

considerations of social justice and public morality with the material interests of importing trades and consuming industries. Free Trade culture was not so much about the virtues of the market as about a remarkable trust in civil society, its ability to thrive in an open economy, to raise civic-minded consumers, and to escape the dreaded materialism and selfishness associated with protectionist societies.

Bread and Circuses

This time the spread of enlightenment has reached the masses.

Alfred Mond, industrialist and Liberal politician, 1912¹

Vote For Branch, and Don't Eat Doggy.

A Liberal in Enfield turns his dog into a walking political advert, exploiting stories of dogmeat consumption in protectionist Germany, January 1910²

Since nobody can think statistically in millions, and only students can think diagrammatically, the ordinary man must be helped to think by contrasts, and in pictures.

G. Wallace Carter, secretary of the Free Trade Union, on the principles of propaganda, 1910³

The trouble started on Friday. Just as a final group of men was proceeding through the centre of High Wycombe, a small town in south Buckinghamshire just west of London, to cast their vote in the January 1910 general election, mayhem broke out. Amidst cheering and jostling from Free Trade and Tariff Reform supporters, a stone was suddenly thrown, shattering the screen of a motor car. Then, as the town clock struck 8 p.m., 'a section of the crowd' made an attack on the Penny Bazaar, the committee rooms of the protectionist candidate, Alfred Cripps, smashing several windows. The police beat back the crowd, but not for long. Free Traders now charged on Oxford Street, with the rallying cry of 'Dump! Dump! Dump!' Protectionists had opened a 'Dump Shop' there the week before with a shop-window display of cheap foreign goods that were undercutting honest British labour. Free Trade supporters had already threatened the Dump Shop in the previous days, and eventually protectionists had boarded it up at the advice of Chief Constable Sparling. Undeterred, the crowd now tore down the boards and knocked in the

windows. A helpless policeman was pushed through the window of a neighbouring shop. More stones began to fly. The police fought running street battles with a 'band of rowdy youths'. Officers drew their truncheons, only infuriating 'the mob' more. The crowd then made a final assault on the Dump Shop. Overwhelmed, the Chief Constable withdrew his men and allowed the shop to meet its fate.⁴

Within minutes the Dump Shop was demolished from top to bottom, including windows, gas fixtures, and its exhibits. More than one barrow-load of stones needed to be cleared away from inside it the next day. With loud cheers, the attackers threw the contents of the shop into the street. 'The chairs were smashed to atoms on the pavement', a local reporter observed, with 'many of the onlookers picking up pieces as mementoes of what they declared to be the "insult" perpetrated on the staple industry of the town'; High Wycombe was home to the furnishing trade. One woman was struggling with a carpet, others walked off with a bed. But most items were piled high in the street and set on fire 'by means of rockets and otherwise'. When the Mayor, Alderman Birch, finally arrived on the scene, the fire had grown large enough to threaten neighbouring houses and the fire brigade had to be called.

Friday was only a taste of things to come. After the disturbances on 21 January 1910, the nineteen members of the local police force were augmented by eighty men from the Bucks Constabulary, seven mounted. On Saturday, the whole force paraded in front of the Guildhall as the votes were counted and the election result declared. Cripps, the Tariff Reformer, had won, reversing the Free Trade victory of 1906. The town was quiet—until about 8.30 in the evening. Witness accounts and subsequent court testimony would later differ about what exactly ignited the violence and who was responsible, but they all agreed about the speed with which it spread. Groups began by charging the homes of local protectionists and smashing more windows. By the time the pubs closed at eleven o'clock, the crowd had swelled to over 6,000, singing Liberal songs and challenging the increasingly exhausted police. A local reporter who stayed close to the police denied rumours that the crowd threw bottles or pricked the police horses with hat pins, but there was certainly a growing scent of violence in the air. By midnight, fearful of a return of the events of the previous evening and urged on by the Chief Constable, the Mayor finally read the Riot Act and called on the people to disperse, but not before another massive chant of 'Dump!, Dump!, Dump!' erupted from the crowd.

Most people in High Wycombe that Saturday night either failed to realize the seriousness of the situation or were unable to hear the reading of the Riot Act. Suddenly, after waiting ten minutes for the crowd to disperse, the police, standing two deep in a line, drew their batons and rushed on the crowd. Even the local newspaper, which rejected many reports as exaggerated fabrications, was in no doubt about the gravity of what followed. 'It was an extraordinary scene, such as the streets of the ancient Borough of Wycombe had never before witnessed.' The Mayor was besieged by an 'angry throng'; 'some of the women present actually spat in his face!' The police bludgeoned the crowd 'unmercifully'. Innocent people got trampled and knocked unconscious, as the police chased them to the outskirts of town. It was 1.30 on Sunday morning before the police finally retired, leaving the streets of High Wycombe deserted, and over thirty wounded in the care of the local doctors, Dr Fleck and Dr Bell.

The next few days bore witness to the severity of the clashes. Across town there were signs of splattered blood. Young men walked around with hands in slings, their heads covered in bandages. Ten days later the inhabitants of High Wycombe would gather at an overflow town meeting to condemn the decision to read the Riot Act. Amidst cries of 'shame', many accused the police of unnecessary brutality. They had been like 'demons' let loose, knocking down men and women, even children. The reading of the Riot Act had trampled upon their English liberties, 'which had been bought by their forefathers with great treasure and blood'. 'Are we in Russia, or are we in good old England?', the chairman of the meeting, James Holland, wanted to know.

It was no accident that the Conservative Dump Shop was in the early line of fire, and that the crowd was swelled by the chant 'Dump!, Dump!, Dump!' As a constituency, High Wycombe was like a doughnut. The area surrounding the town had a residential population with Conservative leanings. The town itself, however, had a Liberal core. Before going to the Liberals in 1906, the constituency had been consistently Conservative, and in January 1910 swung back, to elect a Tariff Reformer with a majority of 2,556. There was heated debate about the Conservatives' decision to open a Dump Shop in the centre of the town. For many Liberals it was a deliberate provocation. Even to many who worked in the local chair-making industries facing foreign competition, the display of cheap dumped goods was like rubbing salt in open wounds. Rather than demonstrating the social costs of free imports, as Tariff Reformers had

hoped, it mocked their proud British workmanship. The Dump Shop was like 'the holding of a red rag to a bull', said Councillor Forward.

Conservatives, in turn, insisted on their right to political expression and called for compensation; the Conservative owner eventually received only £52 for damages of almost three times that amount. Their Dump Shop was a novel but 'perfectly proper and legitimate' form of politics, they argued. It contained 'nothing to offend the common sense of anyone: it is simply an exhibition of articles in common use imported into this country, duty free, which might quite as well be made at home'. And, anyhow, they had followed the law every step of the way, even boarding up the shop before polling day when urged to do so by the police. '[Y]ou know quite well that the animosity the Dump Shop aroused was caused by its success in converting the electors from the fallacies of so-called Free Trade', leading Tariff Reformers told the editor of the local paper. Recalling an earlier attack on Conservative offices in the 1906 election, Tariff Reformers put the blame squarely on Free Trade Radicals, 'who, judging by their offensive posters and literature, have no consideration for the feelings of their opponents'.

The ringleaders behind the demolition of the Dump Shop were never identified. Subsequent hearings at the police court suggested that the mayhem probably resulted from a fairly spontaneous, pent-up popular irritation with protectionist propaganda. Some who had challenged Conservative supporters in the streets had been intoxicated; others were young men 15–18 years old. Those who were charged with destruction of property, throwing missiles, or endangering public safety, however, were respectable workers and small businessmen. One such was Frederic James, a local chairmaker, who together with a man known as 'Cheshire Cheese', asked others to join in as they made for the Dump Shop, armed with a hammer and sticks. James got off lightly, with a fine of £1 or 14 days' prison, though the Magistrate found it hard to believe that he simply happened to have his hammer in his pocket when he left his workplace. The carrier William Hoskins certainly did his bit to add to the commotion outside the Dump Shop as it was torn to pieces and its goods burnt in the street. Sober but excited at the time, Hoskins was charged with driving his cart and pony at great speed—no less than 16 miles an hour, according to a policeman—through the crowd, not just once but three times, knocking down Captain Butler of the Fire Brigade and interfering with the police. There was laughter in the courtroom when Hoskins rather ingeniously suggested that his actions had been nothing but a well-intentioned attempt

to assist the police: he had hoped his driving would frighten the crowd and make it go away. It was £1 4s. 6d. for Hoskins.⁵

The wild scenes in Wycombe in January 1910 show us the emotion and energy unleashed in the conflict between Free Trade and Tariff Reform. The riots at High Wycombe may have been exceptional—though there was also violence in some other towns such as Droitwich⁶—but they point to the cultural, material, and indeed physical dynamics of political communication at work. Free Trade set people and objects in motion, in a battle over the meaning and representation of things. It generated passions all but lost in the more rational, institutionalized climate of today's advocates of trade liberalization. Feverish enthusiasm, emotional politics, and, indeed, urban riots and vandalism have become associated with movements opposed to free trade and globalization. Historically, however, there has not always been a simple divide between the reasonable atmosphere of Free Trade and the inflamed, passionate ideology of its critics. Far from being a sober calculation of economic costs and benefits, Free Trade in the past could be a warm-blooded creature. Wycombe combined new ways of communicating politics—the shop-window display of goods embodying the impact of globalization—with an older drama of popular protests.

What happened at High Wycombe runs counter to conventional accounts of Free Trade that have tried to explain its success in terms of its superior economic reasoning and material calculation. For liberal economists the strength of Free Trade is rooted in its superior theory of trade.⁷ For liberal historians, too, its success has been related to its supposedly distinct and superior form of reasoning. Liberalism, in this view, promoted a culture of reasoned argument in public meetings which favoured the scientifically superior case of Free Trade. Free Traders won because they were able to dictate the terms of engagement, forcing Tariff Reformers to present their case 'rationally and publicly', and exposing the deficiencies and inconsistencies of the protectionist programme.⁸ In brief, there has been a tendency to imagine a divide between two political cultures: sober public deliberation and scientific truth (Free Trade liberalism) versus beer, prejudice, and passion (popular Conservatism). The events at High Wycombe suggest we need to look at the two as a pair, playing at the same pitch of popular politics, responding to, observing, and emulating each other as the game developed.

The riots at Wycombe are an invitation to ask what Free Trade looked like in practice, in the world of everyday politics and public life, beyond

the clean and sober pages of economic textbooks. For most people (past and present), 'the economy' is far more of an elusive riddle than most economists or historians have allowed. On the eve of the First World War, the Treasury economist Ralph Hawtrey penned a long 'Afterthought on Protectionism' in which he criticized Free Traders and Tariff Reformers alike for popularizing and simplifying their mantras. Yet Hawtrey had the good sense to realize that 'philosophers are not kings'. Politics followed a logic different from that of scholarly inquiry: 'arguments are no use in political controversy... [if they] are too refined for the comprehension of the electorate or of the average politician'.⁹ Nor was ignorance the preserve of the masses. At the Treasury, the staunch Free Trader Francis Mowatt was literally in despair in 1903 during the cabinet crisis over Chamberlain's proposals: half the cabinet did not appear to understand basic economics.¹⁰

Yet the increasingly violent nature of the disagreement over trade policy resulted from more than simple ignorance. Protectionists and Free Traders had different starting points and were asking different questions. Supporters of Free Trade pointed to the absolute increase in the volume and value of trade, while protectionists were worried about trends and degrees—the gradual decline of British trade relative to foreign competitors who were becoming increasingly self-sufficient, shielded by trade barriers and subsidies. To the latter, the future lay with imperial and home markets and it was worth sacrificing a share of foreign trade to foster them. Liberals viewed free imports as wealth flowing into the country; protectionists worried that they displaced British jobs and led to the emigration of capital and manpower. In the midst of the campaign in 1903, for example, the Ebbw Vale Steel company, undercut by cheaper foreign competition, closed plants with a loss of 3,000 jobs. To Liberals this was merely part of the natural and benign process of competitive adjustment and efficiency gains from trade, giving other British industries the cheap materials they needed to stay competitive in a tough world market. To protectionists, by contrast, it was the frightening sign of a jobless future to come.

Was the decrease in wages which preceded the 1906 election and the elections in 1910 a case for sticking to the old liberal policy or for ditching it? Food cost 15 per cent more in 1911 than in 1899 while wages rose only an average of 6 per cent.¹¹ Was this evidence of the failure of Free Trade or of it being more indispensable than ever before? Free Traders were quick to pull Chamberlain's figures to pieces—his picture of Britain's decline was based on the abnormal years of 1872 and 1902. Tariff Reformers in

turn stressed the questionable methods used by Free Traders, especially in comparing the conditions of workers in Germany and Britain with data that was based on different wage structures and unemployment statistics. Liberals and historians since have pointed to the expansion of trade and returns from shipping and foreign investments as evidence of the superiority of Free Trade, but the burst of growth on the eve of the First World War only began in the winter of 1909–1910, after two years of depression and high unemployment. In fact, real wages continued to fall until 1911. For people going to the polls in the two elections of January and December 1910, it was a time of uncertainty.

For groups caught in the middle between these competing projections of Britain's future it was not immediately self-evident which side had the better argument, what counted as a fact, or indeed what measure to use. Was wealth more important than employment? Was secure employment worth a rise in the cost of living? For most Britons at the time, knowledge remained local, barely stretching beyond one's town or surrounding district unless the subject was sport.¹² Free Traders realized that Tariff Reform would not be defeated by statistics alone. Facts and good arguments do not win by themselves. They were also acutely aware that they faced a more difficult task than Tariff Reformers in communicating their programme. A tariff promises immediate, direct benefits for particular industries. This makes it easy to organize strong, concentrated support. For Free Trade it is harder to organize collective action: with the exception of trades like the cotton industry, which depended on cheap imported raw material, the benefits are more diffuse and indirect, spread out across society as a whole. It affects most people slightly rather than a few people greatly.

Free Traders faced two related challenges: they had to create and communicate a picture of the economy that was meaningful to people, and they needed to do so in a way that was entertaining as well as educational. Politics did not inhabit a distinct planet. The battle over Free Trade developed within a competitive and changing world of communication and leisure. The late Victorian and Edwardian period saw an explosion of commercial consumer culture. There were seemingly never-ending new opportunities for distraction and entertainment, from an evening out in a music hall or a bank holiday at the seaside to shopping at one of the new department stores, from reading one of the many new penny magazines to watching visual tricks on the screen. In addition to competing with each other, then, Free Trade and Tariff Reform also had to respond to this

visually rich commercial and technological incursion into public space and time. Today it is often this expanding commercial sphere that is blamed for a decline in voting and political participation. But historically it offered fresh opportunities for political engagement, as well as challenges and distractions.

What had begun as an argument over the cost of a small tariff in 1903 had grown by 1910 into a vast political circus. With regiments of supporters, Free Trade and Tariff Reform organized tens of thousands of meetings, plastered millions of posters on town walls, and held picture shows and exhibitions, up and down the country. Far from declining, turnout shot up to extraordinary heights—87 per cent in the January 1910 election, unrivalled since. Political economy was revitalized by a new kind of politics of emotion, a politics that fused entertainment and education and entered into dialogue with commercial culture. Free Trade changed itself—and transformed political life in the process.

White Loaves, Black Bread, and Horseflesh

The single most popular icon in the Edwardian campaign was the Free Trade 'cheap loaf'. Everywhere cartoons, posters, and postcards offered visual contrasts between the large Free Trade loaf and the smaller 'protectionist loaf', between a British regime of cheap free imports and a foreign world of trade barriers, expensive food, and hunger. Supporters paraded the two loaves in the streets, some even dressed up as the cheap loaf in processions. The loaf was displayed on sticks, in shop windows, and worn as a badge. Liberal speakers threw loaves into their audiences.¹³ It offered a tangible yet flexible way to communicate political economy to the people. The loaf revolutionized the sensibilities of consumers and provided a new barometer for the standard of living. It was the first time that actual goods were used to illustrate the effects of government policies on people's household budget, a role that has become familiar over the past few decades through politicians' use of the shopping basket, especially in debates over the European Community in the 1970s. But the loaf was much more than a register of prices. It expressed broad ideas about culture, society, and national identity. As the campaign developed, so did the symbolic use of the cheap loaf. Information about prices and the standard of living became linked to increasingly nationalist representations of the superiority of British civilization.

Most Britons had begun to prefer white bread already in the late eighteenth century, although oatmeal remained popular in Scotland and northern parts of England, and some regions retained distinct types of bread into the early twentieth century, including 'lava bread' made of seaweed in some Welsh towns. Whatever later generations of nutritionists would say, most Victorian people and social reformers were convinced that the shift from the coarser grains of the brown loaf to the white loaf followed naturally on the shift from hard outdoor labour to more sedentary work in towns and factories. Nineteenth-century experiments found that switching workers back to a coarser loaf increased their problems with digestion and led to a decline in morale and performance.¹⁴ By the turn of the twentieth century, bread had been displaced by meat as the single largest item in the food budget of the working classes (25–32 per cent) but bread and flour still accounted for 20–25 per cent.

As a political symbol, the loaf was already deployed in the battle leading up to the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. Alongside the central image of the wheat sheaf that proclaimed 'Our Bread untaxed, our commerce free' on drawings and pottery, the Anti-Corn Law League adopted the loaf as a symbol in 1841. *The Anti-Bread Tax Circular* showed three loaves in different sizes to make a point about how Britons were less well fed than Poles and Frenchmen. On a few occasions, the League even used the loaves as stage props at meetings, suspending a large Polish, medium French, and small British loaf from the ceiling. Large French and small English loaves also made an appearance at Chartist meetings.¹⁵ In Bristol, in the 1852 election, Liberals used the loaf to caricature and stigmatize Conservatives who had supported Free Trade in corn but whose interests in the West Indies now made them stop short at sugar. A large, smiling, and well-dressed loaf-man fronts the successful Liberal candidates on the hustings next to the grumpy, small loaf of the Conservative candidate.¹⁶

The Edwardian campaign made the cheap loaf its central symbol. It was a simple and entertaining shorthand that both appealed to common wisdom about the price of food and crystallized a single, clear picture out of the ever-expanding and much more complex data and arguments about the economy. Yet ironically, it was protectionists who first drew wide attention to this icon. In one of the defining moments of the campaign, on 4 November 1903, Chamberlain dramatically produced for his Birmingham audience one Free Trade loaf and one protectionist loaf, barely



Figure 5. 'A Sporting Question': Joseph Chamberlain displays two virtually identical loaves on this political postcard, re-enacting his stunt in Birmingham, 1903.

distinguishable in size. Conservative postcards quickly reproduced images of the 'actual loaves' shown by Chamberlain (see Figure 5). Chamberlain's point was simple: the 2s. duty he proposed was so small that it made effectively no difference. In response, the liberal *Daily News* promptly baked its own two loaves based on the statistics of the government's recent blue book and displayed a big Free Trade loaf next to a smaller protectionist one in its London offices. What, then, was the correct size of these competing loaves? Which factors should be taken into consideration for comparison—prices, or also different wages and living conditions more generally? And whose figures could be trusted?

Liberal cartoonists seized the opportunity to contrast the common sense of British workers who knew their loaf with the abstract promises of Tariff Reformers. 'Spectacular Deception' was one of F. C. Gould's many influential cartoons for the *Westminster Gazette*, and widely used in posters, lantern lectures, leaflets, and postcards. Chamberlain here appeared as a con-artist on a soap-box, with a tiny loaf in the palm of his hand trying

to persuade two passing workers to look at the loaf through his 'patent Imperial Protection double magnifying spectacles'. The workers reject this trick and remind Chamberlain that 'we want to Eat the loaf, not to look at it'.¹⁷ Chamberlain's stunt was a public relations disaster. It reinforced popular suspicions of his untrustworthiness. And instead of demolishing the Free Trade icon, it encouraged a much broader use of the loaf to represent the condition of entire societies.

The late nineteenth century ushered in a revolution in statistical knowledge and social surveys. Governments knew ever more about the economy in ever greater detail. The Board of Trade had started an index of a number of retail prices in 1896. The government blue book of 1903 compared conditions in Free Trade Britain with those in protectionist countries. This new wealth of information provided Liberal and Conservative rivals with endless material for debate and refutation, but it was also far too voluminous and detailed for popular politics. The big loaf and the little loaf were attractive symbols for embodying complex economic relations. In the 1906 election, Liberals used handbills showing a photograph of candidates next to the two loaves, with information from the blue book about wages, hours of work, and prices in Germany and Britain. The loaves' respective size did not try to capture the price of flour but to reflect working conditions more generally: 'Half an hours skilled labour in England purchases 3 times as much Bread as half an hours skilled labour in Germany.' (Colour Plate VIII.) An argument about price had expanded into one about purchasing power and social conditions.

Whatever the statistical merit of the comparison—Tariff Reformers complained that the blue book figures unfairly ignored higher wages for unskilled labour in Germany and that Liberal pictures presumed that the entire wage was spent on bread—it was this visual image of the Free Trade loaf three times the size of the protected loaf that won out. Often numbers disappeared altogether, and the loaves were left to speak for themselves, as in the posters sponsored by the *Daily News*: 'We Plead for the Women & Children' (Colour Plate IX).¹⁸ In Bradford in 1906, a man dressed up as the big loaf led a children's procession in support of the local Liberal candidate.¹⁹ Dudley Ward's 'The Storm Cloud. Wake Up! Your Children's Bread is in Danger' draws on fairy tales and shows the loaf 'Prosperity' running away from a tornado with the face of Chamberlain seeking to carve it with the knife 'Taxation'. The household loaf's irregular shape lent itself well to broad cultural claims based only loosely on actual numbers and prices; the

image of a sliced loaf, which could represent economic differences more precisely, was exceedingly rare.²⁰

Tariff Reformers tried to argue away the cheap loaf and shift concerns to wages and employment, but in the process they only reinforced the centrality of the liberal icon. 'Yes, lass, the bread may have gone up a farthin', a British workman explains to his plump wife in a Conservative picture, but it was nothing to worry about since his wages had increased, and other taxes had been lowered. At the same time, his wife was serving a loaf.²¹ Other Conservative postcards illustrated the British lion's 'Obvious Preference' for a 'preference loaf made of colonial and home grown wheat' over a Free Trade loaf. Tariff Reform efforts merely helped to keep the loaf in the public eye.²²

In the new medium of film, Lewin Fitzhamon, a pioneer of the moving image, was a director with strong protectionist convictions—his horse, which acted in many of his films, was called 'Tariff'. Famous for the hugely popular animal drama *Rescued by Rover* (1905) and social comedies like *What*

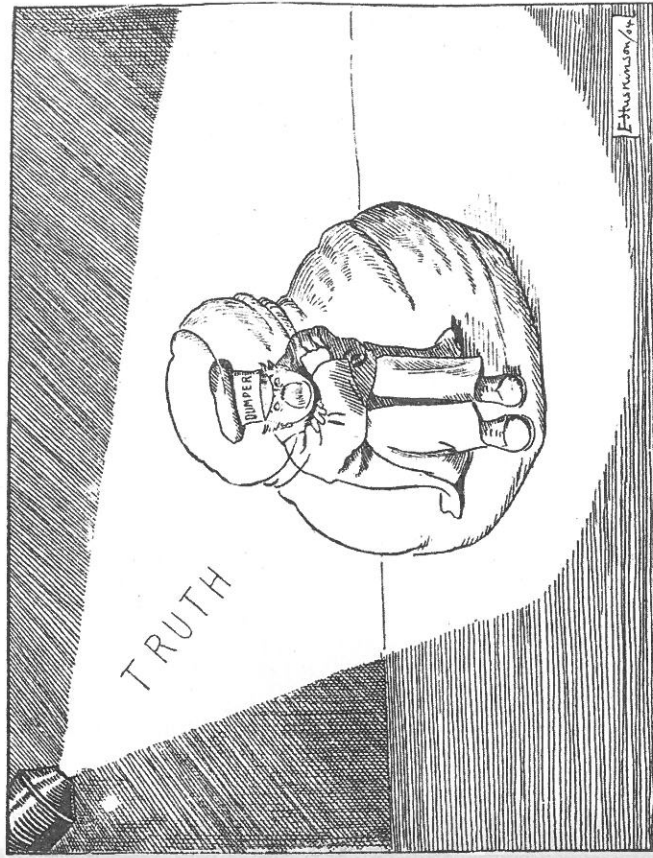


Figure 6. John Bull triumphs over the Free Trade witch, on his left, with the Fair Trade fairy and a saved working-class couple, on his right, with Britannia presiding. Note the two loaves on display on the table. A still from 'The International Exchange', 1905, one of the earliest political propaganda films, directed by Lewin Fitzhamon and produced by Hepworth.

the *Curate Really Did* (1905), 'Fitz' also teamed up with Cecil Hepworth to make *International Exchange* in 1905, one of two pioneering political films championing protection. In the short film John Bull is freed from the spell of the ugly Free Trade witch by the charm of a fairy maiden 'Fair Trade'. Yet, again, the loaf is a central and ambiguous image on the screen: John Bull leaves a Free Trade witch holding a large loaf for a fairy with a smaller loaf (see Figure 6).²³

There was a remarkable failure by Tariff Reformers to develop their own images of political economy. The figure of the 'dumper', recognizable by his German cap and pipe, or of 'Herr Schmit', the German shopkeeper who had infiltrated the open British market as an agent of foreign producers, were the closest protectionists came to developing a rival image. Yet even these never entirely managed to escape the magnetic pull of the loaf. The pictures by Huskinson, the gifted chief cartoonist of the Tariff Reform League,

FOUND!



THE RÖNTGEN RAYS AND THE LARGE LOAF

Figure 7. With the help of modern scientific technology, Tariff Reformers expose the German dumper hiding in the Free Trade loaf. A protectionist cartoon, 1904.

show the dilemma. X-rays expose the scheming German 'dumper' hiding in a large loaf (see Figure 7, above). Elsewhere, the loaf is used to block John Bull's binoculars as he tries to scan the seas for British traders in difficulties.²⁴

Many of these representations developed a life of their own. Cartoonists and politicians closely followed each other's images, emulating and undercutting each other. So it was perhaps no accident that the contrast of the big loaf and the little loaf eventually found its way back into the Tariff Reform campaign. Harry Furniss, the fat and restless illustrator who had caricatured politicians for *Punch* since the 1880s and whose humorous



Figure 8. The sun is rising over a plentiful future under Joseph Chamberlain, next to the bleak present under Free Trade.

weekly *Lika Joka* had sold 140,000 copies on its first day of publication in 1894, turned his brush to political cartoons for the Conservative weekly, *The People*. Furniss shows Chamberlain still holding out two similarly sized loaves, but now he is standing proudly on a heap of gigantic loaves, brightly illuminated by the rising sun. 'If "Joe" succeeds Bread will be Plentiful.' Next to Chamberlain, against the backdrop of a gloomy, grey industrial horizon, a lonely, minuscule loaf sits on a placard which explains: 'This is all the bread working men can afford to buy while foreigners rob us of our trade and English works are closed.'²⁵ (see Figure 8.)

The cheap loaf was a powerful symbol of prosperity under Free Trade—as long as prices were low and steady. Once prices starting rising in 1908–10 it ran into difficulties. 'Where is that Radical Cheap Loaf?', Conservative posters asked, showing Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister, serving the regular 4½ lb loaf at an increased price of 6d.²⁶ Price became a deeply ideological issue.²⁷ In response, the Free Trade campaign shifted its focus from quantity to quality, played out in increasingly stark contrasts between civilized life in Free Trade Britain and barbaric conditions in Germany. The large white Free Trade loaf and the smaller protectionist white loaf were now joined by coarse black bread, typical, it was said, of the subhuman diet that tariffs forced upon Germans, driven to eat even horses and dogs.

From the beginning of the campaign in 1903 some Liberals had produced black bread to entertain audiences and remind them of Britain's higher civilization embodied in the white Free Trade loaf. Loulou Harcourt proudly told his father, Gladstone's last Chancellor, how he had held up in the course of a speech 'two loaves of German black rye bread to show what protection had done for the German peasant—and there was nearly a riot afterwards to get hold of pieces of the loaves!'.²⁸ Lloyd George, who knew how to whip up a crowd, told audiences that Chamberlain was a 'new Joshua' who asked them to proceed 'to a land, not flowing with milk and honey, but rolling with black bread and German sausages'.²⁹ Radicals and Liberal Unionists voiced fears that a tariff would drive British workers to a diet of horseflesh, as in protectionist Germany.

Horses figured prominently in Horatio Bottomley's election campaign in South Hackney, in the heart of London's East End, in 1906. Bottomley was a self-styled 'born champion of the people', Holyoake's nephew and president of the Workman's Anti-Sugar Tax Association. He was also a well-known sportsman and knew about horses. His horse Wargrave

won the Cesarewitch, the famous flat handicap race for thoroughbreds at Newmarket, named in honour of the future Tsar Alexander II. Bottomley's propaganda made much of the testimony of a dealer in worm-out horses at a recent county court hearing in Newcastle. In the last ten months he had exported 1,500 horses to be sold as butcher's meat abroad.³⁰

By 1910 horrifying examples of life under protection were everywhere. Britons were deluged with figures of German horse consumption; the daily slaughter of sixty horses in Breslau alone fed 24,000 people, leaflets by the Free Trade Union reported. There were photographic reproductions taken directly from German newspapers, like the Chemnitz *Volksstimme*, in which a butcher advertised his horseflesh for its nutritious qualities. Horseflesh steaks and sausages were exhibited alongside black bread in shops and market displays in many towns, from York and Hull to Brighton. Following Lloyd George's witty challenge to those members of the House of Lords who opposed the Liberal budget to go and try the horseflesh sausage that came with tariffs, Liberal Club windows displayed pictures of a couple of German sausages next to two peers.

Britons were treated to sensationalist accounts of what happened to horses in Germany. When a drayman's horse fell and died, German crowds dragged it to a meadow, skinned it, and within minutes 'cut away all the flesh from the bones' before the police could intervene. In the 1910 elections, Free Traders paraded with placards of sausages and old mares. As late as 1912, in a by-election in Bolton, Liberals paraded through the streets a broken-down pony labelled 'Horseflesh for Germany'.³¹ Worse, protection drove hungry Germans to eat even man's best friend. Seven thousand dogs a year were killed for human consumption according to official German statistics eagerly circulated by Free Traders. In suburban Enfield, just outside London, a Liberal had the ingenious idea of giving his dog a run with a card round its neck pleading 'Vote for Branch, and don't eat Doggy'.³²

With their dietary propaganda Free Traders fanned the flames of Anglo-German rivalry—Tariff Reformers responded by publicizing the outrage expressed by conservative German papers at the jingoistic tone of radical propaganda with its "'fairy-tales about German workers subsisting on sour black bread, horse sausage, and dog's flesh'".³³ But it was also part of a new and dynamic stage in the production of knowledge about foreign societies, and its manipulation for a popular audience at home. The average British worker had little awareness of the colonies, let alone of protectionist countries like Germany. In addition to tapping into a tradition

of national caricatures like Uncle Sam and John Bull, revived by economic nationalism on both sides of the Atlantic, the battle over Free Trade unleashed an unprecedented flow of information (and prejudice) about an unknown world of life and labour. It accelerated and popularized the international distribution of news, in print and increasingly also through photos. Previously *terra incognita*, distant places like Düsseldorf, Breslau, and Bocholt entered the everyday life of British politics.

It was Tariff Reformers who first set this wave of foreign reporting in motion with a new kind of educational tourism. In the autumn of 1908 the Yorkshire newspaper editor Rayner Roberts together with the Conservative candidate for Dewsbury, W. B. Boyd Carpenter, organized a trip to Germany for a small group of working men from the local heavy woollen industry. By the summer of 1910, Conservatives had financed some five hundred of these 'Tariff Trippers'. They returned with vivid reports of the favourable conditions of life in Germany: German workers had respectable homes, social insurance, and labour exchanges. Germany was living proof of the Tariff Reform vision of high wages and social welfare buttressed by protection. Progressive Liberals had their own social reform schemes, but at a time of high unemployment it was far from clear whether they could compete with the Conservative picture of well-paid Germans who worked securely behind the shelter of a tariff. For the first time since the battle began, Tariff Reformers had an effective challenge to the cheap loaf.

Free Traders were under pressure to present an alternative dystopian vision of life under protection. Once again, they made food their central theme. Excerpts from the foreign press, especially social democratic papers in Germany and Austria-Hungary, became a staple of local and national politics in Britain. Liberal candidates read to audiences from German newspapers about clerks' protests at high prices. The *Free Trader* reproduced photographs of protests against meat prices in Vienna. Reports critical of the tariff system by the British consul-general in Germany, Francis Oppenheimer, were disseminated through leaflets, pamphlets, and local newspapers.³⁴ Some who had deserted from the Tariff Trippers, like Edward Baker of Limehouse, spoke of the bribery and duplicity involved in the protectionist tours. It was impossible to find a single loaf of white bread anywhere, Baker told readers; German sausages 'struck me as having been designed for cow diet'.³⁵ Free Traders' own investigations reached their climax when Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour leader and future

Prime Minister, travelled to Düsseldorf, Nuremberg, and Bocholt in 1910. His report on the 'true conditions' of German workers in an influential series of newspaper articles sold at one penny. MacDonald acknowledged that Germany had been getting richer. But this was in spite not because of tariffs; it was the result of education, organization, and social reform, especially an effective system of unemployment relief. Germany emerged as a text-book illustration of the horrors of protection. Horsemeat could be found in any butcher's shop. He bought bread only to find it 'rough, heavy, unpalatable'. He tried to buy tea and was unable to find any. The 'stories about horseflesh, dogflesh, and black bread are perfectly true', MacDonald reported.³⁶

Tariff Reformers pointed out in vain that it was nonsense to collapse diet, living conditions, and culture into one inevitable result of protectionism. Not only did Germany have a low tariff by international standards. A darker bread was popular with most people in Germany, and 'eaten by the same class of people which here in London dined at the Ritz and the Savoy'.³⁷ It did not reflect either poverty or tariffs. Holland, the country on the continent closest to free trade, also had a preference for rye bread. Debunking the supesize Free Trade loaf versus the small German loaf, Tariff Reformers pointed to Board of Trade statistics which showed that the price of the typical household loaf in Berlin in 1908 was identical to that in London, and even less than in Edinburgh and Dublin. Conservative papers printed letters by Britons who had spent some time in Germany and praised the taste and nutritious qualities of rye bread. Was there better proof than the absence in Germany of the British craze for patent pills? Even *The Lancet*, the authoritative voice of medical science, was dragged into the debate to prove that black bread was not famine food, nor nutritionally inferior to the white loaf. Queen Alexandra herself was a keen consumer of black bread, Conservatives stressed, reproducing the royal warrant held by a local baker.³⁸

Not surprisingly, the reality behind the stories of horseflesh and dogmeat was more complex than in Free Trade accounts. German protests against meat prices had at least as much to do with rising expectations as with the direct effects of a tariff. German meat prices, in fact, fell in 1906 and stayed constant until the autumn of 1910, until well after the British horseflesh drama had unfolded. The German standard of living had improved sharply in the late nineteenth century. This created a pronounced sense of relative deprivation once the general price of food began to rise after 1900,

in Germany as elsewhere. The typical German worker now expected a piece of meat for lunch. In fact, German workers ate as much meat as 'civil servants. And as workers began to eat more expensive, higher quality meats, so their sensitivity to prices increased. In Chemnitz, several restaurants served raw dog. But consumption of horseflesh and dogmeat reflected not poverty but distinct regional cultures, as the Board of Trade acknowledged in its inquiry into industrial conditions in Germany in 1908. Almost all of the 6,000–7,000 dogs killed in Germany per year met their end in slaughterhouses in Saxony and Silesia, an area with a high number of Polish immigrants who saw in dog flesh an antidote to tuberculosis.³⁹ In rich areas like the Rhineland more than twenty times as many horses were slaughtered as in poorer areas like Posen. *Chevaline* was, and remains, a perfectly acceptable food in France and Italy, and could be had in the 1980s in the Harvard Faculty Club, not especially known as a canteen of the poor.

Whatever its accuracy, however, there can be little doubt about the success of the Free Trade campaign. Conservatives wrote in despair to their party central office for guidance as stories appeared in their local papers about tariffs driving Germans to eat dogs; the most 'effective' point which the information department was able to suggest to speakers was to remind meetings that 'the German does not live on dog meat nor on horseflesh'.⁴⁰ Free Trade tapped into broader national stereotypes and cultural sensitivities. Victorian campaigns against vivisection and cruelty towards animals had left behind a new humane sentiment.⁴¹ The dog was a social animal, capable of trust and loyalty. In mid-Victorian Britain, The Society for the Propagation of Horse Flesh sought to advertise the nutritious benefits of horsemeat, but its campaign only reinforced a sense that this was really a pagan, foreign custom. A civilized nation did not consume horse or dog. In truth, butchers continued to sell horseflesh in the poorer districts of the East End and in Camden, where many Belgians settled. In 1910 medical officers even believed that some cat meat 'may in fact be used for human consumption'.⁴² But at the popular level, accounts of dietary customs abroad corroborated a view that protection meant barbarism. When the general secretary of the Union of Blastfurnacemen, P. Walls, was asked in a Board of Trade inquiry during the First World War whether the living conditions of German workers would not be an inducement for British workers to support a tariff, the answer was simple: 'I think the standard of living for the workers in Germany requires no discussion: we do not use any horseflesh here.'⁴³

Free Trade now seemed at the root of a very British form of civilization. The difference between Free Trade and tariffs was not one of degree. Protection did not simply lead to slightly higher prices, shifting supply and demand curves, as economists might see it. Rather, as Free Traders returning from Germany amplified again and again in 1909–10, tariffs had produced a fundamentally different culture. It was impossible to find tea or jam. 'The German working classes do not know the pleasure of sitting down to a roast joint, large or small of beef, mutton, or pork... not one in fifty has the knowledge which the English average working-class housewife has of cooking.'⁴⁴

This wholesale attack on German 'barbarity' was shared even by those advanced Liberals who looked to Germany for inspiration in the realm of social insurance. No one was more active in condemning German culture at the time than Lloyd George, who has been mainly remembered as a modernizer inspired by Bismarck's welfare system.⁴⁵ Up and down the country, Lloyd George rallied supporters with stories of German horseflesh. 'Three months of blackbread diet and the most juicy horseflesh rump steaks' would make the peers pass the Liberal budget before three days were out, he assured voters in the January 1910 election.⁴⁶ He 'was not afraid of the German navy; he was not afraid of German trade competition; but he had a real dread of the German sausage. (Cheers and laughter)... Tariff Reform had brought people to poverty in Germany and to food which we here would not give tramps.'⁴⁷ 'If this country wanted German tariffs', he told a meeting at York, 'it must have German wages... German militarism, and German sausages.'⁴⁸ Free Trade had become a cultural question. Stark comparisons with Germany now required Liberals to backtrack from earlier warnings of the millions of starving Britons to whom a tariff was a matter of life and death: Britons were much better off.⁴⁹ Positive observations, such as Germans' much-noted cleanliness, were explained away as a mere reflection of the authoritarian atmosphere bred by tariffs. Germans only appeared to be cleaner. In reality, tidiness was the sign of a police state. Fear of authority meant poverty was hidden from public sight. In Britain, by contrast, the air of liberty meant the poor were not ashamed to go out in rags.⁵⁰

Crusading Armies

When Chamberlain christened his campaign for tariff reform a 'crusade', he captured the zeal and manpower that would be unleashed on the political

landscape. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the campaigns against slavery and for the repeal of the Corn Laws had introduced a new kind of pressure group politics. Edwardian politics gave birth to their own variety of lobbies and pressure groups, from the Navy League to Single Taxers. But the battle over Free Trade inspired mobilization on an altogether different scale. In the Ludlow by-election in December 1903, Tariff Reform dispatched an unprecedented 18 agents to this small agricultural constituency in Shropshire, and won.⁵¹ Liberals were stunned. Over the next few years, the Tariff Reform League and Free Trade Union swelled into veritable mass armies. Between January 1909 and the January 1910 election, the Tariff Reform League held 7,763 meetings, distributed 53 million leaflets and pamphlets and organized 161 Dump Shops, motor omnibuses, and caravans; 900,000 copies of the cartoon *Fiscal Facts* were sent out and 166,000 posters were issued in the election alone.⁵² Its main rival, the Free Trade Union, expanded from a small committee in 1903 into a vast organization of permanent campaigning. By 1908 it sponsored 2,943 meetings, by 1909 over 5,000. In 1910, a year with two general elections, it held no fewer than 12,471 meetings.

The activities of local branches give a sense of the size of the operation. The Free Trade Union branch in Middlesex and North and West London had a central office at Caledonian Road with branch offices in Hornsey, Teddington, Ealing, North Kensington, Wembley, and Fulham. Henry Nettleship here headed a staff of 29 speakers, 3 messengers, 1 typist, 2 errand boys and another 32 voluntary workers. They organized no fewer than 190 meetings in the January 1910 election.⁵³ In that election, the volume of printed material sent out across the country had increased by more than half over 1906, including 660,000 Free Trade coloured pictures and posters and one million *Liberal Song Sheets*.⁵⁴

The agitation is impressive for the sheer numbers of people involved, but equally for the new forms of political marketing it pioneered. 'Chamberlain shows us how to do it', concluded Herbert Gladstone, the organizational mastermind and whip of the Liberal party, after the early by-election battles in the winter of 1903–4. The Tariff Reform League was an active organizing force, enlisting 'heaps of men who are not paid'.⁵⁵ The Free Trade defence, by contrast, started out as a loose alliance of campaigning bodies without a general headquarters. Free Trade initiatives ranged from the Whiggish and exclusive Unionist Free Trade Club to Sheridan Jones' People's League Against Protection, which rallied Trade Union

leaders and Labourites, from the donnish Oxford Free Trade League to Miss Birch's private, non-party Free Trade organization which sought to bring together Free Trade speakers across the political spectrum, from the Conservative Arthur Elliot to advanced Liberals like L. T. Hobhouse and Bertrand Russell.⁵⁶ Much energy was wasted in attempting to recruit Conservative and Liberal Unionist allies, even though to most of them the prospect of appearing with Radicals on the same platform was as distasteful as Tariff Reform itself. They were 'fine weather free traders', Elliot despaired. The Cobden Club was likewise considered unsuited for a 'strong agitation'. It was too small, with an ageing membership, and widely viewed as a partisan body.⁵⁷ It was the Liberal-dominated Free Trade Union and its auxiliary regiments that became the main fighting force of the campaign.

The Free Trade Union underwent a remarkable evolution from its birth in the summer of 1903 to its full fighting strength in 1910. Its birth was not uncomplicated. It displayed the classic symptoms of a pressure group, with competing egos of overzealous organizers and diverging strategic priorities. Chiozza Money, the Liberals' statistical brain, felt snubbed at having to work in a subordinate position to L. T. Hobhouse, the sociologist, and first secretary of the Union. Some Liberals like Herbert Gladstone and Hobhouse wanted to build a popular organization of activists with Free Trade bodies all over the country. The majority of the organizing committee, by contrast, wanted to focus on instant propaganda to respond to the protectionist avalanche and prepare for a general election that they feared would be called at any moment.⁵⁸ Initially, the Free Trade Union did not recruit grassroots members but acted mainly as a leafletting and information bureau. By Christmas 1903, 15 million leaflets had already been distributed. Loulou Harcourt single-handedly raised money to hire 37 lecturers on his own initiative, but overall the Union operated on a shoestring. In the autumn of 1903 it had one overburdened researcher who prepared information on particular industries, like potteries.⁵⁹ A year later its funds were near exhaustion.

The 1906 election landslide victory turned out to be a mixed blessing for the Free Trade Union. On the one hand, it demonstrated its ability to strengthen the sinews of war: money. Publicly, Free Traders tried hard to position themselves as a movement supported by small people and toilers, in contrast to Tariff Reform millionaires. Notwithstanding many small contributions, however, most of the work of the Union was made

possible thanks to large donations from rich Liberals and businessmen, such as J. B. Robinson's £2,000 or the £1,000 donation by the oil and engineering tycoon Weetman Pearson in the summer of 1903, only the first in a series of generous gifts.⁶⁰ In addition to millions of leaflets targeting voters, the Union was also a vital source of information for candidates and speakers. It supplied them with much-needed ammunition in the form of updated, trade-specific figures, and concise primers, such as the *ABC Fiscal Handbook*, penny books like *Look at Germany*, and *101 Points against Tariff Reform*. On the other hand, such was the historic size of the Liberal triumph that an air of easy complacency began to spread. When the Tariff Reform League resumed its crusade in 1907, colonizing the Unionist party, Free Traders were caught napping. Tariff Reform tactics became more aggressive and ruthless. Working from Unionist committee rooms, protectionists 'import[ed] large numbers of alleged "unemployed" who had lost their occupation owing to Free Trade', and freely adjusted their proposals to the particular make-up of different constituencies.⁶¹

It was now that the Free Trade campaign began to undergo its metamorphosis. By the time of the 1910 elections the Free Trade Union and its auxiliary bodies had grown into a nationwide network of 400 branches, supported by an army of 'missionary volunteers'. Already in 1909, a non-election year, the Union held over 5,000 public meetings, almost double that in 1908.⁶² While leafletting continued at an ever greater rate (over 16 million leaflets and pamphlets in 1909), the style of politics now shifted towards new forms of engagement in mass meetings and spectacles: education via entertainment. Not much has been known about this new political world, simply because the later unravelling of Free Trade culture led to the decline and disappearance of these organizations, and with them their records. Fortunately, records have survived, hidden away in Churchill's papers, from one main auxiliary of the Free Trade Union: the National Free Trade Lectures and Exhibitions. This important set of sources makes it possible to not only reconstruct the size of the campaign but, even more importantly, to watch how Free Trade became embedded in a new style of mass politics.⁶³

The world was fundamentally different after 1906, the Free Trade organizer G. Wallace Carter explained two years later. Before 1906 the Tariff Reform League on average sent between six and twelve workers into constituencies during a by-election, now they sent one hundred.⁶⁴ This huge jump in the scale of the opposition aggravated Free Trade's growing

problems in maintaining public support. Here, again, Free Trade was in part a victim of its own success. The huge expansion of statistical information and economic literature generated in the battle over tariffs created dilemmas of its own. In the domain of popular politics, statistics proved to be like the many-headed hydra of Greek mythology. The moment one head was cut off, another appeared. While statistics gave Free Traders factual ammunition to challenge Tariff Reform prophecies of doom, they also offered Tariff Reformers endless fresh opportunities to draw people's attention to yet another dying local industry. For Free Traders, this partly raised questions of resources, but it also became more than that. Simply put, they faced a communication problem of the highest order. There was a mismatch between Free Trade, the economic idea, and the dynamic nature of democratic politics. The world of economic knowledge was becoming ever more complex and specialized at the very time that politics had come to rely more than ever before on mass support, rather than experts or authorities. And, to add to the pressure, Free Traders faced a marketing problem, having to rally support, again and again, over the course of a decade, for what was effectively the same basic article.

To meet these challenges the Free Trade campaign developed two somewhat contradictory strategies. The first one expanded the efforts to provide speakers and voters with short statistical information on particular industries. By the time of the general election in January 1910, the Free Trade Union operated an Information Bureau together with sixty local offices with no less than fifty permanent agents who trained local speakers and workers. The country was divided into districts according to their industries. As R. B. Dack, the Free Trade Union agent for Stirling, explained, the campaign work 'will be more telling and effective if the speaker grasps the conditions of local industries'. General speakers were easily embarrassed by protectionist opponents and hecklers who cited specific trades harmed by 'dumping'. The division into districts boosted speakers' local knowledge, enabling them 'to dispose of such [protectionist] "fairy tales" as that the Cambusbarron Mills have been ruined by Free Trade'.⁶⁵ Yet such specialization by region and industry also carried a potential problem. After all, Free Traders' identity and reputation rested on speaking on behalf of the public interest, not the more particular interests favoured by Tariff Reformers. Hence the appeal of unifying national stories and symbols in the campaign.

The work of the National Free Trade Lectures and Exhibitions organization, NFTLE for short, shows how much the particular, industry-oriented aspect of the campaign was subordinated to more general types of communication. The NFTLE was financed by J. K. Caird, a leading Dundee jute industrialist, then seventy years of age, without wife or children. To Caird, who employed almost 2,000 men and attributed his own success to Free Trade, the fact that the 'well to do Classes' had to a 'great extent [become] heterodox' on this great principle was deeply disconcerting.⁶⁶ He gave £13,500 to the cause, a huge donation, though not unusually large by the standards of this benefactor; in 1914 he sent the explorer Edward Shackleton a cheque worth £24,000 in support of his Antarctic expedition, and Shackleton duly named his 23-foot whaler after Caird. But by the standards of political campaigning, this made all the difference. The Free Trade Union had a fighting fund of only £12,000 at the time, having spent £27,168 in the first half of 1910, while the Tariff Reform League managed to raise £30,000 in the course of the year.⁶⁷ The Free Trade campaign is often thought of as the poorer cousin, but this picture changes considerably, indeed is even reversed, once the funding and level of activity of associated bodies like the NFTLE are taken into account. The body was run by G. Wallace Carter, the secretary of the Free Trade Union, and the former private secretary to the chief whip. Carter reported directly to Winston Churchill, who had taken refuge in Dundee as Liberal MP after his famous by-election defeat in Manchester in 1908, and who took a lively interest in putting Caird's money to effective use.

Between May and early December 1910, that is, not counting the election campaign of December 1910, the NFTLE organized an extraordinary 5,460 meetings (Colour Plate X). Of these, only 87 were targeted specifically at business groups, 37 at trade unions and cooperatives, and 6 at farmers' clubs and agricultural societies; 863 of the public lectures were aimed at rural audiences, 106 at women. The largest group, 4,361 meetings and lectures, was for general audiences. Over 370 general lecturers were at work. To put this in perspective, the prominent Congo-reform campaign managed only 300 lectures and 43 town meetings in 1906-7. At its peak in 1840, the Anti-Corn Law League had employed 15 speakers, giving 800 lectures. The NFTLE managed to double the campaign volume of the Free Trade Union, which itself was responsible for a not insignificant 2,558 meetings during the December election, outdoing the Tariff Reform League (2,127).⁶⁸ In other words, the NFTLE altogether erased the comparative advantage the

Tariff Reform League had previously enjoyed. As these numbers show, most of that fresh activity went into the pursuit of public audiences, not specialized groups, and most occurred during the regular year, not the election fight.

The sheer size of the campaign transformed the challenge of recruiting and training a new generation of volunteers. Bodies like the Cobden Club had offered prize essay competitions in the past but these attracted mainly aspiring young intellectuals, such as F. W. Hirst, who became editor of *The Economist*, or the economist A. C. Pigou. They were hardly designed to produce the army of informed speakers and organizers required by a mass movement. One purpose of the massive campaign in the summer and autumn of 1910 was to recruit 'progressive helpers' and 'new and permanent auxiliaries of Free Trade work', Wallace Carter stressed. Audiences were not just listeners, they were potential members. The Liberal party dispatched 'live' agents to meetings to 'spot the right man' for recruitment.⁶⁹ Seaside gatherings offered a particularly good opportunity to draw interested members of the audience into 'yeoman service', helping distribute literature and posters or, even better, returning to their home town to found a new branch of the Free Trade Union. By 1910 a network of several hundred local branches had emerged. Where most of the activity of the early Victorian Anti-Corn Law League had centred on the manufacturing towns of Lancashire, Cheshire, and Yorkshire, the Edwardian movement was a genuinely British one, with branches in small towns like Totton in the New Forest or the Fenland village of Wimblington, alongside those in Bournemouth and Swansea.⁷⁰

The mass campaign created fresh opportunities for women activists especially. In London, the Free Trade Union's chief organizer was the effective and attractive Miss Ivy Pretious, who was pursued by more than one Liberal minister. 'A perfect woman, nobly planned... with something of an angel's light', was how the staff of the Union, reciting Wordsworth, congratulated her on her wedding.⁷¹ The schedule of women speakers and organizers like Miss McLaren Ramsay gives an indication of the intense level of activity. After taking part in the by-election in the New Forest in early December 1905, she went to North Dorset to set up three new branches for the Women's Liberal Association (WLA) in ten days. She then went to work in Rutland until 30 December, then off to Lincoln, where she took charge of a committee room leading up to the poll on

15 January 1906, back to Mid Hertfordshire for the poll on 17 January, then by night train to Carlisle to work until the end of the month in Cumberland and North Westmorland.⁷² By 1910 the WLA had amassed over 120,000 members. In the Home Counties, Miss Isabel Edwards organized 104 associations for 1,850 'Crusaders', visiting an estimated 52,000 homes each month.⁷³ In the first half of 1910 The Women's Free Trade Union campaigned in 52 constituencies and six by-elections, holding another 86 special meetings and distributing half a million leaflets.⁷⁴ Speakers included educated middle-class ladies like Dorothy Hunter but also women like Jessie Richardson, 'a Cockney of the most delightful type' who 'is quite at home with the roughest audience' and 'has a most happy knack in her addresses of intertwining humour with pathos' one organizer remembered (see Figure 9).⁷⁵ Enthusiasm even spilled over to the children who were often recruited to sing. In North Staffordshire, children 'took possession of a shed and made it their own committee room, where they learnt Liberal songs and organised processions'.⁷⁶

The engine of political education went into top gear. If there was considerable distrust of women's analytical and statistical intelligence at the



Figure 9. A woman speaking on Free Trade during the Reading by-election, 1913.

outset—the Free Trade MP Thomas Lough started a typical speech to a women's audience in 1903 warning that the subject was a difficult one 'since figures were trying subjects for women'⁷⁷—the campaign quickly enabled women to prove themselves as students, teachers, and speakers. There were prize essay competitions for women; in 1910 Miss Muriel Parker, the honorary secretary of the Mildenhall WLA, collected the first prize worth £2 2s. for an essay showing how a tariff diminished imports. She cited a wide range of sources, from established British texts like Brassey's *Fifty Years of Progress* to evidence given by Mr Rotch of the US Commission on Merchant Shipping 1904 on the deplorable state of the American mercantile marine.⁷⁸

By 1910 the mass campaign developed an infrastructure of teacher-training. Local Liberal associations set up study circles. In Birmingham, Charles Fellows of the Free Trade Union taught a weekly class for 'young people (of both sexes)' on the 'Principles... Fruits... Ethics and The Opposition to Free Trade'.⁷⁹ For self-improving 'young men', there were the classes sponsored by the Lancashire and Cheshire branch of the FTU, designed along the lines of the economic lectures of the university extension programme. From 60 to 200 pupils, 'all earnest young men of the right type' would listen to lecturers like F. Bower Alcock (MA, Pembroke College, Oxford), a senior extension lecturer at Ruskin College, the Oxford college for the working classes. Students wrote weekly essays and submitted their final papers to the Manchester committee for examination.⁸⁰ By September 1910, the Free Trade Union was promoting private classes 'in all sorts of houses, from cottages to mansions' supported by trained lecturers with a simple promise: 'Make yourselves masters of the question.' W. Wilkins (MA) provided 'Our Study Circle Page', which outlined study plans on general subjects like Land, Labour, and Capital, and recommended readings, ranging from the more academic, like Fawcett's and Cannan's introductions to political economy, to the more journalistic, like Bastiat's 'Things Seen and Things Not Seen'.⁸¹

'Fifty students are more valuable to the cause of Free Trade than five hundred men in an average audience', Wallace Carter argued. Study circles for men and women would prepare a new generation of speakers with the knowledge and skill to withstand hecklers and inspire audiences. They would support candidates often out of their depth on the particularities of the Free Trade question. 'We have had Tariff Reform meetings "captured" by Free Trade students', Carter noted proudly. By the spring of 1911, Carter

was drawing up plans for a kind of popular university of Free Trade, a national network of 'Free Trade Instruction Classes' in 200 doubtful constituencies, complete with examinations, public demonstration, and prizes. Twenty to fifty students per constituency would meet fortnightly or monthly for three terms with a fully qualified lead lecturer. Caird gave his 'enthusiastic approval' and happily funded 114 study centres, of which he wanted to see 80 in London. In the autumn of 1911, the Liberal MP Eliot Crawshay-Williams took over from Carter to complete the scheme, arranging for the supply of textbooks (G.W. Gough's *Fifteen Fiscal Fallacies*), examinations and national competitions for gold, silver, and bronze medals, and prize money. The elite of Free Traders, including J. M. Robertson, Fred Maddison, Captain Wedgwood, and Henry Vivian, chaired the inaugural session and gave lead lectures.⁸² How many students passed through these classes, and what were their backgrounds? Unfortunately, we do not know. But, together with the nationwide campaign and educational activities by movements like the cooperatives—books on Free Trade and Morley's biography of Cobden were a staple of cooperative libraries and courses—these classes played some role in the broad popular resurgence of interest in political economy in the Edwardian period, a phenomenon that may help explain the remarkable 52 per cent of classes in 1913 run by the Workers Educational Association on economics or economic history, a proportion that has steadily declined ever since.⁸³

On the Beaches

By the end of the summer of 1910 the Free Trade campaign had swelled into a wave of unprecedented size and force, crashing into areas previously untouched by politics at a time of year normally considered a 'close season' for political agitation. Most seaside resorts had by-laws protecting their towns and visitors from partisan agitations to preserve an air of leisured political neutrality. The seaside campaign of July–September 1910 opened up these virgin lands. Free Traders invaded the sands and piers, competing with ice-cream vendors, fortune tellers, and minstrel singers for the attention of the perambulating tourist.⁸⁴ Free Traders now fought the enemy across the entire country, in market towns, in rural villages, and on the beaches.

Wallace Carter had experimented with a few seaside meetings in the summer of 1909 in Blackpool and Brighton and found them 'a great

pitch' for three meetings a day, 'whenever the weather was favourable'. Altogether, they held 45 meetings with an attendance of 10,500, Mr Smith calculated.⁸⁹

The appeal of this 'novelty' was not lost on local tourists. The 'wonderful melange' of Free Trade politics, *The Lancaster Guardian* mused, made an interesting addition to the 'cosmopolitan' attractions that normally greeted the visitor, who 'may have his thirst quenched by vendors of mysterious compounds... have his fortune told by palmists' or his cravings 'for the refined and elevating [satisfied]... by the grotesque antics of men with blackened faces'.⁹⁰ Morecambe was mainly, though not exclusively, a middle-class resort, and attracted amongst others businessmen from the wool, cotton, and lace trades. The decision to target such upmarket resorts as well as seaside towns popular with working-class day-trippers, like Blackpool, is revealing. In thinking about the effects of commercial leisure on political life, it has been customary to focus on the 'affluent worker' who withdraws from public life into a world of private pleasure. The seaside campaign shows that for Free Traders it was as important to pull the middle classes back into the political domain as to educate the working classes. Caird's frustration with the apathy of the middle classes chimed with the experience of Free Trade activists. Wallace Carter had found it increasingly difficult to engage the middle-class voter at home, where he was 'pressed with the affairs of his work or business'. The seaside campaign was designed to reach him where he was easy prey for political persuasion. 'The average middle class man', Wallace Carter told Churchill, 'soon tires of the usual sea shore attractions, and is very glad to listen to Free Trade speeches as a sort of intellectual exercise.' On 'his holiday his mind is in a more receptive condition'.⁹¹ For campaigners beginning to think about voters as people outside constituency boundaries, seaside resorts, with their playfulness and social mixing across class and geographical background, offered particularly fertile ground.

As in Morecambe, so along the entire British coast. Free Traders were remarkably successful in planting themselves on beaches and promenades, overcoming by-laws, and pulling crowds away from rival amusements. In north Wales, the authorities gradually gave in to the public interest in the meetings and tolerated speeches, although the distribution of political literature remained prohibited. Only in parts of Norfolk did local corporations stick to a ban, limiting Free Traders to Yarmouth and Lowestoft.

110 BUILDING A FREE TRADE NATION

success'.⁸⁵ In the spring of 1910, Caird's cheque provided the opportunity to turn the experiment into a nationwide campaign that would send an army of hundreds of lecturers across the entire English, Welsh, and western Scottish seaside. Carter was fortunate to have the backing of a Liberal leader with an instinctive appreciation of strategy and military-style campaigning, Winston Churchill.⁸⁶ For not all Liberals were convinced by Carter's ideas of modern political communication. Montagu complained to Asquith about the 'odious and useless Carter' who was left in charge of the Free Trade Union in 1909 with the impending marriage and departure of Ivy Pretious.⁸⁷ Wallace Carter may have lacked his predecessor's charm, but he certainly had a feel for the shifting rules of political engagement. Caird, himself on the way to Karlsbad to take the waters, thought Carter's seaside scheme excellent, as did Churchill. Already by the end of April 1910, Carter had selected fifty seaside towns and secured permission to hold meetings in another twelve. Where political activity was formally banned, Carter planned to have a large yacht cruise up and down the coast, with speakers on deck, and 'Free Trade' in bold letters emblazoned on its sails. Even the sudden death of King Edward VII on 6 May 1910 did not put a brake on the massive campaign. By early June Carter had engaged sixty-seven speakers, at a cost of £1,550, to hold a planned 1,500 meetings in fifty-six resort areas. By the end of the summer, more than 1,343 lectures had taken place, ranging from 87 meetings in Brighton to 5 on the Isle of Wight, and from 85 in the west of Scotland to over a hundred in Devon and north Cornwall. Such was the success of the seaside invasion that the yacht proved superfluous.⁸⁸ (Colour Plate XI.)

In Morecambe the campaign began on 2 August. It was led by Alfred Smith, who was assisted by Mr. C. F. Lambie from London, and by Mrs Fletcher from nearby Oldham. At first these Free Trade speakers set up their pitch at Sandylands just outside the Morecambe boundary, to circumvent the town's by-laws against political meetings. After a fortnight of being 'exposed to every wind that blew [such that it] required as great an effort to speak as it did to listen', they changed tactics. On Monday afternoon, 15 August, they moved into Morecambe itself and held a meeting near the old pier in defiance of the town council. Given free advertising in a local newspaper, the story ensured 'a fine audience' the following evening. A day later the Free Traders had secured the town's permission to hold meetings on the beach, right opposite the Winter Garden—'an admirable

On the Isle of Man alone Free Traders held 46 meetings with an estimated attendance of 37,500, the largest open-air meetings there in living memory. Across the country, 90 per cent of the overall planned 1,500 meetings were held, reaching almost one million people.⁹²

The 'novelty' character was aimed especially at 'people who did not often attend open-air meetings'.⁹³ It reflected more generally how far Free Traders had moved away from the ideal of the reasoning, informed, independent male citizen. Entertainment, in the form of bazaars, balls, and concerts, had of course been a long-standing feature of political culture. What was distinctive about Free Trade was that it self-consciously turned entertainment and spectacle into an integral part of political communication. In many ways, it was a mode of politics that put into practice Graham Wallas' warning against over-intellectualizing political behaviour: politics should not be divorced from instincts and impulses. Wallas' 1908 *Human Nature in Politics* spoke to the heart of that growing professional body, the political agent, who did much of the organizing, canvassing, and speaking in the localities, and who were always on the look out for new ways of engaging people. The professional magazine *The Liberal Agent* cited Wallas approvingly about the emotional needs of politics. A party was 'something which can be loved and trusted'. Party colours and songs were important for triggering 'emotional associations'. It was from Wallas that agents learnt how advertisers had discovered the importance of variety: 'Our nervous system shows itself intolerant of repeated sensations and emotions.'⁹⁴ The seaside campaign aimed to fuse reason and emotion, and win support by playing on excitement, thrill, and group feeling.

Seaside meetings were a lively mix of questions and heckling, often with a hint of physical confrontation in the air. Heckling and interference by 'roughs' were widespread. Disturbances were not the preserve of Tariff Reformers. Free Traders, too, found themselves fined for disrupting political meetings with 'beastly noises' under the 1908 Public Meetings Act.⁹⁵ On Brighton Beach, the 'political cockpit of Sussex' where 'unquestionably the best seaside meetings are held' according to *The Free Trader*, keen hecklers from both sides would form an 'inner circle' around which 'huge crowds' gathered.⁹⁶ The local Tariff Reform League would send their entire staff to heckle. There was a party of men who travelled from Hull to Scarborough specifically to go to Liberal meetings. On Rhyl sands in north Wales, there was the farmer from Stourbridge who reportedly 'became

so interested in the meetings that he prolonged his holidays for a week for the express purpose of being able to continue his attendance at the meetings'.⁹⁷

Heckling and verbal sparring combined entertainment with education. At Morecambe, for example, after a good deal of heckling and laughter from the audience, Mr Smith invited a gentleman to the stage who kept insisting that imports were paid for in money, and not by exports, as Free Traders were keen to point out. They then had several turns of ten minutes each.⁹⁸ Such exchanges were new opportunities for Free Traders to cite statistics in their favour or to challenge protectionist arguments about imports as the cause of unemployment. Free Traders delighted at teasing protectionists about their contradictions and fallacies and recounted with joy how their opponents had been reduced to rowdiness and personal abuse as a last resort.

Yet Free Traders were far from innocent themselves. They too contributed to the 'effective spiciness' and 'fun' of the meetings. On the Isle of Man, speakers managed to draw groups away from the various 'religious platforms and amusements on the beach' for meetings lasting 'sometimes as long as 2½ or 3 hours'. When one Tariff Reform 'gentleman' called for three cheers for "Free Trade, the workhouse, and thieving'", the meeting spun out of control. It immediately raised the 'most hostile demonstrations' against him. If the Tariff Reformer had not been 'surrounded by his few supporters and escorted with them as a bodyguard to his hotel', the *Free Trader* reported, he would have suffered a 'forcible dip' in the sea.⁹⁹

Accounts of these meetings suggest not only that Free Traders were right about the attraction of 'novelty' but also that they had good reason to worry about the level of public knowledge. Activists, of course, have a natural self-interest in presenting their audiences as ignorant and in need of instruction, but, read carefully, reports by speakers and local newspapers offer some intriguing insights into the limits of public understanding. After millions of leaflets and pamphlets setting out the case for Free Trade, there remained a large gulf between the worlds of professional knowledge and local knowledge. In Yarmouth, agents were struck by the 'paucity of questions, and the elementary character of most of them'. Across holiday resorts, *The Free Trader* found that even where there were 'intelligent questions', they revealed 'that the questioners were making their first real acquaintance with Free Trade arguments'.¹⁰⁰ For *The Lancaster Guardian* the meetings at Morecambe afforded 'abundant evidence of the

necessity for propaganda work on the part of the supporters of Free Trade'. 'It is remarkable that after all that has been said and written and notwithstanding the admissions of leaders of the Tariff Reform movement, there should still exist people who claim that our imports are paid for in hard cash.'¹⁰¹

Some historians have argued that the triumph of a liberal democratic order in nineteenth-century Britain came with a decline in public and open-air meetings and a shift to a more restrictive and regulated form of politics.¹⁰² On the contrary, the Edwardian period is proof of a re-energized political culture, interactive and face-to-face. The controlling power of the printed word, or for that matter of government statistics, is easily exaggerated. 'A pamphlet is a poor substitute for a personality', the editor of the *Liberal Agent* noted in 1910. Democratic politics made the public meeting more, not less important. 'The keen and instructed politician may be satisfied by papers and pamphlets, not the average elector.' People were too exhausted after a day's work to spend a lot of effort on obtaining political information. 'At the close of a day of heavy toil the mental application necessary to master a pamphlet involves weariness to his flesh.' 'Listening to a lively speaker he will certainly be exhilarated.' Words were more easily remembered. Above all, the 'spoken word of the magnetic personality' would generate 'enthusiasm' and the 'courage' to become politically active. Agents stressed the importance of cultivating a 'living voice'.¹⁰³

The growing number of professional agents at the same time responded to and reinforced this fresh emphasis on public meetings. One borough agent considered 'outdoor meetings in summer [as] by far the best means of imparting political information to the public', especially since there was 'a class of electors who never went to a Liberal meeting of any kind'.¹⁰⁴ Another recalled how he had spoken in 1908 in 127 indoor meetings in south-east Cornwall, 28 open air, and another 17 in other constituencies. It was his 'settled practice' to address a public meeting the week after any Tariff Reform speaker.¹⁰⁵ On 4 January, a single day in the 1910 general election, the Speakers' Bureau estimated that there were 4,000 political meetings and speeches, the bulk addressed by 'men who never thought of oratory much a year or two ago'.¹⁰⁶

Speeches were about personal magnetism, exhilaration, and accessibility. They were also about authenticity. Drawing on personal experiences, speakers endowed Free Trade with a personal authority that economic

experts were never able to command. From the outset of the battle, Tariff Reformers had ridiculed Free Trade as an antiquated theory out of touch with the everyday reality of 'dumped' goods and unemployed men. Professor Alfred Marshall, the leading liberal economist of the era who had defended Free Trade in a long and characteristically complex analytical fashion, was mocked in protectionist cartoons, lecturing John Bull about the 'truth' that imports did not displace labour but merely redirected employment, just as a long line of displaced workers passed by, reduced to earn their living as sandwich men advertising 'continental novelties on sale at Dumper & Co'.¹⁰⁷ In the political debate, economic theory easily became a handicap. The fact that economists themselves were divided did not help.¹⁰⁸ What mattered most was practical knowledge. In March 1909, Asquith, the Prime Minister, proudly told a large meeting with representatives from over 170 constituencies that he had 'never even produced a pamphlet (laughter and cheers) about the theory of free trade'. The idea that Free Traders were sitting in a study with blinds drawn, a bust of Cobden on the mantelpiece and Bastiat's writings open on the desk, was ludicrous. They were not 'unworldly doctrinaires' but practical men from the world of business, administration, and work, men like Lord Avebury, the Banker, or statesmen like Lord Goschen and Lord Balfour of Burleigh.¹⁰⁹ The seaside campaign was one opportunity to draw on such knowledge at a local level, for example in Morecambe, where speakers pulled in members of the audience to testify to their own experience, enabling other tourists to hear from men in the textile industries.

Speakers played a vital role in bringing the 'real world' to life. The vivid accounts of past suffering by old speakers authenticated the 'hungry forties' in popular memory. In the case of W. H. Chadwick, the last survivor of the Manchester Chartists imprisoned in 1848, neither deafness nor eccentricity—he also worked as a clairvoyant and organizers despaired at his unreliability—lessened the impact of his 'fine, far-reaching, resonant bass voice' giving a dramatic 'delineation of angry scenes, such as groups of wild-eyed, starving men parading the streets of towns with passionate cries of "Bread or Blood"', as one agent would later recall.¹¹⁰ Public meetings were excellent opportunities for old people to step forward—sometimes pushed forward by local Liberals—to add their personal memories to the case against tariffs. An ounce of practical knowledge was worth a ton of theory, as Liberal posters and stories of the old instructing the young never

failed to point out. The *Glasgow Daily Record* reported with pride how 'an old-white haired, white-bearded man [told] a youth, who seemed to think that he was the repository of all the economics in the world, his experience of the "hungry forties"'.¹¹¹ One Edwardian would recall in the 1970s how his grandfather — 'a great man for politics' — 'loved to stand in Market Street [in Guildford] and harangue the crowd': 'he talked to them excitedly about the ... hungry forties or whatever he called them'. On several occasions he had to be moved on by the police for blocking the traffic.¹¹²

The discovery of Germany in 1909–10 placed a new premium on travelling speakers who could recreate the reality of life under protection through eyewitness accounts, such as Edward Baker, of "German Trip" fame' who had deserted the protectionist 'tariff trippers'. Wallace Carter even hired a fully paid German speaker, Franz Wendel, at £59 10s. for four months in 1910. Since much of the debate was fought out over the everyday realities of household and family life, women lecturers played a crucial role. Mrs King, 'a lady who has lived on the Continent for the greater part of her life' toured the south-west of England and gave 'most interesting' accounts of her life in Germany.¹¹³ Annie Esplin, of the Women's Free Trade Union, was despatched to Berlin and Paris to bring back photographs and information for the campaign. And for £10 she was commissioned to produce a lantern lecture for use by other speakers on housekeeping in protectionist countries. Sadly, these lectures do not survive. But agents' reports leave little doubt about their importance in bringing knowledge about everyday life in Berlin and Frankfurt to Britons living in places as far away as Devon, Somerset, and Wales. Esplin's lantern lecture proved 'very popular' in the December 1910 general election. Baker told audiences 'night by night ... the plain, unvarnished tale of his experiences' and attracted the largest outdoor meeting ever held in East Dorset.¹¹⁴

Shop-window Politics

Novelty and authenticity reached a new fusion in the Dump Shops and Free Trade Shops that sprang up all over Britain in 1909–10. By the end of 1910, there were more than two hundred of these shops exhibiting foreign and British goods and prices (Colour Plate XII). The prototype of these exhibits was the Dumping Van. The Dumping Van was a motorized adaptation of

the horse-drawn van pioneered by travelling Conservative speakers in the 1890s.¹¹⁵ A shop on wheels, the van carried samples of freely imported, 'dumped' goods and displayed them alongside political posters. Some vans doubled as travelling theatres. In Chatham and the Midlands, John Bull was pushed from his 'British-Isles' van by men dressed as 'foreigners' in the national costumes popularized by the stage, such as Uncle Sam. The shop window had been integral in protectionist iconography from the beginning, illustrating the costs of cheapness to the British worker in pictures of 'Herr Schmitt' or 'Von Kraus' with their shops full of cheap, foreign wares. Tariff Reform posters showed haggard British workers passing by grumbling that they would rather work themselves than give work to foreigners. The Dump Shop gave a physical presence to these anxieties by placing foreign imports directly in front of spectators. It enabled 'the working-man whose employment is gone or menaced [the chance] to apply the test of his own eyes to the often faked statistics of the Cobden Club', as conservative newspapers put it.¹¹⁶

In 1910, Tariff Reformers fitted out over 160 of these Dump Shops, starting in Chamberlain's heartland Birmingham and then expanding to London. Activists from as far as Glasgow and Eastbourne went to London's Old Kent Road to study the shops and their effects. The Dump Shop soon spread to provincial cities, from Hull to Brighton and from Plymouth to St Helen's. Located in working-class districts or thoroughfares used by workers, some shops combined the display of foreign articles with evidence of the rising cost of living under Free Trade. The shop window in Sheffield's Howard Street, for example, exhibited bread and butter in 'size today' and 'size four years ago'. A shop in Paignton displayed a picture of 'Free Trade' in a frame made from American oak, Belgian glass, and German nails.¹¹⁷

Whatever the particular local layout, all Dump Shops displayed generic foreign articles in everyday use alongside those raising particular anxieties for local industries. In Colchester, home to several engineering works, a passer-by would see a chaff-cutter next to boots marked 'Made in America' and a tea-service 'Made in Japan'. In Hull, domestic tinware and undergarments from Germany were on show next to the cotton-cake for cattle (from Egypt) which competed with local factories. In Walworth Road, one of the London Dump Shops, carpets and ironmongery were joined by window frames and doors made abroad, a warning to the joiners and carpenters in the area. Prominent in almost all shops were

cheap Swedish doors and coffins, which greeted viewers at the entrance and reminded them that Free Trade spelt death for the British worker (Colour Plate XIII). Ten per cent of joiners and carpenters were unemployed in 1909, while Britain imported over 30,000 doors a month. A Swedish four-panelled door sold in Britain at 5s. 6d., basically the same as a British carpenter would have to pay for the wood alone, Tariff Reformers pointed out.¹¹⁸ How, under Free Trade conditions, could British workers possibly hope to compete?

'There is no doubt that the Tariff Reformers' 'Dump' shops exercised considerable influence at the Election', Wallace Carter told Churchill in March 1910. Like Carter, Churchill was alarmed by their 'remarkable effect'.¹¹⁹ Dump Shops drew crowds and led to discussions in the streets about the costs of Free Trade: what is the good of a cheap imported article if men were thrown out of work and had no money to pay for it, people asked.¹²⁰ Taken by surprise, Free Traders initially responded with a variety of tactics. In Newport and Swansea, Liberals paraded a column of sandwich men with Free Trade posters in front of the Dump Shops, simply blocking the view. In Sittingbourne in Kent, they questioned the price listed for a Swedish coffin, only to be pelted with rotten eggs. In Leeds, four Free Trade-minded employees of the Post Office's travelling department used their spare time to descend on the Dump Shop near the Corn exchange, attracting a considerable crowd as they challenged the genuineness of article after article on display. Elsewhere, local tradesmen opened their own 'anti-dump' shops. Some local offices of the Free Trade Union began to exhibit items of food and clothing, others displayed export samples and statistics, yet others focused on locally manufactured items. Some of these were open to the public, others, as the one in Fleet Street, were private affairs arranged for the press. In Maidstone, Free Traders opened a shop and displayed a chair 'Made in Maidstone' from Kentish oak and elm to prove that British industries were thriving under Free Trade. In Brighton, the staff of the Free Trade Union put together an exhibition in which British manufactured exports, each listing the ratio of exports to imports, framed the centrepiece: 'a case of black bread and of horseflesh steaks and sausages'.¹²¹

However creative, these spontaneous local responses failed to add up to a coherent answer to the protectionist initiative. The earlier sensationalist appeal of German black bread and horseflesh sausages had begun to fade. '[P]eople have heard enough of these things', Wallace Carter found; 'and

they are a nuisance to store.' The answer lay in adapting the Dump Shop to Free Trade purposes by organizing a standardized, travelling exhibition comparing British and German consumer goods. A standardized outfit offered economies of scale. And it conveyed a centrally planned message that could target especially doubtful constituencies. Exhibits could be sent out to any constituency at short notice, Wallace Carter explained, with 'no loophole for local blundering'. Caird loved the idea. He wanted the shops set up in 'the very best thoroughfares, well lighted and supplied with mechanical music'. Window displays were to be changed regularly to attract window shoppers, as in department stores. Churchill even wanted to shift the entire focus of the campaign to the Free Trade shop, away from lectures. In the end Wallace Carter dissuaded Caird from throwing his money away on shop windows in the West End;¹²² rents were prohibitively high—up to £1,000 a year or twice as much as what the fifty standardized exhibits eventually cost.

But this reluctance to concentrate on the West End also reflected a working model that politics, while it might learn from the world of commerce, remained a distinct sphere, with its own characteristics, needs, and modes of behaviour. Political engagement and persuasion was about more than selling and buying. It was not like window-shopping. Unlike Selfridges on Oxford Street, catering for the affluent citizens of the metropole, the Free Trade campaign needed to reach millions of voters from different classes across the country. Shops needed to fit in on the provincial high street, not emulate fancy developments amongst West End retailers. The Free Trade shops found their way into a remarkable cross-section of Britain, from Oxford's Queen Street to Renfield Street in Glasgow, and the Grand Parade in Brighton to the cotton town of Hyde and other towns throughout the country.

The Free Trade shops appealed to a much broader identity of the consumer than in earlier campaigns. Instead of the cheap loaf and the spectre of hunger, the 50 travelling exhibits looked beyond 'necessity' to include the trappings of a comfortable home. Shop displays included branded goods, as well as articles of clothing that would have been worn by the more affluent working classes and lower middle classes. There was everything from Lea and Perrins sauce and Quaker Oats to an artisan's cap and the bowler hat of the professional and clerical classes. On Wallace Carter's instructions, the Free Trade Union sent a representative to Berlin, accompanied by a German workman, to buy a standardized set of items

from the department store in Wertheim, situated in a working-class district. Together with a sworn declaration from German officials verifying their retail prices as authentic, the items were then displayed next to goods with London prices. In Oxford, the shop in Queen Street showed Quaker Oats selling at 3d. in London and 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ d. in Berlin. A suit bought in Berlin was over 24s., that made up by the firm of John Barran in Leeds merely 17s. 11d. In Leeds, N. G. Morrison returned from Germany with a bagful of pricey branded goods, including tins of Nestlé's Swiss milk and Colman's mustard, a jar of Keiller's marmalade and some of Huntley and Palmer's 'superior cracknel biscuits'. '[N]one of these articles enumerated are needful for the subsistence of the people', the *Leeds Mercury* admitted: still, they exposed the general trend of prices in a 'tariff-ridden country'.¹²³

As bread prices were rising in 1908-10, the 'cheap loaf' ceased to be an easy rebuttal of Tariff Reformers' claims that living conditions were better in protectionist countries. In place of the earlier threat of starvation, the Free Trade campaign now produced an ever-longer list of domestic goods that would become more expensive under tariffs, from sewing and washing machines to carpets and cutlery.¹²⁴ This more diverse and prosperous basket of consumer goods became especially important as knowledge of high-wage America began to interfere with the black-and-white contrast between Britain and Germany. Protectionist propaganda publicizing the Board of Trade's report on the cost of living in American towns proved a considerable headache for Free Traders. The report found that workers in America enjoyed wages that were 130 per cent higher than those in Britain, while they only paid 52 per cent more on rent and food.¹²⁵ Much to the distress of British Liberals, the report's narrow focus on food omitted many other articles, like clothing, where tariffs pinched American pockets. The image of the consumer expanded accordingly. Alongside the poor mother with barely a crust of bread to feed her baby, American middle-class ladies appeared, lamenting tariffs on hat pins, lace collars, and silk lingerie.¹²⁶ In the summer of 1910 Wallace Carter went to New York and Dowding, his assistant, even planned an 'Anglo-American Exhibition' to show the impact of tariffs on a full range of goods, especially clothing—a scheme that was aborted once the Tariff Reform crusade began to disintegrate in the course of 1911.¹²⁷

Exhibitions had become such a regular feature of public life that by the turn of the twentieth century many people complained of exhibition

fatigue. Already in 1851 at the Crystal Palace, some of the organizers saw the display of British manufactured goods as a demonstration of the superiority of Free Trade, and world exhibitions in the next decade disseminated the ideal of free exchange.¹²⁸ When Edwardians finally appropriated the technique of the exhibit in their shops, they kept spectators interested by incorporating elements of the fairground and the music hall. In the shop in Camberwell, Thomas Macnamara, the Liberal candidate well known across London for his 'hard-hitting speeches spiced with good stories' and for having the 'slimness and the energy of an athlete', theatrically dressed up in flimsy German clothes—a 'really excellent method of propaganda' according to Wallace Carter and one reason for including suits and shirts in the standardized exhibits. The clothes 'would lend themselves to dressing up two members of the audience to represent the Briton and the German and to contrast their cost of living, their wages and hours, etc.'¹²⁹

Free Trade shops were not safe from Tariff Reform attacks—in Blackburn, Tariff Reformers painted thick blue paint over the shop window the day before polling, while in Camberwell, local Conservatives occupied the floor above the Free Trade shop and hung out a banner 'Radical Swank, Look Below and Laugh'.¹³⁰ Yet, in general, they were remarkably effective combinations of entertainment and politics. The display of goods silenced critics and allowed organizers to draw sceptics into the shop to let the articles demonstrate the superiority of Free Trade. When challenged about the origin or price of goods, speakers produced invoices 'to the delight of crowds'. The shop in Glasgow proved the 'most popular form of propaganda', according to W. E. Dowding. Local organizers praised the exhibits for attracting thousands of people on their way home from work in the large cities. Others found them 'most satisfactory' in smaller towns. We do not have oral testimonies to tell us what spectators made of these shows. What we do know is that passers-by engaged with these shops as political audiences rather than as window shoppers flitting through the landscape of consumption, sometimes seen to typify new modern sensibilities. In Exeter, the shop was surrounded by crowds from 9 o'clock in the morning to midnight. J. Howard Wilson, who was in charge of the travelling shop in North East Derbyshire and Chesterfield, confirmed its 'great success': 'The only criticism I have to make is that the same people stayed too long.' People were so interested, 'it was almost impossible to get near the window day or night'.¹³¹

Picture Politics

The battle over Free Trade produced the first multi-media campaign in modern politics. More than ever before, politics was visualized and brought into mass circulation via an array of different artistic genres combining old and new technologies. The use of the moving image of film was still in its infancy—although Tariff Reformers like Fitzhamon and Hepworth experimented with short political films and so-called vivaphone shorts which produced synchronized images of Conservative leaders miming to pre-recorded sound.¹³² Champions of the new film technology thought it a great pity that our 'old friend, the optical lantern, and its first cousin, the kinematograph' were yet so rarely used together, as they were in the United States.¹³³ But this does not mean Edwardians were idle when it came to experimenting with emerging technologies or creatively manipulating established ones. A typical meeting like the divisional tea of the Bedford Women's Liberal Association in October 1903 would include an 'excellent address on "Free Trade Principles"', followed by a gramophone and a cinematograph—'much enjoyed' by the audience—and conclude with a singing of the National Anthem.¹³⁴ Liberal agents like W. Ford, who lectured in rural areas, emphasized the importance of song and new technology in attracting audiences. Free Traders had just as much right to hear and play songs as the Primrose League, the large Conservative women's association. He even built into his meetings the display of new recording devices, such as the graphophone, an early dictaphone developed by the American inventor Charles Tainter in the late 1880s. The graphophone was used to sing songs as well as to show off the marvels of this new technology capable of recording and replaying the human voice on the spot.¹³⁵ Tariff Reformers and Free Traders sometimes fixed a gramophone to the top of their vans. In the metropole, Free Trade speakers in North Paddington and Enfield even attached a screen to a pantechicon van and drove right through these constituencies, 'attracting large crowds and securing meetings which were in some cases phenomenally large'.¹³⁶

The most popular and influential types of visual technology were the lantern and the colour poster. The magic lantern had its origin in the mid-seventeenth century but it was in the Victorian period that it became widespread. It offered entertainment and instruction in phantasmagoria shows, panoramic spectacles, and missionary displays.¹³⁷ By the 1890s

automatic lanterns had been developed that were illuminated by electric light and capable of showing fifty slides in less than two minutes. They were a springboard for future producers of moving images. They also became a favourite medium for speakers and agents in the political mass market. Already in the 1890s the Conservative Primrose League had used the lantern for shows of images of the Empire, the navy, and landmarks of history.¹³⁸ With Free Trade the lantern became a more direct weapon of political campaigning. It was only in the 'last few years that its possibilities as an engine for political warfare have been discovered', J. Wigley, a Free Trade organizer from Manchester, noted in 1903. The lantern was inappropriate in certain contexts, Wigley acknowledged, such as when a cabinet minister came to give a speech. 'But, as every political organiser knows, elections are not won by big meetings, big speeches, or big men, but by steady, persistent, and systematic "spade work" among the great mass of voters. And it is in work of this kind that the value of the lantern as a means of interesting people in politics, and impressing elementary political principles on their minds, becomes apparent.'¹³⁹

One of the Liberal pioneers of the lantern was James Martin. Since first experimenting with a lantern in politics in 1890, Martin, the agent for Ipswich, had given hundreds of shows in small towns and villages and advised fellow Free Traders on how to make the lantern a success. Martin approached schools to use their rooms for free and, in exchange, would offer children a lantern entertainment without charge. He would give the children a short story such as Dick and his Donkey, illustrated by 24 slides to teach 'truthfulness, honesty, and perseverance', making sure to put in well-known hymns and 'plenty of singing'. The schoolmaster would then hand out a flyer for the children to take home, advertising a lantern lecture on politics with upwards of 50 slides plus entertainment for children with 'laughable sketches'. The children invariably returned with their parents in tow.¹⁴⁰

Martin was convinced that 'no other agency is so well adapted to reach the masses and so successfully educate them... as the lantern'. It 'secures the attendance of those who otherwise would never be persuaded to attend a political meeting'. The use of the lantern in Free Trade stage plays, such as the masque *A Message from the Forties*, in combination with shadow play, new lighting techniques, and the dramatic conjuring of Cobden's ghost, borrowed from an existing body of magical theatrical performances. In

the Victorian period, places like the Royal Polytechnic Institution had enthralled audiences with shows that mixed lantern slide shows with visual illusions, shadow play, or supernatural appearances. Comic panoramic slides were also popular. Free Trade lantern shows especially capitalized on the images by the outstanding cartoonist of his generation, F. Carruthers Gould of the *Westminster Gazette*, the first cartoonist to draw for the front page of a political newspaper. Via lantern slides, handbills, and postcards, Gould's cartoons linked the worlds of high and low politics, connecting the 20,000 readers of the *Westminster Gazette* with a political mass market; speakers were able to obtain Gould slides from the newspaper at 1s. 3d. each (his cartoon leaflets cost 41s. per thousand); a cheaper supply of fiscal cartoons was available through the *Morning Leader*, a Liberal halfpenny daily, which mailed sets of twelve post free at 8s.¹⁴¹ 'As long as F.C.G. can hold a pencil,' one county agent wrote, 'Liberals are missing a fine opportunity, if, in the more remote and outlying places, they do not bring the lantern into operation.'¹⁴² Cartoons from *Reynolds's*, too, were considered especially effective in villages, where readers of that radical newspaper would 'often recognise one of the pictures thrown on the screen as an old acquaintance'.¹⁴³

Slides and cartoons helped build a new working model of political persuasion. Colourful cartoons and posters became central to popular Free Trade politics. Their commercial design and print stood in contrast to the older tradition of handmade political banners as well as to contemporary arts and crafts design, hand printing, and needlework developed by the suffragettes, who had their own Suffrage Atelier.¹⁴⁴ The lantern's projection of colourful images enabled speakers 'through the eye to reach the heart', Martin explained, because what people 'see enables them to think over what they hear, and when an Englishman begins to think there is some hope of success'.¹⁴⁵ Symbols and pictures made complex realities accessible and entertaining. Churchill, who personally oversaw the national lecture and exhibition campaign, saw lantern slides and pictures as essential for 'setting out in simple and attractive diagrams those statistics which are so important and yet so difficult for the impatient man to grasp'.¹⁴⁶ Where speakers quoted figures these needed to be accompanied by simple 'pictorial diagrams', such as large and small ships illustrating the superiority of British trade. Wallace Carter based the Free Trade Union's propaganda work on the assumption that 'since nobody can think statistically in millions, and only students can think diagrammatically, the ordinary man must be

helped to think by contrasts, and in pictures'.¹⁴⁷ The lantern reinforced the presentation of stark contrasts. Lantern lectures illuminated the gulf between past and present, between the big loaf and the small loaf, between living conditions in Britain and Germany. In schoolrooms and town halls up and down the country, the Free Trade Union and the Women's Free Trade Union organized 'most instructive' shows of lantern slides which contrasted the hungry forties with the present under Free Trade and offered simple diagrams of progress.¹⁴⁸ When Free Traders introduced standardized lectures written by leading Liberals like J. M. Robertson for their battalion of general speakers, Churchill insisted that each lecturer should be accompanied by a lantern operator: 'special attention should be given to making the lecture not merely convincing but also picturesque and entertaining'.¹⁴⁹

From the windows of their branch offices, Free Traders projected lantern slides onto the walls of the buildings opposite. Free Trade vans operated as travelling shows with a sheet 'stretched tight across the back end of the van' and with gas cylinders lighting a lantern inside. In January 1910, Mr Mitchell, who travelled with a van in rural Sussex, gave 20 meetings in 16 days 'in spite of occasional bad weather'.¹⁵⁰ The National Free Trade Lecture campaign offered political entertainment for large crowds in cities and country alike, including at night. In north London, lantern shows attracted 'enormous audiences' in 1910. In Yorkshire, audiences were treated to eight 'beautiful coloured lantern lectures' in village schoolrooms and on village greens. In Honiton, a small market town in Devon, slides were shown for ten nights in open-air meetings: 'Huge crowds watched them for hours in the rain.' In nearby Exeter, 'huge crowds loudly cheered the appearance of almost every picture', so much so that in the words of one agent it barely required a lecturer: 'There was no need to explain to them; the crowd did their own explanation!'¹⁵¹

The colourful poster was the second prominent form of this dynamic visual politics. Like the lantern shows, the political poster evolved in a hybrid sphere between the worlds of politics and commerce. Several advertisers lent lantern slides to mechanics' institutes and similar bodies without charge in exchange for advertising pictures shown at the end of the entertainment.¹⁵² Colour printing by lithography had become cheap and widespread by the mid-Victorian period and new technologies like the photo-zinc process further boosted the production of cartoons, handbills, and posters. In the Maldon division of Essex, for example, 15,000 handbills



Figure 10. The Free Trade Union office in Clarence Chambers, Plymouth, in 1910, showing a multitude of campaign posters, with local organizers at the door.

found their way into the hands of villagers in 1904. In the January 1910 general election, the billposters Walter Hill and Co. estimated that posters coming from London alone would cover 2 million square feet of wall space. Posters ranged from the modest double crown sheet (30 × 20 inches) to the gigantic 32-sheet version covering a space of 240 × 160 inches. Crewe was the only constituency where candidates agreed not to have posters. Billposting was increasingly recognized as a vital part of political advertising (see Figure 10). It kept a candidate's name and cause 'continually before the electors', one agent noted in 1905, and attracted 'the attention of the non-politician or doubtful voter, who is so often the deciding factor at an election, and who so frequently "goes with the crowd"'.¹⁵³ Many of the leading artists like John Hassall and F. C. Gould were involved in commercial as well as political art and advertising. Advertisers like S. H. Benson and billposters like David Allen & Sons, the largest billposting firm in the world, served both political and commercial masters.¹⁵⁴

Political and commercial posters also shared many icons and reference points, such as John Bull or the coach, widely used in the new brands of food and drink.¹⁵⁵ Yet it would be a mistake to think that political

communication was simply taken over by commercial marketing. Artists, activists, and audiences continued to expect different things from a political poster than from a commercial advert. In 1909, at the height of the political poster craze, *The Daily Graphic* observed that it was not easy to define what made for a successful political poster. The 'funny posters' by Reed and Hassall were singled out. One portrayed a German and American at an Englishman's counter with a long dialogue between them; 'Hier you can everythings buy and more goot and much more sheap as England', the German observes.¹⁵⁶

The continued mix of images and dialogue in political posters ran directly counter to the principles driving commercial advertising. For John Hassall, the 'king of posters' who in 1905 founded the New Art School and School of Poster Design (the John Hassall School), the commercial advert was all about responding to a new society in motion. 'The poster artist has to design an advertisement, not for those who *cannot* read,' he explained, 'but for those who have not *time* to read. The man on the omnibus, the tram, or the suburban train has no time to solve the riddle of a poster charged with letterpress: he must catch the message at a glance.'¹⁵⁷ Hassall's golden rule was that the poster 'should hit the passer-by right in the eye-ball' with 'a huge splash of one colour, which should dominate the whole picture'. For Hassall, the simple political cartoon was a model for the commercial poster. But many political posters continued to mix colours and gave extensive commentary. Instead of eliminating figures and text so that one dominant image could catch the 'momentary glimpse' of the mobile modern citizen, they used familiar images as props for additional figures or political stories. Political symbols and posters were designed to trigger an emotional memory in viewers but also presumed they would stop, think, and listen, as they did around the Free Trade shops and vans, which displayed slides and posters. The imagined gaze of the citizen was still longer and more reflective than that of the shopper.

The most successful political poster of the period was T. B. Kennington's 'Free Trade', a Conservative poster produced by David Allen and Sons (Colour Plate XIV). No picture could possibly have been further removed from the single splash of bright colour that dominated successful commercial advertisements like those for Coleman's Mustard. Kennington, a member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters and vice-president of the Royal Institute of Oil Painters, made a name for himself with scenes of upper-class

mothers and children. In 1889 he had exhibited a street scene, 'The Pinch of Poverty', at the Royal Academy, today hanging at the Foundling Hospital in Brunswick Square, London. Whereas here at least the flowergirl's red lips and yellow daffodils lent some colour and hope to the surrounding misery, his protectionist campaign poster 'Free Trade' was a thoroughly gloomy brownish depiction of a working-class family in despair. His cap and tool-bag thrown down by his side, a worker sits defeated in a barren room, his wife with her head bent on the table, his daughter holding a baby and looking sullenly to the unemployed breadwinner. The table has no tablecloth, the teapot a broken handle. Some clothes are hanging out of the washtub, unwashed. The scene starkly inverted the familiar Victorian image of middle-class domestic harmony popularized by Millais and others. Kennington's was the most widely displayed and controversial poster of the period; 11,000 alone were printed for the January 1910 election, and the image was widely reproduced in the provincial press and on countless handbills and postcards. Handbills used the reverse of the picture to spell out the connection between foreign imports, poverty, and unemployment. Some quoted in bold letters socialists like Philip Snowden, that "'Free Trade" has not brought prosperity to the Masses.'¹⁵⁸

Instead of the bold and simple contours of the political cartoon, Kennington's poster impressed because of its almost photographic quality—Tariff Reformers were at the forefront of camera advertising, introducing photos of German conditions and of dumped goods, like manufactured doors, in lantern shows and handbills.¹⁵⁹ Liberals were furious at Kennington's portrayal of working-class life, especially of the position assigned to the mother. 'It is a pitiable libel upon the women of Britain', *The Cambria Daily Leader* complained. Instead of cheering up her husband, 'the wife, a slattern of the worst type ... has set herself out apparently to deepen his gloom'. 'It is the abiding place—to call it a home would be a misnomer—of an untidy, shiftless, comfortless creature, who is an obvious failure both as wife and mother.' The poster proved just how ignorant Tariff Reformers were of the true conditions of the people. The 'party which keeps it on the walls is simply insulting the wives of the workers'.¹⁶⁰ It even prompted a parliamentary debate. On 23 February 1910, Ramsay MacDonald vented his anger. 'Free Trade' was a 'magnificent poster, full of human sympathy' but it was a cheap tactic for Conservatives to exploit the real misery of unemployed people for their cause. The 'picture could be reproduced in France and in Germany, and with emphasis and added darkness in America',

MacDonald insisted. They had had no right to use it.¹⁶¹ So effective was the poster that Free Traders were driven to caricature it, replacing the original heads of the family with those of Balfour and other Tariff Reformers.¹⁶²

If the battle over Free Trade intensified the role of commercial entertainment and advertising in political life, this did not mean politics became a standardized commercial product or followed the logic of the marketplace. The Free Trade campaign, with its general as opposed to specialized meetings and its self-representation as a public not sectional cause, ran counter to any strategy of market segmentation. There were attempts to centralize and streamline political activities, such as by sending out standardized Free Trade lectures, but speakers could ignore these and audiences often preferred spontaneity and authenticity; instead of sticking to the pre-arranged script, Mrs King, for example, gave her 'own experiences which were most interesting'.¹⁶³ There remained plenty of room for improvisation. In addition to plays, Free Traders organized pageants in which participants dressed up as industries. At carnival, boys appeared with Tariff Reform costumes stitched together from cartoons, and topped with a loaf-shaped hat.¹⁶⁴ Hundreds joined in children's processions, carrying locally assembled posters and banners; in Stirling such a protest against the taxation of food and toys was 'the most interesting incident' in the election, according to *The Free Trader*. It 'came as a dramatic surprise to the bulk of the citizens, and the children were enthusiastically cheered'.¹⁶⁵ In the West Country market town of Tavistock, Fred Ford contributed a large linen poster 'Vote for the Tories who tax food and vote against Old Age Pensions! Why we mus' be mazed', considered a 'remarkably fine piece of work'.¹⁶⁶ Another poster adapted Nestlé's Milk original advert contrasting a well-fed, healthy girl with a skinny, small boy into a political message about the health benefits of Free Trade.¹⁶⁷ Commercially produced political posters were easily manipulated. Their text and image could be altered by political enemies to undercut the message, an early example of adusting, the art of subverting adverts that today has become the weapon of critics of free trade and consumerism. In Bradford, a leading Liberal, H. H. Spencer, was fined 20s. plus costs for cutting 'Free Trade' out from Kennington's poster and sticking on printed 'Tariff Reform' slips instead.¹⁶⁸

New technologies and forms of entertainment reshaped civic culture in the decades before the First World War. They opened up new political

spaces, as well as cutting into older ones. The lantern, the seaside, and the shop window were joined by film. At the Peckham election in 1908, for example, audiences enjoyed 'Singing Pictures' alongside political speeches. The Chronomegaphone show brought together an estimated forty thousand people one night. And the audience did not only enjoy the novelty of the Singing Pictures. 'Interspersed amidst the crowd were various political enthusiasts... and their audiences were enabled to realise the unique situation of listening to heated discussions on Cheap beer and dear bread... and at the same time to be entertained by the Arab on his Steed singing his Bedouin Love Song... and several other more modern airs, among which were Zuyder Zee, and Waltz me round again Willie.'¹⁶⁹ Politics invaded the music hall too. In London, the 'Oxford' and the 'Pavillon' performed plays caricaturing Liberals, which the *Daily Chronicle* decried as 'bad business' as well as 'bad taste'.¹⁷⁰

Often it was the world of commerce which copied politics. The popularity of the Free Trade question did not escape the attention of advertisers of food brands like Bovril, which created posters of Chamberlain drinking Bovril—'Protection Against Colds & Chills Means Free Trade in Bovril'—and of a horned Balfour taking the place of the life-strengthening bull (Colour Plate XV). Local advertisers, too, tried to cash in on the excitement generated by politics. On especially wide screens, lantern slides were used to show commercial and political adverts side by side, a feat that sometimes exceeded the skill of the two operators in charge of running the slides synchronously and left 'startled spectators' with combined messages like 'Palmer's Spring Bedsteads... Deserves the Working Man's Vote'.¹⁷¹

The popular campaign for Free Trade paid off. At the level of electoral politics, it limited the swing to the Conservatives. The Liberal Free Trade government was able to hang on with the slenderest of majorities—274 Liberals plus 40 Labourites against 272 Conservative MPs in January 1910; 272 Liberals plus 42 Labourites against 271 Conservatives in December 1910. Free Trade was not the only issue, but it rallied the troops and voters. The January 1910 election demonstrated the advance of tariff reform in the south, in London and in most English rural areas. Free Trade activism was an attempt to contain the Conservative invasion of England, to retain crucial sections of middle-class support, especially in the north of England, and to target marginals and areas of remaining Liberal

support like Cornwall and Norfolk. It is impossible to measure the electoral influence precisely—not least because the massive seaside campaign was not constituency-oriented. However, comparing cases where the Free Trade movement was particularly active and welcomed by local Liberals with open arms with areas that were distinctly cool to outside agitators suggests some correlation between the degree of activism and electoral success.

In the first place, the campaign kept the issue of Free Trade before the eyes of voters, especially once the Conservative party sought to shift attention to the constitutional question of the House of Lords by pledging to postpone tariffs until after a future referendum. Activists brought much-needed additional manpower and resources, giving several speeches a day, dealing with hecklers, writing letters to the local press, helping with the electoral campaign, and, not insignificantly, reducing the pressure on local candidates and agents to respond to Tariff Reform arguments. But, more generally, campaigners mobilized Liberal voters, and nowhere more so than in doubtful and marginal seats. Where Free Traders were especially active, they helped win back several marginals in December 1910, such as Coventry and Cricklade, where Liberals won by 523 and 128 votes, respectively. Their efforts also paid off in London and in parts of the East Midlands where they reversed Conservative gains; in London, Liberals enjoyed a net gain of three seats. Elsewhere it helped them hang onto seats in traditionally Conservative areas won in the 1906 landslide, as in Somerset North or in Romford, the largest county constituency, with a sizeable middle class, where Liberals even increased their majority between the January and December 1910 elections. Cheltenham and Radnorshire were gained, Tottenham retained. Here local Liberals were grateful for the help from Free Trade speakers and volunteers. In Gloucester, where Free Trade activists praised the 'cordial' reception and the 'plenty of local help & enthusiasm', the protectionist majority was reduced to four.¹⁷²

In Lancashire and Cheshire the story was very different. Here the offer of outside help was largely declined. In many constituencies, Conservatives pledged themselves to a referendum on tariffs, making the issue of Free Trade less urgent. At the same time the Tariff Reform League kept up its propaganda work. Free Trade was left largely undefended at the December 1910 election, and Conservatives increased their share of the vote; in Eastern Lancastria there was a 3.3 per cent swing to the Conservatives. 'It is impossible to maintain Free Trade majorities where such tactics are adopted', Wallace Carter fumed: 'people imagine that Free Traders have

given up their case!¹⁷³ Similarly, in parts of Wales where Free Trade lecturers received little encouragement, as in Montgomery, where relations with local Liberals were 'not at all cordial', the seat was lost in the December election.

Without the popular Free Trade revival the Conservative party would have won in 1910, and Britain would have adopted some sort of tariff regime. The survival of the Liberal government and its programme of social reforms, such as the National Insurance Act, depended in material terms on popular Free Trade. The political impact of the campaign, however, went far beyond the realm of elections. The thousands of meetings and lectures had turned an electoral issue into a more permanent, ongoing feature of public life. There was a new cross-fertilization between politics and commercial spectacle. Free Trade survived because it understood how to mobilize passions as well as to appeal to self-interest or reason, making use of a wide repertoire of entertainment. Some of this pointed ahead to strategies of political marketing to come. But it also carried forward and enriched a colourful tapestry of political culture associated with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with its processions, pageants, spicy rhetoric, and riots.

In the battle over Free Trade, political economy reached people through ever-expanding channels of communication and entertainment, spilling over into the most ordinary and intimate aspects of private as well as public life. No medium typified this better than the political postcard. There was a deluge of postcards after the postal monopoly was abolished in 1903. In 1910, 866 million cards were sent through the post. Beginning in Germany and Japan, the initial craze was for touristic, patriotic, and sometimes erotic images. It was the conflict over Free Trade that rang in the golden age of the political postcard. In the election of January 1910 alone, several million Free Trade and Tariff Reform postcards were produced; even 'music cards' were introduced.¹⁷⁴ Many postcards were reproductions of cartoons from newspapers and posters. Others showed leading politicians or advertised local candidates. But as telling as the image is the use to which contemporaries put them. Some used the postcards to add their political opinion—'poor old Joe! [Chamberlain]'. For others they satisfied the growing appetite of the hobby collector. Yet others used the cards for private communication, informing friends or families of when they would arrive at the local station or inquiring about their health. 'I know you are really longing for a moonlight stroll on the Esplanade, aren't you', one

woman wrote to another. 'You must think I am a horrid girl not to have sent you a card before.'¹⁷⁵ Did the two women ever meet for their walk? We do not know, nor whether they would have talked about the figure of John Bull with his historic liking for the big loaf gracing the front of the postcard. What we do know is that Free Trade had become ubiquitous, flowing almost effortlessly between public and private spheres.