

Introduction

Opening a meeting of the Glasgow College Division Liberal Association in late April 1886, its former president declared that the ‘great controversy at present dividing the country and the Liberal party’ made this an occasion on which ‘every citizen, and especially every member of the Liberal party, was bound to say what his opinions were’ and ‘take his stand on one side or the other’. The meeting was one of hundreds convened in Scotland that spring to discuss Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone’s proposal to establish an Irish parliament separate to that at Westminster, where Ireland had been represented since the 1801 Union. The measure shattered the Liberal party in Britain and undercut decades of Liberal electoral hegemony in Scotland. After considerable debate, the Association narrowly carried a resolution describing the Home Rule bill as forming ‘the basis of a satisfactory settlement of the Irish question’, which, its proposer explained, bound the meeting not to the bill’s details but to its ‘principle’. The meeting was regarded by the *Scotsman* as an example of how the party had been ‘split and rent’ – this was a measure brought forward by a Liberal government, yet ‘the opinion of Liberals’ was ‘so divided’ that only a small majority could be found for its ‘conditional approval’. By contrast, the *North British Daily Mail*, whose proprietor was MP for the constituency, offered a tally of the Liberal meetings to have ‘generally declared in favour’ and asserted first that ‘there is no denying that the Liberal representative bodies’ were on Gladstone’s side and second that this trend showed ‘how the current of thought is running among the Liberal electors’.¹ This episode is indicative of the imperative many Scottish Liberals felt to discuss Home Rule and declare opinion thereon, and of the conflicting interpretations which emerged of what such opinion meant, what it was worth and who it represented. Liberal associations played a crucial role in shaping the crisis beyond Westminster. Their meetings – and the debate which surrounded them – reveal that the policy both caused extensive division within rank-and-file Scottish Liberalism and generated greater scrutiny of the complex relationships between party organisation and political participation and representation in the age of ‘mass’ politics.

This article examines responses to the Home Rule bill during the debate period between its introduction on 8 April and defeat on 7 June 1886), with a focus on Scotland’s constituencies. The extra-parliamentary Home Rule crisis is a neglected area. This is surprising, as historians recognise that it drove ‘a deep wedge through the Liberal party in Scotland’, to the extent that, after 1886, it was ‘no longer a one-party state’.² Historians note the complexity of the split, which cut through and across the groupings typically labelled whig and radical – illustrated by lists of MPs, landowners, businessmen, churchmen and disestablishers who opposed or supported it – and the importance to Scottish politics of the Liberal Unionist party, formed by anti-Home Rule Liberals. However, little has been written about the dynamics or effects of the crisis on the ground during its crucial first months or its effects. We know more about the tensions exposed during that summer’s election, when the party suffered its worst Scottish result since 1841, than we do about the fervent activity that preceded and informed the contest. Instances of constituency activity during the debate period generally serve as snapshots of attitudes in given localities and as illustrations of MPs’ electoral stability

¹ *Glasgow Herald (GH)*, 24 Apr. 1886, p.5; *Scotsman*, 26 Apr. 1886, p.4; *North British Daily Mail (NBDM)*, 26 Apr. 1886, p.4.

² T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000* (London, 1999), 301-2.

or of the extent to which Liberalism was riven by this and other controversies.³ Fuller accounts are provided in studies by John McCaffrey of Glasgow and Catriona MacDonald of Paisley, where Liberals divided into ‘oppositional camps’ striving to establish themselves as the ‘truer’ form of Liberalism. Kyle Thompson’s recent work on Edinburgh situates the crisis in the context of electoral reform and grassroots Liberal ideological and organisational rivalries. However, much work remains to be done to establish a comprehensive picture of this critical period across Scotland. Sixty years ago, Donald Savage noted that in Scotland there ‘developed a full-scale battle in the local Liberal associations’.⁴ This article reveals, for the first time, the ways in and sites and terms on which that fight was fought. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, it demonstrates the enormity of the crisis in the constituencies and examines the cohesion and coherence of ‘Liberal Scotland’ at both local and national levels.

Exploring the extra-parliamentary crisis also prompts questions about how politics was conceived of and functioned outside Westminster, and outside of elections. Constituency Liberal associations were the site of intense debate on the policy, and were themselves at the centre of a complex web of competing understandings about political representation and behaviour. The crisis arrived at a time when, as Ian Hutchison notes, the ‘struggle to acquire control of party organisation’ in Scotland ‘had the appearance of an irreconcilable conflict’.⁵ The party was organised separately in England and Scotland. The National Liberal Federation (NLF), established in 1877, was a predominantly English body. Scottish Liberals founded regional organisations between 1876-7, which amalgamated as the Scottish Liberal Association (SLA) in 1881. This national body aimed to ‘consolidate and strengthen’ the party in Scotland, encourage the formation of constituency associations, and, without interfering with ‘independent local action’, provide them with ‘information and advice’.⁶ Organisational innovation rapidly became a source of friction. The dispute centred on whether members could discuss policy issues, their proclamations upon which might determine the SLA’s public stance and thus that of the Liberal party in Scotland – potentially in the form of a ‘platform’ or ‘programme’ – and enable it to make demands upon party leaders. The SLA was resolute that policymaking lay beyond the scope of its legitimate activity, and confined itself to supplying legal information and speakers and mediating constituency disputes. Yet as the campaign for policy discussion and decision escalated, SLA meetings became ‘tests of strength’, often centring on the issue of disestablishment of the Church of Scotland.⁷ Matters came to a head in late 1885, when radicals formed the National Liberal Federation of Scotland (NLFS) to fulfil roles the SLA abnegated, and demanded that disestablishment be an electoral test question. The two

³ I.G.C. Hutchison, *A political history of Scotland 1832-1924* (Edinburgh, 1986), 163-6; M. Fry, *Patronage and Principle. A Political History of Modern Scotland* (Aberdeen, 1991), 106-13; J.G. Kellas, ‘The Liberal Party in Scotland 1876-1895’, *Scottish Historical Review (SHR)*, 44 (1965), 9-13; D.C. Savage, ‘Scottish Politics, 1885-6’, *SHR*, 40 (1961), 117-20; C. Burness, *Strange Associations. The Irish question and the making of Scottish Unionism 1886-1918* (East Linton, 2003), 46-68.

⁴ J.F. McCaffrey, ‘The origins of Liberal Unionism in the west of Scotland’, *SHR*, 50 (1971), 55-64; C.M.M. MacDonald, *The Radical Thread: Political Change in Scotland. Paisley Politics, 1885-1924* (East Linton, 2000), 84-5; M.K. Thompson, ‘Edinburgh’s Local Liberal Party and the Political Crises of 1885-6’, *Parliamentary History* (forthcoming); Savage, ‘Scottish Politics’, 130-5.

⁵ Hutchison, *Political history*, 141-3.

⁶ *Scotsman*, 4 Jan. 1882, p.5, SLA annual report, constitution.

⁷ M. Dyer, *Capable Citizens and Improvident Democrats. The Scottish Electoral System 1884-1929* (Aberdeen, 1996), 33; Kellas, ‘Liberal Party’, 6-9; idem, ‘The Liberal Party and the Scottish Church Disestablishment Crisis’, *English Historical Review (EHR)* (1964), 31-41; Savage, ‘Scottish Politics’, 119-23.

bodies reunited in December 1886 as a reconstituted SLA with organisational and deliberative functions. Conflict was also apparent locally. Legislation passed between 1884-5 expanded the electorate and redrew the constituency map. These changes placed a premium on organisational efficiency and local volunteer work, prompting the SLA to call for the establishment of an association for each constituency.⁸ They also raised the issue of whether Scotland possessed popular and electoral politics suited to the demands of a massified electorate. Rival associations proliferated as factions clashed over the right to nominate and run candidates they claimed represented the views of local Liberals. Liberals fought Liberals in one-third of Scottish seats at the 1885 election, albeit losing only one of these to the Conservatives.⁹

Although Scottish historians detail these organisational developments and their connection to the disestablishment crisis, they show limited interest in the relationship between later nineteenth-century disputes over the purpose and principle of party organisation and debates about political participation, representation, and opinion. Historians of political culture, language and organisation pay little attention to Scotland. The distinct electoral system and the 'oligarchic' nature of the Liberal party there mean that Scotland does not fit easily into English-focused debates on the supposed 'closing down' of a vibrant, independent, and participatory popular political culture. Likewise, that Scotland was effectively a one-party state and had neither the 'mass party' nor 'mass politics' of the kind that inform this scholarship, complicates narratives in which it was, in part, the 'triumph' of 'party' politics that 'disciplined, regulated and disabled popular politics'.¹⁰ It is also thought Scotland's lack of 'a competitive two-party system' 'inhibited the development' of efficient Liberal organisation, and there were few permanent grassroots structures until the early 1880s.¹¹ Scottish Liberals appeared able to 'do without a close-knit organisation'¹² along the lines of the mass-based, 'highly structured' model and 'representative principles' pioneered in Joseph Chamberlain's Birmingham and NLF as mechanisms for marshalling and managing an expanding electorate and exercising pressure on party leaders.¹³ Hence Scotland's general absence from discussions about the effects of internal party democratisation on the experience and quality of political participation and representation, and about the discourses used to justify and condemn 'modern' party organisation.

Organisations of this nature were known pejoratively as 'the caucus', for their alleged resemblance to American 'machine politics', by which 'manipulation' by 'dictatorial wirepullers' in the name of party challenged the independence of conscience and action of MPs, electors, and rank-and-file alike. Contemporaries used what James Owen terms the 'language of the caucus' to dissect the implications of political organisation and articulate competing visions of popular and party politics, and of democracy and representation, to gain legitimacy or undermine that of opponents.¹⁴ This language was in 1886 crucial to how

⁸ *Scotsman*, 17 Jan. 1885, p.9, SLA AGM.

⁹ Thompson, 'Liberal Party'; Dyer, *Capable Citizens*, 35; McCaffrey, 'Liberal Unionism', 48.

¹⁰ J. Vernon, *Politics and the People. A study in English political culture, c.1815-1867* (Cambridge, 1993), 103-4, 336-7.

¹¹ Hutchison, *Political history*, 141-56; M. Dyer, *Men of Property and Intelligence. The Scottish Electoral System prior to 1884* (Aberdeen, 1996), 123-44.

¹² H.J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management. Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (London, 1959), 167.

¹³ P. Auspos, 'Radicalism, Pressure Groups, and Party Politics: From the National Education League to the National Liberal Federation', *Journal of British Studies*, 20 (1980), 200-1.

¹⁴ J. Owen, *Labour and the Caucus. Working-class radicalism and organised Liberalism in England, 1868-1888* (Liverpool, 2014), 16-7.

anti-Home Rulers articulated opposition to the policy. It was British in scope but was translated in Scotland through competing Liberal discourses which owed much to Scotland's distinct, yet rapidly changing, political culture. Scotland's Liberal organisational structures were not in most cases analogous to those of the English 'caucus', yet there were among Scottish Liberals both concerns about the potential divisiveness of organisation and hopes for its capacity to reflect and effect political change. Moreover, 1886 was a moment of intense political engagement, the significance of which was heightened by its being facilitated to a great extent by Liberal organisations. With 'the public' often conflated with the 'Liberal' in Scotland, Scotland should form a crucial part of scholarly debates over the avenues for and rituals of participation and representation. Where MacDonald suggests that 1886 'shattered a pre-existing – if increasingly fragile – consensus on the *meaning* of Liberalism',¹⁵ it is also clear that the crisis affected both the meaning and purpose of Liberal organisation. Greater attention should likewise be paid to the construction and expression of, and judgments on, opinion – 'public', 'Liberal' or otherwise – during the crisis. It is surprising that 1886 has not previously been analysed as a critical moment in Victorian debates over 'public opinion'.¹⁶ It brought into focus conflicting understandings of where opinion was located, how and by whom it should be articulated, and who had the right to any such expression. It interacted with a desire to change the style of Scottish organisational politics, but activists found themselves debating a policy that was not their own and on which there was no clear or accepted 'Scottish Liberal opinion'.

As Tom Devine argues, Liberalism's dominance is attributable to a perception that it went 'with the grain of Scottish political opinion'. The crisis severely undermined this worldview. Addressing a public meeting in Edinburgh in May 1886, the Scottish MP and cabinet minister Henry Campbell-Bannerman observed that 'the agitation and the political controversy' aroused by Home Rule was 'to a great extent carried on within the limits of the Liberal party'.¹⁷ In Scotland, this reflected both its sudden advent as party policy and existing patterns in Liberal politics. The idea of 'Liberal Scotland' is about more than successive Liberal victories – it suggests a symbiosis of value systems, with the party embodying and reflecting back to 'the people' Scottish values, and to such an extent that the political public could be assumed to be Liberal.¹⁸ The 'limits of the Liberal party' were by this reading the limits of the Scottish political nation, and vice versa. When understood in this way, 'Liberal Scotland' is a vital, yet overlooked, example of the processes by which parties created and sustained popular support. It was a successful political appeal through which the party helped mould the very constituency it would then claim to represent. However, if Liberal opinion and Scottish opinion were synonymous, why had it by the 1880s begun to appear imperative to some within the party to measure such opinion via the medium of political organisation? That party and political nation appeared coterminous, and that this impression was reinforced electorally, meant that political debate 'took place within the party, rather than, as in England, between Liberals and Tories'.¹⁹ Having long monopolised public

¹⁵ C.M.M. MacDonald, 'Locality, tradition and language in the evolution of Scottish Unionism: A case study, Paisley 1886-1910', in idem (ed), *Unionist Scotland 1800-1997* (Edinburgh, 1998), 53.

¹⁶ J. Thompson, *British Political Culture and the Idea of 'Public Opinion', 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 2013), Ch.2.

¹⁷ *GH*, 6 May 1886, p.7.

¹⁸ Devine, *Scottish Nation*, 284-5. For an overview of scholarship on Scottish Liberalism, see D. Torrance, *A History of the Scottish Liberals and Liberal Democrats* (Edinburgh, 2022), Ch.1-2.

¹⁹ K. Robbins, *Nineteenth-Century Britain. England, Scotland and Wales* (Oxford, 1998), 105.

discussion of political issues, Scottish Liberalism was now faced with the conundrum of whether enshrining such discussion within a party apparatus that connected ‘political demands to organizational structure’²⁰ would make Liberal representation more inclusive or exclusionary and whether, having been able to afford ‘internal disputes’ and still win elections,²¹ this would help overcome or intensify them.

Those who demanded organisational reform and policymaking from the party sought to institutionalise popular Liberalism. ‘Liberal Scotland’, although seemingly all-embracing, does not convey a sense of a participatory popular politics. The Liberal ‘public’ might have been represented by ‘Liberal Scotland’, with the Liberal party its representative body, but had that public been invited to participate in its politics or in its ruling party? Those seeking a shift to deliberative and declarative organisational principles appeared to offer to the party, and to Scotland, mass, collective action and opinion appropriate to the age of ‘mass democracy’. However, another consequence of its hegemony was that suspicion of ‘party’ existed and was expressed predominantly within Scottish Liberalism. Both disestablishment and Home Rule, and their prosecution through the medium of the associations, might alternatively seem to threaten the definition of Liberalism around specific policies rather than broad principles and, in turn, to make Scottish political identity more explicitly ‘partisan’. ‘Liberal Scotland’ has an air of permanence to it, yet it was predicated upon a representative relationship and, as Jon Lawrence argues, such relationships could be sustained only by ‘negotiation and renegotiation’. This is not to suggest that ‘Liberal Scotland’ was a myth, rather that, as a constructed political allegiance, it was subject to processes of ‘contention, redefinition, and transformation’.²² These push-pull dynamics are evident in the crises of 1885-86. ‘Liberal Scotland’ is also therefore an example of how political parties make claims to embody and reflect the opinions of electors and ‘the people’ and of how far they can accommodate deliberative, representative structures and practices.

This article comprises three sections. The first helps decentre the crisis from Westminster by offering the first quantitative analysis of the meetings at which the policy was discussed, the volume and intensity of which heightened and maintained the sense of crisis out-of-doors, raised awareness of Home Rule locally and helped identify its supporters and opponents. The second section considers how the crisis interacted with disputes over organisation, which informed debates over the quality and representativeness of ‘Liberal opinion’ and the legitimacy of the rituals of Liberal political participation. The final section explores the difficulties Liberals faced in procuring and performing agreement on Home Rule, looking at the resolutions discussed at meetings, which went beyond symbolic gesture or formal partisan declaration and became part of the debate.

²⁰ A. Heyer, ‘Manipulation or Participation? Membership Inclusion in the Party Organization of the German Social Democratic Workers’ Party and the British National Liberal Federation’, in H. te Velde and M Janse (eds), *Organizing Democracy. Reflections on the Rise of Political Organizations in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 2017), 198.

²¹ L. Paterson, *The Autonomy of Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1994), 48; G. Pentland, ‘By-elections and the peculiarities of Scottish politics, 1832-1900’, in T. Otte and P. Readman (eds), *By-elections in British Politics, 1832-1914* (Woodbridge, 2013), 291.

²² J. Lawrence, *Speaking for the People. Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 1998), 61, 267; idem, ‘Class and Gender in the making of urban Toryism’, *EHR*, 108 (1993), 631.

I. The crisis in the constituencies

As the country awaited Gladstone's 8 April announcement, early reports from Scotland were far from glowing. The tone was set by the 29 March publication in the *Scotsman*, Scotland's leading Liberal newspaper, of the Home Rule bill supposedly presented to the cabinet meeting at which two members resigned in protest. Ireland would have its own legislature but cease sending MPs to Westminster, and the arrangements for finance and fiscal matters would be amended. According to the paper, this was 'separation', a 'calamity to be avoided at almost any cost'. As for Scotland's reaction, the editor Charles Cooper believed it would 'be scouted from one end of the country to the other'. Support for it would be 'resented', and it was doubtful whether even Gladstone could secure re-election for Midlothian.²³ Cooper informed the foreign secretary and Scottish peer Lord Rosebery that, in the week following the publication, there was 'positive consternation in Scotland'. He recounted receiving letters 'innumerable...praying that there be no such plan' and, having talked with 'many men', claimed it was seen as 'down-right folly' by 'staunch Liberals', for not 'one man' had 'even excused' it. If the Ministry adopted 'a plan approaching Repeal' of the Union, Cooper warned, it 'may count on most of Scotland going against Mr G.'. ²⁴ This dismal picture suited Cooper's agenda – he advocated 'local-national self-government' but opposed 'repeal' – but he was not the only source of gloom.²⁵ The NLFS's secretary, Alex MacDougall, was unable to 'speak confidently of the Scottish M.P.'s [sic]', advising his English counterpart that support would be 'perhaps half-hearted', with 'strong exception'. MacDougall had on 29 March 'a call from a good Rad[ical]', who was 'very savage at Mr. G.', while Gladstone's 'warmest friends' were convinced 'he has been too hasty'.²⁶ The alleged bill, according to a leading election agent, caused a 'sensation'. Holmes Ivory told Rosebery that he had been 'ascertaining the opinion of many scores of representative Liberals', including those 'of a more advanced...type both County & City &...working men'. Neither he nor anyone at the SLA's offices had 'found a single Liberal who would support the scheme', and the party was now 'losing ground'. If it was anything like the *Scotsman*'s version, there would not be an 'earthly chance of carrying Scotland'. Liberals there would 'be doomed to immediate and crushing defeat', not least because men who 'would have followed G. to Hell if he asked them are now most seriously hesitating'. Ivory had never 'on any previous subject...listened to opinion so adverse & so unanimous'. He personally did 'not fancy to go into a sinking ship' and would 'wait for a Liberal leader to arise who could better gauge public opinion' – a striking assessment of Gladstone's shortcomings.²⁷ This discomfort did not diminish, and the bill was broadly in line with the *Scotsman*'s description. A week into the debate, Rosebery's secretary, T.L. Gilmour, wrote in his diary 'that the country is against the proposal'; Ivory, 'who ought to know', had given him 'a very gloomy account', for 'nowhere' had it 'been received with enthusiasm'.²⁸ By the end of April, Gladstone's election agent, P.W. Campbell, was warning him that 'things do not look bright

²³ Cambridge, Cambridge University Library [CUL], Childers MSS, RCMS37/5/178, 30 Mar. 1886, to Childers.

²⁴ Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland [NLS], Rosebery MSS, MS10011, fos156-7, 4 Apr. 1886.

²⁵ *Scotsman*, 29 Mar., pp.4-5, 30 Mar., p.4, 5 Apr. 1886, p.4.

²⁶ Bristol, Bristol University Library Special Collections, Francis Schnadhorst correspondence, DM668, uncatalogued.

²⁷ NLS, Rosebery MSS, MS10037, fos143-6, 1 Apr., 5 Apr. 1886.

²⁸ *Ibid*, Gilmour MSS, Acc.8989/4, 17 Apr. 1886.

with us' and feared they would experience 'Liberal disaffection such as [has] not been seen in Scotland in this generation'.

Unease was also evident at a local level. Mr Buchan, agent to the Home Secretary, Hugh Childers, reported that 'several of our people' had 'been at me' on 29 March 'in a state little short of a panic'. Buchan wrote to 'urge earnestly upon' Childers that his Edinburgh constituency 'wd. never return a member to support such proposals'. Nor would any seat in Scotland, for the 'country is not nearly ripe' and only the 'merest fragment of electors' would support it. It would be 'political suicide': the party would 'go to pieces' and face 'annihilation'. The Government should 'be prepared for the most uncompromising hostility of the mass of Scottish Liberals'.²⁹ These fears were not without foundation. The chairman at a 30 March Edinburgh ward Liberal association meeting worried that Gladstone would 'wreck his career' but refused to 'entertain the idea, until the Premier had sanctioned it by his own words'. Other associations thought it similarly wise, the disquiet notwithstanding, to withhold a formal verdict until the announcement. The chair of the Glasgow Central association's executive surmised that night that the divided state of the parliamentary party was a fair indication of extra-parliamentary feeling and reported that several men had declined to join the association given uncertainty over the future 'position of parties'; he advised they reserve criticism but be prepared to 'exercise their own judgment' when the time came.³⁰ Liberal associations would soon assert the importance of their participation in the crisis. For example, a newly constituted organisation, the Stirling Burghs association's inaugural meeting in May was convened to consider the legislation, where its president surmised that if anyone had 'misgivings about the necessity' of such a body, this 'proved that they had good grounds for it'. The president of Dunbarton's association declared it the 'duty' of Liberal associations to discuss and declare their views and thus to 'help the country to arrive at some well matured decision'.³¹ It is to such meetings that this section now turns, providing statistical analysis which demonstrates the extent of the division that had been feared and the scale of the crisis.

The Home Rule crisis was a moment of mass politics in Britain. During the sixty-day debate period, over 3,750 meetings took place at which the Irish question was discussed, and to which were put over 3,500 resolutions and amendments. Of these meetings, 477 were held in Scotland, which together passed over 400 motions (see Table 1).³² As Figure 1 illustrates, over nine-tenths (92.6%) of Scotland's constituencies witnessed at least one meeting. The author used the newspapers surviving from 1886 to gather quantitative

²⁹ According to Campbell, Childers' 'leading Committee man' advised him 'not to come down and speak' for the bill and in the Western division Thomas Buchanan was warned 'he will lose his seat if he supports' it. London, British Library [BL], Gladstone MSS, Add.MS44116, fos95-7, 30 Apr., 1 May 1886. Childers told Gladstone all the 'Liberal Committees in Edinburgh' were opposed. Ibid, Add.MS441232, fos231-2, 7 May 1886; CUL, Childers MSS, RCMS37/5/179, 29 Mar., 1 Apr. 1886, from Buchan. On Edinburgh, which had rival associations in three-four constituencies, reflecting 1885's Liberal-vs-Liberal contests, see Thompson, 'Liberal Party'. On Gladstone and Scotland, see N. Lloyd-Jones, 'Liberalism, Scottish Nationalism and the Home Rule Crisis, c.1886-93', *EHR* 129 (2014), 862-87.

³⁰ *Scotsman*, 31 Mar. 1886, p.6; *GH*, 31 Mar. 1886, p.7. Also, *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 30 Mar. 1886, p.2, Dundee association.

³¹ *Stirling Observer*, 8 May 1886, p.4; *Dumbarton Herald*, 28 Apr. 1886, p.5.

³² Calculated from 9 Apr., the day after Gladstone's late evening announcement, to 7 June, day of the bill's defeat. Gladstone later introduced a land purchase bill, which did not go to a division. Statistics generated by the author from her relational databases. Databases contain entries for each meeting, covering date, location, constituency, convener, purpose, tone, resolutions/amendments, MPs present. Excludes non-political meetings, e.g., of religious bodies, chambers of commerce, conventions of burghs.

and qualitative data on these meetings.³³ That it was possible to identify thousands of events from newspaper reports is testament to the sustained interest in the extra-parliamentary crisis. Meetings were reported in detail by national, regional and local newspapers, covering the principal speeches, exchanges between attendees, audience reactions, and the content of and responses to resolutions and amendments. Syndicated columns with titles such as ‘Public Opinion’, ‘The Political Situation’ and ‘The Irish Question’ contained lists itemising meetings, attitudes of associations, and resolutions. Organisers sent summaries to the press, providing copies of motions passed as evidence of the ‘feeling’ of the meeting. Editors attempted to quantify activity, producing tables which summarised the ‘opinion of the country’ under headings like ‘General approval’ and ‘Opposed’, calculating weekly how many Liberal associations fell under each category and citing the figures in editorials.³⁴ This created a feedback loop among activists, with, for example, the proposer of a pro-bill resolution at a Liberal meeting in Grangemouth in mid-May citing the latest press figures and hailing them ‘the voice of the Liberal Associations’.³⁵ That these events enjoyed such an afterlife enhanced their visibility and extended their audience. Taking into account the content of and responses to speeches and motions, the author classified meetings by their tone, as ‘for’, ‘against’, or ‘mixed’.³⁶ ‘Mixed’ denotes meetings where there was no clear majority for or against. It is applicable, for example, to meetings where there was heated debate, where opinion was divided, where there were multiple amendments or revisions to a resolution, where resolutions hedged considerably, or where MPs or lecturers spoke against it and were supported or opposed by some but not all attendees.

Table 1. Meetings in Britain at which Home Rule was discussed, 9 April – 7 June 1886³⁷

	Total meetings	% meetings for	% meetings against	% mixed meetings	% meetings with MPs present	% Liberal meetings for	% Liberal meetings against	% Liberal meetings mixed
England	3,087	41.8	51.5	6.7	23.4	87.4	0.1	12.5
Scotland	477	43.8	37.9	18.3	12.2	69.8	1.2	29
Wales	206	65	33.5	1.5	18.9	99.2	0	0.8
Britain	3,770	43.3	48.9	7.8	21.7	85.7	0.2	14.1

³³ 154 Scottish newspapers, plus over 550 English and Welsh newspapers, via BL, Gale, British Newspaper Archive and Welsh Newspapers Online. The author manually worked through newspapers edition-by-edition, page-by-page, county-by-county, region-by-region, and cross-referenced speeches and motions across multiple sources. Meetings were typically reported in at least one newspaper, but it is conceivable that not every meeting was covered. Verbatim reporting was inconsistent, and newspapers could downplay or emphasise division, or audience size and composition. There is no perfect way to reconstruct nineteenth-century political events, but the sample scale and methodological rigorosity mitigate these issues.

³⁴ E.g.: *Peterhead Sentinel*, 28 Apr. 1886, p.6; *Dalkeith Advertiser (DA)*, 29 Apr. 1886, p.2.

³⁵ *Paisley Gazette*, 8 May 1886, p.6. Also, Renfrew Liberal meeting, *Falkirk Express*, 21 May 1886, p.2.

³⁶ Classifiable for 95% of meetings (due to lack of reported information for some). In the minority of cases where only a resolution was found, classification was simpler for Conservative-organised events (safely assumed anti-Home Rule). At Liberal meetings that passed pro- motions, there could have been dissenting voices that went unreported, but they were recorded as ‘pro’, based on available information.

³⁷ Where tone known. ‘Liberal’ covers meetings reported as organised by Liberal, Liberal and Radical, and Radical associations, clubs and federations, and by ‘Liberal delegates’. Excludes meetings of Highland land reform organisations. ‘Liberal Unionist’ refers to Liberals identifying themselves/their meeting as opposed to the bill. ‘Non-party’ refers to meetings called by requisition or where convener did not correspond to one of the main parties or was not identified as such in the sources (Irish unionist- and nationalist-organised meetings classified separately).

As can be seen from Table 1, across Scotland, a slightly higher proportion of meetings were favourable than were opposed to Home Rule. However, nearly one-fifth were ‘mixed’, with the Scottish figure over two-and-a-half times that for England and 12 times that for Wales. Just over one-tenth (12.7%) of all meetings were held in Scotland, but it accounted for over a quarter (28.6%) of Britain’s ‘mixed’ meetings. Just over three-quarters (77.5%) of Scotland’s constituencies witnessed at least one anti-Home Rule meeting, with slightly fewer (73.2%) playing host to a favourable meeting – the latter figure explained partly by a concentration in Edinburgh, as Scotland’s capital, of set-piece pro- demonstrations. Three-fifths (60.5%) of constituencies saw a ‘mixed’ meeting. This complex picture was also reflected at a regional level.³⁸ Western constituencies accounted for a slight majority of meetings (52.4%), with eastern seats following closely (45.5%) and Highland and Island seats seeing few meetings (2.1%). However, in neither the east nor west was there a majority for either side. In the east, 41.9% of meetings were in favour and 36.1% opposed. The respective figures were higher in the west, at 45.2% pro- and 40.2% anti-Home Rule. This reflects a higher incidence of ‘mixed’ meetings in the east, at 22% compared to 14.6% in the west. As figures 1 and 2 illustrate, these statistics are also indicative of a Liberal predominance in Scotland and in the discussion of Ireland, and of the extent of Liberal division. Liberals organised 275 meetings, over half of the total (57.7%). Conservatives arranged 111, or around one-fifth (23.3%). Non-party meetings accounted for most of the remainder (11.6%), although these were overwhelmingly hostile to Home Rule (75%), typically being billed as ‘patriotic’ meetings. Overall, 83% of Scottish constituencies experienced at least one Liberal-organised event and two-thirds saw a Conservative one. At no stage were Liberal meetings outnumbered by their Conservative or non-party counterparts, with Liberals typically organising at least twice as many each week.

³⁸ Regions in H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910* (London, 1967).

Figure 1. Location of meetings in Scotland at which Home Rule was discussed, 9 April-7 June 1886

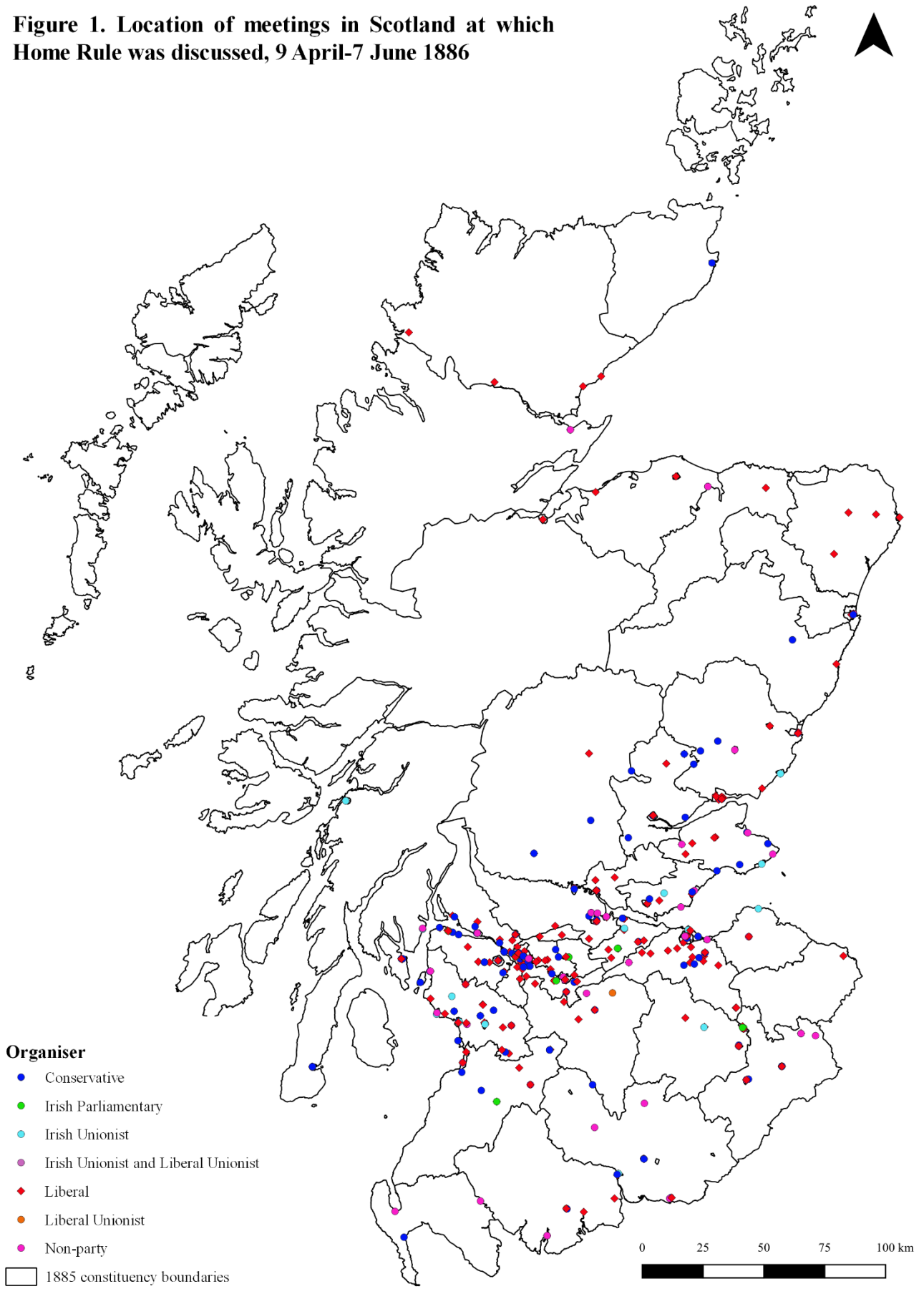
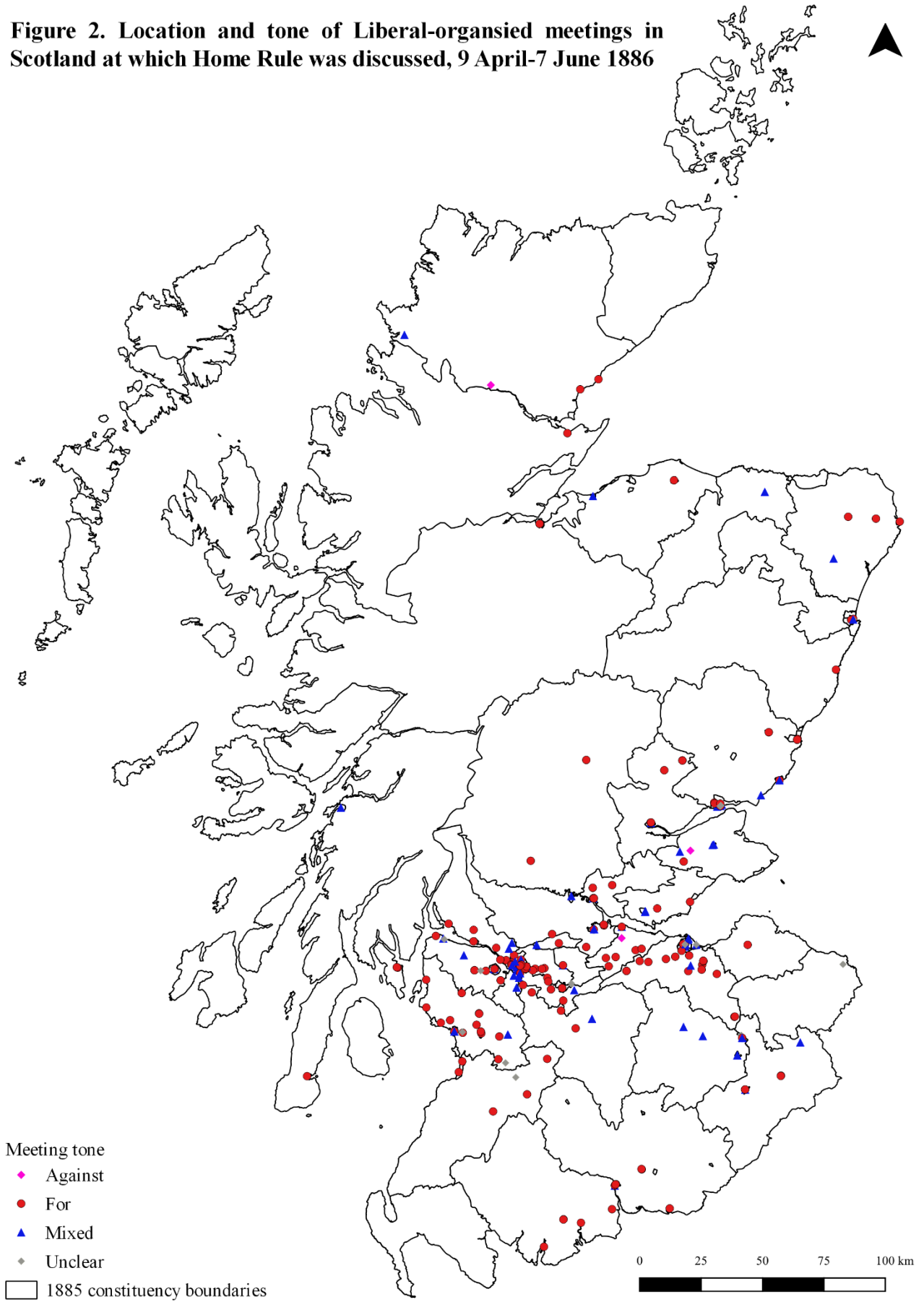


Figure 2. Location and tone of Liberal-organised meetings in Scotland at which Home Rule was discussed, 9 April-7 June 1886



Almost one-third of Scottish Liberal meetings were ‘mixed’.³⁹ This figure is nearly thirty-fold that for Wales and almost two-and-a-half times higher than England’s. Scotland accounted for 15.1% of Britain’s Liberal meetings, but over a fifth (21.4%) of all Liberal ‘mixed’ meetings. As Figure 2 illustrates, of the Scottish constituencies that hosted Liberal events, nine-tenths saw at least one pro-Home Rule meeting, but over two-thirds had at least one ‘mixed’ meeting. The latter figure is twice that for England. Liberal meetings were comparably spread across the east (46.9%) and west (49.8%). In the east, one-third (34.2%) were ‘mixed’, and in the west it was one-quarter (24.2%), where there were early signs of separate Liberal Unionist organisation outside the existing Liberal apparatus.⁴⁰ Formal Liberal organisations were operational in eight-in-ten Scottish constituencies during the debate period, which is indicative of the extent to which the party had developed its organisational network by spring 1886. In total, 182 Liberal organisations were involved – ranging from the national, in the shape of the NLFS, to constituencies’ ward, district and central associations – the vast majority of which arranged one meeting each.⁴¹ Conservatives had fewer than half this number of organisations active. Most Liberal meetings were organised by associations (80.7%). Of these, the majority (88.3%) were party events, arranged by and for local Liberals – such as regular association meetings or meetings specially convened to consider the legislation – rather than ‘open’ meetings to which the ‘public’ was invited (although they were not ticketed).

The Stirling Burghs constituency, where all the Liberal meetings were ‘mixed’, is a key example of how divisions played out as the crisis developed. The MP, Campbell-Bannerman, was perceived to have opposed Home Rule in 1885, and was criticised for his supposed ‘inconsistency’ in now supporting it.⁴² Activists in Stirling relayed to Campbell-Bannerman the ‘very strong’ opposition of ‘good Liberals’ in the town, who, concerned that Gladstone had made ‘a great mistake’ and gone too far, were ‘despondent’ and feared that ‘the Liberal party will be found broken up & rent asunder in Scotland’. There were ‘few’ who ‘would speak right out in approval’ and others hoped for modifications ‘which would relieve them’.⁴³ Similar to Ivory and Buchan, in his early reports from Dunfermline the agent John Ross stated that, having spoken ‘with many on the subject’, he had ‘not yet found one whose confidence in Mr Gladstone is not more or less shaken’. By late April, Ross – who ‘deplored’ the legislation – was explaining that ‘we have been taken by surprise’ and that opinion ‘is somewhat chaotic, but upon the whole adverse’. Some local Liberals felt themselves ‘put in a corner’, believing that Campbell-Bannerman had ‘implied that [he] could not support such measures’. To ‘show him his constituency in minutiae’, Ross in early May organised a ‘very representative’ lunch for Campbell-Bannerman in Dunfermline with ‘men of Liberal principles’, and found them ‘equally divided’ for and against. Ross attempted to resign as agent to two MPs, desiring ‘liberty, certainly in private,

³⁹ Where tone known (92.7% Liberal meetings).

⁴⁰ Although a West of Scotland Liberal Unionist association met seven times, one meeting is included here, as the others were purely organisational. NLS, Acc.10424/19, WSLUA Minute Book; McCaffrey, ‘Liberal Unionism’.

⁴¹ Excludes the few organisations which met but did not discuss Ireland.

⁴² E.g., *Dunfermline Journal*, 24 Apr. 1886, p.3, Liberal Association executive attendees argued Campbell-Bannerman ‘owed his constituency some explanation’.

⁴³ BL, Campbell-Bannerman MSS, Add.MS41232, fo236, from William Sanders, 28 Apr; fo211, from Robert Smith, 20 Apr.; fo216, from Provost Yellowlees, 22 Apr. 1886.

and if occasion arose, also in public, to express my convictions on the grave questions raised'.⁴⁴ Other correspondents drew Campbell-Bannerman's attention to the situation in the Dunfermline Liberal Association, where there were 'so many speakers for & against' that its discussion was twice adjourned between late April and mid-May before a vote could be taken. The association's president stated at the first meeting that he 'did not know when there had been so much division among good and hearty Liberals', and he did not expect that 'everyone could adopt all the points embraced in the Government policy'.⁴⁵ Ross described these meetings as 'ludicrous', the resolution having been 'formed to avoid any definite expression of opinion'. Indeed, the president stated that it was 'in very vague terms', for it did not 'commit the Association to all the proposals in the Irish schemes', which would likely be amended. The local Liberal newspaper lamented that '[u]nanimity could not possibly be produced by a motion of vague confidence in the Government', and urged that if Liberal resolutions were 'to be of any value' they 'must be specific, must accept or reject the particular measures'. Campbell-Bannerman, for his part, hoped that, 'however unfriendly to the Bill the feeling' was, Liberals would 'refrain for the present from committing themselves to any resolution or opinion directly opposed to it'.⁴⁶

While Campbell-Bannerman was criticised for supporting the bill, divisions also emerged in constituencies represented by its Liberal opponents. Half of all 'mixed' meetings took place in seats whose Liberal MP later voted against the bill, a figure out of proportion with the weight these constituencies carried in Scotland's Westminster cohort (31%).⁴⁷ Opinion was often divided over the extent to which support should be given to either the legislation or the MP. This was seen within individual associations and across them. Several of these constituencies saw a greater proportion of 'mixed' Liberal meetings than the Scottish average. For example, all the Liberal-organised meetings in Leith Burghs were 'mixed'. In late April, three of the four resolutions put to the Portobello Liberal Association were oppositional, variously describing the bill as 'unconstitutional and illusory', 'detrimental' to Ireland's interests, and 'dangerous' to imperial unity. The meeting ultimately passed a vague resolution of sympathy for the government's endeavour and declined to 'pronounce on all the details' of the bill. An early May meeting of the Leith Burghs Liberal Association, the central constituency organisation, had five motions tabled, with divisions being taken on whether to delay action, call for the bill's withdrawal, or accept it as 'a basis' for settlement. The latter passed by 48 to 21. Several members, desiring that 'some other expression of opinion should be elicited', wrote and made available for signature a letter to the MP, William Jacks, declaring their 'refusal' to accept the association's resolution as 'representative of the opinion' of Leith Liberals and approving Jacks' opposition to the legislation. Tensions remained when the association convened again later that month, to consider an NLFS proposal that public meetings be convened to discuss Home Rule. It was on the one hand argued that the constituency should make its 'voice heard on the momentous question', not least given Jacks' position, for they did not want it 'supposed

⁴⁴ Charlestown, Broomhall, Elgin MSS, 41/10, to R.P. Bruce, 2 Apr., 10 Apr., 7 May, 12 June 1886 (Ross was Bruce's agent); BL, Campbell-Bannerman MSS, Add.MS41232, fos218, 228, 24 Apr., 27 Apr. 1886.

⁴⁵ Ibid, fos201, 206, from A.J. Cunningham, 19 Apr., 27 Apr. 1886.

⁴⁶ Ibid, fo231, 28 Apr. 1886, to Ross; *Dunfermline Journal*, 1 May 1886, p.2.; *Dunfermline Sunday Press*, 1 May, p.2, 8 May, p.3, 15 May 1886, p.3.

⁴⁷ Where tone known.

that they were going in with' him. On the other hand, several members expressed concern that convening a meeting 'would divide them more' and 'rend the Association'. The matter was left undecided.⁴⁸

There were comparable patterns of division in Partick, Lanarkshire, where half the Liberal meetings were 'mixed'. The Possilpark Liberal Association in mid-April carried a resolution of thanks to Gladstone and trust that, with amendments, the bill would prove successful. Yet by early May, it was debating resolutions criticising several of the bill's provisions and declaring against the structure of the Irish parliament. In late May, the executive committee resolved by nine votes to eight to 'approve' the MP Alexander Craig Sellar's action against the measure. By contrast, the neighbouring Maryhill association approved the bill's 'principles' and expressed 'regret at [his] hostile attitude'. The proposer of this resolution argued that while an MP should not be a 'mere delegate', they had returned Sellar on the understanding that he would support Gladstone, while another speaker stressed that Sellar was 'not in harmony with his constituents'.⁴⁹ There were also instances where an MP's anti-Home Rule attitude clearly ran against the grain. In Dumfries Burghs, only one Liberal meeting was 'mixed'. The Dumfries and Maxwelltown association regretted Ernest Noel's 'uncompromising hostility' to the bill, Liberals in Annan declared 'their want of confidence' in him, and the Lochmaben association announced that it would 'transfer its support to some other representative, whose views and principles are more in harmony with the major part of this Association'. Kirkcudbright Liberals passed a vote of 'censure', reproaching Noel for failing to 'treat the burghs in anything like a fair and honest way' and for having 'treated the Liberal Association with contempt', and arguing that although Noel was 'quite entitled to his own opinion', he 'should have paid a little more attention to the views of those who elected him'.⁵⁰ Such episodes illustrate the manifold responses of rank-and-file Scottish Liberals to Home Rule and the complex ways in which they attempted to express opinion and navigate relationships with their representatives, at both parliamentary and local levels.

Party and public meetings were one of the main 'ways in which democracy was organised' in the nineteenth century.⁵¹ They afford insight into the 'rituals and languages of popular political culture' and the 'connections between popular culture and organized, formal politics'.⁵² They were, variously, tools for gathering and expressing opinion, for constructing and maintaining local allegiances and networks, and for contact with MPs, and they formed part of the struggle to establish legitimacy within constituencies. A meeting could simultaneously be a site and a form of participation and representation – and of political interaction, not just between leaders and led but also between those who considered themselves 'Liberal' or as forming 'the public'. Dan Jackson argues of the Edwardian Home Rule crisis that there was 'massive interest and participation in politics', with meetings a means by which popular sentiment 'could be translated into a tangible, corporeal entity'.⁵³ This holds true for 1886: there was widespread, sustained engagement with Home

⁴⁸ *Leith Burghs Pilot*, 24 Apr., p.3, 1 May 1886, p.3; *Portobello Advertiser*, 14 May, p.2, 28 May 1886, p.2.

⁴⁹ *NBDM*, 22 Apr., p.5, 12 May, p.5, 4 June 1886, p.5; *Govan Press*, 8 May 1886, p.3; *GH*, 5 May 1886, p.5.

⁵⁰ *Annandale Observer*, 28 May 1886, p.2; *Moffat Times*, 12 June 1886, p.3; *Eskdale Advertiser*, 9 June 1886, p.2; *Kirkcudbrightshire Advertiser*, 11 June 1886, p.3; *Galloway Advertiser*, 11 June 1886, p.3.

⁵¹ M. Janse and H. te Velde, 'Perspectives on Political Organizing', in idem (eds), *Organizing Democracy*, 12.

⁵² J. Lawrence and A. Campsie, 'Political history', in S. Berger, H. Feldner, K. Passmore (eds), *Writing History: Theory and Practice* (London, 2020), 335-6.

⁵³ D. Jackson, *Popular Opposition to Irish Home Rule in Edwardian Britain* (Liverpool, 2009), 6, 243.

Rule at a time when its unveiling as Liberal policy made such activity imperative. In Scotland, Liberal discussion of Home Rule took place within the fora afforded by party organisational structures. This suggests both their capacity to function as deliberative assemblies and a perceived need to respond to the policy. This embrace of the association meeting as a mode of collective action and representative claim-making had the potential to forge grassroots support for Home Rule. However, it also generated and exposed rank-and-file division, and the phenomenon of ‘party’ discussion made Liberals vulnerable to criticism.

II. The crisis and party organisation

The crisis erupted at a time of tense debate over the structure and activity of the Liberal party in Scotland. The culture of Liberal organisation in England and Scotland was affected by whether it was deliberative or not. Chamberlain had from the NLF’s inception in 1877 maintained that its meetings were a venue in which ‘the opinions of Liberals on measures to be supported or resisted will be readily and authoritatively ascertained’ and argued that the party should be governed by the principle of ‘the direct participation of all its members in the direction of its policy’.⁵⁴ As Hutchison notes, the NLF’s ‘power derived from being the locus of both organisation and policy determination, the former endowing the latter with greater significance’.⁵⁵ The SLA had no such pretensions. When the matter of policy discussion was raised at the SLA’s first annual meeting in 1882, its presiding chairman stated that they had met purely ‘for the advancement of organisation’ and that ‘the Association had never taken up...or tried to advance any political question’.⁵⁶ The SLA claimed to ‘promote the unity and strength of the Liberal party in Scotland’ and ‘to inform but not to dictate’.⁵⁷ As a central association, it was to fulfil an advisory not a directive role. The SLA comprised an executive committee and a general council, the latter being formed of delegates nominated by constituency associations and executive appointees. The council elected the executive, which compiled the annual report, and the two sections shared a chairman. Unlike the NLF’s, the SLA’s constitution did not require associations wishing to affiliate to be structured according to a ‘representative model’.⁵⁸ According to Lord Elgin, chairman from January 1884, the SLA admitted ‘anyone who came to us with the profession of being a Liberal’. As Elgin told the SLA the following year, it was a matter of pride that ‘they had not...been doing the work which was commonly attributed to what the Tories were pleased to call the Caucus’. Namely, they ‘had not been stimulating or “manufacturing”...agitation’ and their constitution stated that the SLA would not interfere with independent local action.⁵⁹ The SLA was afraid not of organising but of caucusing: party organisation could create problems of adhesion and cohesion if it was understood as, or expected to be, more than the practice of organising for political purposes.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ J. Chamberlain, ‘The Caucus’, *Fortnightly Review* (Jul. 1877), 132-3.

⁵⁵ Hutchison, *Political history*, 157.

⁵⁶ NLS, Acc.11765/2, SLA minute book, p.8, Lord Fife, 5 Jan. 1882

⁵⁷ *Ibid*: Elgin; Maxtone Graham (chairman before Elgin).

⁵⁸ *Scotsman*, 4 Jan. 1882, p.5; Owen, *Labour*, 93.

⁵⁹ NLS, Acc.11765/2, SLA minute book, p.83, special general meeting, 29 Oct. 1886; *Scotsman*, 17 Jan. 1885. The NLF, seen as the archetypal ‘caucus’, also professed to guarantee affiliated associations their independence.

⁶⁰ Determining the composition of Liberal associations is difficult, as few minute books survive. The SLA’s 1884 list of general council representatives mentions some occupations, including manufacturers, merchants, solicitors, and (ex-)provosts, suggesting a middle-class membership. The SLA knew the practical difficulties of encouraging greater

At successive SLA annual meetings between 1884 and 1886, Elgin stressed three things: it was not the SLA's duty to 'frame a political programme, or to issue a political manifesto'; it would not interfere with the independence of local associations; and its meetings should be confined to subjects not generating 'differences of opinion'.⁶¹ Elgin felt that, 'for the sake of the unity of the party', the 'question of organisation & the work of organisation' must be 'kept distinct from those other questions & movements on which different sections of the party hold different opinions'.⁶² Elgin squared this circle by insisting that the 'business' of the SLA was 'simply organisation': 'the programme' did not fall within its 'scope'.⁶³ This precluded action on a second front: if Scotland's central Liberal organisation prepared a programme for the party, Liberals might be expected to support it 'by agitation'. Elgin was clear that the SLA 'should not be involved in agitation in favour of particular measures...until they are officially & universally adopted by the Party'.⁶⁴ However, it appeared to some that, by barring discussion of political questions, the SLA denied Scottish Liberals the opportunity to determine and express opinion on important issues and to influence party or government policy. At the SLA's January 1885 annual meeting, the Galashiels radical Alexander Brown asked members to consider whether the SLA 'was the sort of Association calculated now to meet their wants' or they ought to establish a federation of associations that could provide means to 'gather the opinions of Liberals in Scotland' on pressing questions and 'bring them to bear' on MPs and government. In subsequent letters to the press, Brown argued that Scotland 'required some machinery' to enable politicians 'to ascertain with tolerable accuracy, what is the mind of the country on different political questions'.⁶⁵ Elgin referred the matter to the executive for consideration. Fearing that the 'new organization would lead us into difficulties', it unanimously decided against, citing the 'paramount necessity' of not interfering with local action.⁶⁶

Elgin's views on the subject prompt questions about the quality and extent of representation and participation in Scottish Liberal organisations. He was aware of the difficulties that different organisational forms presented for Liberal representative claim-making and of their amplification in a 'national' institution. He acknowledged that the premise 'laid down' by Chamberlain, that 'an Assocⁿ in order to have authority must be truly representative', could be hard to achieve were the SLA to move toward policy discussion and decision. In the first instance, the SLA 'includes representation from all parts of Scotland' but it was scarcely 'possible to convene them at any one meeting'.⁶⁷ As Elgin explained to one federation advocate, this meant that in the SLA – it 'being a National Society' – debate 'where the constituent elements of the Assocⁿ should be fully represented' would be 'practically if not theoretically impossible'. If the SLA gave 'active support' to a resolution adopted at a meeting where not all local associations were represented, and that resolution 'asserted

working-class participation in associations, which included the effect of attending meetings on wage-earning and finding accessible locations. Elgin acknowledged that delegates might be elected 'because they have the means & perhaps zeal'. Broomhall, Elgin MSS, 41/7; 41/24, draft to Rosebery, Dec. 1885.

⁶¹ *GH*, 24 Jan. 1884, p.6 (AGM); *Scotsman*, 17 Jan. 1885, p.5 (AGM); NLS, Acc.11765/2, SLA minute book, p.80, 19 Feb. 1886 (annual general council meeting).

⁶² NLS, Rosebery MSS, MS10084, fo229, to Rosebery, 18 Dec. 1885.

⁶³ *Ibid*, Acc.11765/2, SLA minute book, p.68, 1885 AGM.

⁶⁴ Broomhall, Elgin MSS, 41/7, draft to Prof. Calderwood, 26 Jan. 1885.

⁶⁵ *Scotsman*, 17 Jan., p.9, 19 Jan. 1885, p.7; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 10 Feb. 1885, p.2. Brown won Hawick Burghs in 1886, defeating the sitting Liberal Unionist.

⁶⁶ NLS, Elliot MSS, MS19487, fo23, 13 Aug. 1885, Patten to Elliot; *GH*, 16 July 1885, p.3, general council meeting.

⁶⁷ Broomhall, Elgin MSS, 41/24, draft to Rosebery, Dec. 1885.

a particular policy as a necessary position of the creed of the Liberal party', that would constitute 'direct interference' with local independence and have implications for SLA members. As Elgin told Rosebery, were 'disputed topics' voted upon at a meeting 'which claims to represent the whole of Scotland', members might find both the Association and themselves 'committed to proposals with which they disagree'.⁶⁸ According to the SLA's secretary, James Patten, the executive's feared 'trouble in holding the Association together', especially if members 'are bound or suppose themselves bound' by any resolution.⁶⁹ Such activity might risk institutionalising and nationalising Liberal divisions in both organisational structure and party programme. In a one-party state, the party's claim to representation could be rendered problematic if voters and the rank-and-file no longer believed it reflected their views.

The executive's attempts to hold the line failed to persuade those who believed policy discussion was crucial to the party's future. As an alternative to the federation, Elgin suggested that the SLA's autumnal meeting – a non-'business' meeting held in a provincial town – be expanded to include a conference of delegates from the area or region, 'on a distinct basis from any other meetings of the Assocⁿ'. This might allow greater opportunities for debate and afford 'a fair expression of the views of a well-defined district' – without 'interfering with the possibly adverse opinion of another part of the country' or giving the SLA 'responsibility for the opinions expressed'.⁷⁰ This cautious compromise was rejected as insufficient.⁷¹ In September 1885, a conference of over 600 delegates from Liberal associations agreed to proceed with a federation and adopted a 'programme' of policies encapsulated in six resolutions. The federation's founding resolution declared it 'a suitable organisation for expressing authoritatively the consensus of enlightened Liberal opinion' and bringing MPs 'more into touch with the currents of opinion' in their constituencies. Its constitution contained two objects the SLA's did not, bringing it more closely in line with the NLF's: the promotion of 'the organization throughout the country of Liberal Associations based on popular representation' and 'the discussion of political questions, and the adoption of Liberal principles in the government of the country'. Also similar to the NLF, the NLFS's general committee could submit to affiliated associations political questions 'upon which united action may be considered desirable'.⁷² It was not until the organisations were reunified and reconfigured in winter 1886 that the new SLA's objects included encouraging 'discussion of political questions in Liberal Associations'.⁷³

According to the meeting's chair Gilbert Beith, president of the Glasgow Liberal Association, the SLA was not suited to this purpose. It 'occupied the arm-chair of Scottish Liberal politics' with 'masterly inaction' and did not accurately represent 'the political opinion of Scotland', thus depriving Scotland of 'facilities for

⁶⁸ Ibid, 41/7, draft to Calderwood, 26 Jan. 1885; NLS, Rosebery MSS, MS10084, fo229, 15 Dec. 1885.

⁶⁹ Ibid, MS10042, fo207, 9 Jan. 1886.

⁷⁰ Broomhall, Elgin MSS, 41/7, 41/24.

⁷¹ According to Calderwood, federation advocates thought it 'would be constantly leading us into difficult questions of responsibility, which would endanger our Association', making a separate body the better option. Ibid, 41/7, 3 Feb. 1885.

⁷² Ibid, 41/10.

⁷³ This was not without difficulty. Debates continued over whether the SLA should propose a programme of future actions, including points that were desirable but not imminently practical and which may place it in advance of the party leadership. Likewise, over how authoritative expressions of national Liberal opinion could be achieved and how far members would be committed by decisions at SLA meetings (and at which meetings). Ibid, 41/8, Elgin-Beith correspondence, Dec. 1886.

expressing the popular mind on political questions'. Theoretically, measuring and articulating opinion in the ways envisaged by the federationists could make the party more responsive. Converting such opinion into a programme of demands could improve the quality of organisation and representation. The federation could thus assert a collective identity for and materialise Scottish Liberalism as a collective political actor. In anti-caucus rhetoric, the caucus disciplined and constrained. For advocates of organisational reform in Scotland, these innovations would free up a rigid apparatus and provide a more inclusive forum. Putting the NLFS's founding resolution, Brown insisted that disagreements would be settled by Liberals coming together in a representative organisation, which would let their political leaders 'know what the country really wanted', who, after all, did not require 'the opinions of the Liberal electors on questions about which there was no difference of opinion'.⁷⁴ Opinion could be located in a deliberative Liberal community, with the NLFS providing its institutional foundation and location, and making it authentic and authoritative. To be truly representative and participatory, organisation could and should be both administrative and deliberative.

There was however the question of how such opinion translated into 'party' – first Association, then leadership, then government – policy. Alexander Cross – a federationist and later a Liberal Unionist – criticised the SLA for thinking unity could only be achieved if Liberals did 'not open their lips on any matter in which the Liberal party were interested'. He stressed that every association member 'ought to have his word in formulating the policy of the party'.⁷⁵ When, as president, he addressed the Liberal Association in Glasgow Central in April 1886, Cross observed that, until recently, policy had been dictated at headquarters by party managers, while 'the rank and file had no political existence except' at elections. Thanks to the formation of local associations, they 'now had a say in [its] promulgation'. Aware of 'differences of opinion' on Home Rule, Cross nevertheless insisted that this should not prevent them from 'discharging' their 'functions', for the aim of the associations remained 'influencing the policy and the opinion of the party'. If they were to debate policy, Home Rule was now the question of the day: to 'shrink or slur' on this occasion would defeat the 'object' of the associations. Still, if having this aim would, somewhat idealistically, enable Liberals to 'face' their 'difficulties', it does prompt the question of how far an association possessing such 'divergence of opinion' could hope, in Cross' words, to reliably 'guide the party'.⁷⁶ The Irish crisis focused these problems, because it was the local associations that mobilised to discuss the policy.

Throughout the organisational debates, the *Scotsman* maintained a line similar to that of the SLA's executive. It warned that there was nothing more dangerous to Liberalism than 'hankering after hard-and-fast "programmes" which lead to disputes' and shut out of the party good Liberals who could otherwise be of service. It praised the executive and secretaries for working to 'organise Liberal effort' and make the Association 'what it was intended to be, a centre of information as to electoral matters', for this had strengthened the party and helped it win elections. Local associations should 'avoid matters of detail, as to which there are pretty certain to be differences of opinion' and which threaten 'trouble and failure'. There was also the issue of how far these organisational forms could constitute genuine representation. The paper

⁷⁴ *Scotsman*, 16 Sept. 1885, pp.7-8.

⁷⁵ *NBDM*, 21 Apr. 1886, p.5; NLS, Acc.11765/2, SLA minute book, p.80, general council meeting.

⁷⁶ *GH*, 27 Apr. 1886, p.5.

surmised that, if associations were ‘supposed to be representative of all sections of Liberals’, and first they and then the central organisation were persuaded to declare for, say, disestablishment, the party’s leaders and the public might believe that ‘the Liberalism of Scotland has spoken’. The problem was that, amid attempts to ‘manipulate’ and ‘capture’ them, the associations were becoming representative of merely ‘those sections which have their own fads’. It likewise saw in the NLFS an illegitimate attempt to speak for Scottish Liberalism and enforce obedience not to principles but to fads. The Federation might confidently proclaim ‘what Scotland desires’, but what its founders meant ‘by Scottish opinion’ was their own and that of ‘those who agree with’ them – opinions they wanted to force ‘down the throats of the people’.⁷⁷ The paper feared that Scottish Liberalism would lose an elasticity that had given it strength and be reduced to adhesion to rigid policy lines. Such rhetoric was mirrored in the complaints against constituency associations in 1886. They were portrayed as the preserve not of a majority of local Liberals but a minority of zealots who, intolerant of opinions contrary to theirs, arrogated to themselves the right to speak for their community – rendering Liberalism not broad-based but cliquish. The crisis gave rise to a rhetoric of a public-association dichotomy, in which neither the public nor public opinion could be found in the associations.

The *Scotsman*’s correspondence columns were crowded in spring 1886 with letters denouncing the associations, which were, as far as their ‘representative character’ could be judged, ‘a sham and a deception on the public’.⁷⁸ Associations presumed to but did not have ‘power to speak for the constituencies’ on the Home Rule question, for this was ‘beyond their scope’, and their resolutions were invariably the ‘reverse of the sentiments of the great majority’.⁷⁹ Letter-writers interpreted association tactics as intimidation, directed against both MPs and rank-and-file Liberals. One thought it absurd that a few men could pass resolutions condemnatory of their MP and of confidence in Gladstone, send ‘a paragraph of the meeting’ to the press, and ‘presto! the world knows that the political life of our sitting member is at an end’. Another condemned the ‘political gamblers’ who pulled the ‘wires’ with the aim of ‘stifling the expression of independent Liberal thought’, so that anyone ‘not for their interpretation of Liberalism must be against Liberalism altogether’. Associations thus both suffocated debate and contained it, making it party-political rather than ‘public’. There was also the issue of how far a meeting’s outcome represented attendees’ opinions. ‘An Independent Liberal’ reported having attended two meetings where the resolutions, giving the impression of ‘full accord’ with the proposals, were not ‘a fair indication’ of the speeches, which revealed objections to key provisions; that members nonetheless accepted the resolutions proved they ceased to ‘exercise independence of judgment’.⁸⁰ Of Scotland’s newspapers, the *Scotsman* was the most forthright in condemning the associations. Its editorials insisted that, despite having ‘assumed to speak for the electors whom they did not accurately represent’, the ‘clamour of a few committees’ had not sufficed ‘to show that public opinion is with Mr Gladstone’. The associations did ‘not represent Scottish opinion’ and what they did produce in the way of it was ‘a mechanical product after a pattern provided for them’. The demonstrations organised by Liberal Unionists were treated as

⁷⁷ *Scotsman*, 16 Sept., p.6, 19 Oct., p.4, 20 Oct. 1885, p.4; 15 Feb. 1886, p.4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, see, 6 May, p.7, ‘A Selkirkshire Elector’; 28 Apr., p.8, ‘A Newbattle Liberal’; 4 May, p.7, ‘A Galashiels Radical’; 7 May 1886, p.3, ‘A Moderate Liberal’.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 28 Apr., p.8, ‘Country Liberal’; 4 May 1886, p.7, ‘Consistency’.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 3 June, p.3, ‘C.M.’; 4 May, p.7, ‘W.S.W.’; 11 May 1886, p.6.

truer indicators of public feeling. Of the NLFS's inaugural conference and public meeting in Glasgow on 30 April, the *Scotsman* claimed that nobody believed it could 'furnish an accurate reflection of Scottish opinion'. The same night, there was a major set-piece demonstration in Edinburgh of Liberals wanting to uphold the UK's legislative integrity, which had 'all sections' of the party represented and showed that 'Scottish Liberal opinion is by an immense preponderance opposed to the Irish measures'.⁸¹ The *Scotsman* and its correspondents appealed to a discourse more typically used to describe an English mode of political action, but which proved adaptable in the changing context of Scottish Liberalism.

On 17 May, the NLFS's circularised affiliated associations counselling that at least one public meeting be held in each district to facilitate 'the greatest possible expression of public opinion throughout Scotland'. The circular suggested three resolutions for such meetings: confidence in the government, approval of the bill, and an undertaking to petition for its second reading. It also recommended that in parishes presently lacking Liberal associations, arrangements should be made for their establishment and for securing expressions of support for the government through these new bodies.⁸² The NLFS's action appeared the antithesis of the SLA's cardinal principle of 'organisation without interference with independent local action'.⁸³ It was however broadly in line with the NLFS's recently-agreed constitution and is indicative of the role it envisioned for itself as an overarching organisational body and repository of Scottish Liberal opinion. It is also possible that the circular was a response to inaction by the SLA, which did not convene until after the election or discuss Home Rule until the autumn. The SLA had been due to hold its annual meeting that spring, but there was concern among the executive that it 'would be very dangerous to have it just now' and would risk 'a regular break up', meaning the longer it could be 'put off...the better'.⁸⁴ Elgin's logic during the federation crisis further helps explain why the SLA held back. Home Rule, the ultimate disputed topic, may have been officially adopted by the party leadership but it was not universally accepted by the wider party. Any pronouncement upon it by the central organisational body for Scotland, at a meeting which claimed to represent but could not realistically bring together the whole of Liberal Scotland, might bear upon its status as a Liberal principle and risk placing the SLA out of step with its broader membership. Indeed, despite the NLFS's representative claim-making, its inaugural conference was criticised for failing to assemble a geographically broad range of associations, and the capacity of local associations to gather and speak for the community was similarly questioned. Together the organisational debates and Home Rule crisis reveal the complexities of the relationship between party organisation and political representation, and of constituting 'Liberal Scotland' in an age of mass politics.

Critics interpreted the NLFS's circular as the work of the dreaded machine, which would, if successful, 'institute a national caucus for Scotland'.⁸⁵ The *Scotsman*, anticipating that Scotland would now suffer 'the screw with a vengeance', asked, would honest Liberals believe 'expressions of opinion' obtained by 'dictatorial' means supplied 'evidence of the real feeling of the Liberal party?'⁸⁶ The Liberal Unionist *Glasgow*

⁸¹ Ibid, 21 May, p.4, 8 June, p.6, 31 May, p.4, 1 May 1886, p.8. *Ayrshire Post*, 28 May 1886, p.3, *Greenock Telegraph*, 1 May 1886, p.2, for critiques.

⁸² DA, 21 Apr. 1886, p.6.

⁸³ NLS, Rosebery MSS, MS10084, fo229, from Elgin.

⁸⁴ Broomhall, Elgin MSS, 41/7, from Robert Cathcart, 20 Apr., 24 Apr; from Lord Stair, former president, 11 June 1886.

⁸⁵ *Fife Herald*, 26 May 1886, pp.4-5.

⁸⁶ *Scotsman*, 20 May 1886, p.4.

Herald branded the NLFS ‘a sham’ and treated the circular as evidence of the coercion of Liberals who followed their consciences – while also reminding readers that ‘the caucuses are as divided as’ the parliamentary party.⁸⁷ Such division, opponents argued, rendered claims to ‘Scottish opinion’ at best impossible and, at worst, fraudulent. This was discipline, not popular force. The Perthshire West Liberal Unionist MP Donald Currie forwarded the circular to newspapers, to alert ‘the public’ to ‘the manoeuvres adopted by certain political wirepullers...seeking to stimulate or manufacture opinion...and to force Scottish members of Parliament to support the measure’. To reinforce the illegitimacy of these tactics, Currie cited a ‘small’ meeting in his constituency, where the resolution regretted his actions and hoped he would vote for the bill. Unsympathetic grassroots recipients also condemned this ‘string-pulling’, forwarding their correspondence with the NLFS’s secretary, MacDougall, to the press. One letter-writer wondered why, if the NLFS sought the expression of public opinion in Scotland, it ‘put before us “cut and dry” resolutions’ – this was not ‘a proper way to go to work’ and he declined to partake in the ‘cooking of public opinion’. Another worried that Home Rule would become ‘a cardinal article in a new Confession of Faith’, to be signed by anyone joining a Liberal association, and protested ‘attempts to coerce’ associations and MPs. According to ‘X’, the NLFS assumed ‘gratuitously that the sentiments of the party throughout Scotland’ coincided with its. It should not however be dictating ‘on a question concerning which public opinion, and Liberal opinion especially, is so much divided’, and so had ‘no authority’ to distribute material or hold meetings ‘in support of one side’.⁸⁸

An alternative reading was offered by the *Stirling Observer*, which countered that there was ‘nothing illegitimate’ and none of the ‘so-called “pressure”’ in associations meeting to discuss Home Rule and forwarding their resolutions to MPs, which was within their rights. Meetings and resolutions were a source of information, and MPs, possessing this knowledge of constituents’ views, could vote as they pleased and face any consequences at election time.⁸⁹ Associations were not usurping rights, but expressing them. Rejecting allegations that a meeting of the Elgin Liberal Association was so small it could have been held in an eight-foot-square room, a member of its executive stressed that the association ‘embraces in its membership a large proportion’ of the town’s Liberals and that its resolution ‘expresses the opinion of the great majority of the party here’.⁹⁰ Such opinion was ‘not manufactured’: resolutions ‘were not passed at the bidding of those sneeringly called...“wirepullers,” but as genuine expressions of their convictions’.⁹¹ When the Irish Secretary, John Morley, addressed the NLFS’s public meeting, he predicted that Scotland’s remaining ‘true to the cause’ would be scorned as ‘the machine-made opinion of caucus-driven hacks’. To laughter and applause, he proclaimed that if a meeting ‘animated...by such a spirit of thoroughness’ was the ‘result of mechanical pressure’, then ‘mechanical pressure puts on every appearance of honest enthusiasm’. Beith, now an MP and NLFS president, chaired and hailed the ‘new order of things’ ushered in by ‘the advent of what is called the Caucus’, through which ‘the independent voice of the people is declared’. He argued that local associations

⁸⁷ *GH*, 22 May 1886, pp.4-5.

⁸⁸ *Scotsman*, 22 May, p.7; 20 May, p.7, ‘A Liberal’; 21 May, p.4, ‘a correspondent at Kincardine-on-Forth’; 22 May, p.7, ‘X’; 25 May 1886, p.3, J.C. Haig. Also, BL, Gladstone MSS, MS44497, fo274, Currie criticising NLFS’s attempt to ‘influence’ MPs ‘through local associations’, 24 May 1886.

⁸⁹ *Stirling Observer*, 27 May 1886, p.4. Also, *Dundee Advertiser*, 25 May 1886, pp.5, 9.

⁹⁰ *Scotsman*, 6 May 1886, p.7. Also, *NBDM*, 15 May 1886, p.4, Hamilton association secretary.

⁹¹ *Ardrossan Herald*, 28 May 1886, p.4.

‘stimulate political thought’ and ‘orderly political action’ and ensured that the ‘organised popular voice guides and controls the action of the party in Westminster’, while the NLFS provided ‘the power of concentrated expression’ and ‘the consensus of Liberal opinion in Scotland’.⁹² Responding to the furore over the circular, MacDougall maintained that adoption of its recommendations could ‘only be from the free choice of Liberals’. He pointed out that the NLFS’s conference had supported Home Rule and argued that the opinions then expressed were ‘the authoritative utterances of a great body of Liberals throughout Scotland’ – the circular could not be ‘dictatorial’, for it gave effect to those opinions. MacDougall also gave short shrift to those who ‘scent every deliverance’ of the associations for Home Rule ‘as the action of “servile politicians” who constitute the caucus’.⁹³

In late April, the Roxburghshire MP Arthur Elliot diarised that although ‘no one likes’ the proposals, ‘party feeling carries people a long way’. He anticipated that associations would ‘support anything Gladstone proposes, if unchecked by the national public’.⁹⁴ Elliot later made explicit the separability of associations from the public at a meeting in Jedburgh, where he emphasised that he ‘looked for the opinion of the constituency to the constituency itself’. He had decided ‘not to wait till some Liberal Association invited him to come’, declaring it his duty to ‘meet the constituency at once’. Elliot had called himself to the constituency, the caucus had not summoned him. ‘Long gone were the days’, he rejoiced, when ‘forty or fifty, sixty or seventy gentlemen in a room can set themselves up as the constituency’. In this rhetoric, association activity might represent a retrograde step, taking local politics back to procedures belonging to a pre-reform era. ‘The constituency’ might now be ‘a very large body indeed’, yet Elliot could declare this an ‘opportunity of meeting you face to face’. An entire constituency could hardly be present at a public any more than it could at an association meeting. Attendance at and membership of the latter however appeared quantifiable and its smallness contrastable with the fullness of ‘the constituency’. A ‘public meeting’ and its resolutions, free from the machinations of ‘party’, provided a record of ‘public opinion’, readily conflated with the opinion of ‘the constituency’. Elliot’s meeting resolved that although ‘local government’ should be extended, the ‘unity of the legislature’ must be maintained. The town’s Liberal Association convened the next day and passed a resolution criticising Elliot and describing the legislation as the basis of a settlement. Elliot did not attend.⁹⁵ The Liberal Unionist *Jedburgh Gazette* argued that no one who formed their judgment of Roxburghshire opinion upon the Jedburgh association’s conduct could have imagined the enthusiastic reception afforded Elliot at his meeting. Emphasising that ‘only about half’ the association’s members approved its resolution, the paper objected not to this small group ‘holding their own opinions’ but to ‘action being taken by them in the name of people whom they do not represent’, concluding that the association ‘throws itself against the decision of the constituency’.⁹⁶ With the impressions given by these meetings vastly different, faith should be placed in the public, not the party-political. These meetings also prompted the question, from a *Scotsman* letter-writer, of

⁹² *GH*, 1 May 1886, p.9.

⁹³ *Scotsman*, 24 May 1886, p.6.

⁹⁴ NLS, Elliot MSS, MS19512, p.63. Elliot opposed the NLFS, describing ‘federations, planks, platforms’ as ‘abominations’ and its originators as “‘bossing” some little caucus’. Broomhall, Elgin MSS, 41/84, to Bruce, 17 Sept. 1885.

⁹⁵ *Hawick Express*, 1 May 1886, p.4; *Kelso Chronicle*, 30 Apr. 1886, p.2.

⁹⁶ *Jedburgh Gazette*, 1 May 1886, p.2. Also, *Southern Reporter*, 29 Apr. 1886, p.2.

how association members, ‘wise in their conceit’, knew whether Scotland supported the legislation. Indeed, the only public meeting called in Roxburghshire to discuss it approved Elliot’s conduct, making it ‘impertinence...to palm off [association] resolutions as representing the Liberal mind of the county’.⁹⁷

Such rhetoric is not only evocative of a public-association dichotomy, but indicative of the prising apart – and falling away – of ‘Liberal Scotland’. If neither the public, nor public opinion, were to be found in the Liberal associations, then the ‘opinion’ they expressed would be worth little. The ‘public meeting’, Lawrence suggests, ‘possessed a legitimacy that was widely recognized and respected’, because it drew ‘together the active, concerned citizenry’.⁹⁸ The legitimacy of the association meeting, seemingly bringing together merely *activists* – and, even then, likely not all of them – was contested in Scotland, most notably by Liberals and among Liberals. The crisis tapped into and writ large debates about whether party organisations were an appropriate sphere for ‘the people’ to be active politically. Where ‘public’ meetings could be seen as a form of community organisation, association meetings could be dismissed as simply partisan gatherings. That associations were seen to endorse Home Rule – albeit often with difficulty – signalled to many a divorce between ‘party’ and ‘public’ opinion. Furthermore, if not all the ‘party’ participated in these meetings, the legitimacy of their representative claims could be further undermined. ‘Liberal Scotland’ seemed to have become very small indeed. According to Eugenio Biagini, it was ‘Liberal veneration for local democracy which inspired popular support for Home Rule’.⁹⁹ In Scotland, the idea that the rank-and-file had a right to a say within a ‘national’ party democracy was organisationally innovative, and the crisis required of local associations deliberation and action on an unprecedented scale. Yet these developments also showed that ‘Liberal opinion’ was far from united. Support for Home Rule, such as existed in Scotland, was expressed through organisational structures whose representative claim-making was controversial; that beneath this support lay evidence of discord made the situation still more problematic. The organisation controversy also reveals competing visions of ‘Liberal Scotland’. One was unspoken, broadly based, and founded upon symbiosis with a Scottish value system. The other was, in the age of mass politics, to be made tangible through organisation and policy pronouncement. James Thompson notes that nineteenth-century ‘notions of public opinion set considerable store by the idea of the unitary public’, meaning that ‘the machinations of party could seem an obstacle to the emergence of a genuine public opinion’.¹⁰⁰ Both the SLA and NLFS’s approaches assumed there existed a Liberal public opinion, and constituted attempts to hold together the idea that ‘Liberal’ and ‘Scotland’ were coterminous. For the NLFS, establishing and facilitating its explicit expression would ensure its authentic representation. Yet it is ironic that Gladstone, by imposing Home Rule from the top down, fulfilled the role the SLA wished of the party’s leaders – it was they who ought to make policy – only for this issue, the most divisive of a generation, to prompt the division it dreaded.

⁹⁷ *Scotsman*, 3 June 1886, p.3, from ‘C.M.’.

⁹⁸ J. Lawrence, *Electing our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), 63.

⁹⁹ E.F. Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism 1876-1906* (Cambridge, 2007), 368.

¹⁰⁰ Thompson, *Political Culture*, 89.

III. The crisis and Liberal opinion

An example of political decision-making and ritual outside of election time, resolutions were a long-established, routine part of nineteenth-century political meetings. Yet they have rarely been analysed as a source, either qualitatively or quantitatively, or in the context of the development of party organisation. Resolutions were intended to document opinion and therefore had both summative and declarative purposes. An attempt to resolve questions of importance, resolutions were a form of political appeal and communication that made representative claims. If an association was said to constitute local Liberals as a body, a resolution could stand for that community, or at least a majority thereof. A resolution could also be seen as a form of political commitment with implications for future political action, particularly if the decision of that majority was considered binding. Consequently, their wording and the process of their passage were subject to intense scrutiny in 1886. Resolutions became part of the debate and affected how Liberal action and Home Rule were depicted. Resolutions were put to over four-fifths (83.6%) of Scottish Liberal meetings, and a similar figure carried at least one motion. Three-quarters (77%) of these meetings saw at least one pro-Home Rule motion, with nearly two-thirds (65%) of all resolutions proposed being favourable. Overall, almost two-thirds (62.8%) of Liberal meetings passed a motion of approval.¹⁰¹ There is a case for adding the resolution to James Thompson's holy trinity of Victorian locations of public opinion (press, platform and petition). Debates about resolutions reflected concerns about how opinion ought in practice to be reflected and measured, and by whom it could be represented.¹⁰² These rituals of deliberation and accord were contested: a resolution had the power to establish or undermine the credibility of an association, and could quantifiably serve either as evidence of local opinion or the lack or falsification thereof. Examining Liberal resolutions enhances our understanding of both how the party operated in the constituencies and the extent of discord within 'Liberal Scotland'. It also throws into relief that political organisation was about more than the mechanics of fighting elections, as were the languages which legitimised and undermined organisational activity.

If taken at face value, Liberal resolutions might indicate considerable rank-and-file support for the policy. If we categorise them as straightforwardly pro- or anti-Home Rule, and do not take into account qualifying phrases or attendees' speeches, it would appear that three-quarters of the Liberal meetings which passed resolutions supported it. However, the climate of unease about the bill's provisions discussed in section I is reflected in association debates over the wording of resolutions and the meanings ascribed to them. The crux of the issue was that, as Chamberlain observed, 'most' associations 'accepted the scheme as a "basis" only', while 'many have urged concession and amendment'.¹⁰³ In total, 77.9% of the resolutions submitted to Liberal-organised meetings in Scotland either described the legislation as a 'basis' for the settlement of the Irish question or approved of its 'principles'. It seems that the word 'basis' was intended to signify support for its essential components. For example, the proposer at a Liberal demonstration in Edinburgh explained that granting a legislative assembly to manage Irish affairs 'was the basis of the whole scheme'.¹⁰⁴ In this sense,

¹⁰¹ Figures include successful amendments/riders.

¹⁰² Thompson, *Political Culture*, Ch.2.

¹⁰³ Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library, Joseph Chamberlain MSS, JC5/8/87, to J.T. Bunce, 30 Apr. 1886.

¹⁰⁴ *Scotsman*, 6 May 1886, p.5.

the bill offered the foundations of a settlement, and ‘basis’ can be seen as an attempt to lend Home Rule a broad appeal. As the *Irvine Times* emphasised, ‘the principle is the key to the settlement of the whole question, however much diversity of opinion there may be as to the details’.¹⁰⁵ Put simply, it was ‘[t]he principle first – the details afterwards’.¹⁰⁶ A ‘basis’ resolution was often recommended at association meetings because it ‘did not bind any one of them as supporting all the details’, instead showing it ‘was the principle of the Irish measures which they accepted as affording a basis for the satisfactory settlement of the Irish difficulty’.¹⁰⁷ Such resolutions were frequently drafted in anticipation of ‘some difference of views’ and ‘desiring that...the meeting should come to a unanimous resolution’.¹⁰⁸ Where Liberals disagreed over the bill’s details, they might agree on the underlying principle of Home Rule, offering a focus on policy rather than practicalities.

However, the formula could often generate rather than contain division.¹⁰⁹ Its equivocalness was challenged: ‘basis’ resolutions were criticised at Liberal meetings in Perth and Govanhill as, respectively, ‘the most meaningless thing that had ever been proposed’, and as offering ‘curious, reluctant, hesitating and doubtful assent’.¹¹⁰ At the Glasgow Blackfriars Liberal Association, the proposer of a resolution calling for the bill’s withdrawal lamented that the axiom ‘a basis for the settlement’ had ‘done duty for the past few weeks’. He could not recollect such a phrase being used to support any previous Liberal measure and was ‘ashamed’ this was now the case.¹¹¹ A series of meetings in North Ayrshire illustrates how difficult it could be to reach accord and how problematic resolutions could be as records of opinion. In late April, the Newmilns Liberal Association passed an amendment stating its inability to approve of the Home Rule and land bills. The amendment was initially lost by a single vote to a resolution to ‘support the principle’, but, with the ‘majority thinking a mistake had been made’, a recount was taken, and the amendment passed by five votes. A second meeting was summoned by requisition to reconsider the decision, with signatories ‘sorry to see so much diversity of opinion’ and hoping they could ‘come to a better finding’. This time, it was proposed that the association ‘stand by’ Gladstone and express hope that the legislation be read a second time and amended in committee, reserving decision for or against until the third reading. Yet compromise was not so easily fudged. As one attendee argued, it would ‘look strange’ if a majority was ‘found against’ only to then be seen ‘entirely reversing’ the decision. It would, another added, ‘look as if the Association did not know its own mind’. The situation unresolved, the meeting was adjourned, on the grounds that the association ‘ought to sacrifice a little in trying to keep unity in the camp’. When it again reconvened, the resolution passed, surviving an amendment to leave out reference to land purchase, but suffering several abstentions.¹¹² There were limits to the capacity of a resolution, however carefully worded, to resolve a contested meeting.

There were, however, important qualifications to the ‘basis’ formula, the ‘basis’ being that upon which a starker critique could be offered. For example, in the Kilwinning Liberal Association’s resolution, the bill

¹⁰⁵ *Irvine Times*, 21 May 1886, p.4.

¹⁰⁶ *NBDM*, 1 May 1886, p.4.

¹⁰⁷ *Campbeltown Courier*, 8 May 1886, p.3, Campbeltown association. Also, *Aberdeen Journal*, 28 Apr. 1886, p.6, Aberdeen association.

¹⁰⁸ *Ayrshire Post*, 7 May 1886, p.5, Ayr association chairman.

¹⁰⁹ E.g., *Aberdeen Free Press*, 10 May 1886, p.6, Tarves Liberal meeting.

¹¹⁰ *Perthshire People’s Journal*, 15 May 1886, p.5; *GH*, 28 Apr. 1886, p.7.

¹¹¹ *NBDM*, 11 May 1886, p.5.

¹¹² *Kilmarnock Herald*, 30 Apr. 1886, p.3; *Ardrossan Herald*, 7 May 1886, p.5; *Kilmarnock Standard*, 15 May 1886, p.3.

was described in the first clause as a ‘basis’ but in the second as ‘defective’ and requiring amendment.¹¹³ The New Kilpatrick association in Dunbartonshire endorsed the bill ‘in so far as it affirms the principle of Home Rule’ but declined to ‘bind itself to an approval of its detail’ or the exclusion of Irish MPs. The latter provision was one to which three Dundee ward meetings objected, along with the parliament’s structure and financial arrangements, while the Alloa association in Clackmannanshire wanted to see imperial unity maintained and ‘discord in the Liberal ranks removed’.¹¹⁴ Divisions often worked their way out in the choices presented between resolutions and amendments. In Peebleshire, Liberals agreed by a margin of 53 votes to 49 an amendment stating that the government should reconsider Irish representation and consider the party’s ‘divided state’, the defeated resolution likewise highlighting the ‘diversity of feeling’ but recommending the bill’s withdrawal.¹¹⁵ Some associations were prepared to accept a less-than-glowing resolution against a hostile amendment. Rather than declare it ‘a disgrace to civilisation’ and ‘injurious’ to Ireland’s interests, Glasgow St Rollox Liberals opted to both recognise the scheme as ‘a courageous effort to settle the Irish difficulty’ and criticise the removal of Irish MPs.¹¹⁶ A fifth of the Scottish Liberal meetings which carried resolutions called for adjustments to the measures – double the number in England and four times as many as in Wales – and there was a high success rate for resolutions making such recommendations (83.6%).

A Scottish Liberal meeting was four times as likely as its English equivalent to see an amendment. At least one amendment was tabled in response to a resolution in 53% of cases. Although three-quarters of the meetings to which resolutions were put had at least one pro- motion, nearly a third of these saw an inverse amendment. Broadly, two-fifths (42.2%) of amendments were hostile or mixed in complexion, while the 7% that were pro- typically attempted to make the original motion more conditional. More than half the amendments (53.2%) were proposed at ‘mixed’ meetings. There were on average 0.4 amendments for every one resolution, but with ‘mixed’ Liberal meetings, this rises to 0.7. In England, there were 0.1 amendments for every resolution. There were on average 1.6 motions (resolutions and/or amendments) at a Scottish Liberal ‘pro’ meeting, and 2.4 at a ‘mixed’ meeting. These figures are indicative of the extent to which debate could go back and forth. Anti-Home Rulers even succeeded in carrying their resolutions or amendments at 12 Scottish meetings (nine of which were ‘mixed’). This figure is not especially high, but is double that recorded in England, which possessed more than six times as many constituencies. In Lasswade, Midlothian, a resolution of general approval was withdrawn. and the association declared its inability to support a bill that ‘introduce[d] such important constitutional changes’ and required ‘important modifications’. The Nairn Liberal Association passed a critical resolution after its proposer reasoned that there ‘must be something radically wrong with a bill that had caused so many staunch Liberals to falter in their allegiance’ to Gladstone.¹¹⁷

Unionists contended that accepting the bill as the basis of a settlement was not the same thing as saying the legislation was in itself a satisfactory settlement. As one *Scotsman* letter-writer advised, resolutions had to

¹¹³ *Irvine Times*, 7 May 1886, p.5.

¹¹⁴ *Scottish News*, 14 May 1886, p.7; *Dundee Weekly News*, 1 May 1886, p.7; *Alloa Advertiser*, 1 May 1886, p.2.

¹¹⁵ *NBDM*, 3 May 1886, p.5.

¹¹⁶ *GH*, 27 Apr. 1886, p.5.

¹¹⁷ *DA*, 29 Apr. 1886, p.2; *Northern Scot*, 22 May 1886, p.5.

be read ‘guardedly, with due stress laid on the qualifications and conditions expressed or implied’.¹¹⁸ At a Paisley demonstration of anti-Home Rule Liberals, the chairman observed that ‘there was a saving clause to every resolution’, and that, as “‘a basis’...might mean anything, and it might mean everything’, the associations had evidently ‘not pronounced in favour of those measures’.¹¹⁹ Unionist newspapers argued that the resolutions, offering merely qualified approval, exposed the ‘hollowness and insincerity’ of associations’ support.¹²⁰ When the NLFS’s conference resolved to approve of the ‘principle which forms the basis of the great measures’ and recommend ‘some modification in details’, the *Glasgow Herald* reasoned that ‘not even the caucuses’ believed they were, as Gladstone claimed, Ireland’s Magna Carta – they were ‘mere bases for legislation’. This made the scope of association declarations appear far smaller than the expansive suggestion that the principle of Home Rule was endorsed. The paper noted that resolutions were carried ‘with some difficulty’, and there was ‘some prospect’ of associations ‘being disrupted even with so cautious and mild an approval’ as a ‘basis’ motion.¹²¹ For all its insistence during the NLFS split that associations avoid issues on which opinion was divided, the *Scotsman* also condemned them in 1886 for inadequately interrogating the bill’s specifics: associations did not attempt to justify it on its merits, and not even ‘the famous “basis” resolution’ had ‘done much’, since their ‘pretended approval...is not echoed by the constituencies’.¹²²

Resolutions were also analysed for their adequacy both as expressions of collective action and as indicators of the scope for participation and representation afforded by Liberal organisation. Critics drew attention to the small number of votes cast on or in favour of them. The *Perthshire Advertiser* lamented that at a Liberal meeting in Oban there were just 19 in attendance; the resolution was carried by 11 votes to four, with four abstentions, meaning that the ‘opinion of Oban’ was reduced to ‘the opinion of seven individuals’. It had ‘had more than enough’ of these ‘caricature[s]’, which were ‘bringing honest Liberalism into disrepute’ and ‘discounted’ the ‘value of Liberal opinion’.¹²³ Opponents could simultaneously argue that these resolutions, passed by hole-and-corner cliques, were of no account, and warn that they misrepresented local opinion to authority and to the nation. The *Border Record* thought that while no one in Galashiels would be ‘influenced’ by ‘the votes of 22 men’ out of a population of thousands, Gladstone might be, because an association resolution could be misconstrued as ‘the declared opinion of the party in the burgh’.¹²⁴ A letter to the Liberal Unionist *Dundee Courier* surmised that the public was meant to infer from the lists of resolutions published in newspapers that across Scotland Liberals supported the legislation – yet it was accepted only as a basis for settlement of the Irish question, and the close margins for the resolutions rendered ‘absurd’ claims the associations were entirely favourable. Moreover, because associations were ‘to such an insignificant extent representative of the people’, none of this guaranteed that ‘the bulk of the Liberal electors are of the same way of thinking’.¹²⁵ Indeed, even Gladstone’s agent advised him that although the situation in Midlothian was more

¹¹⁸ *Scotsman*, from ‘An Old Liberal’, 27 Apr. 1886, p.7.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 3 May 1886, p.5.

¹²⁰ *Jedburgh Gazette*, 22 May 1886, p.2.

¹²¹ *GH*, 1 May, p.6, 24 Apr. 1886, p.4.

¹²² *Scotsman*, 16 Apr., p.4, 3 June, p.4, 21 Apr. 1886, p.6.

¹²³ *Perthshire Advertiser*, 28 Apr., p.2, 5 May 1886, p.2

¹²⁴ *Scottish Border Record*, 24 Apr. 1886, p.2.

¹²⁵ *Dundee Courier*, 30 Apr. 1886, p.2.

favourable than elsewhere, Liberal committee meetings had been ‘small and attended chiefly by the most earnest and interested members’, meaning it was ‘not easy to suppose’ that the party’s supporters more broadly were ‘keeping pace’.¹²⁶

Liberal resolutions reveal both the conditional character of party loyalty on Home Rule and the depth and breadth of the split in Scotland. The crisis also points to the contested and problematic nature of resolutions as forms of representation and opinion. Home Rule was an issue that required declarations of political faith. These events reveal a tension between process and product: while a meeting was a deliberative activity, a resolution was a declaratory act. This dynamic helps explain why it so frequently proved difficult to reach agreement on resolutions and why their wording was invested with meaning. ‘Basis’ was an attempt at reconciling these issues. It became the qualifying word that aimed at both nodding to and containing a diversity of opinion, indicating support for principle but given the perceived binding power of resolutions, not committing an association’s members to details. Yet it also introduced ambiguity and prompted critics to dig beneath the surface of such pronouncements and to discuss issues of party organisation and party policy in tandem. ‘The caucus’ did not have the homogenising impact its opponents feared and could instead have disintegrative effects. Liberal meetings and resolutions failed to convince a broader ‘public’ of support for Home Rule. In late April, *The Times*’ Edinburgh correspondent dissected the resolutions of nine Scottish associations to demonstrate that in ‘scarcely any instance has unqualified approval been expressed’ and that there ‘has been a dissenting minority utterly opposed’. Taking this ‘minority’ in the associations ‘as proportionate to the whole body of Liberals’, it would, the Liberal Unionist *Inverness Courier* reckoned, ‘amount to a considerable defection’.¹²⁷ Just as the *Scotsman* could on the one hand insist that associations eschew matters of detail and on the other, berate them for failing to interrogate the proposals, so too could it both allege mindless rubber-stamping and hail as a ‘most striking fact’ that ‘the opinion of Liberals’ was ‘so divided’. Mutually contradictory statements, they each served a purpose. The paper was adamant that associations did ‘not, as a rule, represent the full strength of Liberalism’ and were ‘more fully representative of the extreme men’. Nevertheless, that discord had arisen in even these circles proved ‘the same dubiety’ existed among ‘the more advanced Liberals as among the more moderate’. The ‘split’, the *Scotsman* concluded, was not therefore ‘a direct cleavage between two sections of Liberals’ but ‘one that breaks across as well as through the party’.¹²⁸ Tensions over the substance of resolutions show not only dissonance within associations, but that associations could and did function in a deliberative capacity. This is important given the SLA’s fear that policy discussion and resolutionary action would reveal and institutionalise divisions and radicals’ insistence that debate was necessary to ascertain opinion and thereby overcome divisions. Insofar as the principle became the platform, it also became a matter of Liberal creed – and Liberal resolutions, for all their ambiguity, played a critical role in Liberal commitment-making at the grassroots.

¹²⁶ See fn29.

¹²⁷ *The Times*, 29 Apr. 1886, p.5; *Inverness Courier*, 21 May 1886, p.3.

¹²⁸ *Scotsman*, 26 Apr. 1886, p.4.

Conclusion

Explaining the reason for a special meeting of the Hillhead and Kelvinside Liberal Association in early May, its chairman stated that ‘when the country was so much agitated by the questions before it’ such associations should ‘make their voices heard’. Whereas previously their association had ‘only engaged in perfecting the organisation of the district’ to secure election victory, it now had an equally important duty to discharge: to ‘contribute their share in the formation and expression of public opinion’. By two votes, the meeting carried an amendment approving the bill’s ‘principle’ against a resolution declaring it objectionable.¹²⁹ Such meetings are indicative of the critical roles – theoretical, practical, and rhetorical – played by Liberal associations, and of the processes and rituals of the crisis. Many grassroots Liberals believed they had a right and duty to participate politically and had a role to play in shaping opinion. That they did so through the fora provided by party organisation facilitated a sustained extra-parliamentary agitation. Yet it also generated extensive debate over the sites of political representation and sources of political legitimacy.

Association meetings and resolutions were the crucial forms and locations of political interaction, communication, and representative claim-making in spring 1886. This article has asserted the importance of this moment of dynamic extra-parliamentary politics in Scotland to histories not only of the Home Rule crisis but also of political culture and language in later nineteenth-century Britain. It has also revealed that, while this form of mobilisation was successful in enabling Scottish Liberal engagement with a defining political issue, it tended to expose and institutionalise Liberal divisions rather than to articulate and unify ‘Scottish Liberal opinion’. Liberals had benefitted electorally from the seeming simultaneous inseparability and interchangeability of ‘public opinion’, ‘Scottish opinion’ and ‘Liberal opinion’. Home Rule shattered this imagined political-national community and appeared to reduce it to ‘party’ opinion. On disestablishment and Home Rule, both Liberal opinion and Scottish opinion were divided – and, seemingly, divided from one another. However, unlike disestablishment, the policy of Home Rule was not formulated *by* the rank-and-file but imposed *on* them, by the British party leadership. If the associations were to ‘promulgate’ it, they would need to do a better job of convincing the public both that there was a consensus of opinion and that this was the opinion of ‘Liberal Scotland’. ‘Liberal Scotland’ was fractured in 1886, both locally and nationally, and the crisis placed under the microscope the mechanisms used by the Liberal party to create, maintain and mobilise its constituency. There was no single, coherent ‘Liberal Scotland’ on display. There were multiple Liberal Scotlands – situated in competing political spaces, embodying divergent forms of ‘the public’, and represented in contested institutions. Home Rule amplified and made it impossible to reconcile these conflicting participatory and representative impulses, and revealed that there was no one united ‘Scottish Liberal opinion’.

¹²⁹ *NBDM*, 5 May 1886, p.4.