, Chaplin, Pearson, Hewins, and Vincent Caillard, an imperialist entrepreneur. Among them, Hewins was the initiator, and he became the secretary of the Commission.³⁹ Although Pearson was one of the founding members of both the Tariff Reform League and the Tariff Commission, he was eventually excluded from the group of core members, as he incurred Chamberlain's displeasure for suggesting the scheme of the intra-Empire free trade which the dominions would never accept.⁴⁰ At its foundation the Commission had 59 members, the majority of whom were industrialists. From 1905 to 1907, the Commission published reports on iron and steel, textiles, agriculture, engineering, pottery, glass, and sugar and confectionery. Marrison has investigated the Commission's activity thoroughly, indicating "the businessman's curiously subordinate role in relation to politicians."⁴¹ Nevertheless, he fails to fully clarify what kind of economic strategy the Commission formed as a result of the primacy of politics.

Although Marrison argues that Chamberlain "tended to leave the Commission alone, except when seeking material for his speeches or when attending meetings to discuss the final proofs of the Reports,"⁴² the framing of the Commission reports was clearly controlled by Chamberlain, who chaired every general meeting until he suffered a stroke in July 1906. From then on, under his authority, Hewins, Caillard, and Chaplin controlled the Commission.

It is worth clarifying how their political initiative affected the

³⁹ Coetzee, *For Party*, pp. 61-63.

⁴⁰ Coetzee, *For Party*, p. 53; Marrison, *British Business*, p. 137.

⁴¹ Marrison, *British Business*, p. 46.

⁴² Marrison, *British Business*, p. 138.

Commission's policy-making. The Tariff Commission prioritized reporting on two key industries: iron and steel, and textiles. Consequently, it managed to publish reports on them before the general election of January 1906. In the process of composing them, a subsidiary committee consisting of each industry's experts made a draft report in cooperation with Hewins, which was then revised during the Commission's discussion in general meetings.

In the first general meeting to discuss the preliminary report on iron and steel in June 1904, Chamberlain raised two points: that the Commission should make a concrete proposal for tariffs and that its proposals should be based on the principle of three-tier industrial tariffs, whereby foreign countries would be levied reciprocal general tariffs or maximum general tariffs, depending on their treatment of British exports, while the colonies would be always levied the lowest preferential tariffs.⁴³

Here lies a paradox that previous studies have failed to note. Chamberlain insisted on highly protective measures for British industry, even while taking great care to limit the influence of industrial protectionists. Note that this scheme of Chamberlain's was a more radical version of protection than that put forward by the fair traders in the 1880s. Under the fair traders' scheme, foreign manufactures continued to be allowed free entry to the British market on a strictly reciprocal basis.⁴⁴ Under Chamberlain's scheme, foreign manufactures would be subject to reciprocal general tariffs, even if the foreign country admitted free entry of British goods. This condition would have made it very difficult for the British government to conclude foreign trade agreements. Although the element of reciprocity remained as a reciprocal general tariff, this was certainly a policy of industrial protection. Even Marrison, who exceptionally notes this three-tier tariff structure and its strongly protectionist implications, has not clearly explained why Chamberlain proposed such a plan.⁴⁵

⁴³ BLPES, Tariff Commission Collection, TC 2/1/8, Minutes of Proceedings, 28 June 1904, pp. 2-4.

⁴⁴ See the manifesto of the National Fair-Trade League, in *The Times*, 3 Aug. 1881, p. 12.

⁴⁵ Marrison, *British Business*, pp. 168-71.

In a memorandum issued in July 1905, the Tariff Commission explained that "The system of [three-tier] tariffs proposed ... is generally similar to that foreshadowed for Canada," and that Canadian Finance Minister Fielding had disclosed such a plan of three-tier tariffs in his budget speech of 1904.⁴⁶ At the same time, in an interview with Chamberlain and Hewins, Mulock mentioned the three-tier system that the Canadian government was preparing, and "expressed the strongest desire, which was shared by his colleagues, that the report and subsequent revision of the Canadian tariff should help forward Mr. Chamberlain's movement."⁴⁷ Thus, the three-tier tariff scheme was intended to apply the British tariff system to the future Canadian system.

As is clear from the discussion on the draft report on trade in iron and steel, Chamberlain thrust this scheme upon the Commission. Hewins read paragraph 2 of the draft: "We are of opinion that we should do whatever is necessary to defend our home and Colonial trade from attack, and to encourage preferential trade with the Colonies." Alfred Hickman, a steel manufacturer, noticed that, with respect to the draft of the iron and steel committee, Hewins had omitted the phrase "and to meet Tariff with Tariff." Therefore, he mildly protested:

I think these words are of considerable importance, and should be retained. I think the suggestion that we propose to mete out to our Opponent abroad the same measure they mete out to us is one that takes a good deal with many people, and it seems on the face of it to be fair ... To leave it out altogether would be a great pity.

Chamberlain ignored this objection and proposed his own version instead: "We are of opinion that we should take steps to defend our home and Colonial trade from the unfair attacks to which they have been subjected, and to encourage preferential trade with the

⁴⁶ USL, Hewins 34/54, Tariff Commission, "The Tariff Systems of Europe and America", 22 July 1905, p. 3.

⁴⁷ USL, Hewins 20/186, "Notes of an Interview", 21 July 1905.

Colonies."⁴⁸ That is, Chamberlain not only refused the principle of reciprocity, but also demanded that the Commission commit more clearly to preferential trade, and as a result, his version was adopted.

If the principle of reciprocity as defined by Hickman had been accepted, Britain would have been obliged to admit free imports of manufactures from the foreign countries that admitted free imports of manufactures from Britain. Therefore, the principle of reciprocity was to be rejected in order to build the three-tier tariff system. Given that imports of manufactures from the colonies were negligible, the three-tier industrial tariffs for Britain was of only symbolic significance. However, for Chamberlain, the symbolic matter of imperial unity was more important than concrete industrial interests.

Chamberlain's intention was also manifest in the general meeting to consider the draft report on the textile industries in May 1905. Hewins read the following sentence in the draft on the cotton industry: "[A] moderate reduction of foreign tariffs would do much to increase the volume of our trade [of cotton goods]; such reductions can only be secured by negotiation with foreign countries on the basis of a British tariff on such goods as will be recommended when our enquiry is completed."

This was the textile committee's amendment to the original sentence, probably written by Hewins. Chamberlain insisted that the original version – "Such reductions can only be secured by the utilisation of a general British tariff to obtain concessions from foreign countries" – was preferable. F. Leverton Harris, a shipowner, objected: "I would suggest that the word 'general' should be left out. 'General' is used in so many different meanings by different economists in different countries that it might be misinterpreted." But Chamberlain was adamant: "I prefer the word 'general' myself. That is a very important part of our plan. There must be a general tariff." The Commission adopted Chamberlain's amendment.⁴⁹

In those days the British cotton industry was highly competitive,

⁴⁸ BLPES, TC 2/1/8, Minutes of Proceedings, 28 June 1904, pp. 29-31.

⁴⁹ BLPES, TC 2/1/10, Minutes of Proceedings, 31 May 1905, pp. 26-27.

so there were only minimal imports of cotton products. Although not a few cotton manufacturers wanted a retaliatory tariff in order to penetrate foreign markets, there was certainly no need for a general tariff for the cotton industry. Nonetheless, Chamberlain pushed his preference through against the will of the textile committee.

In short, Chamberlain dominated the Tariff Commission and arbitrarily decided how its reports were framed. The industrialists had no choice but to obey him. In the second meeting to discuss the report on the iron and steel industry, Hickman voluntarily withdrew the objection he had raised at the previous meeting, remarking "I think most of the Members of the Tariff Commission think it is your scheme, and you ought to have the guidance of it, and that though we are here to assist you we ought by no means to attempt to dictate you."⁵⁰

We should not misinterpret the strong protectionist policy that Chamberlain advocated as reflecting an enthusiasm for reviving British industrial strength. If his policy had been introduced, British industry might have been rather seriously damaged by diminishing foreign trade.⁵¹ On the basis of his economic strategy, tariff reformers could expect export trade to expand only in the markets of the dominions, for those of the dependent colonies such as India were already open to Britain. It is probable that not a few foreign countries would increase tariffs on imports from Britain in retaliation. According to the data of the Board of Trade, the dominions took only 16.4 per cent of British exports from 1896 to 1900, while the shares of foreign and dependents' markets were 65.9 per cent and 17.7 per cent, respectively.⁵² Indeed, Chamberlain himself stated in his speech, "I say it is the business of British statesmen to do everything they can,

⁵⁰ BLPES, TC 2/1/9, Minutes of Proceedings, 11 July 1904, p. 7.

⁵¹ Robert Giffen, the famous statistician, argued this point compellingly. See R. Mason, "Robert Giffen and the Tariff Reform Campaign, 1865-1910", in *The Journal of European Economic History*, 25-1, 1996, pp. 182-83.

⁵² The National Archives (hereafter TNA), London, CO 885/8/3, No. 144 (Confidential), Minutes of Proceedings and Papers laid before the Colonial Conference, appendix x, p. 282.

even at some present sacrifice, to keep the trade of the colonies with Great Britain; to increase that trade, to promote it, even if in doing so we lessen somewhat the trade with our foreign competitors."⁵³

It is dubious whether the expansion of trade with the dominions would have offset the contraction in trade with foreign countries. Chamberlain and leading tariff reformers, such as Hewins, insisted that "a genuinely reciprocal relationship" should be established instead of the past mercantilist system in which colonies played a subordinate part.⁵⁴ Actually Chamberlain assured Australian Defence Minister Forrest, "I do not press the Colonies to go an inch beyond what they would willingly do."⁵⁵ Therefore, it is difficult to assume that a tariff reform government would have assertively demanded that the dominions lower tariff rates on British manufactures significantly. Furthermore, Austen Chamberlain, who took over the leadership of the tariff reform movement after his father's paralysis, considered that India should be given discretion over tariff policy.⁵⁶ In this case, exports to India would also have decreased, although it is not certain whether Joseph Chamberlain shared Austen's view.

4. The Agricultural Strategy of Tariff Reform

At the first general meeting of the Tariff Commission after the 1906 general election, which had produced a landslide victory of the Liberal Party and the crushing defeat of the Unionists, Chamberlain asserted that the result should not be considered as the proper expression of public opinion on tariff reform and that the Commission should continue their jobs to prepare for the Colonial Conference the next year.⁵⁷ After Chamberlain's opening remark, Chaplin

⁵³ Speech at Birmingham, 15 May 1903, in Boyd (ed.), *Chamberlain's Speeches*, p. 131, quoted in Thompson, *Imperial Britain*, p. 81.

⁵⁴ E.H.H. Green, "The Political Economy of Empire, 1880-1914", in A. Porter (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 3, Oxford, 1999, pp. 355-56.

⁵⁵ UBL, JC 17/2/8, Chamberlain to Sir John Forrest, 12 Oct. 1902.

⁵⁶ BLPES, TC 6/4/5, Austen Chamberlain to Roper Lethbridge, 26 June 1909.

⁵⁷ BLPES, TC 2/1/11, Minutes of Proceedings, 3 May 1906, pp. 1-10.

warned that “there will be a reaction” as a result of the election. Cail-
lard elaborated on this point.

[I]n that reaction the principle of Protection may be laid hold of rather violently, and we may see that principle pushed, or attempted to be pushed, a great deal further than we wish, and the question of Preference may possibly be brushed on one side... I think that one of the most useful things that this Commission can do will be to lay particular stress as far as it can ... upon the Preferential side of our proposals, which really include the most constructive part of the Imperial policy.⁵⁸

Clearly they used the word “reaction” to mean the move to adopt industrial tariffs without food duties. Ironically, the Chamberlain group, who had pushed onward with a strong protectionist policy, warned against protection here.

In the meantime, the Chamberlain group started to take action to make significant revisions in their agricultural policy after the election. According to Chamberlain’s original electoral pledge, presented in Glasgow in October 1903, a duty of 2s a quarter on foreign wheat as well as a duty of approximately 5% on foreign meat and dairy products was to be introduced for imperial preference. In this pledge, colonial produce would be admitted duty-free. A substantial preference for colonial wines and fruits would also be introduced. However, Chamberlain said he would not propose duties on maize and bacon on the grounds that those were foods of the poorest people. He added that maize was also a raw material for farmers, who fed their stock with it.⁵⁹

In the interview with Chamberlain in July 1905, Mulock said that he “thought it extremely important that the report of Mr. Chamberlain’s Commission on preference should be confidential because if this report were published before consultation with Canadian Ministers and its recommendations were afterwards found to differ from

⁵⁸ BLPES, TC 2/1/11, Minutes of Proceedings, 3 May 1906, pp. 10-12.

⁵⁹ Speech at Glasgow, 6 Oct. 1903, in Boyd (ed.), *Chamberlain’s Speeches*, pp. 158-59.

that of Canada the movement would be prejudiced." Chamberlain agreed that "no report [on preference] should be published here until after the consultation in Canada."⁶⁰ Consequently, the publication of the Tariff Commission's report on agriculture was delayed until after Hewins's trip to Canada in the fall of 1905. It was further delayed by the resignation of the Balfour ministry in December 1905 and the resulting general election in January.

In July 1906, the last meeting Chamberlain attended was held to discuss the recommendations by the agricultural committee before their draft report was completed. At this meeting, three members of the agricultural committee requested that the Commission consider the reintroduction of the registration duty of 1s on wheat, which had been levied on colonial as well as on foreign wheat. According to this proposal, a duty on foreign wheat would be raised to 3s. At this time, Chamberlain did not express his opinion on this proposal.⁶¹ On the other hand, Walter Peace argued for a direct bounty of £1 per acre for wheat production on the grounds that to restore agriculture, a direct bounty would be far more effective than a modest import duty. Peace, the former Agent-General for Natal, was quite exceptional as a member of the Commission, openly criticizing Chamberlain's adherence to the wheat duty. To this proposal of a direct bounty, Chamberlain replied, "I am perfectly certain that his proposal of bounty would be extremely popular with the farmers... but personally I think it would be impracticable." To substantiate the proposal's impracticality, Chamberlain indicated that year-to-year changes in acreage would cause uncertainty in the amount of government spending.⁶²

Meanwhile, in the same month, under the chairmanship of Chaplin, the agricultural committee decided that a duty on foreign bacon should be introduced.⁶³ In October, at the agricultural com-

⁶⁰ USL, Hewins 20/177, Notes of Interview, 21 July 1905.

⁶¹ BLPES, TC 2/2/7, Minutes of Proceedings, 11 July 1906, pp. 10-12.

⁶² BLPES, TC 2/2/7, Minutes of Proceedings, 11 July 1906, pp. 13-17.

⁶³ BLPES, TC 2/2/8, Minutes of Proceedings at 33rd sitting of the Agricultural Committee, 31 July 1906, pp. 31-36.

mittee, Chaplin, Caillard, and Hewins overruled the opinion of Samuel Boulton, a chemical producer who argued for a bounty, on the grounds that it was impracticable and that Boulton was not a member of the agricultural committee.⁶⁴ On the other hand, Hewins read a passage in the draft report that meant the recommendation of a duty on wheat of “1s. all round and 2s. to the foreign ones” instead of a bounty. To the question of whether that was Chamberlain’s intention, Hewins replied, “Mr Chamberlain approves.”⁶⁵

According to the procedures for the reports on iron and steel and on textiles, the draft reports of those committees were to be subjected to the discussion and approval of the general meeting before publication as formal Commission reports. Nonetheless, the report of the agricultural committee was released without approval of the general meeting. This report proposed not only a 1s duty on colonial wheat (with a 2s duty on foreign wheat, as before), but also duties on foreign bacon and maize, while it rejected a bounty.⁶⁶ At the general meeting chaired by Caillard after the publication of the report, Peace fiercely criticized the executive of the Commission.

I wished to move an alteration in the Report of that Committee, but I was not allowed to do so. I was told the Report would come before the Commission before it was published... Notwithstanding that, the Report was published, containing points which I very strongly object to, and shall continue to object to ...

To this criticism Hewins replied, “Mr Chamberlain specially pointed out on several occasions publicly that he desired the Agricultural Committee to report, as they did report, and we had no choice.”⁶⁷

Obviously, then, the agricultural committee’s new proposals

⁶⁴ BLPES, TC 2/2/10, Minutes of Proceedings at 35th sitting of the Agricultural Committee, 22 Oct.1906, pp. 23-24.

⁶⁵ BLPES, TC 2/2/10, Minutes of Proceedings at 35th sitting of the Agricultural Committee, p. 28.

⁶⁶ Tariff Commission, *Report of the Agricultural Committee*, London, 1906, paras. 373-84.

⁶⁷ BLPES, TC 2/1/14, Minutes of Proceedings, 23 May 1907, pp. 3-4.

were strongly backed by Chamberlain himself. From the electoral viewpoint, this was a self-destructive policy, for it would not only raise the corn tax, so unpopular among the people, but also introduce taxes on bacon and maize, which were the foods of the poorest. It should be noted that food prices were rising and real incomes were falling during the Edwardian era.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the Chamberlain group adamantly rejected the option of a bounty, which must have been far less problematic and more popular among agriculturists, as Chamberlain admitted. The impracticality of a bounty indicated by Chamberlain appears not to be so compelling. How can we interpret this strange move? Two exceptional scholars who do notice the significance of the tariff reformers' new agricultural policy, Marrison and Ewen Green, still do not fully recognise its strangeness.⁶⁹

Green regards this move as the expression of tariff reformers' sincere concern about agricultural interests.⁷⁰ However, it is doubtful that Chamberlain had such sincere concern. Moreover, as Marrison indicates, the agricultural committee originally put little value on a tax on wheat itself, and some members of the committee had intended to abandon the wheat duty, but Chamberlain insisted on retaining it.⁷¹

This puzzle is cleared up by a letter from Hewins to Fielding. Hewins enclosed a copy of the report of the agricultural committee and wrote, "It will be published next Friday before you receive this letter, but I am sending it now because I should wish you to see it at the earliest possible moment." Hewins emphasised that bacon and maize were newly included in the plan of imperial preference. He also indicated that the proposal of the 1s duty on colonial wheat could be revised in the Commission's final general report, which

⁶⁸ A. Offer, *The First World War*, Oxford, 1989, p. 402.

⁶⁹ A.J. Marrison, "The Tariff Commission, Agricultural Protection and Food Taxes, 1903-13", in *Agricultural History Review*, 34, 1986; Marrison, *British Business*, pp. 197-201; Green, *Crisis*, pp. 211-15.

⁷⁰ Green, *Crisis*, pp. 211-15.

⁷¹ Marrison, "Tariff Commission", p. 175.

was to be issued in the near future.⁷² Therefore, clearly, this new agricultural policy was intended to strengthen imperial preference and respond to the colonies' interests, given that the self-governing colonies, such as Canada and Australia, were major producers of bacon and maize. In fact, in his encounter with Hewins in October 1905, Laurier said that preference for dairy produce, cheese, and bacon was of "greater importance" than the wheat duty.⁷³

On that occasion, Fielding told Hewins that the wheat duty was "politically necessary." However, Fielding added that he did not see why Britain should not levy a duty against Canadian wheat, while at the same time giving a preference, if that would help matters.⁷⁴ Thus, for the Canadian government, the small wheat duty was just a symbolic matter, and the imposition of a preferential tariff on Canadian wheat was to be accepted.

This stance on the part of the Canadian government explains why the Chamberlain group dared to propose introducing the duty on colonial wheat. For Chamberlain, who was convinced that the system of imperial preference was the only viable way to consolidate the British Empire, agricultural protectionists such as Chaplin were the most reliable partners for protecting his scheme of imperial preference. Some imperialists did not stick to imperial preference as a means for realising imperial unity. In short, Chamberlain tried to secure support for his scheme of imperial preference by appealing to agricultural interests. In October 1903, Chaplin had already requested that Chamberlain consider imposing preferential duties on colonial produce.⁷⁵ The more prestigious position accorded to landed than to industrial interests within the tariff reform movement can be explained by this same background. As for a bounty, if it had been promised to agriculturalists, their interest in imperial preference might have lessened. In other words, the Chamberlain group feared that a bounty would divert agriculturalists' concern from tariffs.

⁷² USL, Hewins 50/21~23, Hewins to Fielding, 20 Nov. 1906.

⁷³ USL, Hewins 20/89, 23 Oct. 1905.

⁷⁴ USL, Hewins 20/101, 4 Nov. 1905.

⁷⁵ UBL, JC 18/18/27, Chaplin to Chamberlain, 3 Oct. 1903.

Consider also that at the start of the tariff reform campaign, Chamberlain wavered on the question of whether even raw materials should be included in his scheme of imperial preference: he avoided making a definite statement of denial until the Glasgow speech, despite the Liberals' campaign charge that he intended to do so.⁷⁶ When he asked the historical economist William Ashley to survey 11 topics just after the Birmingham speech, one of those topics was "What would be the effect of a tax on Wool upon our manufacturers at Bradford and elsewhere?"⁷⁷ It is true that Chamberlain finally gave up this policy, but it is obvious that he had seriously considered a policy that would have harmed the British wool industry, because giving preference on wool to Australasia would have been a great help to the latter.

Despite strong efforts by Chamberlain's group to win the favour of the Canadian government, after the 1906 general election Laurier was markedly cool to them. Although the Laurier government had previously threatened Chamberlain with the possibility of discarding the British preference, after the election Laurier wrote to Hewins: "I may tell you, as indeed you probably know, that we have no intention of discontinuing the British Preference... As to the question of mutual preference, you know my views; it is for the people of Great Britain to decide."⁷⁸ At the Colonial Conference in 1907, Laurier no longer demanded imperial preference of Britain's Liberal government.⁷⁹ In December 1906, Hewins warned Chamberlain that the Laurier government might use its three-tier tariff system to make a reciprocity agreement with Germany or the United States compatible with the British preference.⁸⁰ Hewins's suspicion would even-

⁷⁶ See A.J. Marrison, "The Development of a Tariff Reform Policy during Joseph Chamberlain's First Campaign May 1903-February 1904", in W.H. Chaloner and B.M. Ratcliffe (eds.), *Trade and Transport*, Manchester, 1977, pp. 216-18.

⁷⁷ UBL, JC 18/18/7, Chamberlain to Ashley, 19 May 1903.

⁷⁸ USL, Hewins 49/19, Laurier to Hewins, 7 Feb. 1906.

⁷⁹ *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers*, 1907, Cd. 3524, Minutes of Proceedings of the Colonial Conference, 1907, pp. 408-12.

⁸⁰ USL, Hewins 50/48-52, Hewins to Mrs. Chamberlain, 13 Dec. 1906.

tually be confirmed by the Canadian-American reciprocity agreement of 1911. However, Laurier's Liberal Party was defeated by the loyalist Conservative Party in the general election the same year and the reciprocity agreement was rescinded, much to the relief of the tariff reformers.⁸¹

5. Arthur Balfour's Plan of Retaliatory Tariffs

After Chamberlain's launch of the tariff reform campaign, the Unionists were divided between tariff reformers and free traders. Given this division, Arthur Balfour undertook his own plan for fiscal reform by asking for the advice of eminent economists, such as Alfred Marshall and Herbert Foxwell, and several civil servants.⁸² This plan was published in September 1903 under the title *Economic Notes on Insular Free Trade*. In this pamphlet, Balfour presented his plan for a retaliatory tariff policy. In his speech at Sheffield in October 1903, he elaborated on this policy, and the Sheffield programme would be the official pledge of the Unionists in the 1906 general election.

The vast majority of previous studies have regarded this policy as a compromise or a middle-ground policy between tariff reform and free trade.⁸³ Consequently, the significance of Balfour's scheme as an independent economic strategy tends to be overlooked. Even

⁸¹ See S.J. Potter, "The Imperial Significance of the Canadian-American Reciprocity Proposals of 19112, in *Historical Journal*, 47-1, 2004.

⁸² A.W. Coats, "Political Economy and the Tariff Reform Campaign of 1903", in *Journal of Law and Economics*, 11, 1968, pp. 190-92.

⁸³ Semmel, *Imperialism*, pp. 104-106; Amery, *Life*, p. 361; Coats, "Political Economy", pp. 182-84; A. Gollin, *Balfour's Burden*, London, 1965, pp. 62-64, 94; D. Judd, *Balfour and the British Empire*, London, 1968, p. 114; D. Judd, *Radical Joe*, p. 246; R.A. Rempel, *Unionists Divided*, Newton Abbot, 1972, pp. 49-58; Fraser, *Joseph Chamberlain*, pp. 253-54; Sykes, *Tariff Reform*, pp. 40, 65, 79; M. Egremont, *Balfour*, London, 1980, p. 186; M. Balfour, *Britain and Joseph Chamberlain*, London, 1985, p. 282; R.F. Mackay, *Balfour*, Oxford, 1985, pp. 144-48; J. Tones, *Balfour and Foreign Policy*, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 92-93; Ward, *The Chamberlains*, p. 57. Exceptionally, Kenneth Young denied the view that Balfour meant to compromise, on the grounds that he flatly rejected protection. However, Young did not go further to consider this question. K. Young, *Arthur James Balfour*, London, 1963, p. 251.

A.W. Coats, who has thoroughly investigated the development of Balfour's plan, observed that "the Prime Minister was far too astute a politician to commit himself to detailed and specific policy statements in a situation where there were so many unknown and unpredictable factors."⁸⁴ Exceptionally, Aaron Friedberg and Frank Trentmann notice its significance as an independent economic strategy.⁸⁵ However, even they do not fully clarify the enormous difference between Balfour's and Chamberlain's tariff reform policy proposals. As a result, there seems to be a consensus that Balfour's policy was tantamount to Chamberlain's reform but without imperial preference or food taxes. It is true that a point of contention between these policies was the adoption of imperial preference, but even apart from that question there were great differences between the two policy proposals.

Now, let us consider the anatomy of Balfour's plan. Balfour reiterated in his pamphlet and speeches that his policy was true free trade policy.⁸⁶ He agreed with the Liberals, "We are not only rich and prosperous in appearance, but also, I believe, in reality."⁸⁷ This was in stark contrast to Chamberlain's Cassandra-like discourse: "Sugar has gone; silk has gone; iron is threatened; wool is threatened; cotton will go!"⁸⁸ However, Balfour warned about the future prospect of continuing the free import policy on the following grounds: "the injury which foreign protection is calculated to inflict

⁸⁴ Coats, "Political Economy", p. 194.

⁸⁵ Friedberg, *Weary Titan*, pp. 62-68; F. Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*, Oxford, 2008, pp. 152-54. Although Patrick O'Brien and Geoffrey Pigman regard Balfour's policy as a compromise, they also notice the significance of this policy, and mention it, albeit very briefly. P.K. O'Brien and G.A. Pigman, "Free Trade, British Hegemony and the International Economic Order in the Nineteenth Century", in *Review of International Studies*, 18, 1992, pp. 107-108; G.A. Pigman, "Hegemony and Trade Liberalization Policy", in *Review of International Studies*, 23, 1997, pp. 205-206.

⁸⁶ A.J. Balfour, "Economic Notes on Insular Free Trade", in A.J. Balfour, *Fiscal Reform*, London, 1906, p. 95; speech at Bristol, 13 Nov. 1903, in *Fiscal Reform*, p. 119; speech at Manchester, 11 Jan. 1904, p. 130; speech at Edinburgh, 3 Oct. 1904, p. 206; speech at Leeds, 18 Dec. 1905, p. 270.

⁸⁷ Balfour, "Economic Notes", in *Fiscal Reform*, p. 93.

⁸⁸ Speech at Greenock, 7 Oct. 1903, in Boyd (ed.), *Chamberlain's Speeches*, p. 177.

on a Free Trade country; its need for open markets; the threatened contracting of existing Free Trade areas; the increasing severity of tariffs in Protectionist areas; the building up of vested protected interests in new countries, which may be discouraged now, but not hereafter ...⁸⁹

Chamberlain and Balfour shared a common rhetoric in that they regarded foreign protection as the greatest danger. However, Balfour's countermeasure differed radically from that of Chamberlain. Chamberlain advocated countervailing tariffs to protect the home and colonial markets against foreign protection, while Balfour focused on the measure to force foreign countries to lower their tariff barriers. In this sense, Balfour's policy was far closer to Liberal free trade policy than to Chamberlain's proposals,⁹⁰ although Balfour did not necessarily prioritize retaining free trade ministers such as Charles Ritchie and Lord George Hamilton over Chamberlainite ministers. In his speech, Balfour clarified his stance on protection, saying, "A Protective policy, as I understand it, is a policy which aims at supporting or creating home industries by raising home prices. ... Now, that may be a good or a bad policy – I shall have a word to say upon it directly – but it is not the Sheffield policy, and it has no relation whatever to the Sheffield policy."⁹¹

In *Economic Notes*, his measure was referred to vaguely as "freedom to negotiate that freedom of exchange may be increased." In the Sheffield speech, he explained it more concretely. That is, "we might inform any foreign country which we thought was treating us with outrageous unfairness that unless they modified their policy to our advantage we should feel ourselves compelled to take this or that step in regard to their exports to our markets."⁹² In his speech

⁸⁹ Balfour, "Economic Notes", in *Fiscal Reform*, p. 93.

⁹⁰ In this sense, Balfour's policy foreshadowed the wartime plan of Lord Balfour of Burleigh's Committee, which Hajime Akitomi called a "Modified Imperialism of Free Trade". H. Akitomi, "The British Trade Policy Plan during the First World War", in *The Journal of European Economic History*, 35-3, 2006.

⁹¹ Speech at Edinburgh, 3 Oct. 1904, in *Fiscal Reform*, p. 198.

⁹² Speech at Sheffield, 1 Oct. 1903, in *Fiscal Reform*, pp. 109-10.

just before the election of 1906, clearly with Chamberlain's plan in mind, he confirmed that he did not intend a general tariff: "if a general tariff is to be constructed upon protective lines, then, as I have already told you, that seems to me to go outside the scope of the fiscal reform which I am proposing to my countrymen for their acceptance."⁹³

There are two very different methods for tariff bargaining. Unionist MP John Gorst distinguished them in his comment on Balfour's intention in 1903: "whether the Government propose a general tax upon all manufacturing goods, to be remitted by negotiation in the case of those countries which give facilities to us, or whether he intends to wait until some hostile tariff is put on by a foreign country against our goods, and then retaliate."⁹⁴ That is, whether tariffs were to be imposed generally in advance of negotiation or partially and *ex post facto*. Whereas the former was the plan of fair traders in 1880s and the tariff reformers, the latter was Balfour's plan, under which idea Britain would pinpoint those countries that levied especially high tariffs on British industrial goods and threaten them with the possibility of a retaliatory tariff if they did not lower their rates. Balfour boasted that this was "a practical policy" and said, "I say that the agreement is easy of attainment."⁹⁵

Green argues that Balfour agreed with Chamberlain on imperial preference, but disagreed on protection.⁹⁶ It is true that Balfour reiterated his sympathy with the tariff reformers' ideal of imperial unity. However, at least during the period between the final decision to abolish the registration duty on wheat in 1903 and the general election in 1906, he was perfectly consistent that he did not intend to introduce food taxes without the public's understanding. Balfour made a definite statement in the Sheffield speech: "I am, therefore,

⁹³ Speech at Leeds, 18 Dec. 1905, in *Fiscal Reform*, p. 274.

⁹⁴ Bod., NUA 2/1/23, Minutes of the Conference of the National Union of Conservative Associations, 1 Oct. 1903.

⁹⁵ Bod., NUA 2/1/25, Minutes of the Conference, 14 Nov. 1905.

⁹⁶ E.H.H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism*, Oxford, 2002, ch.1.

distinctly of opinion ... that a tax on food is not, with public opinion in the state in which we now find it, within the limits of practical politics. So much for the colonial branch of the question."⁹⁷ In the parliamentary debates in February 1904, Gerald Balfour, President of the Board of Trade and brother of the Prime Minister, confirmed that "his [the Prime Minister's] policy does not contemplate the taxation of food."⁹⁸

However, this does not necessarily mean that Balfour never intended compromise in political terms. In February 1905, he suggested to Chamberlain a plan of "double election," whereby the Unionists would fight the next general election on the pledge that they would call another general election in order to introduce food taxes for imperial preference, if the Colonial Conference of 1907 came to agreement on that necessity.⁹⁹ In other words, the Unionists would fight the first election on Balfour's programme. After their victory, they might fight a second election on Chamberlain's programme of imperial preference. This proposal also signifies that Balfour's policy itself was not a compromise but an independent policy.

Was there, then, any prospect of success for Balfour's policy as an economic strategy? In technical terms, if Britain had used agricultural tariffs purely for retaliation, the threat to foreign countries would have been far more effective, because Britain was a huge importer of agricultural produce. However, as Balfour argued, this was not practical politics. Nonetheless, Balfour's policy would have been fairly effective in bringing down the tariffs of some protectionist countries. Although free traders warned against the risk of tariff wars, the danger would not have been so great if Britain's demands to foreign countries were moderate.

Generally speaking, a country with a trade deficit has a strong bargaining position against its surplus trading partner. And in fact

⁹⁷ Speech at Sheffield, in *Fiscal Reform*, p. 109.

⁹⁸ *Parliamentary Debates* (hereafter PD), Commons, 4th ser., vol. 129, 8 Feb. 1904, col.661.

⁹⁹ British Library, Arthur Balfour Papers, Add. 49774, Balfour to Chamberlain, 18 Feb. 1905.

the possibility of British retaliation was considered as a great risk by the German government, in view of Germany's large bilateral trade surplus with Britain.¹⁰⁰ In those days, all the main Western countries were running substantial trade surpluses with Britain. Britain's threat of retaliation would have been effective, at least vis-à-vis such countries as Germany, France, and the United States, which exported significant volumes of industrial goods to Britain. Therefore, as Friedberg observes: "If it had been implemented, it might have helped to reduce the general level of protectionism, thereby improving both the short- and the long-term prospects for British industry."¹⁰¹

S.B. Saul argues for Britain's free import policy in those days on the grounds that it enabled Britain to expand its export trade to neutral markets, especially India. In other words, the more Britain increased her imports from Western countries, the more she increased exports to neutral Asian markets.¹⁰² This mechanism had already been noticed in the 1880s by Thomas Henry Farrer, Permanent Secretary to the Board of Trade.¹⁰³ Therefore, it might be true that Britain's free import policy was a rational strategy in the short term. However, as Eric Hobsbawm argues, it is also true that as a result, British heavy industries lost the competition with other industrial countries and that Britain's export industries retreated into the less competitive markets of underdeveloped countries.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, in the long term, Balfour's economic strategy might have been the better choice, as it was designed to keep British industry competitive in the markets for advanced industrial technology in the developed industrial countries.

Trentmann has demonstrated that the majority of British industrialists preferred a policy of moderate industrial tariffs, essentially

¹⁰⁰ Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation*, p. 154.

¹⁰¹ Friedberg, *Weary Titan*, p. 85. O'Brien and Pigman share this view. O'Brien and Pigman, "Free Trade", pp. 112-23; Pigman, "Hegemony".

¹⁰² S.B. Saul, *Studies in British Overseas Trade 1870-1914*, Liverpool, 1960, pp. 60-64.

¹⁰³ T.H. Farrer, *Free Trade Versus Fair Trade*, London, 1886, pp. 51-54.

¹⁰⁴ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*, London, 1968, p. 125.

on the basis of retaliation or reciprocity, and that originally they did not support either free imports or the full-scale protectionism advocated by Chamberlain.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, Balfour's policy of retaliation or reciprocity corresponded to the majority view of British industrialists. Nonetheless, industrialists were forced to choose one of those extreme poles in the 1906 general election, because of Balfour's unpopularity.

Green argues that tariff reform was a British version of the German *Sammlungspolitik*. In the original version of that policy in Germany, the interests of the Junkers and of heavy industry were integrated through a grand tariff scheme covering both agricultural and industrial goods. In Britain, faced with the weakening support base of the Unionists, Chamberlain resorted to the grand scheme that would enable both vertical and horizontal integration of the main social groups under the Unionists. Tariff reform would enable vertical integration between the propertied class and the working class, because social policies based on the revenue from the regressive tariffs would reconcile those interests. Tariff reform would also enable horizontal integration between industrial interests and agricultural interests, as in Germany. So the tariff reformers behind Chamberlain stuck to the realisation of full programmes of tariff reform.¹⁰⁶

This influential thesis of Green's should be refuted, however, because originally Balfour's plan should have been far more suitable for both vertical and horizontal integration of social groups, without the Achilles heel of food taxes that plagued tariff reform. In other words, as an electoral strategy, Balfour's plan should have been far more effective than Chamberlain's in broadening the Unionist base. It could appeal to the working class with the promise of secure employment as a result of retaliatory tariffs, without alienating them with food taxes, and initially the majority of industrialists supported such a policy. Some observers indicated that retaliation would be a

¹⁰⁵ F. Trentmann, "Transformation of Fiscal Reform", in *Historical Journal*, 39, 1996.

¹⁰⁶ Green, "Radical Conservatism"; Green, *Crisis*, especially pp. 192-93.

popular policy in the prevailing climate of germanophobia, because it would give Britain a weapon with which to chastise Germany.¹⁰⁷ It is true that Balfour's plan gave up agricultural interests. However, considering that the British agricultural population had already dipped below 10 per cent of the labour force at the 1901 census,¹⁰⁸ agricultural interests were the weakest link from the electoral viewpoint. And even the agriculturalists themselves, as mentioned above, did not greatly appreciate the effect of the 2s duty on wheat. Moreover, the great landowners who were the backbone of the Unionist party were now shifting their property base from land rent to stock investment.¹⁰⁹

The financial interests, which in general disliked Chamberlain's policy, had good reason to support that of Balfour, which did not aim at any major revision of the existing free trade order favourable to them.¹¹⁰ As a matter of fact, in 1906 the constituency of the City of London (two seats) elected the Balfourite Alban Gibbs along with the Unionist free trader Edward Clarke. After his defeat in the constituency in Manchester in this election, Balfour himself was elected as a representative of the City of London's constituency, replacing Gibbs when the latter was elevated to the House of Lords.¹¹¹

Thus, Balfour's policy had the potential to achieve horizontal integration between industrial interests and financial interests as well as vertical integration between the propertied class and the working class far more smoothly than Chamberlain's tariff reform. If Cham-

¹⁰⁷ Kennedy, *Anglo-German*, p. 263.

¹⁰⁸ P. Deane and W.A. Coal, *British Economic Growth 1688-1959*, Cambridge, 1962, p. 142.

¹⁰⁹ F.M.L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1963, pp. 319-26. See also W.D. Rubinstein, *Elites and the Wealthy in Modern British History*, New York, 1987, pp. 69-71.

¹¹⁰ As J.M. Hobson indicates, it is true that in the 1910 general elections the vast majority of City businessmen supported the Unionists, who united under the banner of tariff reform, because they regarded the Liberal government's radical fiscal policy as a more serious danger than tariff reform. Hobson, *Wealth*, pp. 142-45. See also Howe, *Free Trade*, pp. 233-34; Y. Cassis, *City Bankers 1890-1914*, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 304-305. However, there is little evidence to refute the general view that prior to 1906 the City was sceptical of Chamberlainite tariff reform.

¹¹¹ Cassis, *City Bankers*, pp. 263-64; Howe, *Free Trade*, p. 234.

berlain and the tariff reformers had truly intended *Sammlungspolitik*, they would have adopted a policy of moderate industrial tariffs like Balfour's, instead of a full-scale programme of tariff reform. If they had seriously intended to support agriculture, they would have adopted a policy with bounty.

Why, then, did Balfour's plan fail to attract widespread support? In short, in a situation in which Chamberlain's dynamic campaign clashed with the Liberals' fierce counter-movement, Balfour's plan was dismissed as an insignificant "halfway house" policy, irrespective of its reality. For instance, in the parliamentary debates Winston Churchill openly showed contempt for Balfour's policy immediately after crossing the floor from the Unionists to the Liberals, saying, "the policy of the Prime Minister was not very important because it was not the issue before the country."¹¹² Balfour himself recognised this, and in his speech in Edinburgh emphasised: "But let me first point out that the fiscal policy that I recommended at Sheffield is not a compromise, and is not a halfway house. It is a logical, self-contained whole, defensible in itself, and not carrying within it the seeds of any necessary development in a direction which either Protectionist or Free Trader may either hope for or fear."¹¹³

As a result, although 308 of the 574 Unionist candidates in the 1906 general election supported Balfour's Sheffield programme, 109 of the 157 Unionists elected (69 per cent) were Chamberlainite tariff reformers.¹¹⁴ This indicates that the choice of the electorate was polarized between the Liberal free traders and the Chamberlainite tariff reformers, and the Balfourites were simply buried. Thus, Balfour's policy has been downplayed by both his contemporaries and present-day scholars.

¹¹² *PD, Commons*, 4th ser., vol. 129, 8 Feb. 1904, col. 656.

¹¹³ Speech at Edinburgh, 3 Oct. 1904, in Balfour, *Fiscal Reform*, pp. 197-98.

¹¹⁴ R. Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher*, London, 1985, p. 181; Rempel, *Unionists Divided*, p. 158.

6. Conclusion

As we have seen, Chamberlain and the leading tariff reformers were caught by a kind of obsession that Britain should strengthen its ties with the dominions through imperial preference. In their vision, even if the scheme of imperial preference should result in strengthening the dominions' economies rather than Britain's, it should be accepted as long as it reinforced the unity of the British Empire.

This thesis is demonstrated by the significant episode of the Liberal government's 1914 tax reform. Faced with a dramatic increase in overseas investment, in July 1914 the government abandoned its position that overseas investment was good for the British national economy and instead introduced a tax on it. Originally, Unionists or Conservatives had harshly criticized the government on the grounds that radical fiscal policies were driving capital abroad, causing domestic industry to suffer.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, the Conservatives were opposed to this tax policy and resisted, tabling an amendment that "Income received in the United Kingdom from investments in British Possessions and Colonies shall be assessable to Income and Super-tax under this Act after the deduction of such Income Tax as has been paid in any British Possession or Colony upon such income."¹¹⁶ One Liberal MP struck the Conservatives at a vital spot, saying "all these hon. Gentlemen will talk about money invested abroad. We want to bring it back and have it invested here. Have you any objection to that?"¹¹⁷

In the division, the Conservatives voted unanimously against the tax proposal and for the amendment.¹¹⁸ Note that the opponents of the tax proposal included die-hard tariff reformers such as Goulding,

¹¹⁵ *PD, Commons*, 5th ser., vol. 2, 17 Mar. 1909, cols. 1146-90. See also A. Offer, "Empire and Social Reform", in *Historical Journal*, 26, 1983, pp. 120-24.

¹¹⁶ *PD, Commons*, 5th ser., vol. 65, 21 July 1914, col. 379.

¹¹⁷ *PD, Commons*, 5th ser., vol. 64, 13 July 1914, col. 1635.

¹¹⁸ *PD, Commons*, 5th ser., vol. 64, 13 July 1914, cols. 1641-46; vol. 65, 21 July 1914, cols. 401-406.

Henry Page Croft, Halford Mackinder, and Hewins, who had been a Conservative MP since 1912. That is, tariff reformers prioritized imperial interests over the interests of Britain's domestic industry.

We can add another case. According to Andrew Cooper, in the 1920s Leo Amery, Colonial Secretary to Stanley Baldwin's Conservative government and leader of the remnant of tariff reformers, "displayed little reluctance in sacrificing the interests of the British farmer," to pursue the dream of the Empire's economic unity. Amery pressured the government to take in augmented imports of every conceivable kind of Imperial product, from Canadian bacon to Australian fruit. He even argued that domestic producers had forfeited their claim to fair treatment insofar as they had "ratted on the Conservatives at the polls" in the 1923 general election.¹¹⁹

In the 1930s Amery was excluded from the front bench of the National Government, which consisted chiefly of Conservatives. At the Imperial Economic Conference in the summer of 1932 in Ottawa, he agitated the dominion governments to press the British government to concede preference.¹²⁰ At the Conference Nicholas Havenga, a representative of South Africa, revealed that Amery had urged him to demand the preference on meat and sugar from the British government, calling this a "great surprise."¹²¹

The system of imperial preference established by the Ottawa Conference may appear to be the realisation of Joseph Chamberlain's scheme by his second son, Neville, Chancellor of the Exchequer to the National Government. However, imperial preference in the 1930s was a far more practicable policy than tariff reform in the Edwardian era.¹²² It is understandable that the National Government

¹¹⁹ A.F. Cooper, *British Agricultural Policy, 1912-36*, Manchester, 1989, p. 85.

¹²⁰ I.M. Drummond, *Imperial Economic Policy, 1917-1939*, London, 1974, p. 220, 262.

¹²¹ TNA, CAB 32/101, Minutes of the 60th Meeting of the Imperial Conference, 17 Aug. 1932, p. 184.

¹²² For the protectionist tide that was already flowing strongly in the 1920s, see F. Capie, "The Pressure for Tariff Protection in Britain, 1917-31", in *The Journal of European Economic History*, 9-2, 1980; W.R. Garside, "Party Politics, Political Economy and British Protectionism, 1919-1932", in *History*, 83-269, 1998.

managed to secure the imperial markets through imperial preference in the 1930s, when world trade was contracting dramatically — a situation in contrast to the Edwardian era when trade was booming. Furthermore, the National Government pushed energetically for trade agreements with countries outside the Empire, such as Argentina, despite the fierce protest of Amery that this betrayed the spirit of imperial unity.¹²³ Robert Self observes that “Neville Chamberlain had never shared the sentimental Imperial vision of his brother or Amery.”¹²⁴

As a result of imperial preference since 1932, the portion of overall British trade accounted for by imperial trade certainly rose. However, the increase in the dominions' exports to Britain overwhelmed the increase in British exports, and Britain's current account deficit remained. Either way, whether imperial preference was an adequate policy for Britain in the 1930s is another story.¹²⁵

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¹²³ T. Rooth, *British Protectionism and the International Economy*, Cambridge, 1992, ch. 5.

¹²⁴ R.C. Self, *Tories and Tariffs*, London, 1986, p. 718.

¹²⁵ On this question, see Drummond, *Imperial Economic Policy*, pp. 279-89; M. Kitson and S. Solomou, *Protectionism and Economic Revival*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 58; Rooth, *British Protectionism*, ch. 11. For Britain's trade policy in relation to tropical colonies, see D. Meredith, “British Trade Diversion Policy and the ‘Colonial Issue’ in the 1930s”, in *The Journal of European Economic History*, 25-1, 1996.

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