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'Shut Up! Sit Down!': The Politics of Disruption and the 1886 Home Rule Crisis in England*

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This article examines the oral and physical disruption of 'public' meetings in England in the spring of 1886, when such activity formed part of broader contests over the legitimacy of extra-parliamentary responses to the Liberal government's Irish Home Rule Bill. Disruption is an important example of the diverse ways in which home rule energised politics outside Westminster and of the heatedness of grassroots responses to it. For those who engaged in it, disruption offered forms of political interaction and participation that, additionally, made claims to representation and opinion. However, disruption was a practice of contestation that was itself the subject of contention and it was decried as transgressing the bounds of appropriate political conduct. Disruption could be seen, in both intent and effect, as a permissive or subversive, inclusive or exclusionary, behaviour. It could therefore legitimise or undermine claims that popular feeling was on the side of or opposed to the policy. The 'politics of disruption' both reflected and generated intense debate about the state of politics in an age of 'mass democracy' – of which home rule was the first major crisis – and about the sanctity of political rights and liberties. This article argues that our understanding of political disruption is enhanced by examining its practice and reception at historical moments, outside the episodic election cycle, when contemporaries believed that it was critically important that 'public opinion' on a political issue be ascertained and voiced, and when the validity of such opinion was disputed.

Keywords: politics of disruption; home rule; 1886; political meetings; public meetings; public opinion; Liberal Party; Conservative Party; the caucus; political violence

1. *Introduction*

The home rule crisis of spring 1886 was a moment of immense political mobilisation and excitement that extended far beyond Westminster. In response to prime minister William Gladstone's introduction in April of legislation to establish an Irish parliament, the opposing sides held thousands of meetings throughout England to discuss the scheme. Taking place prior to the Bill's defeat in the Commons in June and July's general election,

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these meetings were the crucial arena in which the battle to establish extra-parliamentary opinion on the policy unfolded practically and rhetorically. They revealed interest in home rule and were sites of participation and representation, as well as sources and tests of political legitimacy. Accompanying this groundswell of grassroots activity were disputes over the authority and authenticity of the practices and expressions of popular engagement and feeling on display. One such challenge came in the form of the 'politics of disruption',[1] which affected a small number of meetings but was symbolically significant and affords valuable insight into the political culture of later 19th-century England. Politicians, activists and press fiercely disagreed over what disruption was for and what it achieved, who it represented and whether it entailed the expression or suppression of 'public opinion'.

The 'stylized repertoire'[2] of political disruption was ritualised and reproducible, but also adaptable. It included audience interruption, typically in the form of multiple or prolonged, and often competitive, vocal interventions that affected a meeting's soundscape and made it difficult for speakers to be heard or complete their speeches. Although a common feature at 19th-century political meetings, heckling, at its most intense, could impede proceedings, escalating from interruption to disruption. Other, more physical and material modes of disruption included the storming of platforms, destruction of property and bodily altercation, which created visual spectacle and involved the occupation of space. Disruption was a political act that entailed the 'extension of a political contest',[3] and these did not occur solely, or even predominantly, at election time. The contests occasioned by the introduction of home rule were perceived to have enormous significance, not just for Ireland, the Union and the empire but also for the British political system. Disruption was both a product and a manifestation of these contests. It is therefore an important example of the diverse ways home rule energised politics out of doors and of the heatedness of grassroots responses.

Excepting two recent projects quantifying electoral violence,[4] there has been little sustained interest in the politics of disruption since Jon Lawrence's influential intervention two decades ago.[5] Disruption that occurred outside of and was unrelated to elections remains under-studied.[6] Scholars have disagreed on the intensity and prevalence of electoral violence during the 19th century, and over whether it involved 'outbursts of

[1]James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture c.1815–1867* (Cambridge, 2009), 229.

[2]Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People. Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 1998), 187.

[3]Justin Wasserman and Edwin Jaggard, 'Electoral violence in mid nineteenth-century England and Wales', *HR*, lxxx (2007), 127.

[4]Wasserman and Jaggard, 'Electoral violence'; Luke Blaxill, Gidon Cohen, Gary Hutchison, P.M. Kuhn and Nick Vivyan, 'Electoral Violence in England and Wales, 1832–1914', *Past & Present* [*P&P*] (forthcoming) and see 'Causes and Consequences of Electoral Violence: Evidence from England and Wales, 1832–1914', https://victorianelectionviolence.uk/ (accessed 1 Oct. 2023).

[5]Jon Lawrence, 'Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain', *Journal of Modern History*, lxxv (2003), 557–89; Jon Lawrence, 'The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War', *P&P*, cxc (2006), 185–216.

[6]For brief discussions of electoral disruption, see Patricia Lynch, *The Liberal Party in Rural England 1885–1910* (Oxford, 2003), 81–4; Alex Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism in Imperial London, 1868–1906* (Woodbridge, 2009), 103–7. For non-electoral disruption, at different periods, see Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, 181–4, and on suffragette activism, Jon Lawrence, 'Contesting the Male Polity: The Suffragettes and the Politics of Disruption in Edwardian Britain', in *Women, Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present*, ed. Amanda Vickery (Stanford, 2001), 201–26; Vernon, *Politics and the People*, 68–9, 228–9; James Thompson, *British Political Culture and the Idea of 'Public Opinion', 1867–1914* (Cambridge, 2013), 124–6; and Kathryn Rix, '"Go Out into the Highways and the

sheer ebullience … extraneous to the campaign'[7] or 'wilful disruption to [campaign] procedures'[8] and was stimulated by 'personal antagonisms', money and alcohol[9] or by 'elite strategizing'.[10] These trends have been analysed with reference to legislation designed to reform electoral procedures, curtail corrupt practices and extend the franchise, and to the development of 'modern', organised parties.[11]

As these changes affected opportunities for political presence and participation, the historiography has focused on customs that afforded 'legitimacy and a semblance of inclusiveness' and on moments of concentrated contact between leaders and led, where representative relationships were (re)negotiated and 'formal' and 'informal' political structures and practices intersected.[12] According to one interpretation, symbolic, ritualistic communal festivities which thrived upon popular engagement gave way over the century's latter half to a regulated, party-centric politics, which offered limited spontaneity or spectacle and increased the distance between representatives and represented.[13] The counter argument is that popular politics 'remained far from "tamed"' at century's end,[14] and that there existed throughout an 'inclusive and demotic political culture' comprising, and often innovating, a multiplicity of 'forms of political behaviour' and 'sites and spaces for political activity'.[15] Perceived ebbs and flows in electoral disruption – which encompassed boisterous and vociferous actions capable of intruding upon political sequences and experiences – have become intertwined with these contrasting historiographical trajectories. Too often, however, elections, and election meetings in particular – something that typically happened only every several years – have stood as proxy for extra-parliamentary politics more broadly.

Until recently, even among accounts that emphasise the continued vivacity of popular politics, there has been a 'tendency to conflate electoral culture with political culture'.[16]

Hedges": The Diary of Michael Sykes, Conservative Political Lecturer, 1895 and 1907–8', *Parliamentary History*, xx (2001), 228–30.

[7]Donald Richter, 'The Role of Mob Riot in Victorian Elections, 1865–1885', *Victorian Studies,* xv (1971), 25–7.

[8]Wasserman and Jaggard, 'Electoral violence', 154.

[9]K.T. Hoppen, 'Grammars of Electoral Violence in Nineteenth-Century England and Ireland', *EHR*, cix (1994), 605.

[10]Blaxill et al, 'Electoral Violence'.

[11]Four broad timelines are suggested for a decline in disorderly elections. On the period between the 1832 reforms and 1872 Ballot Act, see Hoppen, 'Grammars of Electoral Violence'; Frank O'Gorman, 'Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies: The Social Meaning of Elections in England 1780–1860', *P&P,* cxxv (1992), 79–115; Marc Baer, *The Rise and Fall of Radical Westminster, 1780–1890* (Basingstoke, 2012), 106–20; Vernon, *Politics and the People*, 102–4, 229. For the 1883–5 reforms, see Wasserman and Jaggard, 'Electoral violence'; Cornelius O'Leary, *The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections 1868–1911* (Oxford, 1962). For the 1886 election, see Blaxill et al, 'Electoral Violence'. For 1918 and after, see Lawrence, 'British Public Politics'.

[12]Jon Lawrence, 'The Culture of Elections in Modern Britain', *History,* xcvi (2011), 462; Jon Lawrence and Alexandre Campsie, 'Political History', in *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (2020), 337; Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, 61.

[13]O'Gorman, 'Campaign Rituals', 113–4; Vernon, *Politics and the People*, 102–4, 337–8.

[14]Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, 7; Jon Lawrence, 'The Decline of English Popular Politics?', *Parliamentary History,* xiii (1994), 333–7; Jon Lawrence, *Electing our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), ch.2.

[15]Henry Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners: Petitions and Petitioning in the United Kingdom, 1780–1918* (Cambridge, 2023), 279.

[16]Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners*, 46, 231–52.

Newer scholarship, including that by Richard Huzzey, Henry Miller and Katrina Navickas, suggests that, rather than re-tread the debates of the decades-old New Political History and further tweak the chronologies of the politics of 'closure', we might more profitably explore the idea of a politics of contestation. This opens up possibilities for locating vibrancy, performativity and agency outside elections and for exploring the diversification of the political.[17] As this article demonstrates, disruption was a practice of political contestation that was itself the subject of contention. Disruption, in intent and effect, could be interpreted as permissive or subversive and as inclusive or exclusionary. So, too, can non-electoral political culture. Our understanding of 'repertoire[s] of collective action',[18] behaviour and experience and of practices of representation – like political disruption – is therefore enhanced by examining their use and reception at historical moments, outside the episodic electoral cycle, when contemporaries believed it was critically important that 'public opinion' on a political issue should be ascertained and voiced, and when the validity of such opinion was disputed. The extra-parliamentary home rule crisis was the major such moment in later 19th-century British politics.

The stakes were high: by, seemingly suddenly, committing the Liberal government to home rule for Ireland – a policy which, critics argued, had not been before 'the public' at an election – Gladstone unleashed a polarising issue and a mobilising force. Home rule was politically transformative not only thanks to its creation of a new ideological fault line – which split Gladstone's own party and prompted the formation of the Liberal Unionists – but also because the crisis was about how politics worked and who participated in it and where. Taking place soon after the reforms of 1883–85, this was a democratic crisis entailing political activity and debate on an immense scale. While recent work has revealed the policy's purchase on the electoral platform in 1886 and 1892,[19] grassroots reactions remain overlooked, most surprisingly so for the period prior to the first home rule election, when those both in and outside parliament were responding to a new, rapidly developing political reality, typically through meetings.[20] Although by late May an election was anticipated, the constituency crisis had its own dynamic and was not simply a dress rehearsal. The crisis stimulated, and required, active responses to home rule. How far such activeness could be pushed formed part of a wider contest over the legitimacy of constituency responses, testing the limits of the relationships between represented and representative at a host of political levels. As a result, there played out alternative visions of where and in whom

[17]Richard Huzzey, 'Public Meetings, Respectable Requisitions, and Popular Politics in Great Britain and Ireland, c.1769–1850', *EHR*, cxxxviii (2023), 185–221; Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners*, ch.7; Katrina Navickas, 'The Contested Right of Public Meeting in England from the Bill of Rights to the Public Order Acts', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* 6th ser., xxxii (2022), 199–221.

[18]Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller, 'Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture: Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780–1918', *P&P,* ccxlvii (2020), 124–5.

[19]Naomi Lloyd-Jones, 'The 1892 general election in England: Home Rule, the Newcastle programme and positive Unionism', *HR,* xciii (2020), 73–104; Luke Blaxill, *War of Words: The Language of British Elections, 1880–1910* (Woodbridge, 2020), ch.3.

[20]For home rule and the grassroots outside England, see Naomi Lloyd-Jones, '"Liberal disaffection such as has not been seen in Scotland": Home Rule, political organisation and the Liberal party in 1886', *Scottish Historical Review,* cii (2023), 116–53; Naomi Lloyd-Jones, 'Liberal Unionism and political representation in Wales, c.1886–1893', *HR*, lxxxviii (2015), 482–507.

public opinion was located, and of its legitimate modes of expression and mobilisation.[21] Disruption intersected with, and fed upon and back into, these dynamics. It was political in its intent, meaning and effects.

At a moment when extra-parliamentary activity was closely monitored and scrutinised, disrupted meetings assumed significance as a site and source of direct political contention. Contrary to James Vernon's claim that disruption's newsworthiness was due to its having 'become so unusual',[22] in 1886 it was the swathe of meetings, and the context of grassroots opinion-formation and representative claim-making, that garnered press interest – disrupted meetings were covered as part of an extensive reporting enterprise, not reported on purely because they were disrupted.[23] Newspapers' political inclinations are instructive, for their interpretations of disruption were bound up with the competition to establish 'public opinion' on home rule and attendant disputes over political engagement and behaviour, and with shifting conceptualisations of the extra-parliamentary meeting. Disruption did impact reporters' work – they might struggle to hear or be among the few who could, prompting speakers to direct themselves to reporters over a troublesome audience, and the reporters' table might find itself in the way of a platform invasion. Because newspapers widened 'the scope of a potential hearing public' and extended the '"audibility"' of a meeting, how reporters conveyed disruption affected readers' ability to '"hear"' and how they 'imagine[d] listening'.[24] Reporters' parenthetical and often digressive insertion of disruptors' statements, sounds and actions prolonged disruption's obstructive effects, compounding the challenge to audiences of following the arguments made and to organisers of conveying their political messages. These meetings had an important afterlife, and so, too, did disruption.

The remainder of this article comprises three substantive sections. The first establishes the dynamics of the extra-parliamentary home rule crisis and the kinds of meetings affected by disruption. The following two sections examine how the politics of disruption was enacted and imagined, from the perspectives of, first, those who participated in and defended it, and second, those who were on its receiving end and condemned it.

2. *Grassroots mobilisation and 'public' meetings*

Those outside of parliament had access to a plethora of opportunities to participate in the crisis. During the 60 days of Commons debate between the Home Rule Bill's introduction in early April and defeat in early June, the Irish question was discussed at 3,087 extra-parliamentary meetings in England.[25] All but a tiny fraction of England's constituencies

[21] For sites of 'public opinion', see Thompson, *British Public Opinion*, 61–2; Lloyd-Jones, '"Liberal disaffection"', 145–51.

[22] Vernon, *Politics and the People*, 229.

[23] The meetings discussed below were identified during the author's qualitative reading of reports of all meetings held, not selected through computerised searches of digitised newspapers. They were reported in multiple newspapers, of differing political persuasions. See n.25.

[24] William Tullett, 'Political Engines: The Emotional Politics of Bells in Eighteenth-Century England', *Journal of British Studies* [*JBS*], lix (2020), 557–8; Josephine Hoegaerts, 'Speaking Like Intelligent Men. Vocal Articulations of Authority and Identity in the House of Commons in the Nineteenth Century', *Radical History Review* [*RHR*], cxxi (2015), 128, 137; David Kennerley, 'Music, Politics, and History: An Introduction', *JBS,* lx (2021), 363.

[25] Calculated from 9 Apr. 1886, the day after Gladstone's evening Commons announcement of the Bill on 8 Apr., and inclusive of meetings held until the government's 7 Jun. late-night defeat. The author manually worked

witnessed at least one meeting (98.6%).[26] The proposals were opposed at a slim majority of meetings (51.5%) and supported at just over two-fifths (41.8%) of them, while a small proportion were divided on the matter (6.7%).[27] The activity was urgent, with one-fifth of meetings taking place in the short period before the Easter recess and a further quarter during the two-week parliamentary break. Three-quarters (76.3%) of meetings were party meetings – arranged by a party for attendance by its members and supporters – a figure indicative of the extent to which parties were by the later nineteenth century bound up in organising extra-parliamentary politics. Just over a fifth (22.3%) of all meetings were claimed – in announcements, advertisements, speeches and reports – to be 'public'. In terms of outlook on home rule, the figures for 'public' meetings in England are similar to those overall, at 52.6% anti, 40.9% pro and 6.5% divided.[28] Perhaps unsurprisingly, the two main parties had a hand in organising three-quarters (76.3%) of these 'public' meetings. The Conservatives were responsible for just over two-fifths (41.8%) – 5.5% of which were held in conjunction with Liberal Unionists and 2% with Irish Unionists – making them marginally more likely to lay claim to 'publicness' than the Liberals, who arranged a little over one-third of the total (34.5%). Separately, Irish Unionists convened a further 8.6% and Liberal Unionists less than 1%. Only 12.5% of 'public' meetings purportedly had no 'party' involvement.

Spring 1886 reveals the continued importance of extra-parliamentary, non-electoral meetings to political culture in England in the age of 'mass democracy' and 'mass party'. Disrupted meetings were a minority of those held, at around 1% of all meetings and 5% of 'public' meetings. However, these combative and confrontational behaviours are of historical importance as one of the ways in which disputes over the composition, location and representativeness of 'the public' and 'public opinion', and their meanings and uses, unfolded at a moment of enormous political ferment. Tumultuous meetings became entwined in and were lightning rods for a broader debate over what grassroots reception of the policy meant for home rule, the Liberal Party and the political system itself. Meetings of all stripes experienced heckling, and a great many saw intense and sustained debate on home rule, but it was almost exclusively meetings which were advertised as 'public' and were designed to marshal popular opposition that encountered trouble of such severity that we can deem them 'disrupted'. Such meetings purported to facilitate the reaching and voicing of 'a community's judgment' and drew on the traditions of the 'declarative and deliberative' non-electoral parish, town and county meetings convened to 'allow the public to air its feelings on a matter of burning concern', claims that were challenged through disruption.[29]

They therefore form part of what Huzzey shows were, on the one hand, long-running disputes surrounding 'who could call public meetings, for whom, and about what' and

through the 700+ newspapers surviving from Britain from 1886 (at British Library, British Newspaper Archive, Gale newspapers and Welsh Newspapers Online), to extract and cross-reference information from reports of meetings at which Ireland was discussed (excluding non-political meetings, e.g., of religious bodies, chambers of commerce), the data on which was subsequently compiled and analysed in relational databases.

[26] Constituencies calculated using 1885 Boundary Commission maps, https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/index.jsp (accessed 1 Oct. 2023).

[27] Where tone known (97.5% of meetings). Tone established from qualitative analysis of the content of speeches, resolutions/amendments, audience interaction/reaction and margins for motions.

[28] Where tone known (98% of 'public' meetings).

[29] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', 189, 218; Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, 63. Also see, Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners*, 191–202.

'who should participate' in them – and, on the other hand, processes of 'hybridisation' whereby diverse political actors looked to the forms, practices and meanings associated with the non-electoral 'public meeting' in order to make representative claims to and on behalf of a community.[30] The latter were, as Navickas argues, 'appropriated and subverted' in competition for and conflicts over legitimacy, allowing for the 'creative development of a wider range of public meetings' – and these shifts became entangled with evolving concepts of the 'rights' to public meeting and to 'freedom' of speech. Consequently, these meetings provided an important, and common, experience of 'political debate and collective action'.[31] The changing nature of the 'public meeting' helps explain why, as Lawrence notes, 'many of the most bitter confrontations' involving political disruption centred not on election meetings but on 'protest meetings of more uncertain status', especially where a 'closed, party meeting' seemed to be passed off as 'an open representative' one speaking 'for the public as a whole'.[32] It was such meetings that were disrupted in spring 1886.

Likewise vital to transforming understandings of the extra-parliamentary meeting were party-based experiments in mass membership collective action, typically associated with the Liberals. These innovations prompted questions about the possibility and quality of representation and participation in an expanding electorate, and affected how 'public opinion' was conceived, as a concept, a mobilisable and measurable force and as an experience. From the 1870s and especially around the 1883–85 reforms, local Liberal organisations were increasingly claimed to be – by virtue of their membership, structure, procedure and outcome – deliberative bodies that possessed and represented a constituency encompassing all Liberals in a locality. This would empower participation in and the expression of rank-and-file opinion and enable associations to guide that of the wider public. They would bring 'the public' – assumed to be Liberal – into close contact with politics, beyond the electoral cycle, and routinely involve it in decision-making through a ritualised, legitimating meeting culture. For critics, this was the advent of 'caucus' politics, entailing the creation of self-selecting bodies that enforced artificial authority through dictation and manipulation, and manufactured and despatched opinion in the service of a corrosive version of Liberalism. 'Caucus' members were required to abandon individual conscience and independent action and thus the right to form opinions, and dissent was not tolerated; they were, at the same time, representative of only the more extreme sections of the party. The 'caucus', in construction and operation, simultaneously distanced itself from and interposed itself before 'the public'.[33]

In spring 1886, Liberal association meetings were the principal extra-parliamentary arena in which the party debated home rule – and were more discursive than has been assumed.[34] Unionists[35] portrayed these as partisan gatherings that confirmed decisions taken by an

[30] Huzzey, 'Public Meetings', 186, 219

[31] Navickas, 'The Contested Right', 199–200, 208.

[32] Lawrence, *Electing our Masters*, 63.

[33] On debates over 'caucus' politics, see James Owen, *Labour and the Caucus. Working-class radicalism and organised Liberalism in England, 1868–1888* (Liverpool, 2014), ch.3; E.F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform. Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992), 328–37; Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, 87–93. For the contemporary defence, see Joseph Chamberlain, *The Caucus; and A New Political Organization* (Birmingham, 1883); Francis Schnadhorst; *The Caucus and its Critics* (Birmingham, 1880). For the critique, see W.T. Marriott, 'The Birmingham Caucus', *Nineteenth Century,* xi (1882); *The Times*, 12 Aug. 1878; 23 Apr. 1880.

[34] Lloyd-Jones, '"Liberal disaffection"'.

[35] 'Unionists' is used here to refer collectively to Conservatives and Liberal Unionists.

unbending leadership and produced not the distillation but distortion of 'public opinion'. Similar proportions of Conservative-organised (19.2%) to Liberal-organised meetings (16.7%) were claimed to be 'public', yet political capital lay not in the latter's disruption but in denouncing them as the effects of mechanical pressure, in a language that was, by the mid-1880s, a potent fixture of English politics.[36] For Unionists, 'public' meetings, convened for 'national' not 'party' or 'political' purposes, would ensure that the policy could not be rubber-stamped by wire-pullers who would not allow 'both sides' of the question to be heard. The privateness of 'caucus' meetings threw into relief the publicness of Unionist events. Although the latter were intended as a venue not for competing viewpoints on but for making the case against home rule, the ventilation of this 'other side' in a 'public' setting would enable rational reflection and thus deliberation by the assembled 'public'. Home rulers countered that it was these meetings that deceived, for their organisers excluded the true 'public' from presence and participation and sought not to test the legitimacy of and obtain popular acclamation for their cause but to confirm a predetermined outcome. This argument, and consequent corrective action, inverted the 'caucus' paradigm, making Unionists the perpetrators of hole-and-corner, dogmatic meetings and subverters of the proper political process. Inevitably, though, disruption provided Unionists with ammunition of their own: it became evidence of intent to overwhelm and undermine free and fair participation and representation and to smother popular opposition to home rule. Disruption, by design and outcome, inhibited careful reflection, upending the experience of listening and practice of deliberation fundamental to the public meeting.

Across England, both sides used meetings to register and transmit for political and public consumption 'opinion' on home rule, and to show that they were more in tune with that opinion than their opponents. According to Lawrence, disruption was an enduring feature of (electoral) political culture because, in the name of a 'manly', 'open' politics, it was tolerated as an expression of a vigilant, active citizenry and its right to 'interrogate its would-be rulers', the forbearance of which indicated a politician's 'character'.[37] Disruption could be seen as both enabling and forming part of a legitimate debate that tested the 'real' feeling of a community. Yet, as James Thompson emphasises, by the same token, the 'representative value' of disruption could be 'undermined' if interpreted as an attempt to prevent – by underhand or ignorant, sometimes violent and, typically, partisan tactics – authentic discussion and independent articulation of opinion.[38] These tensions were present in spring 1886, and are explored, respectively, in the following two sections.

3. *The practice and defence of disruption*

In spring 1886, Liberals were fiercely critical of the 'publicness' of events organised to protest the government's Irish legislation. Restrictions on entry – and thus on participation and deliberation – met with reproach, especially when they involved ticketing. 'Ticket meetings', by their very nature, could not be 'representative': as the Liberal-leaning *Luton Reporter* explained, a meeting could 'only be public in the proper sense of the word when

[36] See Owen, *Labour and the Caucus*, for the 'language of the caucus'.

[37] Lawrence, 'British Public Politics', 187–8; *Speaking for the People*, 184–5; *Electing our Masters*, 8–9, 50–63.

[38] Thompson, *British Political Culture*, 95–6, 119.

you throw the doors unrestrictedly open', for this was 'the only honest way to get the voice of the people'. Such rhetoric offered an expansive, if vague, definition of the 'public', one spontaneously available and gatherable and, if unrestricted, possessing an ascertainable 'opinion'. Coupled with claims that these were 'Tory meetings under the thinnest of veneers', it inferred that their opponents operated beyond the bounds of this public and in antagonism to it.[39] As the pro-Liberal *Sheffield Independent* ventured, it was only by the 'voice and vote' of the true 'public' that meetings called to 'pronounce' against home rule could be 'changed … into meetings in support'.[40]

Such arguments played out in Darlington, County Durham in late May. At a ticketed, pro-Union event at the Mechanics' Hall, J.H. Bell, proprietor of the Liberal *Northern Echo*, argued it had been 'constituted for the express … purpose of obtaining an opinion under favourable circumstances' – prompting a shout of 'Tories'. The 'promoters had the selection of the audience' and, despite their claiming to be 'Liberal', had distributed tickets only among anti-home rulers – whom pro-home rule Liberals later again identified as 'Conservatives'. Their resolution was carried, but, Bell insisted, 'had the public been admitted without tickets there would have been a different result' – meaning that 'the expression of opinion goes for what it is worth'. The chair had attempted to pre-empt criticism by suggesting that audience composition did not matter 'so long as the platform was a Liberal one'. Yet, as one local editorial stressed, '"packed"' meetings were 'never in the slightest degree trustworthy indications of the state of public opinion'.[41] The Liberal Three Hundred decided to organise a 'free and open' pro-home rule 'public meeting', pointedly choosing the Central Hall as a larger venue, to counter this 'misrepresentation' and articulate 'public feeling'.[42] Both sides restricted entry – one explicitly, through ticketing, and the other more implicitly, through its designation as a meeting of 'Liberals of the borough' – and maintained that their meetings, intended to convey particular stances on Ireland, were 'public', in composition and opinion expressed. This shows the ease with which organisers – with different purposes and envisioned outcomes – could declare a meeting 'public' and the propensity of opponents to contest such claims.

From the pro-home rule perspective, if an audience chosen by a meeting's organisers could not authentically embody 'the public', any opinion it declared on Ireland could not be 'public' either. By such 'unfair means', promoters tried to 'steal a march' on their opponents and pass off the results as though they emanated from an open meeting.[43] Organisers' claims to a meeting's publicness could be used against them. In late April, at a stormy protest meeting in Uxbridge town hall, Middlesex, an attendee ascended the platform to propose a pro-home rule amendment on the grounds that he was 'there as a citizen who had been called by a public placard, and he claimed a hearing'. He was unsuccessful and there was uproar when the resolution was declared carried after a tight vote.[44] A variation of this

[39] *Luton Reporter*, 5 Jun. 1886.

[40] *Sheffield Independent*, 29 May 1886.

[41] *Northern Daily Mail*, 20 May 1886.

[42] The Three Hundred had previously used the Mechanics' Hall to debate the proposals (Bell was a member): *Northern Echo*, 29 Apr., 20 May, 26 May, 31 May 1886; *North Star*, 20 May 1886.

[43] *Acton Gazette* [*AG*], 5 June 1886, letter from Thomas Sothcott.

[44] Numerous letters in the local press debated whether the chairman treated the amendment's supporters unfairly and who to blame for the disruption. *Uxbridge Gazette*, 1 May, 8 May, 15 May 1886; *Buckingham Advertiser*, 1 May 1886.

argument was made in a letter to the north London press after a rowdy event – billed as organised by a committee of Conservatives and Liberals – in early May at Hampstead's Vestry Hall, the borough's principal municipal building. The writer, a member of the Liberal association, stressed that it was not in his 'estimation a public meeting': he had never 'had to apply for a ticket' for a 'public' gathering, such an entry requirement being typical of the Tories but precluding 'a fair representative meeting of the electors', and the chairman's refusal to permit amendments was further 'proof that it was all one-sided'.[45] In such narratives, the 'public', in its fullest sense, was excluded first by the constraining organisational practices and again by the stifling of free discussion.

These dynamics were evident at a meeting held to condemn 'dismemberment of the empire' in the Millwall Dock Institute, east London, in mid-May. Those on the platform were from the outset subjected to 'hissing and hooting', 'cries of "Shut up", "Sit down"' and questions about their authority, and audience noise made it impossible to propose the planned resolution. The chairman – a well-known local Liberal, dubbed a 'turn-coat' by hecklers – ruled out of order a request to table an amendment. He suggested that anyone wishing to 'express anything contrary' to the meeting's objects should 'hire that hall for that purpose' – attempting, amid the escalating disruption, to re-establish the organisers' authority and signify that home rulers, free to host their own meetings, had no grounds for such behaviour. This was challenged by an audience member who maintained it was 'understood that when a public meeting was called, those present were invited to assent or dissent from the resolutions'. This implied that the organisers had ignored the rules of engagement and this was not a 'public meeting' in the proper sense. When the chairman again refused the demand and declared that the interrupter had 'no right to make a speech', the platform was charged. Chairs were tossed at its occupants and then back into the room, and, amid the fighting, the hall's fixtures and fittings were damaged. The first wave of disruptors to reach the platform was 'pushed back' but a second drove the conveners and their supporters out. Pro-home rulers then appointed a chair, delivered speeches and passed the disallowed amendment as a resolution.[46]

Entry to a meeting, having been denied, might be obtained by crowd action. In early May, a meeting to 'uphold the legislative Union' and promising addresses by Conservatives and Liberals was held in Hackney, east London, at the Morley Hall, on the borough's main thoroughfare. According to the local Liberal newspaper, it was supposed to be accessible to 'the public' but, 'as is usual with the Tories', was ticketed; however, 'thanks to the energy and pluck of the Radicals of Hackney', the 'Tory game was spoilt' and it 'proved a failure'.[47] The organisers maintained that the meeting was 'perfectly open' and that they sent tickets to ratepayers, without distinction of party – something their critics denied receiving or countered were not a stipulated entry requirement. A disturbance arose when stewards and mounted police, supposedly there to 'prevent disorder', stopped prospective attendees entering the main doors, leading to such noise that the speakers inside were inaudible. Eventually the doors were opened, after several within the hall questioned whether it was, in fact, a public meeting and contended it could only be so if all comers were admitted.

[45] *Hampstead Express*, 22 May, letter from T. Burch; 8 May 1886.

[46] The chair had supported the 1885 Liberal campaign in Poplar: *Eastern Post*, 21 Nov. 1885; 22 May 1886; *Morning Post*, 19 May 1886; *Tower Hamlets Independent* [*THI*], 22 May 1886.

[47] *Shoreditch Observer*, 8 May 1886.

The speakers were thereafter consistently interrupted, fighting took place in the gallery and the meeting was wound up by the chair amid confusion over the resolution's passage. One attendee afterwards wrote to the press condemning the organisers' 'audacity' in claiming it was 'open', for 'hundreds were refused admission' and many left in despondence while the doors remained locked – and emphasising that only a meeting 'without tickets' could 'effectually test the true feeling of the neighbourhood on this most important question'.[48]

Disruptors justified their action in the name of popular participation, professing to embody unmediated, unmanufactured opinion, expressed in a setting once closed off but rightly made public. Where an audience had been restricted, disruption might be portrayed as an inclusive practice, in contrast to the tactics organisers resorted to knowing popular sentiment was against them. Through the politics of disruption 'competing political groups contested each other's rights to restrict the freedoms of speech and assembly' and their 'exclusive definitions' of 'the public' and its 'opinion'.[49] Disruption was a form of political 'resistance',[50] a means of gaining 'access to representation directly'.[51] As the Liberal *Eastern Post* put it of the Hackney meeting, 'the locked-out public … insisted upon being admitted' and 'a contemplated fraud on the public was effectually prevented'.[52] What ticketing sought to conceal, disruption revealed. Political rights were asserted and reclaimed through disruption, including the right to be present in the space within which 'the public' was to be represented and counted, and, as members of this body, to alternately refuse to hear and to themselves be heard.

In some cases, local political bodies encouraged opposition to anti-home rule meetings. In south London in mid-May, the Southwark Radical Club responded to the announcement of a demonstration in a Bermondsey school-hall with a circular advising that Tories and 'blustering Orangemen' wanted the district to condemn 'our great Premier'. Members should therefore arrive at the meeting early and 'show by your votes and voices that Bermondsey is still true, and that Gladstone and Home Rule still hold the field'. Print here disrupted the political communication of organisers and heightened anticipation of the event. At the meeting, despite pleas from the promoters, audience noise prevented the commencement of speeches. The organisers reminded attendees that they had paid for the hall, signifying their entitlement to its use – indeed the Bermondsey Liberal and Radical Association had recently hired it for a 'meeting of constituents', where the local MP approved of home rule. There was an attempt to install Francis Soutter, the Radical Club's secretary, as chair; Soutter, refusing to relinquish the position, maintained his 'right' to it 'because the voice of the meeting had elected him'. Vocal and procedural disruption escalated into physical disruption: the dispute unresolved, the platform was invaded and, after a series of skirmishes, the conveners exited. Pro-home rulers then delivered speeches, passed a resolution and sent Gladstone a triumphant telegram pronouncing that the 'meeting re-

[48] *Hackney Gazette*, 5 May 1886; *Evening Standard* (London) [*ES*], 5 May, 6 May, 7 May, 8 May 1886; letters from P. Bagenal, J.F. Richards.

[49] Vernon, *Politics and the People*, 229.

[50] Lawrence, *Speaking for the People*, 65.

[51] Katrina Navickas, *Protest and the Politics of Space and Place, 1789–1848* (Manchester, 2017), 5.

[52] *Eastern Post*, 8 May 1886.

fused to listen to [his] traducers, and had turned it into a magnificent demonstration in favour of' the policy.[53]

The ejection of a meeting's organisers and the giving of speeches and approval of motions contrary to its stated objects were ritualistic and symbolic actions, designed to authenticate and maximise the impact of disruption. The ambitious claims made by disruptors emphasised the representativeness of the expanded audience, its entitlement to contest the promoters' authority and refusal to passively accept a predetermined verdict on home rule. The disruptors became 'the meeting' and thus 'the public'. The community, previously improperly represented, was now on display both on the platform and in the audience. By directly interacting with and reclaiming the platform through oral and physical defiance, disruptors positioned themselves as collective political actors, involved in political decision-making. They insisted that the platform should not be a site of falsified opinion but belong to those who truly represented local opinion. The platform was a contested site, not to be taken for granted. The politics of disruption offers an important example of how 'public opinion' was made and remade, as both a concept and an expression. Political appeals were formed and shaped not just by professional politicians and those seeking election but were also directed from and to platforms and audiences up and down the country.

Disruptors disputed the representative and participatory credentials of protest meetings in whose organisation Liberals were purportedly involved. Such complaints implied that opposition came merely from Conservatives, and those whose claims to liberalism were spurious. In early May, placards announced a demonstration in Acton's school-hall, Middlesex, of Conservatives and Liberals against 'Dismemberment'. John Burn, secretary of the Liberal and Radical Association, wrote to the press to 'repudiate all connection' with the meeting, on whose arrangements Acton Liberals had not been 'consulted', and he issued a notice urging their attendance. At the meeting, the chair described himself as 'a humble Liberal', eliciting hisses and the recommendation, 'Sit down, you're no Liberal'. His statement that 'many' Liberals were invited drew rebuttals, with one attendee noting that Liberal association officers were not sought out and only Conservatives were circularised. Appeals from the constituency's Conservative MP for quiet were countered by cheers for Ireland, Gladstone and Parnell, shouts of 'Down with Churchill and Salisbury' and repeated cries of 'No, No'. The disturbance became so severe that the reporters struggled to hear, and the ladies present were advised to leave, seemingly in anticipation of disorder. An attempt to remove the disruptors was followed by a rush on the platform and violent scuffles, resulting in broken furniture, abandoned belongings and minor injuries, and pro-home rulers took charge. In another letter, Burn afterwards mocked those who must be 'vexed' to think they could hold a meeting 'pretending to represent both political parties … without the Liberals finding out the trick'.[54]

[53] *Southwark Recorder*, 8 May 1886; *South London Post*, 22 May 1886; *South London Press*, 22 May 1886; *St James's Gazette* [*SJG*], 18 May 1886; *ES*, 18 May 1886. The Radical Club met in early June, passing resolutions hostile to Liberal Unionists: *Daily News*, 7 June 1886. Soutter had long supported home rule: Francis William Soutter, *Recollections of a Labour Pioneer* (1923).

[54] The Liberal association had in April resolved in favour of home rule. The Conservative MP later joked at a Primrose League meeting that Liberals were not only 'rough to their political opponents, but were even rough to each other'. *AG*, 17 Apr., 15 May, 22 May 1886; *Middlesex News*, 15 May 1886; *Middlesex County Times* [*MCT*], 15 May 1886. It is in most cases difficult to assess the gender balance of audiences; however, both the disruptors and the disrupted tended to be male.

In Bermondsey and Acton, Liberals were implored, by those claiming to represent them, to use these meetings as opportunities to convey sincere local feeling. Neither platform, audience nor opinion could be 'public', unless made so. This reveals the purposive uses of disruption – representation and participation had to be actively claimed and engaged in – and the significance attached to the rituals of a meeting, like speeches and resolutions. Disruption asserted the political agency of local Liberals: attendance at once 'closed' meetings would bring them together, give them a 'say' and demonstrate that their strength stood not on the advertised platform but in defiance of it. It suggested a need for vigilance by true Liberals, while emphasising the severity of the Conservatives' attempted fraud and the flimsiness of their pretence. However, it is unclear whether such entreaties extended to plans to commit violence – and it was important that dissent should appear sincere, not systemised or malicious. A comparable circular by the Isle of Wight Working Men's Liberal Association counselled members to attend an anti-home rule meeting, vote against the resolution and 'show you have confidence in the Government' and its proposals, but 'earnestly requested' them 'not to create disturbance'.[55] Home rulers would follow the accepted rules of procedure, expressing opinion through voice and vote, even where their opponents did not. By distancing themselves from organisers' professions of 'publicness' and cross-party collaboration, disruptors made Unionists appear the rogue element. This explains why, upon reassuming the chair at Bermondsey, Soutter drew on a stereotype of Conservatives as perpetrators of disorder,[56] declaring that 'the cause of the disturbance' having left, they could have 'an orderly and peaceful meeting'.

Some Liberal MPs opposed to the legislation faced tempestuous crowds at the 'public' meetings arranged for addressing their constituents, finding themselves forced off-script and the 'vocal timbre' of their speeches altered.[57] At a mid-April meeting in the Subscription Rooms in central Stroud, Gloucestershire – with both parties on the platform – such was the commotion as Henry Brand rose to speak that he 'shouted at the top of [his] voice' an appeal for a fair hearing. He hoped 'they should hear a man before they condemned him', but his speech was interspersed by hisses and yells of 'shut up', 'sit down' and 'chuck 'em out'. Brand's declaration that 'he would not personally have any share in breaking up' the party locally was rebutted by 'You have done it'. Arthur Winterbotham, the Cirencester MP, tried to mediate when the noise left only reporters able to hear, but gave up when his pleas for calm failed.[58] Later that month, at Newcastle's Central Hall, the Tyneside MP Albert Grey, scion of the Whig dynasty, was greeted by 'a storm of hooting', cries of 'Traitor' and cheers for Gladstone and John Morley, the Irish Secretary and city MP. For several minutes, this prevented Grey speaking; impediments continued throughout his speech, with calls of 'Give it up as a bad job', 'You separate yourself from the Tyneside Liberals' and 'He has betrayed his trust'. Grey's comments on Ireland garnered repeated shouts of 'Justice', accusations of telling 'only one side' and demands for home rule 'Because it is right'. The chairman – the Liberal association's president, told 'You're no Liberal' by hecklers – persistently, vainly, intervened; Grey's insistence that he 'would not be bullied' and 'would stay all night' if necessary to 'have his say' drew 'loud cries of "Withdraw"'. Though maintaining that he

[55] *Isle of Wight County Press* [*IWCP*], 15 May 1886.

[56] Lawrence, *Electing our Masters,* 65.

[57] Hoegaerts, 'Speaking Like Intelligent Men', 129.

[58] *Bristol Mercury*, 19 Apr. 1886; *Stroud News*, 23 Apr. 1886.

had come to 'a serious political meeting' to 'learn' the views of electors, Grey did eventually abandon his speech, blaming audience 'unfairness'.[59]

However, only a minority of meetings (23%) were attended by an MP, and less than a tenth (7.8%) had a Liberal MP (pro- or anti-home rule) present. Grassroots Liberals were far more visible during the constituency crisis. Particularly hostile was the treatment of Liberals who, to illustrate the issue's seriousness and the meetings' 'patriotic' nature, chaired, appeared on the platform and addressed them. When, in early May, Thomas Bell chaired a demonstration in Lincoln Corn Exchange, he stressed he was no less 'a true Liberal' for it, but his underscoring of previous support for Gladstone backfired, provoking exclamations of 'Stick to him' and 'Follow him now'. Bell's explanation that he undertook the task 'with the view of assisting in the formation of a true and sound public opinion' suggests that disruption would enable dissenters from a meeting's objects to influence the making and expression of 'public opinion'.[60] Similarly, at a meeting in Cheltenham Corn Exchange – reportedly the town's 'most disorderly ever' – the principal speaker's profession to be a 'Liberal' but to 'love Liberalism more than I do its leader' was met with 'What's your Liberalism?' and 'What a specimen of a Liberal!'. Charles Nugent's claim to have been entrusted with the resolution because he was 'a very advanced Liberal' drew 'derisive laughter' and 'ironical cheers' and his adding that its seconding by a Conservative proved 'both sides are represented' led to shouts of 'Toryism is no good here'. The Liberal *Cheltenham Examiner* happily declared the meeting 'a failure': Liberals had been invited to 'curse' home rule but 'unmistakably gave it their blessing'.[61]

Disruption shaped 'what politics sounded like',[62] affording participants the opportunity to be heard and to arbitrate what was heard, and to affect how a meeting was experienced by attendees. As a ritualised, performative behaviour, it could be used at strategic moments, such as in response to arrivals upon the platform, statements about the meeting's purpose, composition or subject, the proposition of resolutions and crucial points in speeches. Disruption therefore challenged a meeting's sequences and oral and aural codes, and could impact its outcome. Just as a crowd 'bestowed legitimacy', it could take it away.[63] Through their tactical deployment of words and mobilisation of noise, disruptors 'expressed dissent, created solidarities, and manifested opposition and resistance'.[64] Through what David Kennerley terms 'sonic disobedience',[65] an audience could test and, to varying degrees, steer 'the performance on the platform',[66] as could those outside a venue, given 'sound's pene-

[59] *Shields Daily Gazette*, 1 May 1886; *Tyneside Echo*, 1 May 1886; *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 1 May 1886.

[60] Bell was the ex-Sheriff of the city; having supported the 1885 Liberal campaign, he reminded attendees that 'they did not hoot like that' at him then. Two days later, the Liberal association passed a pro-home rule resolution. *Stamford Mercury*, 27 Nov. 1885; 14 May, 21 May 1886; *Lincoln Mercury*, 14 May 1886; *Lincolnshire Chronicle*, 14 May 1886.

[61] *Gloucester Journal*, 1 May 1886; *Cheltenham Chronicle* [*CC*], 1 May 1886; *Gloucestershire Echo*, 30 Apr. 1886; *Cheltenham Examiner*, 5 May 1886.

[62] Katie Barclay, 'The Sound of Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century Ireland', *JBS,* lx (2021), 393.

[63] Lawrence, 'English Popular Politics', 336.

[64] Daniel Bender, Duane Corpis and D.J. Walkowitz, 'Sound Politics: Critically Listening to the Past', *RHR,* cxxi (2015), 1–2.

[65] David Kennerley, 'Strikes and Singing Classes: Chartist Culture, "Rational Recreation" and the Politics of Music after 1842', *EHR*, cxxxv (2020), 1173.

[66] Vernon, *Politics and the People*, 125.

trative quality'.[67] Disruption signalled the rejection of a political appeal, helping control the reception thereof, and could vocalise and disseminate alternative points, making it a form of political communication. The loss of control by Liberal Unionists in particular over a meeting's 'sonic environment' implied their loss of popular support.[68] The silencing of Liberal Unionist voices made harder the task of constructing fresh constituencies of support and denied them an identity of their own.[69]

The treatment of anti-home rule Liberals at two Isle of Wight protest meetings shows how disruption could prevent events proceeding as planned. When, at the first meeting in Newport's Drill Hall, Colonel Atherley, president of the island's Liberal Union, explained the responsibility he felt in organising and chairing it, there was uproar and a yell of 'You shouldn't have done it'. His assertion that he was 'as staunch a Liberal as ever' but would not let party feeling interfere with patriotic duty was countered by calls of 'You're wrong now'. References to Atherley by the constituency's Conservative MP – who stressed that 'the question should be fairly discussed and looked at from both sides' and was heckled with 'Home Rule' and 'Coercion' – occasioned shouts of 'Turncoat' and 'Catspaw'. After several Liberal speakers struggled against the noise, one, hissed at when trying to support the resolution, declared that the audience had 'lost all sense of decency'. Despairing of 'persons who were afraid of argument', Atherley convened another meeting, in Ryde town hall. He was greeted there with hisses and 'rat', a word also called out when he mentioned front-ranking Liberal Unionists. Atherley was supported by Sir Barrington Simeon, son of a former local MP, who had also been shouted down at Newport, and was now urged to 'come down' off the platform and be 'among your party'. When Simeon insisted that those 'making a great row and howling at me … won't make me a whit less a good Liberal', he was advised to '[k]eep away from bad company', and his resolution prompted 'howls, cheers, hisses, crowing [and] stamping'. An amendment was proposed by a member of the Liberal Union, who stated that he could not understand the position taken by those on the platform – 'if they still remained Liberals', why were they 'attempting to break up the Liberal party?'. One letter to the press, from a 'true Liberal', condemned the 'disastrous policy' of local leaders who organised and appeared on platforms 'with their enemies'. They should 'not be surprised or annoyed if the rank and file of their party … see only in them men who are made the catspaw of others'.[70]

In spring 1886 Liberals drew on an ideal type of a 'public' meeting and its rituals. It would neither pretend bipartisanship nor be 'packed'; the audience would be active in its participation, demanding opportunities for face-to-face interaction with and to question the authority of those claiming to speak to and for it on a question of vital importance. Disruption could therefore both enable and expose. It was about who had – and how they had – the 'rights' of presence and participation, and thus, the 'rights' of speaking and listening. Disruption was inclusionary of those who saw themselves as being, or were claimed

[67] Kennerley, 'Music, Politics, and History', 372.

[68] Kennerley, 'Strikes and Singing Classes', 1175.

[69] See Blaxill, *War of Words,* 111–16 on electoral language and Liberal Unionist identity.

[70] *Isle of Wight Observer* [*IWO*], 22 May 1886; *Portsmouth Evening News*, 20 May 1886; *IWCP*, 6 Feb., 15 May, 22 May 1886. Comparably, in Hampstead, H.M. Bompas, the Liberal organiser and former candidate who chaired the protest meeting, was not elected to the new Liberal and Radical association's executive as he was deemed not 'representative' of the party and because, while it was 'one thing to have these people as members', it was 'a different thing to have them as leaders': *Hampstead Express*, 8 May 1886.

as, part of a community represented by a given action. It was simultaneously exclusionary of those who did not perceive of themselves as belonging to that community or were not intended to do so. Disruption was a public act undertaken by those claiming to embody 'the public' and served as a vehicle – oral, aural and physical – for 'public opinion', meaning that its audience extended far beyond the locality. It was intended to demonstrate that popular feeling was behind home rule – after all, if Unionist meetings were interrupted, it was because they were out of touch with it.

4. *Combatting and condemning disruption*

Unionist narratives, like their Liberal counterparts, reflected assumptions about what a 'public meeting' 'did' politically, how and for whom. Platform and audience would be representative of the local community; pertinent information would be relayed by authoritative sources; attendees, having learned about the subject at hand, would engage in decision-making by signalling their views on a resolution; and the verdict reached would echo, and itself become a part of, the feeling of the broader 'public' with which the meeting was coterminous. Realistically, given both the traditions and changing nature of the 'public meeting', it was unlikely an event organised with a manifest stance on a political issue would be unambiguously discursive: it would tend to attract supporters of its core proposition, speakers would not present diverse perspectives and any judgment would be on a pre-prepared motion. However, for Unionists, a deliberative meeting could be conceptualised as entailing a reciprocity predicated upon conscientious listening to and consideration of the points discoursed in speeches – and herein lay a participation that made possible the working out of a community's position on the matter and a consultative expression of opinion. This position was presumed naturally to align with that of the platform, underscoring the representativeness of the latter and reinforcing the meeting's ability to make tangible a body of loyal sentiment already existing. The appearance, moreover, of both Conservatives and Liberal Unionists, and often of Irish loyalists, on the platform, would demonstrate the variety of viewpoints ranged against home rule.

As a result, certain cultural expectations were placed on attendees of 'public' meetings. According to the *Acton Gazette*, the 'least' that should be asked – especially when a matter of 'vital importance' was at stake – was that audiences 'behave decently' and seek to learn 'what is best to be done, and what is the will of the people'. These were outcomes achievable only 'by argument' – something that speeches in a public setting would provide and enable – and ones that required adherence to the rules of 'fair play'.[71] The 'right of free discussion' was imperative. It was defended from the platform at a disorderly, ticketed 'non-party' meeting in the Wolverhampton Exchange Hall, Staffordshire, where speakers were shouted down and the attending chief of police admitted that his constables were powerless to eject the disruptors. The chairman – 'a Liberal all his life' – declared that for the interrupters to 'not allow' their opponents this right showed that they 'were a body of mean cowards'. The proposer of the resolution, announcing that he was 'ashamed' of them 'not to hear', asked, 'do you think that brawling and shouting is better than argument?'.[72] Such meetings

[71] *AG*, 15 May 1886.

[72] *Birmingham Daily Post*, 20 May 1886; *Birmingham Mail*, 20 May 1886; *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 27 May 1886.

were, as the audience at Uxbridge were reminded from the platform, intended for 'calm consideration' of a question which 'required the whole weight of intellect and reason', and attendees were requested to 'listen patiently'. It was therefore disconcerting that 'so many … had come with their minds already made up' and, in their unwillingness to hear 'argument which would enable them to judge right', had determined to stop speakers 'finish[ing] their sentences' and thus to prevent others from reaching their own assessment.[73]

These behavioural codes were both dialectical and aural and are indicative of what William Tullett terms 'a politics of listening and hearing'. The making of sound that drowned out political speaking disrupted the process of hearing and thus of 'political listening'; 'who got to speak' and who got to listen (and how) were entwined political propositions.[74] For Unionists, discussion – taking the form of 'argument' – had to be both fully given and properly heard if it was to enable the educated, careful reflection central to the practices of collective deliberation and communal expression. 'Sonic chaos' and the subversion of sonic hierarchies denied the assembled 'public' – platform occupants and honest audience members – and the wider one beyond, of which it was representative, these opportunities.[75] Unionists alleged that disruptors targeted speakers out of fear that audiences would learn facts unobtainable at the private, partisan meetings avowing support for the legislation – meetings that Unionists did not disrupt – a tactic that would further prevent people freely making up their minds. These speakers were not candidates humbling themselves before crowds of would-be constituents but well-informed, well-intentioned citizens discussing a complex matter of national importance. Appeals to 'tropes of "fair play"'[76] undercut the legitimacy of disruption: whereas their opponents were 'intolerant' and unscrupulous, Unionists could stand as defenders of the rights to assemble, speak, be heard and listen unincumbered, and thus of the authentic public opinion at risk of suppression.

Condemnation of disruption also drew on and, by offering a visceral focal point, reinforced depictions of the Liberal Party as hostile to political difference, uncritically devoted to Gladstone and controlled by caucus wire-pullers – and confirmed those Liberals opposed to home rule as upholders of its traditions. Disruption introduced a 'party' element to gatherings intended to be 'national'. For example, in Cheltenham, the Conservative MP James Agg-Gardner attributed his being heckled to 'party factiousness', expressing sorrow that 'freedom of speech', once a 'precious monument' of the Liberal Party, had been exchanged for 'the gag and the cloture'. He afterwards wrote to the press to condemn the 'shrieks of "Turn-coat"' that had been directed at 'most consistent' Liberals on the platform, which plainly could not represent 'a serious expression of Liberal opinion upon a grave and important crisis'. For the local Conservative newspapers, the tumult demonstrated that 'bitter, intolerant, prejudiced Liberals' were 'animated by base motives' and resolute 'to carry embittered feeling into the discussion of every question'. Liberals were, on the one hand, 'so afraid of argument', and 'so strong was the case against them, that they took refuge in the cowardly device' of disruption; on the other hand, having sworn 'grovelling obedience to

[73] *Buckingham Advertiser*, 1 May 1886; *Uxbridge Gazette*, 1 May 1886.

[74] Tullett, 'Political Engines', 578, 580–1.

[75] Kennerley, 'Strikes and Singing Classes', 1172.

[76] Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism*, 106.

one man's will', they would impose servility on others by ensuring that, other 'than their own, no other voice shall be heard'.[77]

In Unionist narratives, disruption laid bare Liberal hypocrisy. As one constituent of Grey, conveying in a letter his 'utter detestation' of the practice, put it, the 'hooting and howling' came from those who 'profess the utmost liberalism while all the time practising the meanest tyranny'.[78] Comparably, after a meeting in Southwark's Bricklayers' Hall – where the speakers were inaudible, the platform was stormed and, amid the fighting, a man was stabbed[79] – one newspaper column underscored the duplicitousness of Liberals who, affecting a 'love of fair play', proved themselves 'spiteful' to all not sharing their views, and who, because they 'dreaded the truth', would 'suppress it by violence'.[80] The Isle of Wight press, Conservative and Liberal Unionist, declared after the Newport and Ryde meetings that when 'persons calling themselves Liberal' strove 'by sheer force of brazen lungs … to prevent the free and fair expression of opinion', it was clearly they who had '"turned their coats" and foresworn the principles of their forefathers'. Their 'ignorance and fanaticism' prompted them to attend meetings 'not to inform their minds on a most momentous question' but 'to howl' at those 'who prefer country to party'.[81] Disruption was thus not the candid impulse to manifest local feeling but the upshot of a tyrannical instinct, born of disingenuousness and narrow-minded partisanship, which threatened not only the sanctity of the public meeting but also the principles of Liberalism.

Unionists strengthened allegations of impure motives by portraying disruption as planned, likely by the caucus. For example, the Conservative *Essex Standard* contended that a 'well-organized Radical opposition' beset a meeting in the Colchester Corn Exchange: coordinated from the outset by members of the Liberal Club, 'present in strong force', the 'rapping of sticks, huzzas, hisses, howling and guffaws' succeeded in drowning out the speeches, and there were scuffles and a minor platform invasion.[82] The Conservative *Lancaster Gazette* similarly condemned the 'organised efforts' of Gladstone's 'blind followers' to 'interrupt the speakers, and thwart the efforts of the promoters' of a demonstration of 'Liberals and Conservatives' in the town's Palatine Hall, and thus to 'stifle free discussion', having already issued placards and handbills urging Liberals to attend and vote against the motion. Surely, the paper asked, those holding anti-home rule views had a 'right to meet and pass such resolutions as they might think wise without being subjected to the interruption and opposition of those who entertain different opinions?'.[83] Liberal Unionists likewise cried premeditation. Kenric Murray, who chaired in Acton, wrote to the press 'as a Liberal', believing that 'Liberalism includes all the liberties of meeting, of discussion, to adversaries and to friends' and hoping to 'invok[e] public reprobation' at those liberties being undermined through 'interference'. The 'Liberal wire-pullers of Acton' were culpable:

[77] Agg-Gardner also argued that it was the 'duty' of anyone wishing to introduce an amendment at a public meeting to ensure it was done 'without producing disorder': *Gloucestershire Echo*, 30 Apr., 1 May 1886; *CC*, 1 May, 15 May 1886.

[78] Durham University Library, Grey Papers, GRE/B217/4, letter from William Robb, 1 May 1886.

[79] *SJG*, 15 May 1886; *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 15 May 1886; *Bristol Times*, 15 May 1886.

[80] *Southwark Standard*, 22 May 1886.

[81] *IWO*, 22 May 1886; *IWCP*, 22 May 1886.

[82] *Essex Standard*, 29 May 1886; *Essex Newsman*, 29 May 1886; *Essex County Chronicle*, 28 May 1886.

[83] *Lancaster Gazette*, 5 May, 8 May 1886; *Manchester Courier*, 6 May 1886; *Blackpool Herald*, 8 May 1886.

the meeting was an 'open one', called by men 'representing both parties', for 'free discussion', yet those 'under the control of the party managers' and 'working in the name of their association' had 'organised the contemptible rowdyism'. They had neither asked to 'join in' the discussion, sent speakers of their own nor proposed any resolution or amendment – a catalogue of failures which harked back to tropes of the public meeting.[84]

Such complaints connected disruption with party organisation and decoupled partisan activists from 'the public', making disruption appear an extension of the excesses of the 'caucus' system, which had long since departed from the proper modes of political conduct. Neither caucus nor disruption could be deliberative: if Liberals wished to pretend so in a 'party' setting, that was one thing, and the trick was notorious enough; to do so in 'public' was another. When a tempestuous meeting in Castleside, County Durham, culminated in a row over whether the disruptors could submit a motion, the principal speaker declared, 'We don't want your mechanical caucus here'.[85] As much as Unionist condemnations of disruption were intended to convey horror at and warning against the suppression of the right and practice of public assembly, there was also a gleefulness in the hyperbole. In these narratives, not only did the caucus stifle debate and present only one side of the story, but its puppets also went to 'public' meetings to do likewise; the caucus misrepresented those it purported to speak for, and disruptors would similarly distort a 'public' they had no legitimacy to claim. Unionists criticised not only the dry procedural of Liberal associationalism but also the more ebullient political displays of their opponents. Vernon argues that it was the emergence of mass party politics that undermined older forms of electoral culture, attributing a decline in disruption to the hardening of parties' regulative roles.[86] However, an important strand within Unionist discourse cast disruption as both a consequence and a function of the disciplinary power which organised Liberalism perniciously arrogated to itself. Whereas, behind the closed doors of the 'caucus' meeting, control was exerted through dictation and manipulation, in the 'open' arena of the 'public meeting', it entailed not the stricter handling but the subversion of popular political culture.

Unionists might also charge Liberals with having a partner in crime: Irishmen.[87] Although the (nationalist) Irish were often identified in disorderly crowds,[88] the crisis amplified the significance of this alleged presence. The disturbance seen in Derby's Drill Hall in early May was traced by the *Derbyshire Advertiser* to the local Irish National League branch, present 'in full force … in accordance with a pre-conceived arrangement' and 'reinforced by a coterie of members of the local Liberal Association'. Such 'organised' attempts to 'drown the voice of reason' with 'senseless noise' were presented as a foretaste of what awaited, 'if ever the loyal minority is handed over' to the 'tender mercies' of home rulers. The National League branch secretary wrote to the press condemning 'slanderous accusations' against 'innocent Irishmen', attributing the disruption to the promoters' having

[84] *AG*, 29 May 1886.

[85] *Consett Guardian*, 4 June 1886.

[86] Vernon, *Politics and the People*, 102–4, 229–49.

[87] See, for example, reports of a public meeting in Ilkeston, Derbyshire: *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 28 May 1886; *Derby Mercury*, 26 May 1886; and Altrincham Conservative Club's condemnation of disruption in Manchester Free Trade Hall: *Manchester Courier*, 30 Apr. 1886.

[88] Windscheffel, *Popular Conservatism*, 106; G. Lansbury, *My Life* (1928), 86.

not 'the least idea of conducting a public meeting'.[89] There were reports of 'hundreds' of Irishmen filling the school-hall in Bermondsey in response to the Radical Club's handbill and of the entry of 'a body of emigrants' to the venue in Hackney prompting first 'confusion' and then fighting – Liberals and nationalists having taken 'good care' to ensure that the 'kind of intimidation' which the attending Irish unionist deputations met with 'in their own country' would not escape them in England.[90] Members of the deputation that addressed the Southwark meeting afterwards wrote to the press of their 'unpleasant' 'experience of liberty of speech in England' – thinking they had 'left behind' in Ireland 'coercion and intolerance', they found themselves refused a fair hearing by 'an unruly mob' of their 'own countrymen'. If this happened in the 'metropolis of the empire', how could 'Loyalists … expect to have our voices heard' in the proposed Irish parliament?[91]

Critics also identified those derailing meetings as 'roughs', similarly connected with the Liberal Party. For instance, the London *Evening News* saw Stroud as an example of how 'the hired roughs of the local Caucus' – which had its own 'hole-and-corner gatherings' – effected to 'break up' patriotic meetings 'in the name of freedom'.[92] According to the Conservative *Tower Hamlets Independent*, there was, prior to the Millwall meeting, a 'very considerable importation on to the Isle of Dogs' of 'hundreds of "roughs"', hired as part of an 'organised opposition', who positioned themselves in areas of the hall out of reach of the conveners and policemen, and waited for their moment to strike, a strategy which suggested they were practised in such chicanery. They were aided in the meting out of 'brutal treatment' by the carriers of an Irish flag and a 'drum and fife band'.[93] Following a turbulent meeting at York's Festival Concert Rooms in late May, one of the conveners, Frederick Milner, a Conservative ex-MP, contended that 'a crowd of roughs, many of them paid to make a disturbance' was able to get in before 'a sufficient number of Loyalists had assembled'. They were 'encouraged in their scandalous conduct by a prominent member of the Radical party', the members of which had 'no sense of fair play'. Lord Brabourne, a Liberal-turned-Conservative in charge of the resolution, had declared from the platform that the interruptions could not be coming 'from real Yorkshiremen', the 'characteristic' of whom was 'a desire to hear what can be said on both sides', and emphasised that 'all Englishmen were entitled to the liberty of opinion' – emotive reminders of the proper rules of conduct.[94]

Used derogatorily, labels like 'roughs' and 'Irish', and their alleged connection to organised Liberalism, were designed to dissociate disruptors from the reasonable, engaged political public and the wider community, and to be contrastable to the laudable intentions of those joining together to defend Union and empire. It has been argued that hired roughs, strategically deployed by local parties, were 'a nigh-ubiquitous cause' of electoral violence

[89] *Derbyshire Advertiser*, 7 May 1886; *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 4 May, 12 May 1886.

[90] *CC*, 22 May 1886; *SJG*, 18 May 1886; *Eastern Morning News*, 5 May 1886; *ES*, 5 May 1886.

[91] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 15 May 1886; also see, *The Echo* (London), 15 May 1886, letter from C.W. Gordon.

[92] *Evening News*, 19 Apr. 1886.

[93] *THI*, 22 May 1886.

[94] *Yorkshire Gazette*, 29 May, 5 June 1886; *Yorkshire Post*, 27 May 1886. Robert Webster, MP for St Pancras East from 1886, later recounted that the 'gang of men' disturbing his 1885 election meetings were 'mostly strangers to the constituency' who did likewise in neighbouring seats: Robert Webster, *Elections, Electors and Elected: Stories of Elections Past and Present* (1906), 74.

and to an extent tolerated.[95] However, Unionists depicted their involvement as a calculated attempt to thwart the expression of opinion and an assault on the right to assemble. Even when not disturbing a meeting directly, Liberals could be blamed for orchestrating disorder, a culpability, which, coupled with roughs' lack of agency, underscored home rulers' disdain for sensible argument. Comparably, by pinpointing an Irish presence, critics inferred the disreputable character of disruptors; specifying a 'nationalist' allegiance signified an extremism, made more threatening by the subject being one on which they could not proceed rationally, and foreshadowed life under home rule. This racialised rhetoric aimed at condemning, simultaneously, the policy, its supporters and its beneficiaries. As well as emphasising an essential outsideness, these narratives implied that there was a lack of thinking and an excess of feeling to disruption, both of which were manipulable – and were transgressions that would 'disqualify certain people from participation in politics'.[96] The accusations were partisan – as was that of 'Tory' exclusionary practices being the prompt for disruption – but this is important, for these were delegitimising tools, and it was likewise in Unionists' interests to emphasise the unscrupulous capabilities of the caucus, above and beyond the power it wielded.

Such apparently wilful intrusions prompted Unionist musings on whether it was any longer possible to hold meetings open to all comers without the threat of disorder.[97] One flashpoint was a turbulent meeting in the substantial Holborn town hall, north London, marked by prolonged noise, inaudible speeches, a rush on the platform and police intervention.[98] It was described sardonically by one local newspaper as involving an 'angry mob', who, instead of orderly discussion, preferred to use chairs 'as a clincher to an argument' and fists 'to enforce their opinions'.[99] For the Conservative *Globe*, Holborn made clear the necessity of such 'precautions' as would enable 'free discussion' of home rule, for '[a]nybody can break up a meeting and the disposition is evidently not wanting'.[100] The Conservative *Northern Chronicle*, published as far north as Inverness, regarded Holborn as 'one of the very worst ebullitions' of 'rowdyism' and lamented that 'the old fashion of holding public meetings, at which both sides of a question were discussed, has had to be given up because anyone can interrupt' and 'the rowdies are organised [and] paid'. It issued a stark warning: a 'system of counterfeit and interruption', orchestrated by 'Caucus agencies and their hirelings', was putting at risk 'the freedom of public meeting and liberty of speech' and was 'becoming more intolerable and inconsistent with healthy political life'.[101]

Nearly two decades later, in his seminal study of political parties, Moisei Ostrogorski remarked that the 'Tories' had been afforded 'an excuse' for ticketing, for when they organised '*public* meetings' these were 'often invaded by rowdies from the opposite camp' (although even ticketing did not 'protect' them from 'disorder'). For Ostrogorski, ticketing was

[95] Blaxill et al, 'Electoral Violence'.

[96] Matthew Roberts, *Democratic Passions. The Politics of Feeling in British Popular Radicalism, 1809–48* (Manchester, 2022), 13.

[97] The Liberal Unionists organising the Darlington protest meeting decided to ticket to 'prevent the Irish and Home Rule element from taking possession of it': *Middlesbrough Daily Gazette*, 15 May 1886.

[98] *London Daily Chronicle*, 22 May 1886; *ES*, 22 May 1886; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 23 May 1886.

[99] *St Pancras Guardian*, 29 May 1886.

[100] *Globe*, 22 May 1886.

[101] *Northern Chronicle*, 26 May 1886.

symptomatic of a 'decline of habits of freedom' that was ever 'more a characteristic of great party gatherings'.[102] However, in spring 1886, such methods were presented by Unionists as guarding 'rights' and 'liberties' and shielding 'the public' against the intrusion of 'party'. 'The public' was a space and a body from which Liberals had, in their caucuses, closed themselves off. 'Precautions' like ticketing were justifiable as providing the conditions for un-assailed deliberation: 'the public' would be invited and welcomed in, while those outside it – for reasons of 'party' or 'nationalist' fanaticism or as hired muscle – and seeking to subvert it would not have the opportunity to prevent its legitimate assembly or misrepresent it. The breach of these measures reinforced the baseness of political disruption and the depths of Liberal hypocrisy. The Unionist defence of popular political culture thus encompassed not only protection of those freedoms endangered by Liberal 'faddism' and wire-pulling but also those of public assembly and deliberation. Lawrence argues that, rather than an endeavour to regulate popular politics, 'the recourse to "ticketing" reflected widespread fears about its untameability'.[103] In 1886 it formed part of a broader claim to champion that very politics and a bid to demonstrate that those elements historians have identified as 'untameable' were in fact 'controlled', through the machinations of party. It was the caucus and disruption that would 'close down' the 'public' and Unionists who would maintain its openness.

Unionist rhetoric treated disruption as a threat to active political engagement – understood as listening to and reflecting upon reasoned argument, which, in turn, implied deliberation – that entailed not the assertion but the deprivation of political rights and liberties. Disruption was the result not of the healthy competition of rival groups in the name of ascertaining local feeling, but of one side purposely setting upon the other. Unionist narratives sought to invalidate the political contributions made by disruption, which was a menace to free assembly, speech and listening. Disruptors intruded upon and sought to suppress 'the public'; being extraneous to it, the 'opinion' they forced upon a meeting could not be 'public' either. The denunciation of disruption was one of the ways Unionists endeavoured simultaneously to lay bare their opponents' disregard for and willingness to undermine the political system to pass home rule and to expose the dangers inherent in the policy itself and its unpopularity.

5. *Conclusion*

The politics of disruption generated intense debate in spring 1886 about the state of English politics in the new age of 'mass democracy', of which home rule was the first major crisis. Indeed, both sides in the intertwined home rule and disruption debates argued that those outside parliament were engaged politically and actively interested in the issues at stake and should not be prevented from experiencing politics in its fullest, most 'public', sense. For participants in disruption and their defenders, such actions formed, and were performed, rituals both of de-legitimisation, challenging the ability and the right of a meeting to speak to and for the community, and of legitimation, establishing the power of genuine feeling over the falsities an audience was expected to believe. It was a means of mobilising and

[102] Moisei Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* (2 vols, 1902), i, 383–4.

[103] Jon Lawrence, 'Class and Gender in the Making of Urban Toryism, 1880–1914', *EHR*, cviii (1993), 629–52; Lawrence, 'English Popular Politics', 336.

making visible a collective body that had been excluded or misrepresented. For those subjected to it, disruption contravened the bounds of acceptable political conduct, preventing the proper flow of the political process, undercutting genuine attempts at representation and subduing the free manifestation of opinion. Such narratives also made the condemnation of disruption a vital weapon in the fight against 'caucus' politics. Both the practice of and opposition to disruption offered forms of political interaction and participation and reveal that representation was 'a dynamic process of claim-making and the reception of claims' – throwing into relief the importance, as Miller puts it, of viewing 19th-century political culture as 'contested terrain'.[104]

Perpetration and interpretation of disruption were significant components of a broader battle to establish and legitimise 'the public' and its 'opinion' as, alternately, for or opposed to home rule. Such opinion was assumed both to be natural and inherent and in need of collective working out and manifestation. The two sides mirrored one another: each insisted upon the rights to assemble, to deliberate matters of national importance and to express opinion unincumbered, which they accused their opponents of endangering and portrayed themselves as defending. What one decried as transgressive the other hailed as empowering. The perceived presence or absence of 'the public' impacted a meeting's legitimacy – a dynamic further complicated by arguments as to whether 'the public' had needed to insert itself into or had been expelled from a meeting. This made starker the problem of who had the authority and ability to speak to and for whom, in what setting and with what outcome. It, in turn, affected the authenticity of the 'opinion' on display: both organisers and disruptors were charged with fearing and attempting to circumvent 'true' popular feeling and impose an artificial one by nefarious means. Disruption was a form of agitation in favour of home rule, for raising awareness of and demonstrating enthusiasm for the cause and for preventing a spurious record of opinion going forth. For Unionists, support for legislation too wild to elicit popular enthusiasm could only be manufactured by the caucus or enforced through disruption, and both methods underscored the policy's dangers. How people discussed home rule was bound up with how people discussed politics.

These debates also prompt questions as to the trajectories ascribed by historians to political disruption. A recent quantitative project has concluded that, having been 'endemic' throughout the 19th century and reached its 'apogee' between 1868–85, electoral violence permanently receded from 1886. The project posits a 'political explanation' in place of the prevailing 'cultural' accounts: electoral violence was about 'political strategy', being a 'tool' deployed 'to help win elections' and given 'cover' by the campaign rituals historians have associated with political vibrancy. The introduction in 1883 of strict limits on spending and tough penalties for corrupt practices and the newly categorised illegal practices[105] made these manoeuvres riskier – yet they did not immediately curb disorder. By way of an answer to the question 'why 1886 and not 1885?', the project suggests that it took an election for the 'revised rules of engagement' to bed in and for 'local parties to fully acclimatise'.[106] However, what also occurred between the 1885 and 1886 elections was the constituency crisis, with its mass mobilisation and scrutinisation of political participation, representation

[104]Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners*, 16–17, 277.

[105]K. Rix, '"The Elimination of Corrupt Practices in British Elections"? Reassessing the Impact of the 1883 Corrupt Practices Act', *EHR*, cxiii (2008), 65–97.

[106]Blaxill et al, 'Electoral Violence'.

and opinion. Without it, we have only a partial chronology. What the constituency crisis, and the roles played by disruption in it, reveal are contemporary interest in and the contestation of political engagement and shifts in the patterns and expectations of the political game. The 1886 election was not the inauguration but the culmination of a period of intense political agitation. Electoral violence was, moreover, one facet of a wider politics of disruption, and it would be interesting to consider the prevalence of disruption at other moments of political excitement and to trace whether its scale in spring 1886, relative to that of meetings overall, reflected part of an overall downward trend that extended beyond the electoral cycle. This would further nuance our comprehension of how politics was done, by and to whom, to what ends and with what outcomes.

There are limits to the explanatory power of elections, and extra-parliamentary, non-electoral politics forms a vital piece in the puzzle of political change. We need to do more to disentangle where 'electoral culture' meets and diverges from 'political culture'. At the same time, the 'political' cannot be fully understood without the 'cultural', and vice versa. The constituency crisis of spring 1886 has for too long fallen through these historiographical and methodological gaps. This is symptomatic of the fact that the 'turn' occasioned by the 'New Political History' became a loop in which histories of 19th-century politics got stuck, something that contributed to the period falling out of fashion and scholarship on it fragmenting, and to a sense that 'the field' of modern British political history, such as one exists, centres increasingly on the 20th century.[107] The challenge for the emergent revival in 19th-century political history will be to establish both a distinctiveness and a coherence. Reorienting how we conceive of extra-parliamentary politics will be vital to this endeavour, and developing the idea of a politics of contestation offers one possible path forward.

[107] See recent 'state of the field' pieces by Alex Middleton, 'The State of Modern British Political History?', *Parliamentary History*, xxxviii (2019), 278–285, and Colm Murphy, 'Introduction: The Future of British Political History', *The Political Quarterly*, xciv (2023), 201–7 and the corresponding special issue. Also see the contributions of 'New Political' historians like Lawrence to the emerging 'vernacular turn' in 20th-century political history: 'Roundtable: Historians' Use of Archived Material from Sociological Research', ed. Christopher Hilliard, *Twentieth Century British History*, xxxiii (2022), 392–459.