

# Politics and Corruption: Oxford and the General Election of 1880

By P.D. JOHN

## SUMMARY

*The year 1880 was the annus terribilis of Oxford's political history. A General Election in April was quickly followed by an unprecedented by-election to oppose the re-election of a designated cabinet minister. Amid allegations of gross corruption and widespread electoral malpractice, a petition was filed against the Conservative candidate which resulted in the loss of his seat and in a Royal Commission being set up to investigate the extent and depth of corruption in the city. The report of the Commissioners which was published in April 1881 revealed a web of corruption on a quite unprecedented scale which resulted in Oxford being disfranchised for seven years. This article will attempt to throw some light on the causes of this widespread corruption and to gauge its effect on the political processes in the city during that year.*

## I

Never perhaps, since the passing of the Reform Act of 1832 has an electoral battle been fought out in the United Kingdom with more determination than is likely to be displayed now.<sup>1</sup>

The General Election of 1880 was called by Lord Beaconsfield on 8 March. In his famous manifesto<sup>2</sup> he set out the integrity of Empire, the threat of Home Rule agitation and the maintenance of British supremacy in Europe as the three central issues.<sup>3</sup> The Liberals countered in Gladstonian style with a campaign based on the famous 'Peace, Retrenchment and Reform' slogan.<sup>4</sup> For the Liberals, the election was very much a moral crusade, a kind of state trial with the electorate acting as both judge and jury.<sup>5</sup> The Liberal Party, as Chief Prosecutor, would highlight the failings of the government and try to indict its foreign and domestic policy and more particularly the moral principles underpinning it.

This was very much the pattern adopted by the Liberals in Oxford, where the coming contest was greeted with much enthusiasm and optimism. The pro-Tory *Oxford Times* commented that the contest was 'long looked for and has come at last', while the more Liberal *Oxford Chronicle* went straight into the offensive with a personal attack on Lord Beaconsfield:

<sup>1</sup> *Times*, 10 March 1880.

<sup>2</sup> In reality a public letter to the duke of Marlborough. See C. O'Leary, *Elimination of Corrupt Practices In British Elections* (1962), 112-13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.102; T.O. Lloyd, *General Election of 1880* (1968), 39.

<sup>4</sup> *Punch*, 13 December 1879.

<sup>5</sup> T.O. Lloyd, *op.cit.* note 3, 38.

Will this cynical and vainglorious statesman who has done so much to tarnish the fair face of England succeed in cajoling the constituencies into giving him a fresh lease of power?<sup>6</sup>

Both local party organisations had been at work for some time before the dissolution was announced and had already begun the process of persuading the electors with various handbills and posters, so much so that the *Oxford Times* commented on 13 March that 'the organisation is as near perfect as possible on both sides'.<sup>7</sup>

The election fever which gripped Oxford between March and April 1880 had its temperature raised by Gladstone's fierce denunciation of the Tories in a speech in Oxford on 30 January 1878.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Liberals had decided to nominate two candidates for the constituency, Sir William Harcourt, the sitting Liberal member, and his friend, the London lawyer J.W. Chitty. In reality this meant that both the city's representatives could be elected by the same body of (Liberal) voters. Since each Oxford voter was electing two members, each had two concurrent votes, but was not permitted to vote twice for a single candidate, though he could 'plump' and vote for one candidate with one single vote. In thus nominating two candidates the Liberals, it was felt, were trying to monopolise the representation of the city. This provoked Alexander Hall, the Conservative candidate, to claim that the Liberals were denying the voters of Oxford the possibility of rightful representation, and that 'the Liberals have disgraced themselves by not allowing two candidates to represent Oxford'.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly this factor, combined with Oxford's marginal status,<sup>10</sup> was a major force in the heightening of political tension in Oxford. Another was the increasing intensity of the national campaign, which contributed to the greater competition for political hegemony in the city. Here an amalgam of personalities, the issues both local and national, and the press helped to create the most aggressively fought election Oxford had ever seen.

From the start the foreign-policy record of the Tories was at the centre of the debate. In much of the Liberal propaganda, the Tories were depicted as war-mongering spendthrifts who carried out a 'policy of wicked bluster, bloodshed and disaster'.<sup>11</sup> While Sir William Harcourt, in a meeting at Corn Market on 26 March, claimed that the Tories had failed to keep the Russians out of Constantinople and that the Zulu wars had been both expensive and unnecessary, Mr R. Buckell, one of Harcourt's agents, summed up the Tory foreign policy by claiming that its net result 'was the capture of poor King Gateway'.<sup>12</sup>

To counter this, Hall and his campaign supporters continually stressed the positive aspects of Conservative foreign policy since 1874, often drawing comparisons to the Liberal policy of the 1850s. On 20 March, when addressing over 5,000 people at Gloucester Green, he claimed that unlike the Liberals in the Crimean War the Conservatives had stopped Russian aggression without recourse to war.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 13 March 1880.

<sup>7</sup> *Oxford Times*, 13 March 1880.

<sup>8</sup> *Oxford Times*, 2 February 1878; *Oxford Chronicle*, 2 February 1878.

<sup>9</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 6 March 1880.

<sup>10</sup> Between 1857 and 1868 the Conservatives did not even bother to contest the seat. In 1868 the Tory candidate, Dr J. Deans, polled only half of Harcourt's vote. However, by 1874 the difference had been dramatically reduced. Hall, the new Conservative candidate, was defeated by only 100 in 1874, and was eventually returned a month later when Cardwell was given a peerage.

<sup>11</sup> O[xford] C[ounty] L[ibrary], MS. Oxford Election Handbill, ref. 324.2.

<sup>12</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 21 March 1880.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 26 March 1880.

The question of domestic policy also caused considerable local antagonism, with statistics being bandied about to justify each party's line.<sup>14</sup> This method was combined with lists of various financial and fiscal reforms which both parties claimed they had carried out. The Tories continually claimed financial prudence as their main attribute, while the Liberals concentrated on the bad trade figures and the lack of domestic legislation under the Conservatives. J.W. Chitty, in his election address to the electors of Oxford, said dismissively that 'to criticise the domestic legislation of this government is impossible because there is nothing to criticise'.<sup>15</sup> The issue of Home Rule for Ireland was laid out by Lord Beaconsfield in his manifesto on 18 March as one of the principal platforms on which to attack the Liberals. Hall took up the challenge and pointed out on many occasions that 'we should have nothing to do with the Liberal man who swallows the shibboleth of Home Rule'.<sup>16</sup> In return the Liberal candidates claimed that it was their policy merely to give equal rights and to promote peace and prosperity in Ireland.<sup>17</sup>

Undoubtedly the keenness of the party struggle at national level and the clear-cut nature of the issues were manifestly felt in Oxford, so much so that these national factors tended to swamp many of the local disputes, which also had a fierce edge to them. The high rates paid in Oxford was a familiar theme, and this was continually linked to the Liberal Party because of their dominance of the local corporation. Conservatives claimed that the rates had increased from £5,870 to £7,000 between 1878 and 1879 and that this sum had been gained unfairly by pressurising the ratepayers of Oxford.<sup>18</sup> The Liberals replied that the money had been spent on sanitary improvements, so that by 1880 Oxford could rank as one of the healthiest towns in Britain.<sup>19</sup>

The campaign was given an extra dimension by the great personal animosity between the two candidates and their supporters, which increased as the campaign developed. This growing antagonism was a new phenomenon, and clearly ties in with the overall heightened political atmosphere of the early 1880s. In 1874 the candidates remained friendly both during and after the elections. A letter of 6 February 1874 from Hall to Harcourt demonstrates this:

Surely no man ever had such a generous opponent. Thank you very much for your letters; admit all your work to have taken the trouble to write to me is an act of kindness I shall not forget.<sup>20</sup>

This generosity of spirit soon evaporated in the tense political atmosphere of March and April 1880. The bad feeling was often disclosed in statements attacking the excesses of the supporters of each party. Harcourt claimed that Hall could not control the acts of his agents,<sup>21</sup> while Hall more directly claimed that Harcourt owed his victory in April to the misrepresentation, slander and calumny of his supporters.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Oxford Times*, 20 March 1880.

<sup>15</sup> The Tories claimed, in an election handbill, that they had reduced the national debt by some £20m. They did this by recourse to a simple sum: nat. debt 1874, £779,283,000; nat. debt 1880, £758,941,000; sum saved, £20,342,000 net. See O.C.L. MS. Oxford Election Handbill, ref. 324.2.

<sup>16</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 27 March 1880.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 20 March 1880.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 27 March 1880.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 20 February 1880.

<sup>20</sup> A.G. Gardiner, *The Life of Sir William Harcourt* (1923), i, p.269.

<sup>21</sup> *Oxford Chronicle Supplement*, 3 April 1880.

<sup>22</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 8 May 1880.

The Liberal meetings were also peppered with personal attacks on Hall. One such attack focussed on his voting record in parliament, claiming he always voted along party lines, particularly those set out by Disraeli. Others were aimed at destroying the myth that Hall was the friend of the working man, a claim he had often tried to use as an electioneering tool. Chitty continually stated that Hall had always been on the side of the most reactionary of triffers.<sup>23</sup> This character assassination was a central part of the Liberals' election material, with attention continually being focussed on Hall the flogger.<sup>24</sup> This was related to Hall's apparent support for the return of flogging in the army in peacetime.

Hall, for his part, continually referred to Harcourt's speeches as being 'as dull as ditchwater', and frequently spoke of the 'ancient history of Sir William Harcourt',<sup>25</sup> while a series of letters to the *Oxford Times* during the election weeks tried to show Harcourt as a coward particularly in matters concerning defence.<sup>26</sup> This was combined with various attacks on the Liberals as a party attempting to monopolise unfairly the Parliamentary representation of the city and on the fact that Chitty was an outsider who had no ties with Oxford.<sup>27</sup>

Another factor which helped to engender an atmosphere of intense political rivalry in Oxford was the nature of the press. In 1880 the city was served by three local newspapers – the Conservative *Oxford Times* and *Journal*, and the more blatantly Liberal *Oxford Chronicle*. Each carried numerous accounts of political meetings, verbatim transcripts of major speeches and contentious, polemical editorials.

The influence of these newspapers on their readers throws important light not only on the nature of political opinion and its dissemination but also on the way it could be instrumental in heightening already pent-up political feelings. Voters, particularly floating voters, could only gain information from three sources: the speeches of candidates, the handbills and verbal assaults of canvassers, and the press. Furthermore, the reports in the press in 1880, particularly when compared to those in 1868 or 1874, were far more virulent in their attacks on the politicians of both sides, and consequently the political tension multiplied.<sup>28</sup>

During the campaign and, indeed, during the poll itself, allegations of corruption or the intent to pervert the lawful direction of the election were rife. As early as February Liberals were complaining that the buying of votes was still accepted by many people.<sup>29</sup> The role of drink in this process was also hinted at, particularly in relation to Hall's position as the major publican and brewer in the city.<sup>30</sup> Thus in many Liberal election songs, the pub played an important role:

Tory tricks no more shall fool us / Bung and beer no more shall rule us<sup>31</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The Liberals in Oxford produced a rhyme to illustrate Hall's voting record: 'Always voted at his party's call / And Dizzy did the thinking for himself and all': *Oxford Chronicle*, 13 March 1880.

<sup>24</sup> O.C.L. MS. Oxford Election Handbill, ref. 324.2.

<sup>25</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 3 April 1880.

<sup>26</sup> *Oxford Times*, 20 March 1880.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 27 March 1880.

<sup>28</sup> The reports and editorials of the local press tended to be calmer in tone and less personal and vindictive in rhetoric, e.g. *Oxford Times*, November 1868; *Oxford Times*, February 1874.

<sup>29</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 7 February 1880.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> O.C.L. MS. Oxford Election Handbill, ref. 324.2.

while other songs claimed that:

With the brewery beer and the roughs Hall may think to win Oxford again but Englishmen will not be bullied by Walsh and his brewery crew.<sup>32</sup>

In a more subtle and somewhat ingenious handbill, the Liberals cleverly linked those voters in Oxford, whom they felt were more susceptible to bribery and politically apathetic, to the drinking bribe:<sup>33</sup>

The St Giles pheasant noted for his gills which are crimson, his feathers which are blue and his habits of suction, for he is attracted to a pewter pot like an iron to a magnet.<sup>34</sup>

The anxieties and accusations about electoral improprieties were focussed in particular on the practice of canvassing. The *Oxford Times* clearly wanted to express its disapprobation of the manner in which canvassing was carried out, complaining frequently that the people designated to do the job were in every way manifestly unfit for it.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, a week later, the same paper was complaining that too many promises had been procured in this way.<sup>36</sup> By 3 April these fears and accusations had more foundation, but cautious press reports were keen to stress that the incidence of corruption was still mainly associated with a few over-zealous party workers or black sheep,<sup>37</sup> rather than with the candidates themselves.<sup>38</sup>

The General Election campaign itself produced violence and uproar on a scale not seen at Oxford in previous election years. Fighting and the beating-up of supporters was commented on continually by the press.<sup>39</sup> Even Sir William Harcourt, in his statement of evidence to the Royal Commission in March 1881, stated that, 'certainly I should say that there was more violence . . . in the first election of 1880 than there was in the first election of 1874'.<sup>40</sup> J.W. Chitty, his co-candidate in 1880, also commented to the Commission on the level of violence, some of which was aimed against him: 'I was walking with a friend who suddenly had his hat knocked off and it appeared that violence was going to be offered to us both'.<sup>41</sup> Finally the Commissioners themselves reported that because of the rioting, additional constables had to be obtained by the Police Committee from Birmingham and other towns.<sup>42</sup>

On the day of the poll rival party colours and flags were observed in all directions.<sup>43</sup> Party vehicles and cabs were in constant use ferrying voters to the various polling booths. Polling began at 8 o'clock and by mid-day over one hundred special constables had to be

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *Report of the Royal Commissioners into the existence of Corrupt Practices in the City of Oxford, I, Report* [C. 2856], p.9, H.C. (1881), xlv.

<sup>34</sup> O.C.L. MS. Oxford Election Handbill, ref. 324.2.

<sup>35</sup> *Oxford Times*, 20 March 1880.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 27 March.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 3 April.

<sup>38</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 3 April 1880.

<sup>39</sup> For reports of the incidents see *Oxford Times*, 20, 27 March 1880, and *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 13, 27 March 1880.

<sup>40</sup> *Report of the Royal Commissioners into the existence of Corrupt Practices in the City of Oxford, II, Minutes of Evidence* [C. 2856], p.1035, H.C. (1881), xlv.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.1014.

<sup>42</sup> *Rep. Royal Commissioners, I, Report*, p.16 (1881).

<sup>43</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 3 April 1880.

drafted in to deal with the violence. Both Liberal and Conservative party workers were anxious to get the largest possible number of voters to the stations. Polling closed at 4 p.m. and the result was announced at 7.50 p.m.<sup>44</sup> Harcourt gained 2,771 votes, Chitty received 2,669, and Hall came a close third with 2,659 votes.

On closer analysis virtually all of Harcourt's and Chitty's votes came from electors voting for both of them. Most of Hall's votes came from electors voting only once. Thus, in the constituency of Oxford City, there were in 1880 approximately 2,655 Liberal voters and 2,502 Conservative supporters and although Hall was supported by marginally less than half the voting electorate, he failed to win either seat. The Liberals, on the other hand, with the support of just over half of the franchised population, had both seats. This created much anger and frustration in the Conservative camp, which was clearly revealed in Hall's post-election speeches. In the Mitre Hotel he said clearly that 'I am sorry that our opponents did not behave and show the generosity which I have shown',<sup>45</sup> while one of his spokesmen said to the press that Oxford had chosen two lawyers to represent them whose only desire was the development of their own personal interest.<sup>46</sup> Hall continued this theme later, in a condemnation of the dual candidature of the Liberals during a wide-ranging and partly oblique attack on the electoral system itself. He commented that 2,659 votes out of a constituency of 6,000 would normally have procured a victory, and that in the near future 'the Conservative cause shall rise like a giant refreshed'.<sup>47</sup>

The Liberals had, of course, not only won a victory in Oxford but also in the country as a whole.<sup>48</sup> They achieved this partly through superior organisation, particularly that of the National Liberal Federation and the Birmingham Association.<sup>49</sup> They also succeeded because of the failure of the Tories to take advantage of the popular enthusiasm generated in 1878, and their inability to solve the economic crisis of 1880. Finally the victory was made possible because of Gladstone's gargantuan oratory and crusading spirit, which enabled the Liberals to bring morality into the realm of popular politics. These more vigorous campaigning efforts, the more finely tuned national and local organisations, and the greater political awareness engendered by the campaign all combined to create an atmosphere of political volatility. In Oxford these developments, together with its marginal status and the dual candidacy of Harcourt and Chitty, led the Conservatives and the Liberals to intensify their methods of securing electoral victory. These factors, combined with a political community which regarded corruption as socially and politically acceptable, led to Oxford experiencing electoral improprieties at a level which produced almost national notoriety.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 3 April 1880.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> *Oxford Times*, 3 April 1880.

<sup>48</sup> T.O. Lloyd, *General Election of 1880*, 134.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Chamberlain, in a letter to *The Times*, 13 April 1880, pointed out that the caucus had been successful in 60 out of 67 boroughs where it had become established.

## II

I have never fought a pure election in Oxford all my life.<sup>50</sup>

As in 1874 the Liberal victory was short lived.<sup>51</sup> Sir William Harcourt was soon appointed Home Secretary in Gladstone's Government, and under the Statute of Queen Anne had to face re-election along with all other Ministers of the Crown.<sup>52</sup> What was astonishing was that the Oxford Conservatives broke the convention which had stood for over fifty years of not opposing a Minister's re-election, by deciding on a new contest. The Oxford electors were therefore forced to go to the polling booths for a second time in only six weeks.

The decision to contest Harcourt's re-election was made on 26 April at a 'large and influential' meeting at the White Hart Assembly Rooms,<sup>53</sup> despite some doubts being voiced about the funding and morality of the fight. Initially, at the first meeting of the Oxford Conservatives on 24 April, the party had decided not to contest the seat on the grounds of a lack of funds.<sup>54</sup> However, some of the more determined elements in the party approached the Central Conservative Offices with a view to obtaining financial assistance. It was felt that about £3,500 would be needed to oppose Harcourt's return.<sup>55</sup> Sir W.H. Dyke and Col. W.P. Talbot decided on behalf of the Conservative Party to advance £3,000 for the purpose of fighting the election. This they claimed came from a fund which was set up by subscriptions and contributions for the purpose of assisting candidates at important elections. The remaining £500 was raised by local zealots headed by Montagu Burrows, Chichele Professor of Modern History at Oxford University. By 30 April the money had been successfully obtained.<sup>56</sup>

The decision to stand against Harcourt stimulated a vigorous response in both the local and national newspapers. *The Times* called it 'unexpected and unprecedented'<sup>57</sup> and claimed that Hall had broken an unwritten rule of political courtesy. *The Observer*, in similar vein, described the candidature as being 'outside the etiquette of party politics and outside the spirit and meaning of the law.'<sup>58</sup> *The Telegraph*, in a more muted criticism, explained that the Oxford Conservatives had shown a complete lack of political chivalry, but qualified it by claiming that Harcourt's language at the April election rendered it 'injudicious to talk of chivalry'.<sup>59</sup> Only *The Globe* gave the contest its wholehearted support, hailing Hall's courage and determination to oppose Harcourt's return, claiming

<sup>50</sup> Statement by Percival Walsh, Hall's chief election agent and a leading Conservative, during his examination by the Royal Commissioners. See *Rep. Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, II, Mins. of Evidence*, 101.

<sup>51</sup> In February 1874, Sir William Harcourt and E. Cardwell were both elected to represent Oxford. Soon after Cardwell was given a peerage, and in the subsequent by-election Hall was elected to the second seat with a majority of 46 over his Liberal rival, J.P. Lewis.

<sup>52</sup> The Statute of Queen Anne, passed in 1707, was created to prevent ministers from changing parties frequently under new administrations. It was therefore an attempt to keep party discipline and to stop political jobbing at a time when party politics was more fluid. By the late 19th century the political climate had changed, and the re-election of ministers was a formality.

<sup>53</sup> *Times*, 27 April 1880.

<sup>54</sup> *Rep. Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, I, Report*, p.9.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Rep. Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, II, Mins. of Evidence*, p.481.

<sup>57</sup> *Times*, 3 May 1880.

<sup>58</sup> *Observer*, 9 May 1880.

<sup>59</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 10 May 1880.



that Sir William had been one of the most 'rancorous and unfair of all the oratorical slanderers who have vilified the late government'.<sup>60</sup> Locally the contest was deplored by all sections of the press.<sup>61</sup> So why did Hall stand against Harcourt in May 1880?

In his election address he claimed he was responding to 'an overwhelming and powerful feeling throughout the city'.<sup>62</sup> However, on further analysis he was clearly personally peeved by the fact that the Liberals had put up two candidates in April and had thereby forced him out of a seat. This, combined with the unusual voting patterns of the constituency, led to Hall developing a 'deprived thesis' as a means of justifying his candidature. In his election address he clarified this with a reference to the fact that a large body of the citizens of Oxford would not be represented in the deliberations of the new parliament. This 'intolerable wrong', as Hall called it,<sup>63</sup> led to his 'deprived thesis' being supported by a number of letters from Conservative supporters to the *Oxford Times*. All these claimed that the Conservative voice in the city had been removed by an unfair combination.<sup>64</sup>

Running throughout Hall's reasoning was not only the unfairness of the previous contest, but also the feeling that Harcourt needed to be taught a lesson because of the bitter invective which he had unleashed both locally and nationally, and which had done so much to secure a Liberal victory in April 1880. Sir William himself later claimed that the contest was part of a desire on behalf of the Conservative Party to attack the new Liberal administration through the body of one of its senior members.<sup>65</sup> This national revenge thesis was taken up by the *Oxford Chronicle* in an editorial on 1 May: 'the real reason for the contest comes from the Junior Carlton Club in London who feel it is a chance to attack the government and to gain revenge for the rout of last month'.<sup>66</sup> Thus, the theory went, in unseating one of the administration's most prominent members the Conservatives could make an example of the government. This 'strike at Mr Gladstone's Government' was, the *Chronicle* claimed, being used by an unscrupulous faction to embarrass the Liberals, and combined with Hall's apparent vanity and the petulant spite of his supporters formed the reasoning behind the contest.<sup>67</sup> Whatever the case, as has been shown the Conservative Party itself, through its central offices, funded the by-election to the tune of £3,000, and so it seems likely that Hall's candidature must have had some official approval, although no concrete evidence exists to support this. Moreover, the 1880 General Election, despite being a clear victory for the Liberals in terms of seats, was not, on closer analysis, a landslide in terms of votes.<sup>68</sup> In marginal seats (of which Oxford was clearly one by 1880) the election was a very close race, and a shift of 4,000 votes in key marginals could have lost the Liberals their overall victory. This factor, combined with the fact that the Liberals were able by 1880 to put up more candidates in seats which they had conceded unopposed in 1874, may have led the Conservatives to feel even more bitter about the result.

<sup>60</sup> *Globe*, 26 April 1880.

<sup>61</sup> *Oxford Times*, 1 May 1880.

<sup>62</sup> O.C.L. MS. Oxford Election Handbill, ref. 324.3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Oxford Times*, 1 May 1880. The *Globe* and *Bath Chronicle*, 1 May 1880, continued this theme, the latter being particularly vociferous in supporting Hall's position.

<sup>65</sup> Evidence of Sir William Harcourt to the Royal Commissioners: *Rep. Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, II, Minutes of Evidence*, p.1032.

<sup>66</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 1 May 1880.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 8 May 1880.

<sup>68</sup> See T.O. Lloyd, *op. cit.* note 3, p.134.



On 6 May 1880 the *Times* commented that 'the battle in Oxford will not be fought on high political grounds but for local and personal reasons'.<sup>69</sup> This comment proved to be largely correct. The campaign was fought amid accusations of bribery and on issues which were more personal and vitriolic than they had been in April. From the start Harcourt was at a disadvantage in that he could not spend so much time electioneering because of his other responsibilities in London. This was made more of by the local Liberal press when they claimed that the election was distracting one of the most important ministers in the government from carrying out his national duties.<sup>70</sup> Harcourt and his supporters were also suspicious of the methods being used by Hall to secure his victory. Word seemed to have permeated the political echelons of Oxford that the Conservatives had received considerable largesse from the party's Central Offices. In retaliation, Harcourt was quick to enlist the aid of two prominent members of the Birmingham caucus, Schnadhorst and Nuttall. Harcourt obviously appreciated the increasing skill of the Birmingham Association, but also wanted Schnadhorst and Nuttall to detect any obvious corruption during their superintending of the election.<sup>71</sup>

This importing of political organizers created a great deal of political animosity. Sir Robert Peel,<sup>72</sup> at an open air meeting in Gloucester Green on 3 May, derided the influence of the 'Americanising Caucus which degraded and debased popular institutions'.<sup>73</sup> The influence therefore of the Birmingham managers made the contest keener. Their methods of organisation created the first political caucus in Oxford. Names of supporters were registered; those with strong political opinion, whether working class, middle class, teetotal or trade-associated were leafleted and canvassed; thus political support was noted whether it was favourable, unfavourable or undecided. This led Hall's supporters to employ even more canvassers, bill stickers, clerks, constables, orderlies and messengers.<sup>74</sup> Inevitably, the foundations were laid for an escalation of organised corruption.

Throughout the election Harcourt constantly made reference to the danger of swopping votes. He continually claimed that if votes changed and he was defeated the whole of England would doubt whether Oxford was an intelligent or honest constituency.<sup>75</sup>

Allegations of corruption were more widespread during May than they had been in April, with the candidates continually pointing the finger at each other's agents. In a meeting at Gloucester Green on 1 May Harcourt claimed that the Tories were fighting the battle with 'other means', while Nuttall in the same meeting claimed that Hall only appealed 'through his bungs and his taps'. Similarly Thorold Rogers, a local academic and Liberal, encouraged voters not to sell their hopes for 'a pot of beer'.<sup>76</sup>

This theme was central to the election handbills which were printed by the Liberals. In a 'constitutional assessment', a verse created by party supporters, Hall is shown as buying his seat 'to send the squire to Parliament, the Tories must find the city's price'.<sup>77</sup> At the centre of the debate was the theme of abstinence and morality, and here again

<sup>69</sup> *Times*, 6 May 1880.

<sup>70</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 1 May 1880.

<sup>71</sup> *Rep. Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, II, Minutes of Evidence*, p.133.

<sup>72</sup> Son of Sir Robert Peel and Tory M.P.

<sup>73</sup> *Times*, 6 May 1880.

<sup>74</sup> *Rep. Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, I, Report*, p.12.

<sup>75</sup> *Oxford Times*, 8 May 1880.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> O.C.L. MS. Oxford Election Handbill, ref. 324.3.

Hall's status as a major brewer and pub owner came under attack. In a leaflet, Hall was branded as the devil incarnate, 'Satan reproving sin, the Devil preaching morality'.<sup>78</sup>

This was quickly followed by series of bills presenting Harcourt as a fine national politician with great national responsibilities; this coming in complete contrast to the parochial, even immoral Hall. In a series of rhetorical questions, one of the bills asked 'Is it fair or generous to deprive the country of an eminent public servant who has just been elected for the fourth time?'<sup>79</sup>

On election day, which fell inside the University Term, many undergraduates gave their assistance to the Conservative cause. Polling began at 8 o'clock on Saturday 8 May, and according to estimates nearly four fifths of all the available voters had been polled by 1 p.m.<sup>80</sup> Violence was again much in evidence with scuffles and fights breaking out at various committee rooms across the city.<sup>81</sup> Counting began at 4 p.m. and by 8 p.m. the result was available.

The large crowd outside the Town Hall, which had gathered from 6 p.m. onwards, was vociferous and rowdy because rumours of an upset had already been floating about the city.<sup>82</sup> The result eventually showed Hall as the victor by 2,735 votes to 2,681, and the *Oxford Times* commented that 'no language can do justice to the frantic delight which the announcement was received by the Conservatives'. Hall, in his victory speech, commented 'we have got our fair share and we are content and happy'.<sup>83</sup> Harcourt addressed a large group of supporters outside the Clarendon Hotel, saying that the assemblage was a magnificent response by the honest men of Oxford to the attempts 'which had been made to corrupt it'.<sup>84</sup> His disappointment was hidden, and he immediately sent a telegram to his wife explaining his defeat: 'It has gone wrong here. I am quite well and shall be home tonight'.<sup>85</sup> A.G. Gardiner, his official biographer, commented, 'He took his beating handsomely as he closed his account with his old constituency'.<sup>86</sup>

The reactions to Harcourt's defeat were swift and clear. The *Times* commented that the unexpected shift of public opinion as witnessed in Oxford would tend to confirm the theories 'of those who declared the movements of large and diminutive constituencies to be incalculable'.<sup>87</sup> Other newspapers seemed to go along with the view that the Tories had had their revenge both locally and nationally and that much of it had been achieved through 'pot and bung politics'.<sup>88</sup> Finally the *Oxford Chronicle* outlined the reasons for the defeat in clear terms – a combination of corruption, the University and the clergy had resulted in Hall's victory: 'The Bible and the Bear [a local pub] which did so much for the Tories had been revived in Oxford in May 1880'.<sup>89</sup>

Clearly Harcourt's defeat had wider implications. On 19 May Samuel Plimsoll resigned his seat at Derby, and informed Harcourt that he was sure of his success there.<sup>90</sup> The local Liberals, however, were dumbfounded and bitter, turning their scorn on the

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 8, 15 May 1880.

<sup>81</sup> *Oxford Times*, 15 May 1880.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 15 May 1880.

<sup>85</sup> Bodl. MS. Harcourt dep.228.

<sup>86</sup> A.G. Gardiner, *The Life of Sir William Harcourt*, i, p.365.

<sup>87</sup> *Times*, 10 May 1880.

<sup>88</sup> *Daily News*, 10 May 1880.

<sup>89</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 10 May 1880.

<sup>90</sup> Letter from Sir Samuel Plimsoll to Sir William Harcourt, 10 May 1880: Bodl., MS. Harcourt dep.348.

corruption and bribery perpetrated by the baser elements of the city.<sup>91</sup> So deep was this feeling that one correspondent to Harcourt claimed that the constituency could be disfranchised, and he hoped that Harcourt would not forget that there were still some righteous men in Oxford.<sup>92</sup>

### III

We must clean out this pungent stable or suffer degradation for years.<sup>93</sup>

Almost immediately after Harcourt's defeat the Oxford Liberals began their post mortem. They felt that Hall's reversal of the April result had been achieved by foul means and that according to the law, a petition could be filed against the candidate on the grounds of political and electoral malpractice. In order to file the petition, the Oxford Liberals, under the guidance of J. Bickerton, decided to collect evidence of corruption and to raise a guarantee of £3,000 in order to prepare a case.<sup>94</sup> The aim of the petitioners was to remove Hall and to have Harcourt re-elected in his place.<sup>95</sup> Because of the activities of Nuttall and Schnadhorst, the local Tories decided upon a similar course of action. Mr Evetts, one of Hall's election agents, employed a private enquiry firm from London which sent three agents, to try to uncover electoral malpractice on the Liberal side.<sup>96</sup>

As the investigations continued, by a curious stroke of luck a letter was found by a small boy in the High Street opposite the London and County Bank. This letter, from Professor Burrows to Dallin, a Tory supporter, contained the suspicious phrase that the election fight would collapse unless £500 over the Carlton £3,000 could be found. Eventually the letter found its way to the Liberal mayor, Thomas Galpin,<sup>97</sup> who instructed the town clerk to publish it in the local press.<sup>98</sup> In a letter to Sir William Harcourt the town clerk jubilantly proclaimed that 'I have a treat for you in a letter from Burrows to Dallin' and immediately a petition against Hall was filed.<sup>99</sup> The petition trial took place between June and August 1880. As soon as the petition was filed the Tory *Oxford Times* welcomed the challenge.<sup>100</sup> The Liberal *Oxford Chronicle*, in opposition, attempted to show in its editorials that the Conservatives had attempted to gain the suffrage of the constituency by the most 'profuse and demoralising expenditure'.<sup>101</sup> The enquiry itself was prematurely stopped in early August when Hall admitted that he could not controvert the evidence against his agents. On 4 August Judges Lush and Manisty gave their verdict.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Letter from J. Bickerton to Sir William Harcourt, 10 May 1880: Bodl., MS. Harcourt dep.348.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from F. Max Miller to Sir William Harcourt, 9 May 1880: Bodl., MS. Harcourt dep.348.

<sup>93</sup> Letter from J. Bickerton to Sir William Harcourt, 10 May 1880: Bodl., MS. Harcourt dep.348.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Letter from J. Bickerton to Sir William Harcourt, 17 May 1880: Bodl., MS. Harcourt dep.348.

<sup>96</sup> C. Fenby, *The Other Oxford* (1970), p.42.

<sup>97</sup> The Liberals had a majority of 32 to 8 on the town council.

<sup>98</sup> Letter from the town clerk to Sir William Harcourt, 27 May 1880: Bodl., MS. Harcourt dep.348.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> *Oxford Times*, 5 June 1880.

<sup>101</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 7 August 1880.

<sup>102</sup> Copies of the shorthand writer's notes of the judgement, in the petitions filed against members' return to the House of Commons: Parliamentary Paper, Bodl. V57 and V58 (1880).

The judgement showed that corrupt practices at the May election had prevailed. Some direct bribery by payment and offers of money had also been proved.<sup>103</sup> Most of the corruption, however, was in the form of 'colourable employment', with both sides employing an excessive number of voters as messengers and clerks in order to secure their votes.<sup>104</sup> What seemed to have surprised the judges most was that the practices such as those quoted had continued on such a large scale despite the introduction of the secret ballot.<sup>105</sup> Hall was immediately removed from the seat and a recommendation was made for a Royal Commission to be set up to investigate electoral malpractice in the city.

The *Times*, in an editorial on 6 August, commented that undoubtedly Oxford had become a 'vast bribing booth'.<sup>106</sup> However, the editorial also claimed that one of the worst vices was the system which allowed such malpractices to continue. The evil, according to the *Times*, was the canvassing system, which turned the voters into sheepdogs, and it was pointed out that this must be controlled if the purity and independence of the electors was to be maintained.<sup>107</sup> The Tory press completely vindicated Hall of any blame, the *Oxford Times* being quick to stress the Liberal control of the Corporation and other city institutions by corrupt methods.<sup>108</sup> The *Oxford Chronicle*, on the other hand, was less satisfied with the judgement, claiming that the judges had made notable omissions. It was pointed out that no reference had been made to the Carlton £3,000, and the paper took particular offence to the judges' claim that the Liberals were equally as guilty as the Conservatives.<sup>109</sup>

The Royal Commission appointed by the Government convened on 1 October 1880.<sup>110</sup> During the investigations, which lasted until April 1881, thousands of witnesses were called including Sir William Harcourt, the Home Secretary. The report revealed that the Carlton £3,000 had been brought to Oxford in the form of gold and had been lodged in two bank accounts in order to protect the users in the event of a petition. The carrier was Charles Pegler, who it seems was employed by Charles Martin, then secretary of the Junior Carlton Club, and whose tasks were to transport the money and to help carry out other election duties.<sup>111</sup> This pretence would have been successful but for Dallin's carelessness in losing the letter in the High Street.<sup>112</sup>

What was the extent of the corruption in Oxford? During the May election, in a campaign which lasted ten days, the Liberals spent £3,275 and the Conservatives £5,611 21s.<sup>113</sup> The Conservatives split the constituency into districts which coincided roughly with the polling areas, in order to maximise the effect of the canvass. In some of the districts, notably St Ebbe's with 906 voters and St Thomas's with 1,234 voters, over 380 people were employed as clerks, messengers, constables, detectives, orderlies, bill stickers and watchmen, the number of people employed in St Ebbe's alone being 250. Clearly some of the agents felt that the April election had been lost because of insufficient

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* p.59.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* p.60.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* p.61.

<sup>106</sup> *Times*, 6 August 1880.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* See also *Oxford Chronicle*, 7 August 1880 and *Oxford Times*, 7 August 1880.

<sup>108</sup> *Oxford Times*, 7 August 1880.

<sup>109</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 7 August 1880.

<sup>110</sup> The judges were Messrs. Carr, Cowie and Ridley.

<sup>111</sup> *Rep. Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, I, Report*, pp.10-11. By the time Commission met, Charles Martin and Charles Pegler had escaped to the continent.

<sup>112</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 27 November 1880.

<sup>113</sup> *Oxford Chronicle*, 27 November 1880.

employment on the Tory side, and so resolved to engage anyone who wanted a job.<sup>114</sup> Here again treating was frequently employed, particularly in supplying free beer to voters at public houses.<sup>115</sup> Many freemen who had to travel into Oxford to vote were given extra money over and above their travelling expenses when they came to register their vote.<sup>116</sup>

This vast expenditure exceeded the original estimate by over £2,000, and Hall had to meet part of this himself. After the election he tried to replace much of this sum from the coffers of the Junior Carlton Club, which had collected nearly £1,000 for the purpose of opposing the petition in July. Charles Martin, the then secretary of the Club, paid the money to Percival Walsh,<sup>117</sup> who believed that it was being given to cover the excess election spending,<sup>118</sup> while, Sir George Prescott, who signed the cheque, was under the impression that it was for the fight against the petition. From a close examination of the minute book of the Junior Carlton Club it seems that Martin tried to deceive the Club by hiding the true direction and purpose of the money.<sup>119</sup>

The Liberal organisation and campaign was funded by Sir William Harcourt personally. The Liberals employed over 500 people at the election, of whom only 220 were actual voters. In the north ward of St Giles and St Thomas 264 people were employed. In defending this, R. Buckell, a Liberal agent, admitted that if the Liberals had not employed that number they would have 'infallibly lost the election'.<sup>120</sup> It also became apparent that the two Birmingham managers used 'breakfasting' to a considerable extent in order to influence voters, or as they claimed, to get the poll early on election day.<sup>121</sup> The 'breakfasts' were disguised in the accounts under 'committee room expenses'. Obviously this practice was used extensively in Birmingham and on a much grander scale.<sup>122</sup>

The April election seems to have been carried out in a similar fashion, but with less organised corruption. The expenditure on the Conservative side was considerably less despite the election being longer. The Conservatives employed about 800 people whilst the Liberals employed 365.

The overall conclusion of the Commissioners was that Oxford was not generally corrupt, with only limited evidence of the direct buying and selling of votes. Most of the corruption was in the form of 'colourable employment'. Some money had also been expended in paying voters for their loss of time and in the process of treating.<sup>123</sup> The number of voters influenced by these practices was upward of 1,000 and only a few direct accusations of extreme malpractice were cited in the evidence. One such incident related to the printing and distributing of forged ballot papers. In his evidence Percival Walsh,

<sup>114</sup> *Report Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, II, Minutes of Evidence*, p.165.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* pp.102, 165, 171, 178.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* pp.49, 50, 124.

<sup>117</sup> Hall's chief election agent, see above, note 50.

<sup>118</sup> *Rep. Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, II, Minutes of Evidence*, pp.496, 540.

<sup>119</sup> The minute book of the Junior Carlton Club reveals two entries: 27 July, the Secretary reported that with the consent of the leaders of the party, a loan of £500 has been made to the agents of the Oxford Election; 3 August, loan to the Oxford Petition Fund.

<sup>120</sup> *Rep. Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, II, Minutes of Evidence*, p.50.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.* p.118.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* pp.118-19. Schnadhorst claimed that it was not unusual in wards of 4,000 in Birmingham to breakfast hundreds at a time. This procedure was not illegal and did not quite fall under sec.23 of the Corrupt Practices Prevention Act of 1879. For a full discussion of the influence of the Birmingham caucus on British politics see B. McGill, 'F. Schnadhorst and the Liberal Party Organisation', *Jnl. of Modern History*, xxxiv (1962), 362-97.

<sup>123</sup> *Rep. Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, I, Report*, p.16.

who organised the printing and sending out of these papers for the Conservatives, claimed the whole exercise was for the purpose of 'instructing the voters in how to fill in a ballot paper'. Various meetings were held throughout the city to act as 'practising classes'.<sup>124</sup> It was also claimed that eight forged ballot papers had been found in the ballot boxes.<sup>125</sup> However, the Commissioners could find no evidence for this, or for the allegation that the ballot boxes had been opened and detained in Oxford until Monday, 10 May.

How far did this corruption influence the political process in Oxford? The Conservative agents clearly saw the use of 'colourable employment' as a means of inducing the voter to plump for Hall. The increasing corruption during the May election seems to have been due to the fact that the Conservatives felt that an inordinate number of voters had fallen to the Liberals.<sup>126</sup> The fear of losing in May was also one of the main motivating factors in increasing the level of corruption.

In reality this corruption, particularly in the form of treating, breakfasting and colourable employment, influenced the political process only to the extent that some floating voters could be secured from the clutches of the opposition. Most of the corruption was in equal measure, and was mainly an attempt to keep the support of already supposedly committed supporters. Generally, then, it influenced the political process only marginally; but as time went on it became more and more compulsive, particularly when four conditions were present: firstly, when the political stakes were higher, as in April and, more especially, in May 1880; secondly, when both sides knew that each party had escalated or broadened the corruption; thirdly, as we shall see later, when economic and social factors give rise to a demand; and finally when public opinion openly sanctioned its use. The Commissioners, however, did not have enough firm evidence to convict more than 180 people. They generally believed that the money or employment offered was meant to confirm party allegiance, not to subvert it.<sup>127</sup>

Among those convicted of malpractice were agents and election organizers from both sides. Some were members of the town council while two were magistrates of the city. Finally, J. Bickerton, who had since May been appointed as town clerk, was also found guilty.<sup>128</sup> All these characters were high ranking inside the local party machine and were very close to both Hall and Harcourt. Yet both candidates were exonerated of any implication in the misdemeanours. Sir William Harcourt was called before the Commissioners and claimed that he gave very strict instructions that the law should not be violated.<sup>129</sup> The press, after the publication of the report, also freed Harcourt and Hall of any blame, preferring instead to blame 'the residuum or ill-educated' sections of the population who they felt had sucked up the corruption.<sup>130</sup>

Throughout the sitting of the Commission suspicion was raised that Harcourt had perhaps sweetened the investigators by giving them overtly long recesses.<sup>131</sup> There were

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. II, *Minutes of Evidence*, pp.84-5 (1881).

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. p.100.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. p.56.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p.19.

<sup>128</sup> The five town councillors convicted were R. Buckell, J. Colcutt, G. Cooper, W. Evetts and T. Wells.

<sup>129</sup> Rep. Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, II, *Minutes of Evidence*, p.1040.

<sup>130</sup> *Oxford Times*, 16 April 1880.

<sup>131</sup> *Hansard*, ccliii, 71. Sir George Campbell claimed the delay in the production of the Commissioners' Report was causing 'grave apprehension to members of the opposition benches' and that Sir William had given them over-long recesses in order to secure their favour.



also allegations that he had attempted direct bribery in the May election.<sup>132</sup> None of these had any real foundation, but an entry in his son Lewis Harcourt's journal on 4 March shows Sir William's relief after giving evidence to the Commission. This entry was accompanied by numerous press cuttings and other notes relating to the Commissioner's investigations, but there is no direct comment on the verdict.<sup>133</sup>

In the absence, therefore, of any clear evidence no direct complicity can be proved in the case of either Harcourt or Hall in the corruption process. However, it is clear, if only from circumstantial evidence, that both were very much aware of the illegal practices taking place, and that both sanctioned them either actively or passively.

The Royal Commission concluded that one of the principal causes of the corruption was that there were so many ready takers because the city had suffered a winter of great distress. Subsequently many more were subjected to temptation arising out of the unusually large sums of money being spent.<sup>134</sup> When this was combined with the temporary nature of Oxford's employment, a residuum of voters was created who were open to the influence of money.<sup>135</sup> Various witnesses described the harshness of the winter and its effect on the population.<sup>136</sup> This, they claimed, created a ready market for employment and treating.

The Reports of the Poor Law Guardians support these statements, and show that there was a five-fold increase in the number of paupers taken into the Oxford workhouse during the winter of 1879-80, while the number claiming outdoor relief increased by 432.<sup>137</sup> Consequently by April and May 1880 there were many more ready hands willing to take money or jobs as a means of off-setting their bad winter. The Royal Commission pointed out on numerous occasions that the number of voters clearly outnumbered those employed or treated at elections, however,<sup>138</sup> so other causes must be taken into consideration.

#### IV

What conclusions can be drawn from the evidence and analysis presented? Firstly, the conclusion of the Royal Commission that 'Oxford is not in our opinion generally corrupt' seems to have been correct. What corruption existed was not of the more injurious kind, but was widespread and deep seated.<sup>139</sup> Of more importance was the fact that in May 1880 accounts had been 'cooked', and that there had been a deliberate attempt to conceal election spending. Here the Junior Carlton Club played a subversive and clandestine role in funding both the May election and part of the excessive overspending, and the fight against the election petition.

<sup>132</sup> There was a claim by a Mr Laker that Sir William had sent him a letter promising to pay for a tub of butter if he voted Liberal. This letter was never discovered and no proof was brought forward.

<sup>133</sup> There are numerous entries in Lewis Harcourt's journal, including a very clear sign of relief after Sir William had given evidence: 'we are all satisfied' he said. Bodl., MS. Harcourt dep.348.

<sup>134</sup> *Report Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, I, Report*, p.16.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* p.9.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid. II, Minutes of Evidence*, p.85.

<sup>137</sup> 'Annual report of the Guardians of the poor in the City of Oxford, 1879-80': O.C.L. ref. Oxfo.362.5. For similar reports see *The Oxford Clothing Charity 1880-1888*, Bodl.G.A. Oxon. 4<sup>o</sup> 266.

<sup>138</sup> *Rep. Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, I, Report*, pp.12-14.

<sup>139</sup> For a comparative list of English boroughs that possessed a corrupt element between 1865 and 1864 see H.J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management*, p.263.



Secondly, it is clear that an interplay of complex factors created a web of corruption which reached its zenith in May 1880. The initial ingredient was the tradition of corruption in Oxford, which had become firmly ingrained in its political life throughout the 19th century. This, however, is only a partial explanation of a much more complicated process. The development of Oxford into a marginal seat by the 1870s, combined with its dual voting system, created at local level a much greater feeling of political rivalry. This, in conjunction with the dual candidature of Harcourt and Chitty in April 1880, created further disenchantment and bitterness and a feeling that Oxford's Conservatives were being denied their rightful representation. This seems to have been the decisive factor in Hall's decision to oppose Harcourt's re-election, and consequently must have been one of the major factors in causing the increase in corruption.

In addition to these local factors, national politics had also become more aggressive, 1880 being particularly marked as a nasty campaign.<sup>140</sup> April 1880 then, marks the start of the first of the big national campaigns which have dominated British political life ever since.<sup>141</sup> These new campaigning methods and the intensity of the struggle between the leaders and their followers led to the rivalry permeating all levels of political action, and Oxford was no exception. Indeed, the ferocity of Harcourt's speeches provided the best example of this heightened political tension, which created an atmosphere in which corruption could flourish.

These national factors, combined with accentuated local forces, were clearly evident in Hall's opposing of Harcourt's re-election. It seems unlikely that Harcourt's revenge thesis had any foundation, but it must be added that the Liberal victory of 1880 was much closer than many contemporaries appreciated. More acceptable is Hall's deprived thesis, which was motivated by personal frustration and bitterness at the small margin of Chitty's victory. This outcome, together with Harcourt's appointment as Home Secretary, obviously heightened the political stakes. This was all exacerbated by the bags of Carlton gold.

The level of corruption in May managed to turn around a Tory loss in April. This was achieved at great expense by wrenching a small number of floating voters from the greasy palms of the opposition. Only to this extent did the corruption influence the political process.

May 1880 saw corruption in Oxford reach unknown peaks. It had clearly been caused by a combination of the above factors. Neither side could afford to lose, and on a national stage both parties encouraged by one another were forced to dip further into their pockets in order to counter each other's actions. In the final analysis it was the shock of disfranchisement combined with the punitive legislation of 1881 to 1883 that finally brought Oxford's politicians to heel.

*The Society is grateful to the Twenty-Seven Foundation for a grant towards the publication of this paper.*

<sup>140</sup> See O'Leary, *op. cit.* note 2, p.113.

<sup>141</sup> P. Walsh, Hall's agent, claimed that there would not have been so much corruption had Harcourt not been made Home Secretary in April 1880: *Report Royal Commissioners into Corrupt Practices, II, Minutes of Evidence*, p.616.