

British Liberty Stained: “Chinese Slavery,” Imperial Rhetoric, and the 1906

British General Election

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At many campaign events during the 1906 British general election, hecklers shouted out for Parliamentary candidates to discuss “Chinese slavery.” The importation of approximately 64,000 indentured laborers from China to the South African gold mines provided a contentious issue upon which every candidate expounded, voluntarily or involuntarily. The issue of Chinese laborers in the British colony of the Transvaal in South Africa served as an election ploy by the Liberal party, out of power for most of the past twenty years, to embarrass their opponents who had approved the measure, the Unionist party.¹ In 1906, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was a unitary state with no regional government or administration. Representative municipal government had begun only recently and did not exist evenly throughout the country.² Parliamentary elections presented one of the few outlets for the national government to hear the demands of individual voices. The compressed campaign lasted for six weeks, from the last week of December 1905 to the first week of February 1906, with the polling occurring over four weeks from 12 January through 8 February 1906.

In late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, no imperial issue took such a prominent position during a general election campaign as “Chinese slavery.” While recent historians have examined the impact of the British Empire on the British Isles, no historian has truly analyzed how politicians explained the British Empire to their constituents. Other historians have scrutinized Chinese mine laborers in the Transvaal, the place of “Chinese slavery” in British and South

¹The *Unionist* party refers to the coalition between the larger *Conservative* party and the smaller *Liberal Unionist* party from 1895 to 1912, when the Liberal Unionists fused officially into the Conservative party.

²A number of Parliamentary reforms over the nineteenth century, primarily the Municipal Corporation Acts of 1835 and 1882 and the Local Government Act of 1888, increased the scope, accountability, and responsibilities of local government. P. J. Waller, *Town, City, and Nation: England 1850-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 242-253; G. R. Searle, *A New England? Peace and War 1886-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 125.

African politics, and the weight of “Chinese slavery” in the results of the 1906 general election.³ Instead, this article will investigate the public’s notion of the Empire through the issue of “Chinese slavery.” To get elected, politicians needed to speak in a language with which their constituents agreed. And unlike any other time from 1884 to 1914, politicians had to describe the everyday realities of maintaining a global empire. Candidates explained the British Empire to their constituents not on the merits or faults of imperial policies but rather through conceptions familiar to the lives of British voters. An examination of the electoral rhetoric with which Parliamentary candidates supported or attacked the “Chinese slavery” issue demonstrates how politicians defended their state’s global interactions to a concerned electorate.

This article focuses on the political rhetoric utilized by Parliamentary candidates in Glasgow, Scotland and Liverpool, England, two of the more imperially-connected cities of the United Kingdom. Along with London, we should consider Glasgow and Liverpool as “British” cities, and not just a “Scottish” or “English” one. Their industry and commerce connected their residents to all parts of the Empire and the world. Migrants travelled to each city from all corners of the British Isles, especially Ireland, in search of work and a better life. However, politicians standing for election in Glasgow and Liverpool rarely used local specific touchstones when discussing “Chinese slavery” on the stump, unlike the other two main issues of the 1906 general election, Unionist Joseph Chamberlain’s tariff reform directive, which aimed to end the policy of free trade, and Irish Home Rule, the campaign for a separate parliament for Ireland

³ On Chinese mine laborers in the Transvaal, see Peter Richardson, *Chinese Mine Labour in the Transvaal* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982) and Gary Kynoch, “„Your Petitioners are in Mortal Terror’: The Violent World of Chinese Mineworkers in South Africa, 1904-1910,” *Journal of South African Studies* 31 (2005): 531-546. On “Chinese slavery” in British politics, see Kevin Grant, “„Chinese Slavery” in South Africa and Great Britain, 1902- 1910,” in *A Civilized Savagery: Britain and the New Slaveries in Africa, 1884-1926* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 79-107. On the 1906 General Election, see A.K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide: The General Election of 1906* (Newton Abbot, Devon, UK: David & Charles, 1973).

within the United Kingdom.⁴

As a response to either support or discredit literary critic Edward Said's work on the strong influence of imperialism on metropolitan culture, scholars in recent years have sought to understand the impact that the British Empire had on the British Isles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵ Some historians, such as Catherine Hall, argue that the Empire permeated British society to the point that it became "ordinary," "everyday," and "simply part of life."⁶ Other historians, such as Bernard Porter, argue the opposite that, outside of material goods, the British Empire meant little to the development of British society and culture.⁷ The reality lies somewhere in-between. If the Empire was ubiquitous, then it had little prominence in everyday life. Although they drank their Ceylon tea with West Indian sugar, to most Britons the Empire remained in the background.⁸ It appeared important during times of imperial crises, such as the death of General Gordon in the Sudan in 1885 and the relief of Mafeking during the South African War in 1900. These events of conquest and defense captured the public's imagination. Accounts of routine imperial maintenance did not. Overall, as Andrew Thompson posits, the Empire's impact on British subjects varied greatly across the Isles, depending upon class,

⁴ See Scott C. Spencer, "Aligned Concerns: British Identities and the Candidate-Constituent Links of the 1906 British General Election" (master's thesis, University of Virginia, 2006).

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993). Also see Frederick Cooper, "Introduction: Colonial Questions, Historical Trajectories," in *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3-32.

⁶ Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, "Introduction: Being at Home with the Empire," in *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, eds. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1-31.

⁷ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), xv.

⁸ Notwithstanding the differences between England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, this article considers the four "nations" as equally British and all inhabitants of the British Isles as Britons.

religious, and regional backgrounds.⁹ Despite these differences, the Empire functioned as a giant outlet valve for the energies of the peoples of the British Isles. While only a minority actually undertook the opportunities of settlement, employment, good works, commerce, and personal betterment that the British Empire provided, to all Britons those potentials existed whenever they desired to grasp them. Many took advantage of these opportunities, as the years 1901-1914 saw the largest emigration from British Isles ever, with the majority of migrants moving to the white settler colonies of Canada, Australasia, and South Africa.¹⁰ No matter where historians place themselves within this debate, the Empire provided the one common affiliation that all Britons – English, Welsh, Scottish, and Irish – shared.

A detailed examination of general election rhetoric provides scholars with a strong means to investigate how deeply the British Empire impacted Britons. Few scholars have examined imperial rhetoric from the stump, mainly because the Empire rarely provided an important electoral issue for voters.¹¹ As P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins contend, the political-financial elite of the “gentlemanly capitalists” guided the fortunes of the British Empire from London at the turn of the twentieth century.¹² The voting public had little influence over imperial policy, or arguably little desire to influence it.¹³ More than any other electoral issue during any of the eight

⁹ Andrew Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow, Essex, UK: Pearson Longman, 2005), 241.

¹⁰ Stephen Constantine, “Migrants and Settlers,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Vol. IV: The Twentieth Century*, eds. Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 165-167.

¹¹ Only one historian, Jonathan Schneer, has studied a general election of late Victorian and Edwardian period through an imperial lens – the 1900 general election in London. However, by examining outliers such as M. M. Bhowndaggee, the only Indian Member of Parliament, and only candidates standing in London, Schneer fails to impart how the British people as a whole understood the Empire. Jonathan Schneer, “The Khaki Election of 1900,” in *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 229-263.

¹² P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688-2000*, 2nd ed. (Harlow, Essex, UK: Longman, 2002), 56.

¹³ B. Porter, 308.

general elections between the Third Reform Act of 1884 to the start of World War I in 1914, “Chinese slavery” made the voting population focus on the maintenance of the British Empire.¹⁴ As Liberal candidates reminded voters continuously of the “repulsive” Unionist policy of “Chinese slavery,” constituents had to consider the merits of imperial policies more than usual.

Candidates and parties promoted their electoral positions primarily through newspapers. In Edwardian Britain, newspapers commanded a near monopoly on the flow of information.¹⁵ While the London press covered Parliamentary politics, provincial newspapers chose which national events and figures to report. Most large cities had at least two dailies that supported one of the major parties. The editor placed his own slant on national politics, as he selected which stories from the wire services and other newspapers to include in his paper. Even if the local elites read London papers like the Conservative Times or the Liberal Westminster Gazette, the general population read their local papers which provided information on local events and stories that the London papers did not carry. While reading the Liberal Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury or the Conservative Liverpool Courier, or the Liberal Glasgow Daily Record and Mail or the Liberal Unionist Glasgow Herald for their local news, readers would accept, for the most part, their paper’s view of the national scene. Press coverage of politics increased during the general election campaign. Papers printed each local candidate’s election address, an official

¹⁴ We can dismiss three other potentially “imperial” issues at general elections from consideration for delving into Britons’ conception of the Empire. The Irish Home Rule issue, the primary electoral issue from 1884 to 1914, dealt more with Ireland’s place within a unitary United Kingdom than within the British Empire. Alan O’Day, *Irish Home Rule, 1867-1921* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998). Voters considered the South African War, the main issue of the “Khaki” general election of 1900, more through a patriotic lens than an imperial one. Paul Readman, “The Conservative Party, Patriotism, and British Politics: The Case of the General Election of 1900,” *The Journal of British Studies* 40 (2001): 107-145. And the Unionist call for tariff reform to end Britain’s free trade and enact trading preference within the Empire in the 1906 and two 1910 general elections represented a domestic issue, although, for some, it had an imperial end. E. H. H. Green, “Radical Conservatism: The Electoral Genesis of Tariff Reform,” *The Historical Journal* 28 (1985): 667-692.

¹⁵ Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Volume Two: The Twentieth Century* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), 9.

statement of the candidate's stance on pertinent issues, on its front page at least once during the campaign. They listed the daily schedules of all local candidates, publicizing where and when each candidate would hold his public events for that day, and printed verbatim speeches of the popular and influential local and national candidates and segments of speeches from all local candidates. While candidates could reach their constituents most effectively through newspapers, they also used placards and posters, distributed campaign literature, and held campaign rallies where they would fend off against hecklers, to the audience's delight. In the papers, on the street, and at public rallies, voters saw and heard numerous attacks and defenses of "Chinese slavery" throughout December 1905 and January 1906.

The Liberals and their allies won the January 1906 general election in a landslide, capturing 513 out of 670 seats. Commentators at the time and historians since have explained the Unionist loss from a combination of its uncoordinated tariff reform policy, a general resentment after nearly twenty years of Unionist rule, and the rise of Labour working-class politics. Historians rarely mention the issue of "Chinese slavery."¹⁶ Kevin Grant argues that the Liberal party employed the rhetorical tactic of "Chinese slavery" at the 1906 general election in order to wage class politics against the Unionists.¹⁷ While the leadership of the Liberal party may have had this motive, Liberal candidates did not use the "Chinese slavery" issue to appeal directly to trades unionists. They courted trades unionists through their calls to overturn the Taff

¹⁶ A. K. Russell devotes only four pages of his 239 page monograph on the 1906 election to the "Chinese slavery" issue. E. H. H. Green briefly mentions "Chinese slavery" as part of a larger trades union movement against the Unionist Party. Russell, 105-108; Green, 682-683.

¹⁷ Grant, 106-107.

Vale Judgment, an anti-union law passed by the Unionist government in 1901.¹⁸ For the most part, Liberal candidates avoided direct “class” rhetoric. In order for the local candidate for Parliament to win a seat, he needed to convince voters not only of the validity of his party’s policies, but also that he was one of them. In 1906, candidates for Parliament were not one of the people. They were wealthy, most likely did not work, and resided in London or a wealthy provincial suburb. The rhetoric that a candidate employed needed to convince his potential constituents that they voted with him, and not for him.¹⁹ The “Chinese slavery” issue provided the Liberals with another link to stress the inadequacies of Unionist government in the new twentieth century.

The Rand gold mines, the world’s largest and most crucial, brought the Chinese laborers to South Africa. With the issue of “Chinese slavery,” voters recalled the recent South African War (1899-1902). The British Empire had taken nominal control of South Africa away from the Dutch during the Napoleonic Wars. By the late nineteenth century, British colonies nearly surrounded the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, two republics comprised of earlier Dutch settlers, or Boers. With the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand, or Rand, region of the Transvaal in 1886, the focus of South Africa turned inland from Cape Town to Johannesburg, a new city built around the gold mines. Gold provided the anti-British Boers in control of the Transvaal state with the potential to dictate the economic and political future of South Africa, threatening the regional British hegemony. While the South African War did not occur as a

¹⁸ A lesser issue in the 1906 general election, the Taff Vale Judgment of 1901 made trades unions financially liable for the actions, i.e. strikes, of their members. Once elected, the Liberals in March 1906 passed the Trades Dispute Act to overturn the Judgment. See Norman McCord, “Taff Vale Revisited,” *History* 78 (1993): 243-260.

¹⁹ P. F. Clarke, *Lancashire and the New Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 15; Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 63, 164-167.

capitalist grab of the gold mines as some historians argue, British policymakers needed to guarantee that the power emanating from the gold mines remained securely within their sphere of influence.²⁰ The Unionist government had justified the War to the British public as a means to protect the voting rights of Uitlanders – recent non-Boer migrants, many of whom were British – in the Transvaal. The Liberal party fractured over whether or not to support the War. With over 450,000 imperial troops deployed and £230m spent, and not the expected 75,000 troops and £10m, the War proved vastly more costly than the government had expected.²¹ Although the British Empire annexed the Boer republics as colonies in 1900, guerrilla warfare continued until May 1902. The Imperial Army incarcerated tens of thousands of Boer and African civilians in concentration camps and destroyed much of the countryside in order to end the guerrilla war. In the end, these camps killed more civilians than the Imperial Army had Boer fighters. The means employed to end the war took its toll on the patience of the British public, as the War exposed inefficiencies in the army, imperial administration, and government financing.

The Rand mine-owners imported the Chinese laborers to rejuvenate the gold mines. The South African economy required significant redevelopment in the aftermath of the war. The most urgent sector was the gold-mining industry, as taxation revenue from the mines would pay for other developmental projects.²² A dearth of native unskilled laborers prevented a rapid

²⁰ South African historians divide themselves on the origins of the War. One school, represented by Shula Marks, argues that the War developed to maintain the smooth continual development of the gold mining industry. Another school, represented by Iain R. Smith, argues that the War developed in order to maintain British hegemony over the region. While both arguments contain valid points, Smith's argument is more persuasive. Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, "Lord Milner and the South African State," *History Workshop* 8 (1979): 56-57; Iain R. Smith, *The Origins of the South African War, 1899-1902* (London: Longman, 1996), 403, 420-423; William H. Worger, "Southern and Central Africa," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Vol. V: Historiography*, ed. Robin W. Winks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 513-540.

²¹ Smith, 2.

²² For the complexity of the Rand society and economy, which revolved around the gold mines and its support industries, see Charles van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914, Vol. 1: New Babylon and Vol. 2: New Nineveh* (Harlow, Essex, UK: Longman, 1982).

expansion of mining operations, or so the Chamber of Mines, the representative body of the Rand mine-owners, argued. It petitioned the Unionist government in London to introduce thousands of indentured laborers, or “coolies,” from China to fill temporarily the gap in the labor supply. Unionist Prime Minister Arthur Balfour accepted this petition in March 1904 and the importation of Chinese laborers began two months later. Other British colonies previously had used indentured Asian laborers, but as the Transvaal Ordinance of 1904 outlined, harsher conditions prevailed for the Chinese mine laborers in the Transvaal. They could not leave the mining premises without permission, had little legal protection from the mine-owners, could not interact with local society, and had to return immediately to China after their contracts ended. The local government considered them criminals if found outside their mining camps.²³ Despite the undesirable circumstances, the temporary labor influx worked. By 1907, the gold-mining industry had revived.²⁴

Discontent among labor and humanitarian activists developed in Britain and South Africa with the methods of the Chamber of Mines and with the Unionist government that had approved the importation licenses. Trades unionists accused the mine-owners of importing Chinese laborers to undermine skilled white union laborers. Humanitarians accused the mine-owners of both trying to lower the wages of unskilled African laborers and treating the Chinese laborers inhumanely.²⁵ Both factions protested the Unionist government before and after its acceptance

²³ Doris Birnbaum, “Chinese Labour in the Transvaal,” *The Independent Review* VI 20 (1905): 142-145; Persia Crawford Campbell, *Chinese Coolie Emigration to Countries within the British Empire* (1923; reprint, New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 194.

²⁴ Christopher Saunders and Iain R. Smith, “Southern Africa, 1795-1910,” in *Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume III: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Andrew Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 620; Richardson, 185-187.

²⁵ Richardson, 176-180; Thompson, 69-72.

of the policy. To some detractors, the importation of Chinese laborers represented another imperial misstep by the Unionist party. Their Liberal opponents equated the treatment of the Chinese laborers to “slavery.” The British colonial government of India had rejected similar South African requests for laborers; as imperial subjects, Indian laborers expected to interact with the local communities and have the opportunity to remain the colony after their work contracts ended.²⁶ David Northrup argues that the indentured servitude of Indians, Chinese, and South Pacific Islanders in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries occupied a place between the earlier Atlantic World enslavement of Africans and contemporary voluntary European migration. Many servants established their own communities and remained in the country after their contracts had ended, as voluntary migrants did.²⁷ The Chinese imported into the Transvaal did not have this right. However, they could end their employment at any time by purchasing their contracts.²⁸ While these poorly-treated laborers did not have the same rights as free subjects of the Empire, they were not the slaves that the Liberals and other opponents of the policy claimed.²⁹

Public debate over the morality and practicality of the Chinese labor scheme occurred in Britain when the Unionist government considered its approval in early 1904. After approval, public discussion of the controversy continued, with ebbs and flows, throughout that year and into 1905. Along with their opposition to Unionist Joseph Chamberlain’s protectionist tariff reform program, the Liberal party used the “Chinese slavery” issue to bring their splintered party

²⁶ J. E. B. Seely, “Chinese Labour for the Transvaal: letter to the editor of *The Times*,” *Times* (London), 16 April 1904, 12.

²⁷ David Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 10.

²⁸ Campbell, 191-192.

²⁹ Kynoch, 534-535.

back together.³⁰ The Unionist government resigned in December 1905, and the King appointed Liberal leader Henry Campbell-Bannerman as Prime Minister. Immediately Campbell-Bannerman dissolved Parliament and called for a general election in order to gain Parliamentary majority. In his first major speech as Prime Minister, Campbell-Bannerman dismissed the need to discuss Liberal policy and spoke at length on the Unionist policies that his Liberal party would overturn. The first specific policy that he mentioned was Chinese labor. “One conclusion his Majesty’s [new Liberal] Government has arrived at, and it is this – to stop forthwith as far as it is practicable... the recruitment and embarkation [sic] of coolies in China (loud and prolonged cheers)... and their importation into South Africa; and introductions have been given to that effect.”³¹ Liberal candidates followed the Prime Minister’s lead in their discussion of Chinese labor. Seventy-five percent of Liberal candidates voluntarily addressed Chinese labor as a major issue in their election addresses. Only nineteen per cent of Unionist candidates voluntarily defended Chinese labor in their election addresses. They reluctantly discussed the issue when prompted by hecklers in the audience.³²

While the Rand mine-owners treated their indentured Chinese laborers poorly, these workers were not slaves. So how did the employment of these coolies, the “scum” of China as politicians from both parties referred to the indentured laborers, override the importance of South African economic development to the British Empire?³³ Candidates intertwined the discussion of this issue with other aspects of public contention. The excerpts from following campaign

³⁰ Richardson, 5-6, 22-23.

³¹ Henry Campbell-Bannerman, in *Times* (London), 22 December 1905, 7.

³² Russell, 65, 83.

³³ Henry Vivian, Liberal candidate for Birkenhead, (county Cheshire), in *Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury* (hereafter cited as LDP), 12 January 1906, 8; Arthur Salvidge, Unionist Liverpool Alderman, in LDP, 12 January 1906, 8.

speeches and election addresses represent only small portions of the rhetorical appeals employed. However, these excerpts were not isolated appeals. They serve as examples of themes upon which most candidates touched.

Liberals used the issue of “Chinese slavery” to declare their opponents unfit for government. The use of the term “slavery” purposely raised eyebrows. Slavery represented an evil of the past. After Parliament abolished slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833, taking effect in 1838, the British Navy worked throughout the nineteenth century to end slaving on the African coasts. These moves gave Britons a sense of pride and formed a component of the national identity. Edwin Jellicoe informed his potential constituents in Liverpool that “the emancipation laws, which for three generations had been a sacred trust in the hands of the British people, had been practically repealed, and the shadow of slavery hung over the British Empire.”³⁴ It did not matter that these laborers were not slaves. By tingeing the policy with the term “slavery,” any defense of the policy corrupted Unionist candidates. The members of the Unionist government, while not slave masters themselves, had enabled others to be slave masters. As one Liberal candidate stated, this policy placed “a black stain on the British flag.”³⁵ Therefore, the Unionists could not properly govern Britain and her Empire.

Because “Chinese slavery” occurred in the Transvaal, any discussion reminded the voters of the recent South African War. First, Liberal candidates inverted the Unionist rhetoric of the past general election, held in 1900 during the War. “The war was entered upon because it was said the Boers would not give Britishers a vote; but now they found that the mineowners did not

³⁴ Edwin Jellicoe, Liberal candidate for Walton (Liverpool), in LDP, 16 January 1906, 10.

³⁵ Thomas M’Kinnon Wood, Liberal candidate for St. Rollox (Glasgow), in *Glasgow Herald* (hereafter cited as *GH*), 5 January 1906, 6.

want men with votes.”³⁶ Liberals charged that the Unionist government had publicly justified a costly military engagement in South Africa in order to defend the rights of British miners. Now, in conjunction with the former enemy, the Boers, the Unionists injured the rights of Britons in Britain. They allowed the mine-owners to import Chinese laborers, removing potential jobs from British miners. How could Britain transform the Transvaal into a civilized British colony if Unionists had removed the incentive to migrate there? Second, the Liberals referred to the widespread, but incorrect, notion that the War had occurred only to secure the mineral wealth of the Rand. Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman outlined this position in his election address to his constituents in a sarcastic manner. “As the result of a policy [the War] which involved such sacrifices on the part of the people of this country, South Africa has been reduced to a condition in which loss of prosperity, nay, even ruin, can only be avoided by the use of servile labour imported in unlimited quantities from China.”³⁷ Britain had annexed the Transvaal to integrate and secure its mineral wealth for the globe. If the only means that the Unionists could use to ensure its “prosperity” was to import foreign laborers, then this action represented an unacceptable “sacrifice” for the British people. Liberals hoped that this point would cause voters to reflect on their unpleasant memories of the War.

The Liberals linked “Chinese slavery” with the proper administration of the Empire. To what degree should Parliament regulate the self-governing white settler colonies? For the Liberals, in certain circumstances, such as this imposition of slavery, Parliament needed to intervene. This stance countered directly the main Unionist defense of Chinese labor –

³⁶ William Lever, Liberal candidate for Wirral (county Cheshire), in *LDP*, 9 January 1906, 8.

³⁷ Campbell-Bannerman, in *Liberal Party General Election Manifestos 1900-1997*, ed. Iain Dale (London: Routledge, 2000), 9-10.

Parliament should not interfere with the domestic affairs of the self-governing colonies. The Liberals contended that Parliament needed to protect the reputation of the British Empire.

The Transvaal had an autonomy for certain internal matters, but as the trustees for the whole Empire his [Liberal] Government were determined to stamp out every trace of slavery. If there was one reason to quarrel with the late [Unionist] Government, if there was one reason that helped to lose Britain her moral leadership among the nations for equity and liberty, it was this stain.³⁸

Imperial management needed to improve so it could ensure the welfare of all its subjects.

The Liberals connected “Chinese slavery” to a general dissatisfaction with finance capitalism. They posited that the mine-owners had taken away potential jobs from Britons because they refused to pay white man’s wages. This charge countered Unionist claims that white men would not work in the mines next to coolies and “kaffirs,” a derogatory term for the local Africans. The Unionist government approved the Transvaal Ordinance

to benefit a few wealthy mineowners – to make their dividends 100 per cent instead of 50, and 50 per cent instead of 20. For his [the candidate’s] part, he would rather see the gold remain in the ground and the diamonds never shine on the necks of beauty than have the stigma on the British flag... The whole thing was an infamy dishonouring to humanity and the name of freedom.³⁹

The Liberals informed the public that the mine-owners could afford to pay higher wages for white laborers, but they would rather import cheap indentured servants from China. In turn, this declaration reinforced the view that the Unionist party represented the capitalists, the employers, and the upper classes at the expense of white working men, who comprised the majority of British voters in 1906.

Candidates employed “experts” to support their views. Men with firsthand knowledge of the situation in South Africa provided validation for any political statement. In a progressive

³⁸ William M. R. Pringle, Liberal candidate for Camlachie (Glasgow), in *GH*, 12 January 1906, 8.

³⁹ M’Kinnon Wood, in *GH*, 10 January 1906, 8.

age, experts provided an apparently non-partisan legitimacy to a candidate's position. A candidate expected his constituency to accept his expert's testimony as unbiased. For example, Major J. E. B. Seely, a veteran of the South African War, leading national critic of Chinese labor, and Liberal candidate in Liverpool, stumped with F. H. P. Creswell, an acquaintance of Seely's from the War.⁴⁰ Creswell, a former South African mine manager and South African proponent of "white labour," informed the rally that white men had worked for him after the War; the men of South Africa had not wanted Chinese laborers imported into the Transvaal, but the Chamber of Mines and the Unionist government had overruled them. Seely then added that it was "pure nonsense to allege that white men would not work in the mines."⁴¹ This example demonstrates the tension within the Liberal position of appealing through the identifiers of class and race concurrently. The Rand mine-owners should not treat the Chinese miners as slaves; however the owners should not treat those miners as the equals of qualified white British workers.

Unionist candidates had to defend an unpopular policy of their recent administration, a much tougher proposition than the Liberals' attacks. If possible, Unionist candidates rarely mentioned Chinese labor. When prompted by hecklers, most candidates attempted to defend the economic merits of the policy, while dismissing Liberal criticisms as mere partisanship. Others discussed the racial divide between white workers and African and Chinese workers in South Africa. No unified defense of the policy existed.

While the mine-owners may have worked their Chinese laborers in less-than-ideal

⁴⁰ Creswell, the founding leader of the South African Labour Party in 1910, was an early and consistent critic of the importation of Chinese miners in South Africa. A supporter of white-only mine labor, he later served as a Cabinet Minister under National party South African Prime Minister J. M. B. Hertzog in 1924-25 and 1929-33. W. J. de Kock, ed., *Dictionary of South African Biography, Vol. 1* (Pretoria: Nasional Boekhandel Bpk. for National Council for Social Research, Dept. of Higher Education, 1968), 187-189.

⁴¹ Seely, Liberal candidate for Abercromby (Liverpool) in *LDP*, 11 January 1906, 10.

conditions, for the Unionists it remained an issue for the responsible government in the Transvaal to decide.⁴² The Unionist Campaign Guide informed its candidates to stress to the voting public that “ever since the American Colonies were lost to this country, because of the attempt to regulate the management of their internal affairs from Downing Street, it has been a fixed principle of our policy not to interfere with self-governing and responsible colonies in matters of domestic concern.”⁴³ As the American Revolution had proved, the British government should not intervene in the domestic affairs of its settler colonies. For the Unionists, this policy had strengthened the post-1783 British Empire and the global position of the United Kingdom. The Campaign Guide imparted “that never before was there an empire, not only of such an extent, but comprising men of so many colours, races, and traditions, held together by so small a military force, and ruled with so constant a regard to the welfare of the governed.”⁴⁴ Unionist candidates then instructed the public that changing a century-old principle because of the misperceived slavery of Chinese coolies in South Africa could jeopardize the entire Empire.

As Liberals equated the importation of Chinese laborers with slavery, Unionists needed to show the fallacy of this statement. Unionist candidates frequently compared the importation of Chinese laborers to the Transvaal to the earlier importation of Chinese laborers to British Guiana, which occurred in 1894 under the last Liberal government. “This was no new thing in

⁴² Technically the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony were directly-ruled Crown Colonies at the time of the 1906 general election. However, per 1903 instructions from Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, His Majesty’s Government “would treat them in all matters in which Imperial interests were not directly concerned as if they were self-governing Colonies.” The two former Boer republics gained an official self-governing, or Dominion, status in 1907. “Proposal to import Asiatic, more particularly Chinese, labour for the Transvaal Mines,” Colonial Office Files, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew, CO 879/82/3.

⁴³ Conservative Central Office, *The Campaign Guide 1906. A Handbook for Unionist Speakers* (Harvester Press British Political Source Series, British General Election Campaign Guides 1885-1950: Hassocks, Sussex, UK: The Harvester Press Limited, 1976), microfiche, 211.

⁴⁴ Conservative Central Office, 65.

the management of our Colonial Empire... And why was that done... by the Radical [Liberal] party? Because they thought it in the interests of that Colony just as the Unionist Government thought the introduction of Chinese labour was in the interests of the Transvaal.”⁴⁵ Indentured servants had constituted a normal policy of imperial management by both parties. This defense questioned why the Liberals would now call these workers slaves, when in fact they had followed the same policy in the past in similar circumstances. However, differences existed between the indentured servants of British Guiana and the Transvaal. The Transvaal Ordinance excluded any Chinese interaction in the local labor market and the local government could initiate criminal proceedings against any Chinese found outside their camps.⁴⁶ Unionists also chastised the Liberals for not following up their rhetorical accusations with action.

If it had been slavery, why in the name of wonder didn't Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman and his Colonial Secretary, Lord Eglon, say that there should be no longer any slavery in South Africa? (Cheers.) Why, if there were 48,000 Chinamen held in slavery there didn't they say, 'Let the slave go free.' That was not the plan they took. They said they were to remain there until the end of their contract.⁴⁷

If this policy truly constituted slavery, Unionist candidates proposed that once the Liberals had taken control of the Government, they should have immediately manumitted these slaves.

Instead, the Liberals wished only to halt the importation of additional Chinese laborers.

Therefore, for Unionist candidates, the Transvaal Ordinance could not be deemed slavery.

Even if Unionist candidates successfully dismissed the slavery claim, indisputable evidence existed that the Chinese laborers had few legal rights in the Transvaal. They needed to

⁴⁵ Charles Scott Dickson, Unionist candidate for Bridgeton (Glasgow), in *GH*, 5 January 1906, 6.

⁴⁶ Campbell, 178.

⁴⁷ Dickson, in *GH*, 5 January 1906, 6.

convince their constituents of the economic benefits of the policy for Britain. Unionist candidate and future Prime Minister Andrew Bonar Law informed his Glaswegian constituency that “if the mines failed, if they ceased to advance, every industry in the country would go back, and the British white population all over the colony itself would be bankrupt.”⁴⁸ For the Unionists, the electorate needed to trust that their government had explored all possible options and had chosen the best one. If the public focused on one portion of the imperial program to integrate the former Boer republics into the Empire, as the Liberals desired, voters would misunderstand the overall benefits of the program. Some Unionists informed their constituents that they sympathized with portions of the Liberal criticisms, but pointed out the benefits of the policy. Incumbent John Stirling-Maxwell disclosed to his constituents that he “had a strong prejudice against Chinese labour, and against a system of labour under such conditions as existed in the Transvaal, and he [Stirling-Maxwell] had also a prejudice against South African millionaires... The prosperity of South Africa depended upon the success of these mines, and it had advanced in a marvellous [sic] way since the importation of Chinese labour.”⁴⁹ For Unionist candidates, the Unionist government had made the best of a bad situation, and the policy had and would pay dividends for the entire Empire and not only for the mine-owners.

Unionists countered the Liberal argument that imported Chinese workers prevented Britons from obtaining South African mining jobs. On the contrary, Unionists stressed that the importation of Chinese workers created jobs. Mines running at full capacity needed foremen, supervisors, and clerical workers. As one Unionist candidate informed the crowd, “it was only

⁴⁸ Andrew Bonar Law, Unionist candidate for Blackfriars & Hutchesontown (Glasgow), in *GH*, 5 January 1906, 6.

⁴⁹ John M. Stirling-Maxwell, Unionist candidate for College (Glasgow), in *GH*, 9 January 1906, 9.

when representations came from the Transvaal that the [Unionist] Government, after the fullest consideration, consented, and when it was represented to them that there was a deficiency of black labour, and that, if yellow labour could not be got, large numbers of white men would be turned out of employment.”⁵⁰ In addition to preventing unemployment, Unionist candidates imparted that the increase in gold-mining production following the introduction of unskilled Chinese laborers would create additional jobs for Britons. Another candidate stressed to his constituency, “the introduction of the Chinaman had been essential to the development of the mines, and to the colony from the fact that it gave employment to 5000 more whites... We could never make the colony prosperous unless we had unskilled labour, black or yellow.”⁵¹ A prosperous Transvaal could provide skilled labor opportunities for Britons, if they were willing to embark on the 6,000-mile trip south.

No matter how sound these arguments appeared they did not have the same sensational appeal that the Liberal cry of “slavery” had. Another Unionist tactic reminded constituents of their self-worth as white men. In the decades prior to 1914 the knowledge of “whiteness” spread globally as states institutionalized divisions between whites and non-whites.⁵² Unionists portrayed the racial differences between labor positions in South Africa. White men worked with other white men. They would not work with these lesser kaffirs and coolies. Sir Edward Carson, leader of the Ulster Unionists, discussed the issue with a Liverpool crowd. “Anybody who knew anything about the Transvaal, knew that if a white man worked alongside a Kaffir at some of the work which the Kaffirs had to do in the mines, the caste of an Englishman would be

⁵⁰ John Wilson, Liberal Unionist candidate for St. Rollox (Glasgow), in *GH*, 9 January 1906, 9.

⁵¹ Dickson, in *GH*, 5 January 1906, 6.

⁵² Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3-4.

gone for ever.”⁵³ The mine-owners had employed the Chinese to perform unskilled labor in the Transvaal. Hence, Chinese workers did not compete for white jobs. For Bonar Law, “it was considered beneath the dignity of a white man to do Kaffir work... If the Chinaman had gone to South Africa to compete with the whites then... let the gold remain in the earth for ever.”⁵⁴ For the Unionists, the Liberals had caused a commotion over a non-issue. The Chinese performed work that white Britons would not and should not do. This policy had taken away no British jobs.

In presenting those defenses of the Unionist government policy, Unionist candidates questioned the Liberal motives for raising the topic of “Chinese slavery.” To the Unionists, the Liberals had manipulated a legitimate government policy only for partisan reasons. Unionist candidates stressed why their Liberal opponents spoke about this issue at the election. For one Glaswegian candidate, “those charges of slavery were as false and fraudulent as could be. But the charge of Chinese slavery was being worked for all it was worth with the object of representing the Unionist party as slave-drivers.”⁵⁵ Unionist candidates informed their constituents that the voters would recognize the Liberal posturing as valueless rhetoric in the end. The Liberals

were not honestly pressing it. Did the electors think he [the candidate] would be a party to put men in chains of slavery for millionaires or anybody else? (Prolonged cheering.) Their opponents were putting their money on that red herring, because they thought the electors would not hear the truth or that their passion or their prejudice would not enable them to appreciate it.⁵⁶

⁵³ Edward Carson, in *LDP*, 12 January 1906, 12.

⁵⁴ Bonar Law, in *GH*, 15 January 1906, 11.

⁵⁵ Dickson, in *GH*, 11 January 1906, 8.

⁵⁶ Dickson, in *GH*, 17 January 1906, 11.

By its nature, all electoral rhetoric was partisan. Every candidate desired election. However, the public certainly should not perceive this motive. It remained better to point out the deficiencies of one's opponent.

As Seely had done in Liverpool, Bonar Law stumped with a South African "expert" in Glasgow – Louis Zietsman, a MP in the Cape Colony legislature. While Zietsman personally disliked the importation of Chinese laborers, "the mining industry in South Africa could not be developed to the extent they expected it to be by native labour. They must get the labour from somewhere." Zietsman further informed the audience "not to send to Parliament men who would unduly interfere with the development of the resources of South Africa or with their notions of government in the Colony. They were quite capable of looking after their own domestic affairs; and for God's sake... leave us alone or there will be ructions."⁵⁷ His thinly veiled threat warned voters of the potential consequences for interfering in the domestic affairs of a self-governing colony, especially one that could revive a costly guerrilla war.

From the political rhetoric employed to discuss "Chinese slavery," we can discern how late Victorian and Edwardian British politicians explained imperial and international issues to their constituents. First, candidates for Parliament framed these issues through their parties' conceptions of British identity, as they needed their constituents to affiliate the issue within themselves. The differing Liberal and Unionist arguments came from components of the shared British past. Liberals stressed how British liberty and freedom provided the strength of British character. Unionists stressed how British practicality and self-determination provided the strength of British character. Second and more important, all candidates emphasized how their

⁵⁷ Louis Zietsman, member of the Cape (Colony) Parliament for East Griqualand, in *GH*, 12 January 1906, 8.

party, through their support or disapproval of Chinese labor scheme, maintained their constituents' ability to seize opportunities in the British Empire, bolstering the one physical connection that all Britons held to a distant Empire out there beyond the Isles. For Britons, the British Empire meant more than just the material goods imported from around the globe. In this earlier period of globalization, the Empire provided British men, women, and families with the opportunity to work and settle nearly anywhere in the world, an advantage that people do not hold legally today in the twenty-first century.

Neither party held much concern about the fate of individual Chinese indentured servants in the Transvaal. The lives of nearly 64,000 Chinese workers 6,000 miles away had little, if any, real consequence to the daily lives of voters.⁵⁸ Here we can identify the continuities between early twentieth century and twenty-first century globalization. For the general population, it is difficult to sympathize with those unseen, less fortunate people on the other side of the world, whether indentured Chinese mine laborers or Vietnamese sweatshop workers. For activists, journalists, and politicians to raise public awareness, they must place their rhetorical calls for action into a local context.⁵⁹ In most cases, consumers remain ignorant about the low-wage labor that produces the cheap imported goods they consume. However, today's generation of globalized activists have many more tools of information distribution available to them than their counterparts 100 years ago to make consumers aware of the conditions and lives of low-wage workers.

⁵⁸ The Liberal government suspended recruitment in China in November 1906, with the last importation contracts issued to mine-owners in June 1907. The last Chinese miner departed South Africa in February 1910. Richardson, 166, 184.

⁵⁹ For a similar contemporary humanitarian issue, regarding a French charity that sought to save abandoned Chinese children, see Henrietta Harrison, "A Penny for the Little Chinese": The French Holy Childhood Association in China, 1843-1951," *The American Historical Review* 113 (2008): 72-92.

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