

A Singular Liberal:
Richard Robert Fairbairn and Worcester
Politics
1899-1941

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Abstract

The political career of Richard Robert Fairbairn, a Liberal member of a Conservative- dominated Council in Worcester from 1899 to 1941 provides the focus for this study. Labelled by the Tory press as a Radical, Fairbairn would appear to personify the New Liberalism of the period before 1914 and remained firmly committed to the Liberal cause for the rest of his life. From 1908 he dedicated his considerable energies to municipal affairs and, as chairman of the local National Insurance committee for 28 years, he was responsible for the implementation and administration of a major Liberal reform in the city. Based on examination of his extensive personal collection of press cuttings and other related primary sources, this thesis assesses how far, as the leader of a small minority group within the Council, Fairbairn was able to put his Liberal principles into practice in a largely unsympathetic environment. Fairbairn's work is also considered within the wider context of the declining position of the Liberal party over the same period. He contested eight general elections as the Liberal candidate between 1910 and 1935 and served briefly as Worcester's MP in 1922- 3. Analysis of his election campaigns and his numerous public speeches has been used to demonstrate the response of a loyal, but independent, Liberal to changes of leadership and policies within the party. It is argued that by maintaining second position in the polls for the party in the face of any Labour challenge, Fairbairn ensured that Liberalism remained alive in Worcester at a time when the party was seen as increasingly irrelevant elsewhere.

Introduction

Richard Robert Fairbairn's active involvement in Liberal politics began at a time of the revival in the party which culminated in its landslide victory in the general election of 1906 and the subsequent period of ten years in government. By the time of the general election of 1935, when Fairbairn stood as a Liberal candidate for the eighth and last time, the party had been reduced to the position of third party in the House of Commons and the number of Liberal MPs fell to a mere 21. As early as 1935 George Dangerfield presented his explanation for the rapid decline of the Liberal party in *The Strange Death of Liberal England*. Writing from a somewhat limited perspective Dangerfield claimed, that the 'true pre-war Liberal [party] - supported, as it still was in 1910, by Free Trade, a majority in Parliament, the ten commandments and the illusion of Progress – can never return. It was killed, or it killed itself, in 1913'.¹ Fairbairn, a convinced Free Trader, and a Liberal - 'because I believe Liberal principles are the nearest approach to the practice of the Christian religion in politics'² - would have profoundly disagreed with Dangerfield's verdict. Ever optimistic, he was more likely to have endorsed the view, expressed at a meeting of Worcestershire Liberals in 1936, that the report of the party's death, like that of Mark Twain, 'had been grossly exaggerated'.³

Speaking on the hundredth anniversary of the Liberal party's landslide victory in the general election of 1906, Kenneth O. Morgan said that very few historians now pay much heed to Dangerfield's 'brilliantly written' and highly entertaining' book.⁴ However, while it is true that his conclusions may have been dismissed by later

¹ DANGERFIELD, George. *The Strange Death of Liberal England*. First published London 1935. 1970 edition p14.

² *Worcester Evening News*, February 21st 1935. Fairbairn Scrapbooks (hereafter F.S.) Box 12, Vol.1, p92. Worcestershire Record Office (hereafter W.R.O.)

³ *Daily Times*, November 10th 1936. F.S. Box 12, Vol 1, p146. W.R.O.

⁴ MORGAN, Kenneth O. Speech at the Guildhall, London, February 7th 2006 reprinted in *The Journal of Liberal History*, Issue 51, Summer 2006.

historians, Dangerfield's argument has since provided a useful starting point from which to consider alternative explanations for the Liberal decline. It was not until the early 1960s that Dangerfield's thesis was seriously challenged when disillusion with the two major parties led to a renewed interest in the Liberal party and a spectacular by-election victory in 1962 raised hopes of another revival. A new edition of Dangerfield's book was published in 1966, the same year in which *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-1935*⁵ by Trevor Wilson appeared. Wilson's contention, that the Liberal party was still healthy until 1914 when 'the outbreak of the First World War initiated a process of disintegration which by 1918 had reduced it to ruins',⁶ opened up a debate which still continues. Written thirty years apart these two books present an interesting contrast in their approach to the issue. Dangerfield had set out to prove that the Liberal party was responsible for its own sudden death while Wilson's narrative approach and the use of the word 'disintegration' indicates a far more gradual process. Dangerfield acknowledged that in writing of relatively recent events his access to private papers of living people was necessarily limited but his bibliography shows that he did not consult any newspaper reports beyond 1914. As far as he was concerned that was the end of the story. Wilson, on the other hand, was able to consult a far wider, and later, range of papers and had more time to reflect and consider his subject from a greater distance. However, it is worth noting that he chose to end his narrative in 1935, the year in which *the Strange Death* was published, showing that he, too, saw little hope of any revival after that date.

Peter Clarke⁷ introduced another factor into the debate with his study of Liberalism in Lancashire before 1914. He claimed that New Liberalism, with its emphasis on progressive ideas and in informal alliance with Labour, had adapted to

⁵ WILSON Trevor, *The Downfall of Liberal England 1914 – 1935*. London 1966.

⁶ *ibid* p23

⁷ CLARKE P.F., *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*, Cambridge 1971

the changing political context allowing the party to retain its support in the North-West. In his view it was the wartime split between Asquith and Lloyd George which had proved fatal to the party. Clarke's work raised further questions such as the nature and origins of New Liberalism and the extent to which Liberal MPs supported progressive ideas in 1906. Michael Bentley has argued that the Liberal reforms largely depended on the energy of a few Radicals led by Lloyd George and that 'exactly how many Liberal MPs one ought to count as "Radical" in this Parliament depends on the generosity of the definition'.⁸ David Dutton supports this view, quoting a contemporary opinion that Asquith himself was 'really an old-fashioned Radical of the Manchester school, who [was] leading a heterogeneous band of followers'.⁹

A further issue raised by Clarke's work was how far his conclusions, which related to a largely industrial region, might be applied to other Liberal areas. Later local studies show considerable variation in the influence of New Liberalism, and the impact of Labour, on the grass roots of the party. Michael Dawson, with reference to rural Devon and Cornwall, concluded that traditional Liberalism, based on the Gladstonian principles of peace, retrenchment and reform, plus Free Trade, was 'an essential aspect of the party's appeal' before 1914 and continued to be so until at least 1929.¹⁰ This is borne out by Garry Tregidga's study of the South-West after 1918 in which he demonstrates that Liberalism, based on 'a deep reverence for the cause of Gladstone and the moral fervour of religious non-conformity', remained a major force

⁸ BENTLEY Michael, *The Climax of Liberal Politics. British Liberalism in Theory and Practice 1868-1918*. London 1987. p113

⁹ McEWEN J.M. (ed), *The Riddell Diaries: A Selection*. London 1986 p39, quoted in DUTTON David *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* Basingstoke 2000. p21.

¹⁰ DAWSON Michael, 'Liberalism in Devon and Cornwall, 1910-1931: "The Old-Time Religion"', in *The Historical Journal*, 38, 2 (1995), p425.

in the region up to 1929.¹¹ These regional studies were concerned primarily with Liberal parliamentary representation whereas George Bernstein's earlier work on the period before 1914 - focusing on reactions to New Liberalism and the progressive alliance at constituency level in Norwich, Leeds and Leicester - suggested a different approach. He suggested that in these urban constituencies, where Liberalism was predominant, Liberal attitudes to emergent Labour groups, and to the issues of reform, very much depended on local circumstances. He concluded that, while cooperation was acceptable for Parliamentary elections in line with the agreement of 1903 between the Liberals and the Labour Representative Committee known as the Progressive Alliance, it did not easily transfer to municipal matters.¹² Richard Fairbairn's career in municipal politics in Worcester presents the opportunity to examine the strength of Liberal sentiment, and reactions to the rise of Labour, over an extended period in an urban constituency where support for the party was relatively weak.

If the Liberal decline was simply the consequence of the party's own shortcomings, it might be argued that it could have revived as it had done in the past. However, the party's displacement by Labour as the second party in the House of Commons after 1922 proved critical. The election of 1922, which was described as a period of 'confusion unknown in any former election',¹³ marked the arrival of three-party politics for which the Liberal party was quite unprepared. For Ross McKibbin the 'rise of Labour and the fall of the Liberal party are intrinsically connected'.¹⁴ His main theme was that 'political allegiance became more and more determined by class

¹¹ TREGIDGA Garry, *The Liberal Party in South-West Britain since 1918*. Exeter 2000 p55.

¹² BERNSTEIN George L., 'Liberalism and the Progressive Alliance in the Constituencies, 1900-1914: Three Case Studies' in *The Historical Journal*, 26, 3 1983, pp617- 640 and *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian Britain*, Boston 1986

¹³ *Nation* 11, November 1922, cited KINNEAR. M., *The Fall of Lloyd George; The Political Crisis of 1922*, London 1973 p135 quoted in DUTTON D., op cit., p87.

¹⁴ McKIBBIN Ross, *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910-1924*. Oxford 1974, p236.

self-awareness' and that the Liberals had no claim on the loyalties of any class.¹⁵ Cooperation between the two parties in the guise of the progressive alliance had faded away during the war. The decision to leave the wartime coalition, as well as the successful drafting of a new constitution for the party in 1918, enabled Labour to present itself as a united and independent party in the 1918 election, in marked contrast to the divided and disorganised Liberals. Having been formed to represent the interests of Trade Unions and the working class, Labour benefited from the wartime increase in Union membership, which ensured a steady income for the party and provided a model on which to base its organisation. Keith Laybourn argued later that the working class had already transferred its loyalty to Labour before 1914 through the union movement and that the Liberals failed to recognise the need to connect with the working class.¹⁶ The extension of the franchise in 1918 made this failure even more significant in the long term.

Duncan Tanner, in his study *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918*, rejected the idea of class as the main determinant of voting behaviour in the limited period covered, claiming that other factors such as 'past political practices and current economic interests combined to create an extremely uneven electoral map'.¹⁷ Like Clarke, Tanner considered the North-West but he also included other areas such as "the Tory regions", the coalfields and Yorkshire and called for a less generalised and more diversified approach. Describing the political system as 'an elaborate jigsaw',¹⁸ he argued that political choices were influenced by a wide variety of factors which were constantly changing. Tanner's work has led to the publication of several case studies of specific constituencies and individuals, such as Jon Lawrence's

¹⁵ *ibid* p245

¹⁶ LAYBOURN Keith, 'The Rise of Labour and the Decline of Liberalism: The State of the Debate', in *History*, Vol. 80, No259. June 1995

¹⁷ TANNER Duncan, *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900-1918*, Cambridge 1990 p317.

¹⁸ *ibid* p420

investigation into the progressive alliance in Wolverhampton before 1914,¹⁹ and Barry Doyle's examination of aspects of middle class Liberalism in the city in Norwich.²⁰ These studies, plus brief biographical articles on Liberal MPs published in *The Journal of Liberal History*,²¹ all provide additional evidence to fill in the gaps in the overall picture of Liberal activity and decline.

Richard Fairbairn's personal collection of press cuttings²² relating to his work in Liberal politics from 1899 to 1941 presents a unique opportunity to examine the activities of an individual in a Conservative-dominated constituency whose commitment to the party was widely acknowledged by his supporters and political opponents. Meticulously organised in chronological order in twenty-four volumes, the collection would appear to include any reference to Fairbairn's activities from both local and national papers. Of particular interest for the present study are verbatim reports of council meetings, accounts of election campaigns in which Fairbairn took part and editorial comment from both sympathetic and hostile standpoints. There is little reference to national events or personal matters and no personal notes or comments beyond minor factual corrections. Fairbairn left no diaries or other personal papers and, in common with many constituency Liberal parties of the period, there are no local records available. Consequently this study of Fairbairn's career in Liberal

¹⁹LAWRENCE John, 'The Complexities of English Progressivism: Wolverhampton Politics in the early twentieth century'. *Midland History*, XXIV, 1999 p147.

²⁰ DOYLE Barry M., 'Urban Liberalism and the "Lost Generation": Politics and Middle Class Culture in Norwich, 1900-1935' in *The Historical Journal*, 38, 3. 1995, p617

DOYLE Barry M., 'The Structure of Elite Power in the early Twentieth Century City; Norwich 1900-35', *Urban History*, 24, 1997

DOYLE Barry M. 'A Conflict of Interests? The Local and National Dimensions of Middle Class Liberalism, 1900-1935' in *Parliament and Locality 1660-1936*, ed. DEAN David and JONES Clyve, Edinburgh. 1998.

²¹JONES J. Graham, 'To Hold the Old Flag: Sir Henry Hayden Jones 1863-1950'. *Journal of Liberal History*, 50, Spring 2006. (Jones was the only Asquithian Liberal returned in Wales in 1918).

MANDER Nicholas, 'Last of the Midland Radicals: Sir Geoffrey Mander, Liberal MP for Wolverhampton East 1929-45'. *Journal of Liberal History*, 53, Winter 2006-7.

HUNTER Ian, 'At the Heart of the Party.' *Journal of Liberal History*, 46, Spring 2005. (Raymond Jones 1883-1948 Constituency organiser, election agent and Parliamentary candidate.)

²² Fairbairn Scrapbooks. W.R.O. ref 5569: 899.486

politics has largely been based on a critical examination of his scrapbooks mindful of the fact that the material inevitably represents his particular interests and political priorities. Further related sources have been examined, wherever possible, to test the evidence presented by the subject himself. Unfortunately it has not been possible to consult the minutes of the Worcester's Housing Committee, an area of policy in Fairbairn took a particular interest, as these are subject to a 100 year bar. From other primary sources Earl Beauchamp's involvement with the Liberals in Worcester has been confirmed, although no direct link with Fairbairn was established, and Fairbairn's participation in the party's activities beyond the city has been demonstrated. It has been assumed throughout that Fairbairn's collection was intended for his own use as a source of information and personal record.

The study is organised in six chapters. After the introductory chapter the subsequent five chapters consider phases in Fairbairn's political life chronologically. 'Radical Councillor 1899 -1908', relates to Fairbairn's role in the revival of the Liberal party in Worcester and the consequences of the 1906 election in the city for Fairbairn and local Liberals. His appointment as Liberal agent and the general election campaigns of December 1910, 1918 and 1922 in which Fairbairn stood as the Liberal candidate are considered in the chapter entitled 'Professional Politician and Parliamentary Candidate 1908 – 1922'. This chapter also includes Fairbairn's work as chairman of the National Insurance committee and his contribution to the war effort. In 'A Year at Westminster 1922-3' Fairbairn's dual roles as Councillor and constituency MP and his defeat in the 1923 general election campaign are examined in detail. Fairbairn's concern for the welfare of the poor and his continued commitment to the Liberal party are demonstrated with his return to municipal

politics in the chapter 'Independent Liberal 1924-1941'. The final chapter assesses his achievements and his significance as 'A Singular Liberal'.

Radical Councillor

1899-1908

‘An episcopal city, a municipal and Parliamentary borough, capital of the county and a county itself’.¹ The opening words of a glossy publication celebrating Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee provide a useful snapshot of Worcester in 1897. In addition to defining the city’s position in the local government system which was set up in 1888, this publication was clearly designed to publicise the city’s industrial and commercial activity, as well as its social attractions. The overall impression is one of civic pride, with a tinge of complacency, as ‘the civic and municipal administration of Worcester may well be a source of profound pride and satisfaction to every citizen of this flourishing and exceptionally favoured city.’²

The status of the cathedral city of Worcester had been considerably enhanced when it became one of the ten newly created county boroughs in 1888. By Act of Parliament the elected borough council, meeting in the Guildhall, acquired full responsibility for public health, highways, lighting and law and order, including the appointment of magistrates, within the city boundary. The county council, which met in the city at the Shirehall, was responsible for the same services for the wider county. In 1902 education was the first addition to the list of services to be run by local authorities, the number and scope of which was to increase considerably in the early twentieth century. Up to 1885, when the Liberal party split over Irish Home Rule, Worcester had been represented in Parliament by prominent local industrialists who supported the Liberal party. In 1885 the sitting member, Rowley Hill, lost his seat, by 84 votes, to the Conservative and Unionist candidate, George Allsopp. Allsopp, the son of Lord Hindlip, went on to win three subsequent elections in 1886, 1892 and

¹*An Illustrated and Descriptive Account of Worcester, 'The Faithful City'*. Author unnamed London 1897 p1. Worcester Family History Centre

² *ibid*

1892 and was returned unopposed in 1900. At this time, Worcester had acquired a reputation, which it shared with other cathedral cities such as Exeter, Norwich and Rochester,³ for corruption in elections. In 1892 a petition alleging bribery in Worcester's election was dismissed but the presiding judges of the Royal Commission investigating corruption in the election of 1906 found otherwise. In their report they stated that they had heard 'sufficient evidence to convince us that both before and since 1892 corrupt practices at both Parliamentary and Municipal Elections in Worcester have systematically prevailed'.⁴ This issue was to have a profound effect on subsequent elections and on the Liberal party, in particular, in Worcester for some long time afterwards.

Worcester had expanded rapidly in the nineteenth century as an industrial and commercial centre. The city's traditional industry of gloving continued to be significant although, by 1900, much of the production was factory based. Worcester's more modern industry was particularly diverse and the number and variety of products was regarded as unusual for a cathedral city. Industries based on metal included cast iron products such as railings and gates, railway signalling apparatus, agricultural implements and tin plate. Transport links were well established and the Vinegar Works, which produced two million gallons a year, had its own connection to the railway line while canal and river trade continued for some goods. The city could also boast of brick works, timber yards, a specialist carriage works, boot and shoe manufacture, the Royal Worcester Porcelain Company, Worcestershire sauce, and a thriving mail order business. The commercial and banking centre for the county, the prestigious buildings of the banks, the Corn Exchange and the Hopmarket Buildings, which opened in 1900, are an indication of the scale and importance of those

³ PELLING Henry, *Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910*. London 1967 p429.

⁴ Report of Royal Commission on Worcester Parliamentary Election 1906, published December 10th 1906. W.R.O.

particular businesses. A purpose-built Market Hall opposite the Guildhall was the centre for other trades. However, Worcester's 'most distinctly modern feature' in 1897, was electric light which had recently been introduced. A municipal enterprise, hydro-electricity was supplied from the river Teme and was 'widely employed in business premises, private dwellings, and even churches, and tends to be universal'.⁵

Many of Worcester's public buildings such as the Shirehall, the Market Hall and the Public Hall were built between 1840 and 1875 but the Victoria Institute, funded by public subscription as a Jubilee memorial to Queen Victoria, was opened in 1896. Designed to provide a free library, school of art, reading and reference rooms, this building is a further indication of civic pride. According to the Jubilee booklet, having listed many other attractions such as a theatre, hotels, clubs, musical societies and racing, "Worcester is not lacking in attractions which make civic existence in modern times endurable, and sometimes positively agreeable".⁶

Underlying the rosy picture perhaps the most pressing of Worcester's problems was housing. With the expansion of the city by the end of the nineteenth century many new houses had been built but these were largely for the middle class. Poorer families continued to live in overcrowded accommodation, often in deteriorating buildings and in areas prone to flooding. As a matter of public health, which was the responsibility of the council, housing for the poorer members of the community was to become a major concern for Richard Fairbairn and long running political issue in the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1894, at the age of 27, Richard Robert Fairbairn moved to Worcester from London to take up the position of manager of Worcester Tramways. In 1895, the seventh Earl Beauchamp of Madresfield Court accepted the invitation of Worcester

⁵ *The Illustrated and Descriptive Account of Worcester*. op.cit. p17

⁶ *ibid* p15.

Corporation to become Mayor of the city. He was 23. These two young men, from vastly different backgrounds, each played a major role in the revival, and the continued influence of the Liberal party in the city of Worcester during the first half of the twentieth century. There is no evidence to suggest that they ever became close colleagues but their separate and complementary contributions to the cause of Liberalism in the locality reflected their contrasting social positions and personal circumstances.

Having no family connection in Worcester or Worcestershire, Richard Fairbairn came on the local political scene as an outsider but soon made his presence felt, having become a city councillor within five years of his arrival. He spent his whole career in opposition, serving as a Liberal member of the Conservative-dominated city council for 40 years and briefly representing the constituency in the Parliament of 1922, again on the Opposition benches. However, his presence and personality ensured that the Liberal voice was heard and heeded in both arenas. In contrast, as a member of a respected and aristocratic landowning Worcestershire family, Earl Beauchamp's role was that of a figurehead and patron providing support and encouragement for the activities of the party in the county. A prominent convert to the Liberal party, he was an asset to the party in Parliament, served in the Liberal Cabinet between 1908 and 1915 and was leader of the party in the House of Lords from 1924. His active support for Liberal candidates in Worcestershire up to his retirement from public life in 1931 lent some credibility to the cause at a time when the party nationally appeared to be in serious decline.

When Fairbairn became MP for Worcester in 1922, stories of his early life and experience received attention in the national press as a 'rags to riches' story with

headlines such as ‘From Newsboy to MP’⁷ and ‘Romance of an MP’⁸. Based on a speech he made to newsboys in Worcester, it is not surprising that the newspapers seized upon what was clearly regarded as a somewhat colourful and unusual past for an MP at the time. Fairbairn did not discourage such publicity and even provided more details, using the opportunity to describe how his background had influenced his political views. It was quite true that his family had experienced hard times, and he had sold newspapers on the streets both in London and in Canada, but the family did not live in a state of permanent poverty.

Fairbairn was born in London in 1867 and the family emigrated to Canada during the 1870s, presumably to seek a better life. There, they were in contact with relations and Fairbairn sold papers on the streets for an aunt after school. This appears to be the only formal education that he had as, when the family returned to London in 1880, his father was unable to work and Fairbairn did sell newspapers for W.H. Smith’s for a time on Ludgate Hill Station for six shillings a week. Having lost that job, he worked for an evening paper in various roles, eventually as a reporter. This experience no doubt made him aware of the importance of the press in politics. The very detailed style of political reporting of the time made it possible for Fairbairn, in later life, to keep a personal record of his political career made up entirely of press cuttings.

Fairbairn’s father’s political activities, which on his death in 1916, merited obituaries in the Daily Mail, the London Evening News, the Morning Post and the Westminster Gazette, as well as the local Worcester papers, must inevitably have influenced his son’s views. Richard Robert Fairbairn senior had been ‘conspicuous in

⁷*Lloyds Sunday News*, May 13 1923. (F.S.) loose in Box 9 Vol. 2, p W.R.O.

⁸*Evening Despatch*, Birmingham, January 29 1923 F.S, Box 9 Vol. 2, p116. W.R.O.

all labour movements in London'⁹ having taken part in demonstrations for the extension of the franchise, municipal reform and the right to meet in public in open spaces. As Secretary and later President of the Amalgamated Society of Watermen and Lightermen he had been involved in negotiations over the building of Tower Bridge and had been on the Conciliation Board after the dockers' strike of 1889. Described as a fluent public speaker, it would seem that he passed on this facility to his son. Membership of a political party is not mentioned but it is reasonable to assume that his sympathies could be said to be broadly radical.

It was as a 'radical' that Fairbairn was described in Worcester's Conservative local paper and a report, which appeared much later in his career, confirmed that 'he belonged very much to "the Left"', having 'happy memories of H.M. Hyndman, Harry Quelch, Charles Bradlaugh, and other noted Radicals of the day'.¹⁰ Having taken part in London in the elections of 1885, 1886 and 1892, and having been secretary of the Rotherhithe Liberal Association when Dr. Pankhurst was a candidate, his political experience must have been invaluable at a time when Worcester Liberals were beginning to re-emerge. Fairbairn first became a councillor in Worcester in 1899, in place of Beauchamp representing St. John's ward, and he was returned unopposed in the municipal election of 1902. He was appointed as secretary and agent of the Worcester Liberal Association in 1903, presumably an honorary position at this stage. He arrived at a most opportune moment for the Liberal party in Worcester.

It would appear, from the evidence available, that Fairbairn was perhaps better qualified for his political role than he was for his salaried position as manager of Worcester's tram system. He came to Worcester from the West London Extension Tramways but it has not been possible to establish whether he had any specific

⁹ *Evening News*, London, September 20 1916, F.S. Box 8 Vol.1, p5. W.R.O.

¹⁰ 'Our New Chairman', *The Liberal Agent*, July 1927 quoted in *Worcestershire Echo*, September 24th 1927. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 1, p32. W.R.O.

training for his position. It is worth noting that his earliest scrapbooks contain numerous cuttings relating to systems in other cities, references to municipalisation, legal judgments and salaries. No reference has been found to his appointment in Worcester. Just as he quickly became involved in Worcester politics, he made his mark by successfully improving the financial position of the company. In 1898 Worcester Tramways Ltd became the Worcester Electric Traction Company and wages were increased and working hours reduced. The electrification of the system was to be Fairbairn's main concern during his early years on the council involving frequent clashes over the municipalised electricity supply. He was opposed to municipalisation on principle, convinced that private enterprise provided a better and more efficient service. Wrangling over this, and other matters, went on for over five years but eventually the tracks were successfully relaid and extended and the newly electrified system was officially opened in February 1904. This major work became known locally as the Worcester Tramway Siege, having involved considerable disruption to trade for over six months.

The Conservative Education Act of 1902 is often regarded as a major contributory factor in the revival of the Liberal party at the beginning of the twentieth century. Under the terms of the Act, Worcester as a County borough, was required to set up a local education committee, which was to take responsibility for the provision of elementary and secondary education within the city. In 1903, at the first meeting of the newly formed Education Committee, Fairbairn was appointed as a member of the elementary education sub-committee. Many Non-conformists, whose political affiliation generally tended towards the Liberal party, objected to the Act on the grounds that some of the rates paid for education would be used to support existing Church of England and Roman Catholic schools. This was an issue on which Liberals

could focus in opposition to the government and, according to the local press, several meetings were held in and around Worcester, both for and against the measure. However, the local Conservative press reported that there were few signs of displeasure at the act in Worcester and it appears that the local Education committee got on with the practical business of implementing the Act. It can only be presumed either that there were few Non-conformists in Worcester or, that the Liberals were not sufficiently organised at that point to make any serious protest. Fairbairn did report on a resolution from a Liberal Federation meeting in 1903 that Liberals were urged 'to take a share in the work of the Education Committees' to see that the Act 'was administered in a progressive spirit'.¹¹ It is not known whether Fairbairn himself had any particular sympathy with the Non-conformist view, but it is probable that he was more concerned with the electrification of the trams at that time.

The apparent failure of the local Liberals to campaign positively against the Education Act makes the sudden and quite spectacular revival of Liberal activity in Worcester and Worcestershire all the more remarkable. Signs of renewed interest in the party can be detected in 1902, but it was in 1903 that three factors combined to cause the party to burst into action. The happy coincidence of Fairbairn's enthusiasm, energy proven organisational skills, with the reputation, commitment and generosity of Beauchamp and, a new political cause in 1903 - that of opposition to the tariff reform campaign - led to a period of remarkable activity for Liberals in Worcester.

Having been appointed secretary and agent to the Worcester Liberal Association in January 1903, Fairbairn seems to have thrown himself into reviving the party locally. He organised several meetings, at first for his own ward of St. John's, and then for the city association, concerning himself with both practical and policy

¹¹ *Worcestershire Chronicle*, April 24th 1903. F.S. Box 2, Vol. 2. p70. W.R.O.

matters. Contacts were made beyond Worcester as he attended a meeting of the National Liberal Federation in Birmingham and, with Beauchamp, who was elected President of the city Liberal Association, he became a member of the National Liberal Club. Reporting back from the Liberal Federation he emphasised the importance of keeping in touch with evolving national policies and also the need to work in harmony with the Labour party in support of progressive policies. Fairbairn's contribution to the development of the Liberal party in Worcester in the period up to the general election of 1906 was largely one of loyal support to the principal players. Beauchamp as President of the Worcester Liberal Association took the chair at all major events and, when a prospective Parliamentary candidate had been named by 1903 he, naturally, was the main speaker. Fairbairn's presence is recorded at all these events, sometimes as part of the platform party, sometimes in the body of the hall and sometimes, according to the Conservative press, as cheerleader. He was by no means a figure in the shadows as he continued to carry out his duties on the city council and, in 1905 celebrated six years as a councillor by holding a public meeting for his ward constituents to address them about his extensive municipal activities. He was not opposed at the next municipal election. This practice of keeping his constituents informed was one which Fairbairn continued throughout his political career.

No secret was made of Beauchamp's financial support for the party at this time and this received much attention in the Conservative press with observations such as, 'One supposes that the peer who pays the piper calls the tune'.¹² A major rally of Worcestershire Liberals at Madresfield Court in August 1903, at which the estimated attendance was between 13,000 and 14,000 people from eight county constituencies, was held to 'demonstrate the fact that Liberalism has awakened from

¹² *Daily Times*, January 4 1903, F.S Box 2 Vol. 2, p2. W.R.O.

the lethargy of the last few years'...¹³. Lavish hospitality on a massive scale undoubtedly attracted voters' attention as refreshments, sports events and fireworks were interspersed with speeches covering all aspects of current Liberal policies from Beauchamp and the county's candidates. On this occasion Fairbairn received acknowledgement as a capable and energetic organiser. These rallies at Beauchamp's country home continued as a fairly regular event in the party's calendar into the 1920s. A reception given by Beauchamp at Worcester Guildhall in 1905 for 'all grades of the Liberal party, including most of the prominent city Liberals',¹⁴ was attended by 600 people and this time Mr. and Mrs. Fairbairn were among the guests, though not included in the platform party. No doubt it was owing to Beauchamp's connections, and his well-known hospitality, that national figures such as Asquith and Haldane appeared as guest speakers at meetings of the party in Worcester. It is not surprising that the local Conservative paper continued to refer to Beauchamp's 'open purse' and role as 'paymaster' for the Liberals and went on to suggest that a relation of Beauchamp was being considered as a possible Liberal Parliamentary candidate for the constituency. H. D. Harben who, though not a relative, had been at Eton with Beauchamp, emerged as the recommended Liberal candidate early in 1903. Much was made of Harben's willingness to move to Worcester and to become involved in local affairs. It is interesting to note that it was Fairbairn who stressed Harben's concern for the interests of the working class and the trade unions, appealing to the supporters of progressive reform to work with the Liberals. He added that 'the Labour party would find him a good man to support' and encouraged them to join with the Liberals to elect Harben to Parliament.¹⁵ There is no indication that there were sufficient Labour supporters in Worcester to merit a more formal progressive alliance.

¹³ *Worcestershire Echo*, August 5 1903, F.S Box 2 Vol.2., W.R.O.

¹⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, July 22nd 1905, F.S. Box 3, Vol.1, p183. W.R.O.

¹⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, March 26th 1903. F.S. Box 2, Vol. 2, p60. W.R.O.

Beauchamp's local involvement in Liberal activity demonstrated his sincere commitment to the party. He was apparently an effective speaker, even allowing for the deference of the time and, with the approach of the election in 1906 he was much in demand to speak on behalf of Liberal candidates all over the country. While endorsing Liberal attacks on the Balfour government Beauchamp's main theme was that of Free Trade and the arguments against the re-introduction of Protection as advocated by Joseph Chamberlain. Asquith, who was described in the local Liberal press as 'the most militant of Liberal leaders',¹⁶ was invited specifically to demolish Chamberlain's case on his visit to Worcester in 1903. In May 1905 Beauchamp chaired and spoke at another meeting in Worcester, held under the auspices of the Free Trade Union, a cross-party organisation of which he later became the treasurer and with which he continued to be closely connected into the 1920s.

By 1905 the Liberals could congratulate themselves on their achievement in Worcester. The party was now well organised on a ward basis, its finances were assured, its policies had been well publicised and clearly defined and the candidate was well established in the constituency. Fairbairn had ensured that the party's voice continued to be heard at meetings of the city council and, in November 1905, the Liberals gained two seats in the municipal elections. They could look forward to the coming election with some optimism. In marked contrast the Tories, split over tariff reform and under attack on several fronts, appeared complacent. The Liberal press made great play of the fact that their opponents had held no open meetings for the voters in the city. The sitting Conservative member, the Hon. G.H. Allsopp, was accused by the *Worcestershire Echo* of acting as if he were 'an irresponsible, independent person whom the electors of Worcester must perforce send to

¹⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 10 1903. Box 2, Vol. 2, p141. W.R.O.

Parliament'.¹⁷ Tory complacency was considerably dented however in November 1905 when Allsopp announced that he was to retire. The Tories had some difficulty in finding an acceptable candidate in a hurry and eventually G.H. Williamson, who no longer lived in Worcester but had been mayor and maintained local business connections in the city, agreed to stand.

Polling in the 1906 election was on January 17th. Both parties had conducted a short but frantic campaign issuing policy statements and holding almost daily meetings through the previous month. On January 18th the constituency's result did not reflect the national landslide to the Liberals. In Worcester the Liberals had increased their share of the vote from the last contested election by 10% but Williamson, the Tory candidate, had won by a majority of 129. However the celebration in the Tory party was short-lived. On February 14th Harben, the disappointed candidate, Beauchamp and Fairbairn were reported as having gone to London to present a petition to Parliament alleging bribery and corruption in the election in the constituency. Harben, and Richard Cadbury, a prominent local Liberal, were named as the petitioners and Williamson as the respondent. Fairbairn seems to have maintained a fairly low profile in what became known as the 'Worcester Election Scandal'. He was not directly involved although his attendance is recorded among local aldermen and councillors at the Shirehall on the opening day of the trial of the Election petition in May 1906. With the withdrawal of Williamson from the case, and the verdict that bribery and treating had taken place, the election was declared void. A Royal Commission was appointed to inquire into corruption in the Worcester election and to consider the electoral record of the constituency at the same time. Fairbairn was called to give evidence to the Commission in August 1906 and is

¹⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, May 3rd 1904. Box 2, Vol.2, p195. W.R.O.

reported as stating that Harben should have won as bribery had directly affected the result of the election. In his opinion as many as 600 voters could be bribed. It is now clear that the Liberals had decided, before the election, to try to expose the bribery and corruption in the constituency. At the time of the municipal elections in November 1904, an editorial in *Worcestershire Echo* referred to requests for money for votes and concluded that ‘the public service, local and national, will never be satisfactory until the vote is treated, both by candidate and electors, as a trust and a privilege, and not as a marketable commodity’¹⁸. Evidence of the Liberals’ intention may be found in Beauchamp’s correspondence where it appears that, during 1905 he took legal advice on how to prove that bribery had taken place.¹⁹ The Royal Commission of 1906 came to the conclusion that the constituency ‘on the whole was not corrupt’ as only 60 people were reported as receiving money and the total sum involved was under £8 but, at the same time, ‘there exists in Worcester a class of voters, numbering almost 500.... who are prepared to sell their votes for drink or money’ and that, in the Parliamentary election of 1906, ‘corrupt practices on an organized system extensively prevailed....’²⁰

The repercussions of the 1906 election in Worcester were considerable and remained long in the political memory of the city. The constituency was without an MP and its voters therefore disenfranchised for two years, relations between the political parties in the city became increasingly acrimonious during that time and this, in different ways, had an impact on the individuals involved. The Liberal Government appeared reluctant to grant the necessary writ for a by election to be held in the constituency, no doubt aware that the city was unlikely to increase its Parliamentary

¹⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 2nd 1904. FS, Box 3, Vol. 1, p51. W.R.O

¹⁹ Letter from H.Drysdale Woodcock, 3 Elm Court Temple, E.C. June 1st 1905. B.P, K 1,ii, Madresfield Court.

²⁰ Report of Royal Commission on Worcester Parliamentary Election of 1906, published December 10 1906. W.R.O.

majority. The Conservatives had held the seat since 1885, the party dominated the city council and as Pelling states ‘the Liberals had to bear the odium of having publicized the whole matter – and of having cut off a regular source of income for “the needy”’.²¹ The fact that the Tory press could claim, ‘in every ward the Progressive candidates were overwhelmed’²² in the municipal elections of November 1906 would appear to bear out Pelling’s observation. The first application for a writ was refused by the House of Commons in December 1906 and, in January 1907 Beauchamp was informed by letter²³ from 12 Downing Street that it was unlikely that an application would be granted within that year. The Liberals appear to have accepted the delay without comment but the Conservatives, anxious to prove their continuing support in Worcester, stressed the relatively small scale of proven corruption. Thus, in December 1906 the *Daily Mail* hoped that ‘the writ will not be delayed’²⁴ and the *Daily Telegraph* commented that the city’s honour having been vindicated, ‘it may hope soon to be again represented in the councils of the nation’.²⁵ However, after the failure of the second application in February 1907 the Conservative *Pall Mall Gazette* did ‘not pretend to regret the vote which has further postponed the issue’, and took the view that ‘a further spell of deprivation may teach Worcester its lesson....’.²⁶ It was not until January 1908 that the writ was finally granted.

Bitterness and open hostility characterized the relationship between the political parties up to the by-election of January 1908. Exchanges during the municipal election campaign of November 1906, which took place before the report of the Royal Commission was published, demonstrate the depth of the parties’ mutual

²¹ PELLING H., *Social Geography of British Elections 1885-1910*, London, MacMillan 1967, p 193

²² *Daily Times*, November 3rd 1906, FS Box 4, Vol. 1 p51. W.R.O.

²³ Letter from Whiteley, 12 Downing Street, January 22nd 1907. B.P., K1ii, Madresfield Court

²⁴ Quoted in *Worcestershire Echo*, December 11th 1906, F.S. Box 4 Vol. 1 p 138. W.R.O

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ Quoted in *Worcestershire Echo*, February 17th 1907. F.S. Box 4, Vol. 1 p184. W.R.O.

antipathy. The Conservatives, in their view, cheated of their Parliamentary victory by the use of devious tactics and Beauchamp's money, accused the Liberals of blackening both the reputation of the party and of the city. In response an editorial in the *Worcestershire Echo* claimed that there 'is not a particle of evidence showing that the Liberals have been guilty of bribery or treating. Their public record in this respect is unstained. ... Liberals of course do not give Worcester a bad name. This is the work of Toryism'.²⁷ An attack on the Liberals by the Conservative Arrowsmith Maund, a local solicitor and under-sheriff, described in the *Worcestershire Echo* as a 'mean, scurrilous, untruthful harangue',²⁸ provoked Fairbairn into an allegation that Maund was 'a disgrace to the public profession he follows'.²⁹ This, and other insults, led to an action for slander brought by Maund against Fairbairn in February 1907 when the judge attributed the intemperate language of both men to the heat of the moment and dismissed the case. Ill-feeling remained and Maund continued to attack Liberal 'dirty tricks'. In January 1908, in a letter to *The Times* on behalf of the Worcester Conservative Association, he drew attention, yet again, to Liberal tactics in 1906 and claimed that 'some of the biggest scoundrels in Worcester were employed in setting traps and obtaining evidence' and that 'for several weeks after the election and before the hearing of the petition, money and beer were distributed amongst the lower classes ...',³⁰

Fairbairn, as the most visible Liberal in the constituency, seems to have borne the brunt of Conservative anger. Beauchamp, appointed to a position in the royal household by the new Prime Minister, and also active in the House of Lords, was frequently away from Worcester while Harben, the Liberal candidate and signatory to

²⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 30th 1906. F.S. Box 4, Vol. 1, p79. W.R.O.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, February 8th 1907, F.S. Box 4 Vol. 1, p166

³⁰ A. ARROWSMITH MAUND, Letter to the Editor, *The Times*, January 1908. Cutting among miscellaneous papers of the Earl of Coventry. W.R.O.

the election petition, had left. The failure of Cadbury, the other named petitioner, to be elected to the Board of Guardians in 1907 may be attributed to continuing resentment of his action but Fairbairn was attacked on several fronts. Conservative supporters, carried away by their successes in the municipal election of 1906, seized the opportunity to humiliate the Liberals in a public display. On November 5th both Beauchamp and Fairbairn were burnt in effigy and were also the subjects of a poem featured in the *Daily Times*,

Come on lads, we'll have a spree,

We're going to burn in heff-ig-y

In a medder- New Road way-

Them blokes wot wants to hinterfere

Between a pore man and 'is beer,

Upon election day.

That there F, 'e's the wust –

Blowed if we don't burn 'im first.

I wish it really was 'im.

'Ad the cheek to tell the truth About our little games! Why strewth

E's laughing at us – cuss 'im³¹

Fairbairn refused to be intimidated by this and his characteristically combative reply was that this 'was the next greatest honour to being caricatured in *Punch*.³²

There is no record of his reaction to his exclusion from service on the Severn Fisheries Board but he was successful in defeating a challenge to his right to vote in both Parliamentary and municipal elections at the annual Revision Court held in

³¹ *Daily Times*, November 7th 1906, F.S. Box 4 Vol.1, p 115 W.R.O.

³² *ibid.*

September 1907. It was Maund who, once again, led the attack questioning Fairbairn's residential status within the constituency. This was not the first time that Fairbairn had faced a revision court and the *Worcestershire Echo* commented on September 13th 1907 that, 'citizens of all shades of opinion ...cannot avoid the conclusion that this renewed attack upon Mr. Fairbairn's position savours of persecution, and will resent it accordingly'.³³

The 'persecution' by the Conservatives continued and ultimately led to major changes for Fairbairn, both professionally and financially. It may be said that he brought Maund's action for slander on himself and that he was fortunate that sympathetic city Liberals subscribed to his costs 'including small gifts from working men'.³⁴ However, his financial position was severely affected when his two roles as an employee of the Tram Company and as secretary and agent of the Worcester Liberal Association became the object of scrutiny. The possibility of a conflict of interest had been raised as early as 1903 by the Conservative *Daily Times*.³⁵ In the following year, an editorial in the same paper commented that, if the Radicals were to lose the next general election their agent, Fairbairn, was likely to lose that position but would have 'something to fall back on'³⁶, presumably his position as manager of the trams. In the light of subsequent events, these comments may be interpreted as part of a campaign to embarrass Fairbairn and the Liberals. At the height of the municipal electioneering fever in October 1906, the *Daily Times* had drawn attention to Fairbairn's two roles. While conspicuously denying any intention 'to convey that Mr. Fairbairn's public work is inconsistent with efficient service to the company for which

³³ *Worcestershire Echo*, September 13th 1907, F.S., Box 4 Vol. 2, p 133. W.R.O.

³⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, May 14th 1907, F.S., Box 4, Vol. 2, p 63. W.R.O.

³⁵ *Daily Times*, January 4th 1903. F.S. Box 2, Vol. 2 p42. W.R.O.

³⁶ *Daily Times*, May 3rd 1904. F.S. Box 3, Vol.1 p191. W.R.O.

he acts as manager',³⁷ it was nevertheless recorded that there had been a decrease in the receipts of the tram company over the previous year. Suggestions that Fairbairn 'will shortly relinquish the managership of the Electric Tram Company',³⁸ appeared in May 1908 and were proved to be true when his resignation was announced in June 1908. Fulsome tributes were paid to him for his work for the company but Fairbairn made it quite clear that he did not leave his position willingly. Saying that 'it would be out of place for him to speak of the circumstances in which he was ceasing his connection with the company', he announced his intention to remain in Worcester which would mean 'some considerable loss of income to him'.³⁹ It has not been possible to uncover any details regarding Fairbairn's personal finances but it appears that he had given up not only a substantial salary, but also a house, a not inconsiderable loss for a man with seven children. According to Fairbairn's own cuttings, in 1903, the salary for a tram manager in Birmingham was £1,500, while an applicant for the same position in Leeds was offered £1,200 with annual increments of £100. Although Fairbairn's salary in Worcester, a smaller city, is likely to have been somewhat lower, there is no doubt that, as he said later, 'he had paid the price'.⁴⁰ As permanent secretary and agent for the Worcester Liberal Association from 1908, he would receive a regular income from the party, and could stand 'as a free citizen to say and do what he chose'.⁴¹ In 1903, Manchester Liberal Federation offered a salary of £500 to a new agent but it has been estimated that an average salary range for Liberal agent elsewhere would have been in the region of £150 to £300.⁴²

By the time of the municipal elections in October 1908, Fairbairn was willing

³⁷ *Daily Times*, October 30th 1906. F.S Box 4, Vol.1 p78. W.R.O.

³⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, May 30th 1908. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 1 p93. W.R.O.

³⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, June 30th 1908. F.S, Box 5 Vol.1. p 105, W.R.O.

⁴⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 8th 1908. F.S. Box 5, Vol 1, p145. W.R.O.

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² RIX Kathryn, 'Hidden Workers of the Party: The Professional Liberal Agents, 1885-1910', *Journal of Liberal History*, 52, Autumn 2006.

to say more about his changed circumstances. He reported that a resolution that ‘the manager of the company be called upon to cease immediately from taking any public part in either local or national politics’,⁴³ had been passed by his employers, forcing him to make a choice. However, as he had been advised by a Conservative alderman to give up his council work before this resolution had been passed, he appears to have assumed that the alderman had prior knowledge of the ultimatum. In view of the earlier press campaign, it is perhaps not surprising that Fairbairn came to the conclusion that political pressure had been brought to bear in an attempt to end his political activities. The *Daily Times*’ comment was that having made his choice, he now enjoyed ‘exalted patronage, congenial occupation and a Liberal salary’, and ‘ought not to look for exuberant sympathy’.⁴⁴ It was at this point that Fairbairn became a professional politician committing his considerable energy and enthusiasm to the Liberal cause, financially dependent on the generosity of the party and its benefactors.

At the time of the Parliamentary by-election of February 1908 Fairbairn was still employed by the Tram Company and so his role in that campaign was necessarily merely one of support for the Liberal cause. Prepared to act as chairman at meetings, or to second a proposal when required, there was little opportunity for him to express his personal views at this time. His duties running the tram system, as well as his position as a city councillor, and his newly acquired responsibilities as a city magistrate kept him fully occupied. This additional appointment, made in 1907 to increase the number of Liberal magistrates, and referred to by the *Daily Times* as ‘distinctly a reward for political zeal’,⁴⁵ must have given him some satisfaction at a time when he was continually under attack.

⁴³ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 13th 1908. F.S., Box 5, Vol.1, p149. W.R.O.

⁴⁴ *Daily Times*, October 14th 1908. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 1, p147

⁴⁵ *Daily Times*, July 13th 1907. F.S. Box 4, Vol. 2, p.108. W.R.O.

It might be assumed that the Liberals could face the prospect of the by-election with some confidence as the organization of the party in the constituency appeared intact, its financial position assured and its members could claim the moral high ground. As Beauchamp said in December 1907, 'I have nothing to apologise for. I am proud of the stand which Worcester Liberalism made for a higher standard of political life'.⁴⁶ The Liberals maintained a high profile by holding several meetings when visiting speakers were invited to expound on Liberal policies, in particular Free Trade and reform of the House of Lords. However, Beauchamp had received a warning from the Chief Whip in March 1907 that he feared 'it will not be an easy matter to obtain a candidate for Worcester but we can do our best'.⁴⁷ Another correspondent, almost a year later, commented that 'whenever a town is disenfranchised for a time, as Worcester has been, there is always bound to be feeling against the government which happens to in office at the time'.⁴⁸ The new Liberal candidate, Harold Elverston, was formally adopted at a mass meeting of the party on January 14th 1908 where among those present was Fred Burn, Secretary to the Manchester Liberal Association of which Elverston served as treasurer. This regional organization represented a new development within the party which P. F Clarke sees as significant in the growth of the party bureaucracy.⁴⁹ Elverston as a member of the Executive of the National Liberal Federation would appear to have impeccable party connections, and his acceptance speech demonstrated his support for party policy, but his late adoption, combined with his lack of local knowledge, must have prejudiced his chances of winning the seat. The Conservatives, still smarting from the verdict of the Royal Commission, also took time to recover their composure and adopt a new

⁴⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 11th 1907. F.S. Box 4, Vol. 2, p179. W.R.O.

⁴⁷ BP. K1 ii, letter from Whiteley, 12 Downing Street, March 6th 1907. Madresfield Court

⁴⁸ BP.K1 ii, letter from G., Castle Forbes, January 17th 1908. Madresfield Court.

⁴⁹ CLARKE P.F., *Lancashire and the New Liberalism*. Cambridge University Press 1971. p 207

candidate. Edward Goulding had the advantage of business contacts in Worcester, as well as some Parliamentary experience, having lost his seat in East Wiltshire in 1906. Worcester's highest ever Conservative majority of 1,292, enabled the *Daily Times* to claim the victory as 'a vindication' as well as 'an unmistakable verdict against the government'.⁵⁰ The *Worcestershire Echo* attributed the Liberal defeat to continual references to the electoral petition by the Conservatives and to rising prices plus 'the permanent handicap of the Liberal party...the time-honoured alliance between the Church, the public house and the betting ring, in the service of reactionary politics'.⁵¹

The Conservatives would not let the matter of the Electoral Commission, and Fairbairn's part in it, drop. His position as councillor for St. John's ward was challenged in November 1908 in a contest which 'looked for all the world as though a general election was in progress'.⁵² Not only did the Conservatives continue to hark back to the Commission but they also attacked Fairbairn's position as Liberal agent which, they claimed, would prejudice his independence as a member of the council. At the centre of the campaign and fighting on his own behalf for the first time, Fairbairn's speeches as reported in the local press provide a useful opportunity to examine his methods, principles and policies. Commenting on his style in council the *Worcestershire Echo* described his 'preservation of official and press records of Council work, and frequent reference to them', as 'the kernel of his method' and 'his absolute certainty as to facts as a source of strength to himself, and of irritation and annoyance to ill-informed opponents....'⁵³ Rather than producing a formal manifesto Fairbairn chose to fight on his record over the previous nine years, seeing it as a duty to inform his constituents of his practical efforts on their behalf. Thus, in a speech

⁵⁰ *Daily Times*, February 8th 1908. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 1, p32. W.R.O.

⁵¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, cutting undated, Box 5, Vol. 1, p36. W.R.O.

⁵² *Worcestershire Echo*, November 3rd 1908. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 1, p.167. W.R.O.

⁵³ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 8th 1908. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 1, p.145. W.R.O.

given before he was aware of a challenge to his position,⁵⁴ he drew attention to the amount of time he spent on council affairs, the number of meetings attended, the official positions he held and his membership of major committees. A clear indication of his priorities for the city can be seen from the importance attached to an efficient and economic electricity supply and an effective sewerage scheme, as well as the need for free elementary education for all children. His practical ideas to build a footbridge over the river Severn and to increase employment opportunities in Worcester by advertising its attractions to foreign businessmen demonstrate an economic awareness beyond that of many of his fellow councillors while his involvement in the provision of allotments for working men reveal his concern for the health and well-being of his constituents. Although Fairbairn claimed that, 'the election should be fought on Council work, not on the political questions of the day',⁵⁵ his sympathy with a broadly Liberal agenda in the local context is obvious. Fiercely partisan press coverage indicates continuing ill-feeling and the final result with Fairbairn at the top of the poll took even the *Worcestershire Echo* by surprise. In his victory speech Fairbairn claimed both a personal triumph and 'a triumph for the agent of the Liberal party.'⁵⁶ Now identified with the Liberal party, he was described as 'fighting like a lion in the interests of Liberalism'.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *ibid*, p143

⁵⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 23rd 1908. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 1 p.156. W.R.O.

⁵⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 3rd 1908. F.S. Box 5, Vol.1 p.168. W.R.O.

⁵⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 19th 1908. F.S. Box 5, Vol.2 p.8. W.R.O.

Professional Politician and Parliamentary Candidate

1908-1922

Within two years Fairbairn had been selected to represent his party as the Parliamentary candidate for the constituency, a role he was to play in the eight consecutive general election campaigns between 1910 and 1935. This rapid transformation from local party organizer and councillor to prospective MP may be attributed to a combination of political and local factors. There can be no doubt of his popularity among Liberals in Worcester. Having been involved, since 1903, in the revival of the party in the constituency, he seems to have been regularly greeted with cries of ‘good old Fairbairn’¹ at party gatherings. His organisational skills were frequently acknowledged in the press and, at a dinner of the City Liberal Club in 1910, he was called ‘the Lloyd George of the City Council’.² His outspoken support for the unemployed and lowly paid corporation workmen, his frequently expressed concern for the state of housing, health and education in the city and his criticism of the Conservative-dominated council, ‘composed largely of incapable men’³ had certainly made their mark. His speeches, reported favourably in the *Liberal Worcestershire Echo*, often provoked angry editorials in the *Conservative Daily Times*, an indication that he had become a voice to be reckoned with in local affairs.

Fairbairn’s commitment to the Liberal party was demonstrated in his support both for the local party organization, for which he was largely responsible, and also for the policies of the Liberal government. Well aware of the importance of publicity to stimulate interest in policy issues, he arranged a series of meetings in the autumn of 1909 at which visiting speakers including the prospective Liberal candidate, John

¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 20th 1909. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 2, p115. W.R.O.

Morgan explained Liberal policies in prospect of an early general election. Fairbairn himself spoke on behalf of Lloyd George's controversial Budget in August 1909 proposing that the meeting 'pledges itself to support the government in carrying the Budget into law and in guarding the constitutional rights of the House of Commons'. He added that he was glad to be the first to propose support for the measure in Worcester.⁴ It is quite likely that it was Fairbairn who drew Morgan's attention to a particular local issue: that of the poor state of housing in Worcester. Morgan was 'absolutely horrified and appalled at the situation' and observed that 'there was nothing else to do in some of the large areas of Worcester than to pull [slum property] down'.⁵ At Morgan's adoption meeting in December 1909 which was attended by 2000, Fairbairn reverted to his organizational role and Beauchamp and Morgan himself made the major policy speeches.

In the general election of January 1910 Morgan polled only 330 more votes than Elverston had done two years earlier, improving the Liberal position by a mere 138 votes. The seat was won by the sitting Conservative member, Edward Goulding, by a comfortable majority of 1156. Much had been made by the Liberals, during the short election campaign, of Morgan's local knowledge in deliberate contrast to the previous Liberal candidate, Elverston, who had been labeled a 'carpet-bagger' by his opponents. It is ironic that in its decidedly partial analysis of the result that the *Daily Times* considered that the emphasis on local matters, when the key issues were the budget and the role of the House of Lords, had been a tactical error and that Morgan had been foolishly advised. It was the editor's opinion that 'Mr. Morgan may now be dismissed from local consideration... his name is added to the list of those who have

² *Worcestershire Echo*, October 19th 1909. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 2, p100. W.R.O.

³ *Worcester Echo*, October 31st 1910. F.S. Box 6, Vol.1, p9. W.R.O.

⁴ *Worcester Echo*, August 28th 1909. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 2, p73. W.R.O.

⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, September 25th 1909. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 2, p82. W.R.O.

been defeated, have departed, and have not re-appeared'.⁶ In view of this electoral record it is perhaps not surprising that, despite the fact that another election was generally expected within the year, the Liberals had not selected a prospective candidate by the time of its announcement on November 18th 1910. Clearly Elverston and Morgan would no longer be acceptable and Harben, a popular candidate in 1906, had rejected an approach from Beauchamp in 1908 on financial grounds with the comment, 'in this country even to serve is still the privilege of the few'.⁷

The announcement of an election campaign lasting only a fortnight galvanised the Worcester Liberals into action. The selection of a candidate became a matter of urgency as it was unthinkable that the seat should go the Tories without a contest. It is perhaps not surprising that, in the absence of any other suitable candidate, they turned to Fairbairn who was familiar to them all and available. He had a proven record of loyalty to the party, undisputed local knowledge, a reputation as a fighter and the support of Lord Beauchamp. The *Daily Mail*, published in Birmingham reported that Fairbairn's name 'had been before the party for some time'⁸ and the *Worcestershire Echo* commented that the news of his candidature 'did not come as a surprise'.⁹ Fairbairn emphasised in his acceptance speech that the cause, rather than the man, should be the focus of the campaign. With his experience of municipal elections Fairbairn should perhaps have realised that this was unlikely to be the case. Immediately the partisan local press revived and fanned the flames of old antagonisms resorting to personal attack rather than serious political debate. The general election campaign of December 1910, which was described, on the national scene as 'the most

⁶ *Daily Times*, January 18th 1910. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 2, p147. W.R.O.

⁷ BP.Kii, letter from H.D.Harben, August 15th 1908. Madresfield Court

⁸ *Daily Mail*, November 22nd 1910. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 1, p26. W.R.O.

⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 23rd 1910. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 1, p26. W.R.O.

apathetic within living memory'¹⁰, was, in Worcester, acrimonious and bitter.

Fairbairn took every opportunity to appeal to the working class voter. His election address, 'To my Fellow Citizens', is essentially a personal statement emphasising his working class roots, his local knowledge and his empathy with 'my poor struggling fellow citizens' for whom NOTHING (his capitals) had been done in the last twenty five years. Reference to personal sacrifice 'to retain my political freedom' in the face of a 'system of social and business intimidation' - presumably an allusion to his ousting from his position as manager of the tram system - is included before any attention is paid to official party policies. Having established his credentials in this way, he could then turn to the endorsement of Liberal policy with regard to the 'House of Landlords' (*sic*) and social reform. Indicating his commitment to Free Trade and Poor Law reform, he added a list of further progressive measures, such as free technical training for boys and a minimum wage standard for all trades and occupations, which he would advocate to extend the government's reform programme. The address concluded with a further personal reference, 'All my interests lie in Worcester where my home is, you know me and my record of public service...'¹¹. He embarked on a characteristically energetic campaign, speaking at 17 meetings of varying size and venues between November 22nd and December 3rd. Clearly at ease at these meetings he spoke fluently, mixing policy statements with attacks on his opponent and responding readily to hecklers. The *Worcestershire Echo* reported enthusiastic crowds and the impression is given that Fairbairn enjoyed, and was effective at the hustings. He was supported by several 'outside' speakers including representatives of the Free Trade Union, the Midland Liberal Federation,

¹⁰ LOW Sidney, 'the End of the Old Constitution', *Fortnightly Review*, January 1911, quoted in JENKINS R. *Mr. Balfour's Poodle*, London 1968, p187.

¹¹ FAIRBAIRN R.R. *.Election Address*, November 29th 1910. Special Collections Department, Arts and Social Science Library, University of Bristol.

local trade unionists and his own father who gave a ‘fighting and humorous speech... freely punctuated with cheers and applause’¹². However, his most prestigious support came from Earl Beauchamp who made a point of travelling to Worcester to speak on Fairbairn’s behalf.

Beauchamp as President and Chairman of the Worcester Liberal Association had initially supported the proposal to invite Fairbairn to stand as a candidate and commended him to the Executive Committee as a ‘sound Radical and a Free Trader ...who would be warmly welcomed by the Liberals in the House of Commons’.¹³ Appointed to the Cabinet by Asquith in 1910, Beauchamp’s active support can only have added to Fairbairn’s credibility. Explaining the reasons for the government’s proposals to limit the powers of the House of Lords, and the classical arguments for Free Trade, Beauchamp echoed Fairbairn’s theme, saying that the ‘working man had equal rights with regard to his wife, his children, and his home as the peers’. His final statement that the Liberal government ‘were going to ensure that the will of the people was not going to be frustrated through the interposition of the House of Lords’, was greeted with ‘prolonged cheering’.¹⁴ Another report of this meeting suggested that Fairbairn’s campaign, ‘advanced views and outspoken address’ were rallying the Progressive forces to his side’.¹⁵ Both the Worcester Trades Council, and the local branch of the Independent Labour Party had indicated that they intended to support Fairbairn.

To the Tories the election was an unnecessary contest and Fairbairn’s challenge to Goulding a forlorn hope although this did not deter them from mounting a comprehensive attack on Fairbairn. All aspects of his political life came under fire

¹² *Worcestershire Echo*, November 30th, 1910. F.S. Box 6, Vol.1, p38. W.R.O.

¹³ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 23rd 1910. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 1, p2. W.R.O.

¹⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 2nd 1910. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 1, p49. W.R.O.

¹⁵ Unidentified newspaper, no date given. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 1, p51. W.R.O.,

including his personal style, his position in the Liberal party, the process by which he was selected as a candidate, his record in local politics and the policies for which he stood. Accused of having ‘an exalted idea of his own importance’¹⁶, the *Daily Times* referred to Fairbairn as typical of the professional politicians who would be ‘attracted to fight vexatious contests’ now that payment of MPs was to be introduced. At the same time the writer expressed the ‘fullest confidence that as taxpayers we shall not have to pay a salary to the local Radical aspirant.....He will not be there’¹⁷. Fairbairn was consistently portrayed as a Radical and Progressive, a ‘true disciple of Lloyd George’ who appealed to the ‘least intelligence of the greatest number’,¹⁸ and whose policies would be unlikely to attract the votes of moderate Liberal opinion in Worcester. The Tory press presented its own interpretation of Fairbairn’s policies. Thus support for trade union law reform was seen as evidence of Socialist sympathies, support for government proposals to limit the powers of the House of Lords was portrayed as advocating the abolition of the second chamber and support for Irish Home Rule was represented as acceptance of the break-up of the Union of Great Britain. In an oblique reference to Fairbairn’s involvement in amateur dramatics a mock playbill was published advertising a ‘screaming farce’ presented by ‘Messrs. George and Hardie’s Company’ and entitled “Fairbairn for Worcester or the Earl and the Dustmen’s Friend”.¹⁹ This was followed with a rather clumsily ironic ‘election address’, in which the candidate, presumably Fairbairn, promised to ‘discharge my duties as member of Parliament for the City with the same zeal, disinterestedness and self effacement which have characterised my work as a Councillor’.²⁰ It appears that no holds were barred in the anti-Fairbairn campaign, the tone of which was

¹⁶ *Daily Times*, December 1st 1910. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 1, p43. W.R.O.

¹⁷ *Daily Times*, November 23rd 1910. F.S. Box 6, Vol.1, p28.W.R.O.

¹⁸ *Daily Times*, December 1st 1910. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 1, p43. W.R.O.

¹⁹ *ibid* p44

encapsulated in the Tory candidate's warning to voters that 'if they voted Liberal the country would go to Socialism and the dogs'.²¹

On the declaration of the poll the *Daily Times* could report with satisfaction that 'Mr. Fairbairn is added to the long list of candidates who have fought and fallen'²² but the result was by no means the 'Radical rout' the paper had predicted on polling day. The Liberals had reduced the Tory majority by 135, although the election had been fought on an old register and fewer people had voted than in January. It is unlikely that there had ever been any realistic prospect of Fairbairn winning the seat although much was made in the *Worcestershire Echo* of the vigour of his campaign and his popularity among the working class. At the same time he was aware that there was some disunity over policy in the party and that his active supporters were comparatively few. Speaking to the Worcestershire Liberal Council in February 1911, having had time to reflect on his recent experience, he took a critical look at the Liberal party and called for 'a little more earnestness' in its work. He had even had the temerity to suggest to the Chief Whip that more attention, as well as financial support, should be given to constituency organisations between elections in future so that they could be better prepared for short campaigns such as the last one. Having fought a Parliamentary election, Fairbairn appears here to speak with more authority and his horizons seem to have widened. He had graduated from a supporting to a leading role in the local party and his enhanced status gave him a platform from which to explain his ideas and make a positive contribution to political debate.

Fairbairn turned his attention to social policy after his election defeat. His prime concern was the problem of poverty and unemployment at a time when reform of the Poor Law had become the priority for the Liberal government. The crisis, first

²⁰ *ibid*

over Lloyd George's budget and then over the House of Lords, had diverted ministers' efforts from acting on the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law which had been appointed as long ago as 1905. The fact that the Commission had issued a Majority and a Minority report, each with its own recommendations, added to the government's difficulties in drawing up what was to be a major piece of legislation. Meanwhile the old system of poor relief, supervised by elected Poor Law Guardians, continued. Elections for new Guardians were held in Worcester in March 1911 and, while encouraging his audience to vote, Fairbairn took the opportunity to explain his views on some of the principles within the bill. To him ill-health was a major cause of unemployment which in turn led to poverty. Quoting a scheme suggested by the Webbs, 'the great social reformers', he expressed the view that if free medical treatment were to be available to workers when necessary, they would be able to return to work quickly after treatment and thus avoid falling further into poverty.²³ The effect of illness on school attendance figures, the employment of women and children resulting in depressed wages for men and, the failure to provide technical training, in particular for boys, were also matters about which Fairbairn showed his concern. While it may be assumed that he would support government proposals for the provision of medical treatment for the poor, Fairbairn was clearly unconvinced by the case proposed by both Royal Commission reports for the transfer of the work of the Guardians to local corporations. This is perhaps not surprising in view of his frequently expressed criticism of the capacities of his fellow councillors.

The final terms of the National Insurance Act of 1911, which introduced a compulsory national scheme of health insurance for the working class represented a major political achievement for Lloyd George as he had succeeded in reconciling

²¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 5th 1910. F.S. Box 6, Vol.1, p55. W.R.O.

conflicting claims and objections from a variety of interest groups. Financed by contributions from the employee, the employer and the state, the detailed implementation and supervision of the scheme was to be devolved to locally appointed committees. The process by which the act was put into practice in Worcester, in which Fairbairn was directly involved, provides substantial evidence of the pressures, problems and practical difficulties faced by those who were involved in putting the legislation into effect. Friendly Societies, which had run voluntary insurance schemes for their members for many years, feared that the new proposals would radically alter their role. In October 1911, representatives of several leading societies attended a public meeting in Worcester to ‘support the agitation of the principal Friendly Societies against a number of the provisions of the National Insurance Bill’. Feelings ran high and, for once, Fairbairn was unable to make himself heard ‘against a chorus of booing’. A prominent member of the order of Oddfellows himself, it was as a politician and a supporter of the government that he was drowned out as ‘a considerable portion of the audience was determined that he should not be heard’. While acknowledging that the bill was ‘the greatest measure of social reform ever produced’, the meeting passed a resolution, to be sent to the leaders of all political parties, recommending that, if Parliament ignored their demands, the societies should ‘refuse to assist in the administration of the Act’.²⁴ A month later, in response to a speech by Stanley Baldwin at Ombersley, he strongly denied the charge that ‘the result of the bill would be to destroy the sense of brotherhood that the friendly societies had developed’.²⁵ Opposition from the Friendly Societies eventually subsided when Lloyd George granted them, and the major insurance companies, the

²² *Worcestershire Echo*, December 6th 1910. F.S. Box 6, Vol.1, p60. W.R.O.

²³ *Worcestershire Echo*, March 14th 1911. Box 6, Vol.1, p103. W.R.O.

²⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 11th 1911. F.S. Box 6, Vol.2, p12-14. W.R.O.

²⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 29th 1911. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 2, p49. W.R.O.

status of Approved Societies to administer the Act on behalf of the state. Speaking of the benefits of the Act when it had been passed, in January 1912, Fairbairn emphasised the flexibility within its terms to deal with local circumstances. He confidently predicted that it would become popular when put into operation, although he was realistic enough to recognise that many doctors had yet to be persuaded to take part in the scheme. This was an aspect of the act with which he had to deal directly himself as the first chairman of the City Insurance Committee.

Fairbairn's appointment to this position appears both surprising and inspired. He continued to be a thorn in the flesh of the Tory council and attacks frequently appeared in the Tory press as his opponents seized any opportunity to make political points at his expense. Unsubstantiated accusations of misconduct made by his old adversary Maund in the municipal election of 1911, demonstrated, yet again, their mutual hostility and, the publication of the solicitors' letters exchanged at the time, ensured that their antagonism remained in the public eye. The Conservative *Malvern News* even commented on Fairbairn's choice of the names "Winston George" for his son, born in February 1912, suggesting that he had taken his hero worship of 'the current leading lights of the Liberalism' too far, and that the names were an indication of his 'Radical Socialism'.²⁶ The use of this phrase with its implication of extreme views could be seen as another attempt to discredit Fairbairn. Despite this kind of unwelcome publicity there were some who realised that Fairbairn's energy and enthusiasm could be channeled, and perhaps even diverted to good use. His widely acknowledged capacity for hard work, his attention to detail and his knowledge of local conditions made him an ideal candidate to serve on the newly formed, provisional, Worcester Insurance Committee in June 1912. He was one of the eight

²⁶ *Malvern News*, March 1st 1912. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 2, p82. W.R.O.

councillors, including the chairmen of four major council committees: Finance, Education, Health and General Purposes, nominated to the committee by the council, along with representatives of the Friendly Societies, Worcester Trades Council, local firms and societies and the Nursing Institute. At the first meeting of the committee, which was attended by a representative of the National Insurance Commission, Fairbairn was proposed as the chairman, a position that became permanent at the second meeting in July 1912 and which he held until 1941. Seconding Fairbairn's nomination as chairman, Councillor Simes gave a measured and realistic assessment of the demands of the position and Fairbairn's qualifications for the job. He is reported as saying that 'the work which would be required of the chairman would be very large; and there are few men who had the time. Mr. Fairbairn had identified himself very largely with public work in the city, and perhaps up to the present had been chiefly known as a critic, but he thought that if anyone had earned the honour of being able to do something else besides criticism, and who has the capacity for administration, that gentleman was Mr. Fairbairn'.²⁷

Fairbairn was well aware that co-operation from the doctors was essential to the working of the scheme but, as he had recognised, many were reluctant give their support, fearing that their participation would result in the loss of income and professional independence. When he was elected as chairman, he said that he 'hoped to have the assistance of the medical profession, and perhaps his reputation as one of the advocates of fair wages might make them think that he would endeavour to lead the committee in the right way'.²⁸ The Medical Officer of Health for Worcester reflected the attitude of his profession when he made it clear that he was unprepared

²⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, July 13th 1912. F.S. Box 6, Vol.2, p125. W.R.O.

²⁸ *ibid*

to be involved, 'until the current dispute is settled.'²⁹ However doctors elsewhere gradually came into line and within three months an agreement was reached with Chief Medical Officer. He was to become the Chief TB Officer, to give up his private practice and, on payment of a salary, to advise the committee on medical matters. How far this agreement was due to Fairbairn's chairmanship is not clear but he must deserve a share of the credit for the early success of the Worcester Insurance Committee. The *Westminster Gazette* reported, three months after the formation of the committee, 'Even the comparatively small cathedral city of Worcester, under the guidance of a well-manned Health Insurance Committee, set about an admittedly onerous task with a cheerful vigour, very stimulating to witness and worthy of general emulation.'³⁰

The speed with which a close and effective working relationship had been established between the Insurance Committee and the Health Committee of the local council in dealing with the problem of treatment for TB in the city attracted the attention of the press. The average number of deaths annually in Worcester from the disease was sixty and, it was estimated that, at any time, four times that number of cases needed treatment. Those insured under the National Insurance Act now had a right to treatment in a sanatorium which, it was the responsibility of the local council to provide. So, in July 1912, on the recommendation of the Insurance Sanatorium sub-committee, the council's plans for the provision of sanatorium treatment were approved, a dispensary in the city was designated as a receiving centre for patients and arrangements were made to pay for those insured people needing treatment. In September, the first cases for sanatorium benefit were dealt with under the new scheme. The *Westminster Gazette* reported that, '... instead of raising all sorts of

²⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, July 2nd 1912. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 2, p120. W.R.O.

foolish difficulties and unnecessary obstacles to the administration of sanatoria benefits, Worcester was ready to deal with its consumptives almost from the moment of the Act taking effect'.³¹ The tone of this article appears to indicate that the process was a good deal smoother in Worcester than elsewhere and, it is also worth noting that this was all achieved before the National Insurance Act officially came into force. Further progress was made when, in February 1913, the Insurance Committee came to an agreement with the corporation to hand over to it all sanatorium income so that a scheme to treat the whole population, whether insured or not, could be adopted. According to a report in the *Birmingham Gazette*, in May 1914, Worcester and Birmingham itself were the first two county boroughs to come to such an arrangement.³²

With evidence of such initiatives, it almost goes without saying that the administrative machinery for the application of the Act was all in place by specified date of January 13th 1913. Agreement had been reached with local chemists and a panel of nine doctors and, Fairbairn, always aware of the value of favourable publicity, marked the date by presenting a cup to the first baby born after midnight, whose parents were entitled to maternity benefit under the scheme. As chairman of the Committee Fairbairn attended meetings in London with the National Insurance Commission and, by September 1913, the appointment of a permanent, paid, clerk to the committee was approved. In April 1913 it was reported that 15,000 people were insured and this number had risen to 17,000 by November 1914. Fairbairn had to face criticisms of the running costs of the scheme but had made quite clear that his own position was unpaid, although the appointment of his son as junior clerk to the committee did cause comment. *Berrows Worcester Journal* applauded the decision of

³⁰ Quoted in *Worcestershire Echo*, September 20th 1912. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 2, p140. W.R.O.

the members of the committee not to claim expenses declaring that, it ‘accords well with the devoted spirit which was shown in the past by members of Friendly Societies when they managed on wholly voluntary lines’.³³ Confidence in Fairbairn’s chairmanship is shown by his re-election annually and, at the outbreak of war in 1914, his responsibilities increased when he agreed to serve as chairman of the War Relief Committee, perhaps further recognition of his ability to get things done.

Fairbairn’s concern for the welfare of the working class is demonstrated by his interest and involvement in several projects aiming to promote the health, particularly of children, in Worcester during the period immediately before the first World War. Cuttings in his scrapbooks refer to debates on the provision of an open-air school, the formation of Worcester City Playgrounds and Playing Fields Association, plans to create a garden suburb within the city and, the establishment of a public park from land presented to the city for that purpose by Canon Wilson. The Canon, who frequently spoke about public health matters, sometimes from the pulpit, shared Fairbairn’s concerns. His comment that ‘every step in this direction had been initiated by private, voluntary effort, and the City council had taken up the matter afterwards’,³⁴ with its implicit criticism of the Council, recognises the contribution of individuals, like Fairbairn, to Worcester’s growing reputation for progressive policies in some areas. Certainly, when legislation passed by the Liberal government required more fundamental, and expensive, changes to be made, the Conservative-controlled council dragged its heels. This reluctance to respond is best illustrated by the length of time taken to build a new elementary school in the city, a project in which Fairbairn was involved as a member of the Elementary Education committee.

³¹ *ibid*

³² *Birmingham Gazette*, May 7th 1914. F.S. Box 7, Vol. 1, p171. W.R.O.

³³ *Berrows Worcester Journal*, May 29th 1914. F.S. Box 7, Vol. 1, p177. W.R.O.

³⁴ Name of paper unknown, October 1912. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 2, p147. W.R.O.

At the opening of the newly built, but not quite finished, Stanley Road School in 1915, the Chairman of the County Council, Willis Bund, is quoted as saying that he envied the Education Committee, not because they had completed the project, but because they had successfully “humbled” the Board of Education for thirteen years. He added, to laughter from the audience, that ‘this capacity to humbug Government departments was a characteristic he found strongly developed in the city’.³⁵ Willis Bund perhaps exaggerated the time factor to make his point but obviously there was some truth in what he said. The Board of Education had published a highly critical report of schools in Worcester in April 1909, condemning some premises as unfit for educational purposes. The Church had responded positively but the Education Committee became involved in a long running debate for the next four years, focussing first, on how much new accommodation was needed and then, on the question of a suitable site. Warnings from the Board expressing ‘grave doubts about the adequacy’³⁶ of the plans submitted and, comments such as the ‘proposals did not form a permanently satisfactory solution’³⁷, as well as demands that the local authority should fulfil its responsibilities ‘with all possible despatch’,³⁸ appear to have had little effect. Having agreed on one new building in 1912 it took another year to decide on a site. Of course the council had to consider the costs and the effect on the rates and government regulations about the space needed per child had changed during the period, but there does seem to have been little sense of urgency. Fairbairn himself added to the delay in 1912 when the choice of site had been whittled down to two possibilities by suggesting yet another, cheaper site, despite the fact that it still had to be cleaned and drained as part of major sewage

³⁵ *Daily Times*, October 2nd 1915m Box 7, Vol. 2, p119. W.R.O.

³⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, August 3rd 1912. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 2, p128. W.R.O.

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ *ibid*

project. His suggestion was defeated and with the reduction of a government grant in 1914, accompanied by the threat that the grant might be withdrawn altogether in future, the building of the new school became a priority.

It is possible that in suggesting an alternative site for the new school Fairbairn's motive was really to draw attention to a health hazard in the area of the Moors, a low-lying, working class district east of the river. At the time of a severe flood in the winter of 1910/11, Fairbairn had organised a coal fund to relieve distress in the area and had found that it had not been connected to the main sewage disposal system. Having had no response to his demands for action from the Water and Sewage Committee of the council, of which he was a member, by January 1913 his patience had run out. Ignoring the accepted conventions of local government, he wrote directly to the Secretary of the Local Government Board enclosing a press report of council proceedings with the comment that the attitude of the Committee, and the Council, could be gathered from the content. His action, described by individual councillors as 'arrogant', and 'not one that any honourable member of the Council would take',³⁹ provoked a vote of censure against him. Fairbairn had stirred up something of a hornets' nest. Existing writs of *mandamus*, a legal means of ensuring that councils conformed to the wishes of a higher authority, were 'lying at present in the offices of the High Court ready to be served at any moment',⁴⁰ and it was feared that Fairbairn's letter might cause them to be activated. The proposed vote of censure which accused him of taking 'a step which may involve the city in serious expense', and 'conduct detrimental to the interests of the citizens',⁴¹ was narrowly defeated. 16 members voted for the motion with 7 against but, 10 members left the meeting before the vote was taken. Presumably those who abstained had some

³⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, January 8th 1913. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 2, p180. W.R.O.

sympathy with the view expressed in a local paper that ‘ratepayers generally will not view with any favour this attempt by their representatives to suppress Mr. Fairbairn. They know that he is activated by public motives...’.⁴² It is not possible, from the evidence in Fairbairn’s scrapbooks, to establish whether this dramatic action, which could have left Fairbairn more isolated had any positive effect for those who lived in the Moors.

Fairbairn’s appetite for, and willingness to accept, public office seems to have been unaffected by the vote of censure. In 1913 he was appointed to the Waterways Board, became a governor of the Royal Grammar School and a member of the Severn Commission while continuing to maintain his usual high attendance at council meetings. Accustomed to dealing with criticism from opponents, he generally saw attack as his best defence and his speeches to Liberal gatherings covered all aspects of policy, both local and national. In April 1913, he was re-elected Secretary of Worcester Liberal Association, with Beauchamp as President once again. At major gathering of Worcestershire Liberals in the grounds of Beauchamp’s home at Madresfield Court in August 1913, Fairbairn reverted to his organisational role. Part garden party, part fundraiser and part political rally, the event drew an estimated attendance of over 5000 and was declared a financial success. Attractions such as brass bands, sports competitions, a cycle parade and a spectacular firework display, provided a backdrop for political speeches, which were reported as ‘commendably brief’,⁴³ from Cecil Harmsworth MP, George Thorne MP, and Beauchamp himself. The mood was optimistic in the light of a recent by-election success for the government at Chesterfield and all speakers spoke in anticipation of proposals for

⁴⁰ *ibid*

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² Name and date of paper unknown. F.S. Box 6, Vol. 2, p188. W.R.O.

⁴³ *Worcestershire Echo*, August 22nd 1913. F.S. Box 7, Vol. 1. W.R.O.

land reform to be launched by Lloyd George, in the following October, at a meeting to be chaired by Beauchamp in Bedford. According to Thorne, MP for East Wolverhampton, this major policy initiative would mark the completion of the government's six-year programme of social reform.

The Liberals had high hopes that Lloyd George's proposals for land reform would revive the party and divert attention from the government's long-running problems. Wide-ranging measures were envisaged to improve the position of agricultural labourers and tenant farmers in the countryside and, at the same time, ensure better living and working conditions in the towns. But, the sheer size and complexity of the task led to difficulties and delays in framing acceptable comprehensive legislation and this, in turn, resulted in frustration for the politicians and confusion among the voters. Lloyd George is quoted as seeing no need 'to formulate a series of reforms', assuming that 'a scheme of reform would gradually be evolved'⁴⁴ and his leadership of the campaign proved disappointing. Yet, in a confidential letter to Beauchamp in March 1914, he had himself expressed concern over the lack of progress with the campaign because of a 'lack of impetus'⁴⁵. At meetings of the Liberal party in Worcester during the winter of 1913-14, promised explanations of the policy failed to materialise in other than very general terms. Speakers, including both Beauchamp and Fairbairn, were happy to extol the achievements of the government, but appeared less sure of their ground about any specific proposals. Reports in the local press would seem to bear out the observation of George Bernstein,⁴⁶ whose study of the period is largely based on local newspapers in Leeds, Leicester and Norwich, that the response in the country was uncertain and

⁴⁴ WILSON Trevor (ed), *The Political Diaries of C.P. Scott*, London 1970 p69 quoted in SYKES Alan. *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism 1776-1988*, London 1997, p189.

⁴⁵ BP, K11, Letter from Lloyd George, March 16th 1914, Madresfield Court.

⁴⁶ BERNSTEIN George L, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England*. Boston 1986.

that few leading articles were published on the subject. By the summer of 1914, conscious of the need to inform the voters of the current proposals, Lloyd George created a Central Land and Housing Council to provide speakers and literature for meetings across the country. Two series of open-air meetings were arranged in Worcester and the *Worcestershire Echo* reported on July 1st 1914 that ‘Worcester Liberals are making a big effort to educate the electorate in the land problems and the proposals of the government for dealing with them’⁴⁷. Fairbairn, who had, by this time, been endorsed as the prospective Liberal Parliamentary candidate for Worcester, attended all the meetings in support of the visiting speakers, and was described as “advocating the proposals with all his heart...”.⁴⁸ However, with the outbreak of war in August 1914 the government’s priorities of necessity changed and land reform was put on the back burner.

War also meant the postponement of the general election expected in 1915. It is ironic that Worcester Liberals, having learnt a lesson from their experience in December 1910, had chosen their candidate well in advance this time. Fairbairn’s candidacy was not unexpected. Described as an ‘advanced Progressive... in intimate touch and sympathy with the lives of the working people’⁴⁹, the invitation of the Executive Committee to stand as their candidate was formally endorsed at a general meeting of the Liberal Association on April 17th 1914. At that meeting, Earl Beauchamp, who was unable to attend, but had written in support of Fairbairn, was re-elected President. Fairbairn’s re-election as secretary yet again, provoked the comment from the editor of Conservative *Daily Times* that ‘Mr. Fairbairn...is practically the Association, not merely its Secretary nor its factotum, but its fount and

⁴⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, July 1st 1914. F.S. Box 7, Vol. 1, p187. W.R.O.

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ *Birmingham Gazette*, March 21st 1914. F.S. Box 7, Vol.!, p144. W.R.O.

inspiration. To all intents and purposes he is its “head and forefront”⁵⁰ The paper also suggested that Fairbairn’s candidacy might ‘alienate a large section of Liberal support’⁵¹ but there is no evidence to indicate any serious split in the local party. His local knowledge was accepted without question and the fact that he could not be labelled a ‘carpetbagger’ was definitely to his advantage. The successful implementation of the National Insurance scheme in Worcester can only have enhanced his reputation. With his status as prospective Parliamentary candidate, and the frequent absences of the sitting MP in London, Fairbairn was regularly called upon to lend his name to various local and government initiatives in support of the war effort. He appears to have tackled his additional wartime responsibilities with characteristic thoroughness and energy demonstrating, yet again, his particularly practical approach to his role as councillor and candidate.

Fairbairn’s selection of material to include in his scrapbooks necessarily reflects his personal priorities. The fact that he rarely preserved reports relating to major national events would indicate that his first concern was always with the immediate repercussions and practical consequences of such events in the local context. Thus, the first reference to the outbreak of war in 1914 is a report of a special meeting of the City Council, held on August 11th, ‘to consider the question of raising funds for the relief of wives, children and dependents of those citizens who have been called to join the colours, and to decide how such funds shall be distributed’.⁵² It is, however, surprising that there is no reference to another political development in August 1914 which must have had significance for local Liberals. Beauchamp’s resignation from the Cabinet in opposition to the war is not included in Fairbairn’s record, nor is there any indication of any local reaction to it. There is no evidence to

⁵⁰ *Daily Times*, April 18th 1914. F.S. Box 7, Vol. 1, p159. W.R.O.

suggest that Fairbairn himself shared Beauchamp's doubts on the issue and, in September 1914, in a recruiting speech, he made it clear that he loyally supported the government's decision to go to war. He was quoted as saying that he 'had always been an advocate of peace and of small armaments... he was not ashamed to own it, but he was proud to uphold a Government, and a country, which was standing for their honour and for the rights of small nations'.⁵³ If he had had any doubts they had obviously been resolved and he presented himself as positively keen to do his patriotic duty and available to take a lead in the community. As a consequence, his workload increased considerably during the war years. Used to dealing with legislative and administrative detail, his experience was invaluable to those dealing with various aspects of the war effort in the city and, as developments in the war led to continually changing priorities and the number of committees proliferated, so did Fairbairn's participation. It is an almost impossible task to establish from the evidence available exactly on how many committees Fairbairn served during this period and quite impossible to assess how much time he committed to this work.

The range of Fairbairn's activities during the first World War provides some insight into the issues facing those on the home front. While maintaining routine statutory services, local authorities acquired additional responsibilities which, in turn, involved the formation of new committees, each with several sub-committees, to deal with different aspects of the war effort as the need arose. Inevitably councillors made up the majority on these committees but others with appropriate interests and experience were frequently co-opted. Membership of statutory committees required the approval of the Government Department concerned. Attempts by central government to widen the membership of committees to be more representative of the

⁵¹ *Daily Times*, April 20th 1914. F.S. Box 7, Vol. 1 p160. W.R.O.

community they served was, at times, seen as unwelcome outside interference. Fairbairn was vice-chairman of Worcester's War Pensions Committee, which twice incurred criticism for its failure to include women and representatives of labour among its members. Set up in 1916, its membership was given only limited approval for two years and it was not until November 1918 that any reference is made to a woman's appearance at a meeting.

The *Worcestershire Echo*, in November 1917, provided a useful, if somewhat haphazard and incomplete, list of Fairbairn's responsibilities at that time.⁵⁴ Clearly, he had relinquished none of his pre-war positions and much of his additional work was connected with the welfare of those affected directly or indirectly by the war. Membership of the War Relief Committee involved the distribution of funds raised locally to those in need and, as the mayor's deputy on the War Pensions Committee, Fairbairn had particular responsibility for disabled servicemen and their families. In addition, when the supply of food and fuel became a priority in 1917, he was appointed to the Food Control, Land Cultivation and Coal Prices Committees. As a member of the City Food Production Committee he organised and presided at cookery demonstrations, set up competitions for allotment produce, encouraged the growing of vegetables in school gardens and was present at the inaugural meeting of the Women's Institute in Worcester in March 1917. He seems willingly to have given his support to fundraising initiatives encouraging war savings as well as the raising of a war loan and, in November 1917, he endorsed a proposal by the mayor, Alderman Carlton, to provide homes for disabled soldiers and sailors. Planned as a memorial to those from the Worcestershire regiment who had died in action at Gheluvelt in 1914, the homes were to be financed by public subscription. Fairbairn's comment that the

⁵² *Worcestershire Echo*, August 12th 1914. F.S. Box 7, Vol.2, p2. W.R.O.

mayor 'may be trusted to see that the noble scheme... takes concrete form with the least delay.'⁵⁵ was particularly generous at a time of considerable tension between the parties in the council.

It was as a result of his position as Liberal party agent that Fairbairn was involved in the national recruitment campaign from 1915. On August 11th 1914 the *Worcestershire Echo* reported that there were 10,000 men from the county of Worcestershire in the field although there is no indication of how many of these were regular soldiers and how many were volunteers. Between August 1914 and December 1915 nearly 2.5 million men nationally had volunteered for military service⁵⁶ and Fairbairn did his bit in Worcester by speaking at recruiting rallies in September 1914 and June 1915. He was also elected to the committee of management of the City Volunteer Training Corps where training in musketry was given to those who held essential jobs or who were considered unfit to serve in the army. However, after the initial enthusiasm the rate of voluntary enlistment slowed both locally and nationally. At a rally held in Worcester on October 2nd 1915, which was reported as 'enthusiastic',⁵⁷ the organisers were disappointed when only thirty volunteers, of whom five were unfit, came forward. Only a week later the government, still clinging to the voluntary principle, introduced a national scheme under which agents of all political parties were asked to use their experience of canvassing to contact every man of military age to encourage them to indicate their willingness to volunteer. It was at this point that Fairbairn took on a more formal role as Honorary Secretary of the local Parliamentary Recruiting Committee with the Mayor as chairman. The press pronounced the canvass, which was completed by December, as a success and in

⁵³ *Worcestershire Echo*, September 22nd 1914. F.S. Box 7, Vol.2, p10. W.R.O.

⁵⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 6th 1917. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 1, p138. W.R.O.

⁵⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 10th 1917. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 1, p143. W.R.O.

⁵⁶ DEGROOT Gerald J., *Blighty -British Society in the Era of the Great War*. London 1996 p43.

March 1916 Fairbairn, presumably in common with others in similar positions, received a letter of thanks from 10 Downing Street signed by Lord Derby as Director of Recruiting. However, when this scheme did not produce the desired result the government was forced to resort to conscription for all single men between 18 and 41 under the Military Service Act in January 1916. Worcester, in common with all other local authorities, set up a tribunal to decide on claims of exemption from military service and, although for once he was not a member of this body, Fairbairn gave his approval by commenting that the tribunal was truly representative of all classes. He added that its duties would be light as the city had responded so well to the recruitment campaign.⁵⁸ In February 1917, he was appointed to the local National Service Committee which intended 'to bring into the service of the nation in the present crisis every man between the ages of 18 and 61 who is able and willing to give Germany the "knockout" blow necessary to end the war'.⁵⁹ This committee did not last long as it was dissolved when the new Ministry of National Service took over responsibility for both army recruitment and the direction of essential labour only six months later.

Fairbairn's work on the local National Insurance Committee remained his most regular and demanding commitment throughout the war. Details of the monthly meetings including statistics of income and expenditure, as well as numbers insured, were published in the local press and cuttings of the proceedings were carefully preserved in Fairbairn's scrapbooks, possibly as an *aide-memoire*. He was re-elected each year as chairman and in 1916, in his acceptance speech, made the case for the Insurance Committee to 'do everything in their power to facilitate the prevention of

⁵⁷ *Daily Times*, October 4th 1915. F.S. Box 7, Vol.2, p122 W.R.O.

⁵⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, February 9th 1916. F.S. Box 7, Vol.2, p158. W.R.O.

⁵⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, March 13th 1917. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 1 p62. W.R.O.

ill-health'.⁶⁰ This somewhat 'wider view than Insurance Committees in general take of their duties'⁶¹ reflects the importance that Fairbairn had always attached to the issue of health as well as his awareness of the need to plan for the future. He continued to attribute ill-health to poor housing, a particular problem in Worcester to which he had drawn attention as long ago as 1909. The work of the committee, and the demands on its resources, expanded as the numbers of those insured increased. By 1917 over 18,000 people in Worcester were insured and, it is interesting to note that, when proposals to widen the scope of the scheme were under discussion, the Committee 'cordially welcomed the recognition by the state that it should be concerned with maternity and child welfare and better housing'⁶². However, while accepting the need for some support from central government, the Committee emphasised the importance of continued local participation in the scheme with the proviso that, 'due weight should be given to the benefits of the system of democratic control in the government of the (Approved) societies'⁶³. The financial position of the Societies was, in fact, strengthened under the National Insurance Act of 1918 but the encroachment of central government into local decision-making clearly remained a matter of concern to Fairbairn, both as a Liberal and as a major participant in local affairs. During a visit by the Pensions Minister to Worcester in April 1918, he said he was 'glad to learn that Mr. Hodge (the Minister) believed in giving more power to the local committees'⁶⁴ and this was a theme to which he returned in his election address later in the year.

In Worcester, as elsewhere, party politics had been suspended during the war.

In late August 1914, the Conservatives announced that, because of the national

⁶⁰ *Worcestershire Chronicle*, July 28th 1916. F.S. Box 7, Vol.2, p198. W.R.O.

⁶¹ *Worcestershire Advertiser*, July 29th 1916. F.S. Box 7, Vol.2, p192. W.R.O.

⁶² *Worcestershire Echo*, July 26th 1917. Box 8, Vol. 1, p108. W.R.O.

⁶³ *ibid*

emergency, Fairbairn's position as councillor would not be contested in the municipal election in the following November.⁶⁵ In October, City Liberals followed suit by agreeing to avoid electoral contests, although members were reminded of the need to recruit more members and build up funds for the future.⁶⁶ The importance of maintaining party organisation, 'to resume the fight' after the war, also featured in a message from Beauchamp to the Worcestershire Liberal Council in December 1914.⁶⁷ Speeches at the same meeting also reflected the concerns of Liberals, loyal to their government but uneasy about the war and wary of the growth of militarism. While emphasising the need for national unity, references to the resumption of political debate may indicate optimism that the war would soon be over or, an awareness of the party's vulnerability in a period of uncertainty.

The failure of the Conservative majority on the local council to consult them over the election of civic officials led Worcester Liberals to re-assert themselves briefly as a separate political group in 1916. After the Conservative mayor had been re-elected unanimously for the fifth time in 1915, the Liberals proposed Fairbairn, as their alternative candidate for the position of High Sheriff in the following year. It is unlikely that Fairbairn actively sought nomination for this largely ceremonial and politically neutral role, even for a year, but presumably he did not wish to offend his fellow Liberals by refusing their nomination. Having said that he 'preferred to remain a directly elected member of the council'⁶⁸ when it had been suggested he should become an Alderman, he would be well aware he would need Liberal votes in the future. He must also have been aware too that there was little likelihood of being nominated. Fairbairn's position as the Liberal agent, and his close association with the

⁶⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, April 5th 1918. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 1, p187. W.R.O.

⁶⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, August 28th 1914. F.S. Box 7, Vol. 2, p5. W.R.O.

⁶⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 1st 1914. F.S. Box 7, Vol. 2, p13. W.R.O.

⁶⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 14th 1914. F.S. Box 7, Vol. 2, p34. W.R.O.

Liberal party, was cited by the Conservatives as the reason for their refusal to support his nomination for civic office in the following year. This led to the boycott of the election meeting and the official Corporation luncheon by all Liberal councillors showing that party loyalties had not been abandoned. Fairbairn's third unsuccessful nomination as High Sheriff, came just before the armistice in 1918 when he was suffering from the 'prevalent malady',⁶⁹ presumably influenza. Whether by accident or design, Worcester Liberals had managed to remind their supporters of their continuing existence without seriously disrupting the local war effort, at a time when party politics were temporarily suspended. Certainly the Liberals were sufficiently organised to select and adopt Fairbairn again as their Parliamentary candidate in reasonably good time for the campaign in the general election which was to take place on December 14th 1918.

The official resumption of party politics followed very closely on the declaration of the armistice on November 11th 1918. Within three days Lloyd George had announced the date of the general election and an emergency conference of the Labour party had voted to withdraw from the coalition government on the dissolution of Parliament. Lloyd George's decision to fight the election as the leader of a continuing coalition of the Conservatives in collaboration with some Liberals cost him the support of those Liberals, of whom Fairbairn was one, who still looked to Asquith as the leader of their party. Fairbairn, to whom his opponents had once referred as the 'true disciple of Mr. Lloyd George',⁷⁰ and who had been an enthusiastic advocate of Lloyd George's pre-war reforms and a loyal supporter of the wartime coalition, had become disillusioned with the Prime Minister. The first available evidence indicating his growing disenchantment with Lloyd George appears in an

⁶⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 8th 1916. F.S. Box 8, Vol.1, p15. W.R.O.

editorial in the *Worcestershire Echo* in August 1918, where he was described as ‘not a whole-hearted supporter of the Prime Minister’.⁷¹ In the 1918 election campaign, Fairbairn declared his opposition to the Coalition and support for Asquith. His criticisms of Lloyd George are implicit in the way in which he described himself, at his adoption meeting, as a Liberal who ‘had not changed his colours or convictions’, and who ‘believed the principles of Liberalism were established principles, not subject to variation’.⁷² These comments were clearly intended to draw a comparison between Fairbairn’s own political position and that of the Prime Minister who no longer appeared so committed to Liberal principles. Fairbairn’s suspicion and distrust of the “bargain” that had been made with the Conservatives was spelt out in his warning to the audience to ‘be careful of being misled into supporting the present Government with a blank cheque’.⁷³ For him, the major issue of the election, with which he opened his address to the electors, was the threat to the concept of representative government posed by the personal style of government which had evolved under Lloyd George’s wartime premiership.

The continuing rift in the Liberal party between the supporters of Lloyd George’s coalition and those remaining loyal to Asquith was only one of the unique features of the 1918 general election. The last election, held in December 1910 when the party was united under Asquith, had focussed on the single issue of reform of the House of Lords. The Representation of the People Act passed in 1918 had tripled the electorate with the extension of the vote to women over 30 and the early date meant that servicemen who were awaiting demobilisation were unable to vote. Asquith who saw no reason for such haste said that it was ‘a blunder and a calamity that the

⁶⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 21st 1918. F.S. Box 8, Vol 2, p 36. W.R.O.

⁷⁰ *Daily Times*, November 23rd 1910, F.S. Box 6, Vol. 1, p28. W.R.O.

⁷¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, August 7th 1918. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 2, p22. W.R.O.

⁷² *Worcestershire Echo*, November 22nd 1918. Box 8, Vol. 2, p44. W.R.O.

country should be plunged into the turmoil and tumult of a General Election',⁷⁴ and called for a delay. Fairbairn also made this point at his adoption meeting when he said 'he believed the citizens of Worcester did not wish for an election in the absence of the soldiers'.⁷⁵ But although Fairbairn argued against the timing of the election, he also took the view that voters must have a chance to express their opinions and he certainly was not prepared to allow the seat held by the Conservative, Edward Goulding, to go uncontested. Not only was he concerned about the dangers of Lloyd George's personal style of government but he was also anxious to highlight the risks of continued membership of the coalition to the Liberal party and its principles. Showing an awareness of the political implications of the situation beyond the local scene, he said that he believed this election to be 'an attempt to destroy the Radical wing of the Liberal party and the Labour party at the same time'.⁷⁶

The report of Fairbairn's adoption meeting in the *Worcestershire Echo* presents an image of an experienced candidate secure in his ideas and confident in expressing them. In a speech which was a skilful blend of political argument and personal appeal, the 'unrepentant Free Trader',⁷⁷ declared his support for Liberal policies on Irish Home Rule, land reform and the principle of self-determination, at the same time reminded his listeners of his local connections, his working class roots and his Radical credentials. Speaking as a 'fellow citizen' and 'as the father of a family born and bred in the city',⁷⁸ Fairbairn openly appealed to local feeling and, according to the sympathetic press report, seems to have succeeded in establishing a rapport with his audience and met with its approval. He justified his Radical

⁷³ *ibid* p45.

⁷⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 19th 1918. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 2, p41. W.R.O.

⁷⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 22nd 1918. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 2, p45. W.R.O.

⁷⁶ *ibid* p46

⁷⁷ *ibid* p45

⁷⁸ *ibid* p47

reputation with the suggestion that certain key industries, which had been under government control during the war, should remain nationalised so that ‘the advantages of production should go to the people’s pockets, and not those of individuals’.⁷⁹ When he added that coal mining should belong to the community and that electricity should be developed for the nation by the municipalities, it is not surprising that questions followed about Fairbairn’s attitude to the Labour party’s programme. His reply, that ‘there was no reason why he could not support 19 out of the 20 points’,⁸⁰ left no doubt of his Radical stance. When his adoption as Parliamentary candidate had been formally endorsed by the meeting, it was Fairbairn himself who suggested that as the local Labour party had no candidate, he might be invited to address them as ‘he knew he would have their votes’.⁸¹ He added that he thought that his views were sufficiently advanced to merit official backing from the Labour party.

It has not been possible to establish whether Fairbairn did fight the election with the official support of the local Labour party, but he did receive the endorsement of the Worcester Co-operative Society. Approval was not granted easily. Both candidates were required to respond to a written questionnaire, the answers to which were fully debated at a lively meeting of the Society. Although Fairbairn’s answers appear to have been acceptable, much discussion hinged on his relationship to both the Liberal and Labour parties. Having established that he was an ‘Asquithian’, that he was campaigning as ‘the People’s Candidate’ and that he had already announced he was prepared to carry out the Labour programme, the meeting eventually voted in his favour.

It is relevant to point out here that Fairbairn issued more literature for the 1918 election than he did for any of the six subsequent Parliamentary campaigns in which

⁷⁹ *ibid* p45

he fought. As well as his formal address to the voters dated December 2nd, a further document entitled 'Reasons why Mr Fairbairn should be supported', and a curriculum vitae with a full list of all offices held, were circulated. In neither policy document is any reference, or commitment, made to the Liberal party. Presumably, because of the split in the party, no clear guidance was forthcoming from the party leadership and candidates, like Fairbairn, were free to determine their own priorities and policies. By the same token, this also meant that such candidates could not necessarily rely on the vote of all party members and Fairbairn's commitment to much of the Labour programme may have cost him some Liberal votes. This possibility did not deter him from stating quite categorically, in his official election address that, in 1910, he had expressed 'advanced views' on social reform and 'these views are now embodied in the Labour programme, which in the main, I endorse'.⁸² Much of the address is predictable, reflecting his long-held concern for the welfare of the working classes and calling for improved Old Age Pensions, the establishment of a Ministry of Health, hospital accommodation for all and better provision for disabled servicemen and their families, all proposals with which Labour supporters were likely to agree. However, it was his repeated demand for nationalisation, the call for labour representation at the Peace Conference and the restoration of Trade Union conditions, plus an attack on war profiteers and a reference to a government 'dominated by wealth rather than worth' which further indicate Fairbairn's Radical sympathies. This was followed by a direct appeal to Liberals and Radicals for their support 'because he stands for the main planks of Labour policy. He **knows** the worker's lot; he **understands** the

⁸⁰ *ibid* p46

⁸¹ *ibid* p46

⁸² FAIRBAIRN R.R. *Election Address*, December 2nd 1918. Special Collections Department, Social Science Library, University of Bristol

worker's views; and **fights** the worker's battles',⁸³ represents a blatant call for the working class vote.

Although, Fairbairn's style, at his adoption meeting, was one of 'fighting talk', he had also shown that he was well aware that his chances of winning the seat were slim. He recognised that, in a Tory stronghold, he was challenging a sitting Member, always a disadvantage, and that his opponent supported the Coalition and was backed by a strong organisation. He could not resist the comment that Conservative methods in the constituency had not always been scrupulous but his assessment was, in fact, realistic. Strangely, while Fairbairn's scrapbook includes a full report, from the *Daily Times*, of Goulding's five meetings held on one day, the only reference to Fairbairn's own campaign is an official notice of eve of poll meetings. The importance of the vote of Worcester women was recognised by both candidates and Goulding's meeting, 'mainly composed of women',⁸⁴ is reported in detail. 'Women were heartily invited'⁸⁵ on a notice advertising a meeting at which Fairbairn was to speak, but there is no record of this event. There is no record either in the scrapbooks of any speech made by Earl Beauchamp during this campaign on Fairbairn's behalf although rough, handwritten notes among Beauchamp's papers would appear to be an outline for an election speech. Dated 'Worcester, 10, xii 18', headed 'General Election' and covering such points as 'no votes for heroes' and 'punish guilty' as well as references to 'old Liberal principles', Free Trade and 'free men in a free Parliament', this document ends with the words 'Fairbairn, Worcester'.⁸⁶ It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Beauchamp at least planned to speak in support of Fairbairn's candidacy. The reason for the uncharacteristic gaps in Fairbairn's usually meticulous

⁸³ *ibid*

⁸⁴ *Daily Times*, December 13th 1918. F.S.. Box 8, Vol. 2, p54. W.R.O.

⁸⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 12th 1918. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 2, p53. W.R.O.

⁸⁶ B.P. K1I, Madresfield Court

personal record at this important point in his career can only remain a matter for speculation. In his election address he had made reference to having been ill and, as his apologies for absence from two committee meetings are recorded during the period of the campaign, it is possible that he was indisposed. The fact that he missed the peace celebration at the City council meeting early in January 1919, and was reported to be 'recovering slowly on January 19th', would seem to support this suggestion.

At the declaration of the poll on December 28th, Goulding had polled 9,243 votes and Fairbairn, 4,889. Comparison with the result in 1910 is virtually impossible as circumstances had changed so drastically, but Fairbairn must have been disappointed with this result. He had obviously made a great effort to attract the working class vote in the absence of a Labour candidate and yet he had only achieved 34% of the total poll, 9% less than in 1910. His New Year message for 1919, while claiming optimism and hopes of a revived sense of unity, ended with the proviso that 'justice and true charity must prevail over self interest'.⁸⁷ Goulding, understandably more confident, seems to have adopted Fairbairn's agenda, looking forward to a just peace and social reforms which would ensure decent homes and better opportunities for all.

Poor housing, which had been a perennial problem in Worcester, became Fairbairn's main concern between 1919 and 1922. A report on housing in Worcester by the Christian Social Service Union, published during the election campaign in 1918,⁸⁸ had provided details of crowded and insanitary conditions well below the minimum standards laid down by the Local Authority itself. In its conclusion the report called upon the citizens of Worcester to insist that the City Council used the

⁸⁷ *Worcestershire Advertiser*, January 4th 1919. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 2, p56. W.R.O.

powers it had to improve the situation. Fairbairn clearly saw an opportunity in the aftermath of the war to capitalise on the declared good intentions of the Coalition to create a 'land fit for heroes', and Addison's Housing Act of 1919 must have raised hopes of financial support from central government. Anxious for action but unable to attend the first council meeting of 1919, Fairbairn sent in a motion stressing 'the desirability of co-ordinating without delay, such reconstruction work as may be undertaken by the council'⁸⁹ so that priorities could be decided. The provision of housing featured regularly on the council's agenda in the next two years but much of the debate concerned the acquisition of sites at the lowest possible cost and therefore building was continually postponed. Failure to make progress led, once again, to the threatened withdrawal of central government grants and it was not until September 1920 that the headline, 'New Houses - First Brick', appeared in the *Worcestershire Echo*. The Council, ever concerned with keeping costs, and therefore the rates down, found itself at odds with central government over several other matters. During this period they voted against acting upon national recommendations and refused pay rises for both police and teachers employed by the city and Fairbairn, dissatisfied with the lack of progress in implementing education reforms in the city, resigned from the Elementary Education Committee in protest. His work as Chairman of the National Insurance Committee continued, and involved putting changes in the legislation into effect, and he served on the Regional Council of War Pensions Committees. As may be expected he was highly critical of the reduction in benefits, Council salaries and wages resulting from cuts under the Geddes Axe of 1922.

The political composition of the City Council had changed in November 1919 when six Labour councillors were elected, two of whom represented Fairbairn's ward

⁸⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 27th 1918. F.S. Box 8, Vol.2, p50. W.R.O.

of St. John's. In a letter to the *Worcestershire Echo* he encouraged voters to support the Labour candidates so that the workers might 'secure a direct share in local administration'. In his opinion, 'a vote given to Labour is given in favour of the local policy I have endeavoured to advance in the city for 20 years past'.⁹⁰ He presumably welcomed the new blood onto the Council which, he said, had become 'stale'. This does, however, raise the question as to whether Fairbairn saw any prospect of any fresh Liberal candidates coming forward in the future. Whether he also welcomed the news, in March 1920, that the local Labour party had adopted a prospective Parliamentary candidate is yet another question. The candidate, a Mr. R.E. Jones, had fought the last election on his own home ground in Sheffield where he had been actively involved in the Trade Union and Co-operative movements for over thirty years. 'A little over sixty years of age' he was employed as the chief engineer at the Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Laundry and Bakery.⁹¹ Although Jones did not fight the election in 1922, and Labour did not contest the seat at that time, the adoption of a provisional candidate must be an indication of growing Labour party activity in the city.

When he announced in May 1920, that he did not intend to seek re-election at the end of the present Parliament, Sir Edward Goulding expressed the hope 'for sometime yet to retain the proud position that I owe to the confidence of Worcester'.⁹² Only eighteen months after the last general election, he must have considered that he had given the Conservatives ample time in which to find a new candidate for the seat which he had held with a comfortable majority for 12 years. Goulding, who had become a baronet in 1915 and a Privy Councillor in 1918, was described by Fairbairn

⁸⁹ *Daily Times*, January 8th 1919. F.S. Box 8 Vol. 2, p58. W.R.O.

⁹⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 1st, 1918. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 2, p122. W.R.O.

⁹¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, March 6th 1920. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 2, p165. W.R.O.

⁹² *Worcestershire Echo*, May 15th 1920. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 2, p189. W.R.O.

in April 1920 as the ‘long absent and ever silent city member’,⁹³ and seems to have left the local Conservatives very much to their own devices. According to Fairbairn, it was Mr. Kilbourne Kay, ‘formally a leading Radical’ and now ‘the leading protagonist of the local Tory party’, who had announced that the party was now a ‘thoroughbred Conservative party’⁹⁴ with the implication that local support for the coalition had waned. In fact, Kilbourne Kay appears to have been a lone voice at this time and his alleged declaration somewhat premature. Differences of opinion within the Worcester Conservative party, in particular over its attitude to Lloyd George’s government, lasted right up to the general election of 1922 and had a direct bearing on the result.

Lord Deerhurst, the son of the Earl of Coventry, appears to have been regarded as the most likely replacement for Goulding and by October 1920, although not yet officially adopted by the party, he was generally referred to as the Tory candidate. It may be presumed that he had the support of the executive of the local Conservative Association who, unlike Kilbourne Kay, still remained committed to the coalition. Fairbairn’s allegation that Deerhurst had called upon the Conservatives and Liberals to unite to crush Labour would seem to confirm that he also envisaged a continuation of the coalition.⁹⁵ However, by 1922, criticism of the government’s policies in general, and the premiership of Lloyd George in particular, was expressed frequently at meetings of local Conservative Lodges. An editorial in *Berrows Journal* in April 1922 concluded that ‘the Coalition has served its purpose’.⁹⁶ A new executive committee, opposed to the continuation of the coalition, was set up under a new chairman in response to calls from disaffected Conservatives for an “independent”

⁹³ *Worcestershire Echo*, April 13th 1920. F.S. Box 8, Vol.2, p167. W.R.O.

⁹⁴ *ibid*

⁹⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 15th 1920. F.S. Box 9, Vol.1, p36. W.R.O.

⁹⁶ *Berrows WorcesterJournal*, April 15th 1922. Worcester City Library

Conservative candidate. Deerhurst's declaration that he was a "non-Coalitionist" was not enough for Kilbourne Kay and the new executive, who wanted him to 'take his courage in both hands and come out boldly as an undiluted Conservative, and to fight the constituency under that flag'.⁹⁷ Faced with the demand that he should reject the leadership of Austen Chamberlain and 'refuse to acknowledge the Whips of "any" Coalition Government',⁹⁸ Deerhurst withdrew his candidacy. In July, a more acceptable Conservative candidate, Major the Hon. Henry Lygon, was presented to supporters at a 'monster fete' held at the home of Kilbourne Kay. Introduced as Worcestershire born and bred, Lygon whose only political experience had been as a member of the London County Council, undertook to be a loyal supporter of the Conservative party and its leader as long they remained loyal 'to the principles of Conservatism which had made England great'.⁹⁹

In marked contrast to the disruption and confusion in the Conservative party, Fairbairn's efforts during this period focussed on promoting a positive image of the Liberal party emphasising the continuity and consistency of Liberal principles. The Worcester Liberal Club, presumably a social group, was reported to have had 'A Prosperous Year',¹⁰⁰ in April 1920, with a credit balance and an increase in membership was recorded, although no figures are given. Laurence, Fairbairn's son was re-elected Honorary Secretary and his father, while 'moving a cordial vote of thanks to the officers and the committee',¹⁰¹ used the opportunity to deliver a policy speech. Combining an attack on the Conservatives, and war profiteers, with a call to educate the voters about the party's policies, he declared that 'Liberalism can never die' and, that only through Liberal ideals could sound finance be re-established and

⁹⁷ *Worcester Herald*, April 29th 1922. Worcester City Library

⁹⁸ *ibid*

⁹⁹ *Berrows Worcester Journal*, July 22nd 1922. Worcester City Library

¹⁰⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, April 13th 1920. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 2, p167. W.R.O.

‘the corrupting war spirit be crushed’.¹⁰² At a meeting of the Worcester City Liberal Executive in June 1920 the decision to reject the Coalition Liberals by the National Liberal Federation at Leamington in May, was endorsed unanimously. There is no evidence to suggest that there was any significant dissent, or even much debate, over this decision and it would seem that party members were content to follow Fairbairn’s lead. Desertion of Liberal principles, a government ‘more reactionary even than was anticipated’ and objections to following the lead of a Tory government ‘chosen in a “trick” election’¹⁰³ were the reasons Fairbairn gave for supporting the Leamington Resolution. He concluded in rousing oratorical style, quoting Gladstone’s definition of Liberalism as “Trust in the People, qualified by prudence”.¹⁰⁴ In October 1921, Fairbairn celebrated 22 years as a city councillor by successfully defending his seat against a Conservative challenger in the municipal election, although yet another campaign by the *Worcestershire Echo* in April 1922 to secure his election as an Alderman was once again unsuccessful. With the end of the coalition government and the resignation of Lloyd George in October 1922, Fairbairn was the automatic choice to stand as the Liberal and Free Trade candidate for the Worcester constituency in the general election called by the new Prime Minister, Bonar Law.

Although it is unlikely that Worcester Liberals expected Fairbairn to win the seat, they could approach the campaign with more genuine optimism than in the recent past. They were united behind an experienced candidate who had a well-established local following as well as the backing of Earl Beauchamp, still a major figure in the party. The recent problems within the local Conservative Association and the subsequent change of candidate can only have helped the Liberal cause. The

¹⁰¹ *ibid*

¹⁰² *ibid*

¹⁰³ *Worcestershire Echo*, June 15th 1920. F.S. Box 8, Vol. 2, p196. W.R.O.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*

assumption that Worcester was a safe Conservative seat, and that Deerhurst ‘would probably poll a lot of votes owing to the strength of the Coventry interest, particularly if he did not do much personal canvassing’,¹⁰⁵ was no longer applicable with the substitution of an alternative candidate. Beauchamp himself recognised the significance of the change in his comment to Worcestershire Liberals that ‘the prospects of their friend, Mr. Fairbairn, had been improved by the selection of another candidate on the other side’.¹⁰⁶ Fairbairn and his supporters must have been further encouraged at the end of October by the decision of the Worcester Labour party, unable to resolve a dispute with the Co-operative council over finance for a candidate, not to contest the seat. In a straight fight between Conservative and Liberal candidates, Fairbairn could reasonably expect to profit from the Labour decision.

A nomination day report in the *Worcestershire Echo* that there was ‘no show of enthusiasm on the part of supporters of either party, but this was no departure from the customary’,¹⁰⁷ would appear to indicate that voting figures and participation rates would be low. However, as the final poll in the constituency was 82.5% of the electorate, much higher than the national figure of 71.3%, it would seem either that the mood had been misinterpreted or that the campaign itself generated an unusual degree of interest and participation. Certainly Fairbairn seems to have conducted a particularly vigorous campaign of which the highlight was a mass meeting of over 2000, addressed by Beauchamp. Less is known of Lygon’s campaign although it is surprising to find that he spoke outside the constituency on several occasions in support of Stanley Baldwin’s campaign at Bewdley.

Comparison of the candidates’ manifestos reveals shared concerns and a

¹⁰⁵ From an unnamed London paper quoted by Sir Henry Urwick to Earl Beauchamp, October 28th 1921.B.P. k5I. Madresfield Court.

¹⁰⁶ *Berrows Worcester Journal*, July 22nd 1922. Worcester City Library.

¹⁰⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 4th 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 1, p51. W.R.O.

largely common agenda including the end of the coalition and a return to two-party politics, peace in Europe, the reduction of taxation, the revival of trade and the issue of unemployment. In his “Address to the Electors”¹⁰⁸ Fairbairn adopted a much simpler and more “reader-friendly” style than that used in 1918. The detailed and lengthy political argument of the earlier document was dropped and replaced by a message obviously designed to appeal to a more diverse and less politically literate electorate. Addressed to ‘Ladies and Gentlemen’ rather than to ‘Fellow Citizens’, the document was set out in short paragraphs under headings with key words and phrases printed in dark type. Blaming a ‘camouflaged Tory government’ for ‘all the confusion, discredit and suffering of the past four years’, Fairbairn called for a change from ‘broken promises and wasteful extravagance’ and a return to honesty and common sense. The final, and longest, paragraph provided a generalised statement of Liberal policy which ‘sets the well-being of the community as a whole above the interests of any particular section or class’.¹⁰⁹ A supplementary “shopping list”, entitled ‘Mr. Fairbairn’s 14 Points’,¹¹⁰ was also published and included such specifically Liberal policies as support for the League of Nations, Free Trade, the Irish Treaty, proportional representation and the supremacy of the House of Commons. This was where the candidates’ opinions diverged. Lygon’s address, which included the surprising statement that the Conservative party would ‘be content to adopt as its watchword an historic Liberal policy – “Peace, Retrenchment and Reform”’,¹¹¹ was little more than a series of general statements with no indication as to how change was to be achieved. No mention was made of the League of Nations,

¹⁰⁸ FAIRBAIRN R.R., *Address to the Electors*. 1922. Special Collections Department, Arts and Social Science Library, University of Bristol.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*

¹¹⁰ FAIRBAIRN R.R., *Mr. Fairbairn’s 14 Points*, 1922. Special Collections Department, Arts and Social Science Library, University of Bristol

but alliance with France was regarded as essential for peace, while social reform could only be tackled when the financial situation was right. His most forceful statements related to the restoration of the powers of the House of Lords and condemnation of the Irish Treaty as ‘a disastrous mistake’.¹¹² His somewhat vague final sentence was merely a promise to deal with any other matters at public meetings.

Fairbairn’s election address, as well as reports of speeches made at Liberal meetings, was published in full in the *Worcestershire Echo*, which made much of his credentials as a local candidate. Lygon, who could also justifiably claim Worcestershire connections, was dismissed as being ‘far behind Mr. Fairbairn in mastery of things that matter in every Worcester household’.¹¹³ Earl Beauchamp, the principal speaker at the ‘Finest Political Meeting ever held in the City’¹¹⁴ also acknowledged Fairbairn’s local knowledge as an electoral asset. As a former Mayor of Worcester, he was well aware of local suspicion of “outsiders” as candidates and, as a former Cabinet Minister and senior member of the Liberal party, he could speak with authority and introduce a national dimension to the local campaign. His keynote speech in support of Fairbairn drew the attention of Worcester voters to the wider political context by combining an attack on the record of Bonar Law and the Conservatives with a comprehensive explanation of the major planks of Liberal policy. Beauchamp saw the restoration of Britain’s moral authority in foreign policy as of prime importance. He advocated support for the League of Nations and the avoidance of entangling alliances. This would lead to a recovery of international trade and ultimately reduce unemployment. German reparations were condemned as a disruption to vital trade and he made the point ‘our trade with Germany was not

¹¹¹ LYGON Henry. *Election Address*. 1922. Special Collections Department, Arts and Social Science Library, University of Bristol.

¹¹² *ibid*

¹¹³ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 6th 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p52. W.R.O.

carried on for the benefit of Germany, but for our own benefit'.¹¹⁵ Beauchamp called for a return to Free Trade, a cause for which he continued to fight. In contrast to Beauchamp's conventional address, Fairbairn's more informal style demonstrated his ability to empathise with his audience and he played to the crowd by telling them that 'he came from the street himself and knew and felt what they knew',¹¹⁶ pressing home his political message through frequent local references. Faithfully reporting applause, the *Echo* judged the speech to be 'effective' and 'bristling with points that went home to electors of both sexes'.¹¹⁷ Beauchamp's formal statement of party policy complemented Fairbairn's common touch and personal appeal and must have added considerable weight to the campaign to win over floating voters.

Fairbairn's ability to communicate with his listeners was viewed in a very different light in an editorial commenting on his election as MP for Worcester in *Berrows Journal* on November 18th 1922. Labelling the result as a 'blot on our political map', Fairbairn's success was attributed to 'egotistical self-advertisement and cheapjack appeal to unsophisticated electors in the market place'. Elsewhere in the same paper, it was claimed that the result was as much a surprise to the Liberals as it was to the Conservatives and, to some extent this must be true, as the Conservatives had gained 6 seats in the recent local elections. After a recount which added 200 votes to his total, Fairbairn won by a majority of 773, having polled 10,143 votes and 52% of the total to Lygon's 9,370. The hugely increased turn-out of 82.4% of the electorate compared with the 1918 figure of 62.3% was clearly a major factor in Fairbairn's victory. He was one of Asquith's 62 Liberal MPs while 53 supporters of Lloyd George were returned to Westminster. Together the Liberals were now in third place

¹¹⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 8th 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol 2, p55. W.R.O.

¹¹⁵ *ibid*

¹¹⁶ *ibid*

¹¹⁷ *ibid*

with Labour in second place with 142 MPs and the Conservatives with an overall majority of 87.

Partisan comment rather than abstract analysis constituted the coverage of election results by the local press. Euphoric reports in the *Worcestershire Echo* featured accounts of the scene at the count, messages of congratulation from prominent Liberals, poems in honour of the new MP and descriptions of his departure to take his seat at Westminster. Although, quite naturally Fairbairn preserved only these complimentary cuttings in his scrapbook, it is possible, from the evidence available, to make some assessment of the reasons for his success in a general election which depended ‘almost entirely on atmosphere, personalities and party image’.¹¹⁸ In the context of the election in Worcester in 1922 ‘atmosphere’ could reasonably be interpreted as the political circumstances in the constituency at the time. The disunity and disarray within the Conservative party, combined with the absence of a Labour candidate, both factors over which Fairbairn had no influence or control, proved crucial to the result. To Beauchamp and Fairbairn potential Labour voters were their best prospect. Beauchamp made a point of expressing his sympathy with many Labour principles and Fairbairn, who in 1918 had indicated his approval of much of the Labour programme, consciously directed his appeal to all classes in his election literature and speeches. Although no official endorsement of Fairbairn’s candidacy appears to have been forthcoming from the Labour party, he must have been encouraged by the words of goodwill from a Labour supporter that ‘it would be to the advantage of Labour to support Liberalism in the straight fight in Worcester’.¹¹⁹ Speaking immediately after the count, Fairbairn himself assumed that he had the votes of ‘all the ex-Servicemen... the Labour men, and all the working men and the

working women'.¹²⁰

It is interesting to note that Beauchamp claimed 'we Liberals never fight on personalities; we always fight on principles,' and then went on to support Mr. Fairbairn who 'is standing for Liberal principles'.¹²¹ In Worcester it had become very difficult to separate the personality from the image of the party and its principles. Fairbairn's name had become synonymous with the local Liberal Association which depended on him for all aspects of its organisation. Consistent in his commitment to progressive policies and regarded as the unofficial leader of the opposition in the Conservative-dominated city council, Worcester Liberals appear to have been quite content to follow Fairbairn's lead, creating an impression of unity to the voters and obscuring the inherent weaknesses within the party. Membership numbers remained static, there was no evidence of future candidates eager to take over and, there could be no guarantees that the support of Beauchamp and a loyal core of voters in St. John's, on which Fairbairn's own position depended, would continue. However, in contrast to the internal troubles of Worcester Conservatives at the time, the Liberals were able to present a positive image to the voters. The comparison between a confident and energetic Fairbairn and an inexperienced and ineffective Henry Lygon obviously persuaded some disaffected Conservatives to change their votes. November 1922 was a moment of triumph for Fairbairn and the Liberals in Worcester and Beauchamp's telegram of congratulation linked Fairbairn's 'life-long advocacy of Liberalism' with 'his self-sacrifice for the Citizens of Worcester' as the reasons for his 'splendid victory'.¹²² According to the *Daily News*, Fairbairn had achieved 'one of

¹¹⁸ CAMPBELL John, *Lloyd George: The Goat in the Wilderness*, London 1977, no page given, quoted in ADELMAN Paul, *The Decline of the Liberal Party.1910-1931*. P34, London 1981.

¹¹⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 8th 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol 2, p61. W.R.O.

¹²⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 16th 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p74. W.R.O.

¹²¹ *ibid*

¹²² *Worcestershire Echo*, November 16th 1922, F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p75. W.R.O.

the most striking wins of the Liberal party in the provinces', and had 'created dismay in the Tory camp in the Midlands'.¹²³ This may have been something of an overstatement but it is certain that the Worcester Conservatives had received a jolt to their complacency. The Deputy Mayor, formally seconding a motion congratulating Fairbairn on his election, added the warning that when Fairbairn's opponents 'had got their stables cleaned by the next election', his time as an MP would be limited to one term only.¹²⁴

¹²³ *Daily News* quoted in *Worcestershire Echo*, November 18th 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p80. W.R.O.

¹²⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 22 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p84. W.R.O.

Year at Westminster

1922-1923

On Tuesday, November 21st 1922 Richard Fairbairn MP attended a meeting of Worcester City Council in the afternoon and from there, went to Shrub Hill Station to catch the 6.40 pm train to Paddington on his way to take his seat in the House of Commons for the first time. The events of that day set the pattern for the dual role which Fairbairn was to play for the following year. Speaking to the large crowd at the station, he announced his intention to continue with his local responsibilities and, at the same time, to represent the city at Westminster. He took the opportunity also to point out a few home truths to his excited audience. Well aware that many of his supporters had great, and probably unrealistic, expectations of what he might be able to achieve as their MP, he reminded them that his powers were limited by the political realities of his position. His opponents on the council had already indicated that they aimed to be better prepared for the next election and, he was going to the House of Commons as a member of the Opposition, a position carrying little weight but one with which he was very familiar. He also called upon committed Liberals to strengthen their organisation so that they might retain the seat, a point to which he frequently returned, no doubt conscious that his own contribution to the local party would, of necessity, be curtailed. On a more positive note, fully expecting to serve as MP for Worcester for the next five years, he promised to represent the interests of all his constituents in Parliament whether they had voted for him or not.

Characteristically Fairbairn lost no time in making his maiden speech in the Commons. Within two weeks of taking his seat he addressed the House on the issue of

unemployment, a subject about which he had always been concerned and which had become an even greater problem in the aftermath of the war. Following a speech by the Labour MP, J.R.Clynes, criticising the government's failure to deal with the problem, Fairbairn seized the opportunity to attack the government and, at the same time, to demonstrate his considerable personal knowledge of the effect of its policies on his own constituency. Fairbairn appears to have taken the occasion in his stride, no doubt aware that by tradition, he would not be interrupted. Opening with a mild reminder that his presence meant that, after 37 years, the voters of Worcester had rejected the Conservative candidate, he proceeded to inform the House of efforts made in the constituency to deal with unemployment. He argued that several initiatives to create employment opportunities in the city, backed by all the political parties, had come to nothing, not through any failure on their part but because of the obstruction or inaction of central government. He quoted specific examples from Worcester, including a road scheme delayed by the Ministry of Transport, a proposal to deal with the dole treated 'contemptuously' by the Ministry of Labour, and a canal scheme pigeon-holed by civil servants. He concluded by calling on Ministries and their officials to 'get off the backs of the local authorities'.¹ In his opinion local authorities were capable of working out their own salvation and the only help required of central government was in the equitable distribution of the cost. This speech demonstrates how Fairbairn, as a new MP sitting on the Opposition benches, was able to bring the concerns of his constituents to the attention of the national forum and provide a local perspective on a common problem. By introducing himself as 'a common or garden consumer',² rather than as a spokesman for

¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 12th 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol.2, p102. W.R.O.

² *ibid*

any particular interest group, Fairbairn demonstrated that he would continue to express his independent views, just as he had always done in local politics. Clearly he saw no reason to change his style in order to represent interests of the people and the area for which he had been elected.

The editor of the *Worcestershire Echo* considered Fairbairn's maiden speech of sufficient interest to publish the official report in full but it received less attention in the *Daily Times* and only short paragraphs in the *Birmingham Post and Gazette*. However, an incidental comment he made at a comparatively minor event in his constituency led to a brief period of wider press attention. A tiny paragraph under the heading, 'Once Sold Newspapers', in the local news column of Worcester's *Daily Times* on January 27th 1923, drew attention to Fairbairn's unconventional background. A flurry of larger paragraphs in the *Birmingham Evening Despatch*, *Westminster Gazette*, *The Daily News*, *Daily Chronicle*, and the *Daily Sketch* was followed by an article purporting to have been written by Fairbairn himself in *Lloyds Sunday News*³ in which he recalled 'his early struggles'. The story was apparently of sufficient interest to appear subsequently in the *News of the World*, the *New York Times* and *Titbits*. Assuming that Fairbairn did, in fact, write the article himself, it is the only evidence of his thinking available in his own words, other than speeches reported by a third party. The final paragraph provides some insight into the way he related to those with whom he came in contact in his work. Applicants to the local Pensions Committee, of which he was chairman, were routinely helped with filling in forms and officials were persuaded 'to treat people as human beings'. He pointed out 'that it was just as easy to be courteous to people who were poor

³*Lloyds Sunday News*, F.S. loose in Box 9. Vol. 2. W.R.O.

as to anybody else'.⁴ He himself described this as applying a 'human touch' which may go some way to explain his ability to connect with his audiences, as well as a personal popularity in the constituency which was not solely dependent on his political affiliation.

However, it was as a political, rather than a personal achievement, that Worcestershire Liberals chose to regard Fairbairn's election victory in 1922. Nationally, the party had little cause to celebrate with a Conservative majority overall in the House of Commons, Labour in second place for the first time and the Liberals, still divided, having sunk into third place. The situation was summarised neatly in the minutes of the Midland Liberal Federation, which Fairbairn now attended as an MP, with the comment: 'The election was very confused in its issues, and ran strongly towards Labour'.⁵ However, despite the loss of Liberal seats at Stourbridge and Bewdley, the mood appeared to be determinedly optimistic, at the Worcestershire Liberal Association meeting in December 1922. Beauchamp announced that he planned to introduce an alternative system of voting into the House of Lords and congratulated Fairbairn who, in turn, advised members to 'stick to clean politics' and predicted that reunion was 'not far distant'.⁶ At a Liberal rally in Worcester in the following month, attended by Beauchamp, George Thorne MP and many prominent Midland Liberals, a presentation was made to Mr. and Mrs. Fairbairn in front of a large and enthusiastic crowd. Much was made, by various speakers, of Fairbairn's devotion to Liberalism and the cause of Free Trade but Beauchamp also acknowledged that Fairbairn's reputation, and the respect he commanded in the city, had contributed to his victory. In reply, Fairbairn recognised 'the loving assistance and generous help Lord Beauchamp had always given him', and called on his supporters to

⁴ *ibid*

‘re-organise and re-establish on a firm basis’ in order to stick to their Liberal principles and maintain the position they had achieved.⁷

In his role as a Liberal councillor Fairbairn continued his outspoken criticism of the composition and competency of the Conservative City Council. Calling on the local Liberal Association to ‘clean out the City council from top to bottom’, he declared that ‘with a few exceptions the present City Council is the most reactionary, incompetent and most indifferent body of men that ever ruled the city’.⁸ He condemned the attendance record of councillors, saying that the Council was made up of Tory puppets of whom only a quarter were worth keeping⁹ and stressed the need for the ‘right people’ to carry out the laws passed by Parliament, referring the Tories as ‘the standstill party’.¹⁰ Still concerned for the welfare of the working class and ex-servicemen after the war, Fairbairn became increasingly impatient of the council’s apparent reluctance to adopt a more positive approach particularly over the issue of housing. Anxious to deal with a practical problem and convinced that it was the responsibility of local authorities to deal with local problems whenever possible, he found himself in an ambivalent position. Having expressed the view that ‘the less one had to do with government the better’,¹¹ he was a member of a council which appeared reluctant to take action until put under pressure by a government department. This was by no means a new situation. Busy with his additional duties and unable to attend meetings as regularly as he had done in the past, Fairbairn’s frustration with the ‘inertia’ of the council is illustrated by his call for unity among

⁵ *Midland Liberal Federation Minutes*, December 8th 1922. Special Collections, University of Birmingham.

⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 18th 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol2, p105. W.R.O.

⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, January 30th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p119. W.R.O.

⁸ *ibid* p118.

⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, February 19th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p135. W.R.O.

¹⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 31st 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p35. W.R.O.

progressives and the reported comment that he 'would like a friend on the Council'.¹²

Virtually the only serious challenger in the Conservative - controlled Council, he must have felt very isolated at times.

When Fairbairn announced that his intention to continue in his position as a city councillor at the same time as carrying out his duties as the city's MP, there were those who questioned his decision. A letter to the *Daily Times*¹³ suggested that his attendance at a City Council meeting at the time of an all-night sitting of the House of Commons showed that he was not taking his duties as MP seriously. His supporters immediately sprang to his defence arguing that Fairbairn, unlike his predecessors, was in touch with local affairs and therefore better able to represent the interests of the constituency in Parliament. From the evidence in his own scrapbooks it would appear that Fairbairn did his utmost to keep in touch with his constituency by attending council and committee meetings, as well as official engagements, whenever possible. On one occasion he made special trip from London to speak, unsuccessfully, against a Council proposal to close a dairy in the city centre and, on another, his apologies for non-attendance at an Allotment Holders' meeting are recorded. He was re-elected as the chairman of Worcester's National Insurance Committee on the day of his maiden speech in the Commons, and, although he was not always present at the monthly meetings, he was available for advice and he could speak with authority on the subject at Westminster. In his capacity as the constituency MP, he attended a variety of official functions and he was present when the Duke of York visited the city in December 1922. He was also at the conference of the National Association of Headteachers in the city in May 1923 and the opening of the

¹¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, March 8th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p 145. W.R.O.

Three Choirs' Festival in September 1923. As the city's MP and official opposition spokesman on the council, at a time when there was only one Labour councillor, it was Fairbairn's task, in July 1923, formally to second the Council's proposal to award the freedom of the city to the Conservative Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin. It may well be argued that by his active participation and visible presence in these various roles, Fairbairn was, indeed, considerably more familiar with the grassroots in his constituency than many of his fellow MPs, Liberal, Conservative or Labour.

As MP for Worcester, Fairbairn also made sure that the House of Commons was aware of the concerns and circumstances of his constituents. Described as having 'brought Westminster nearer to Worcester and Worcester nearer to Westminster'¹⁴, he drew heavily on his twenty years experience in local politics and habitually supported his arguments in debate with references relating specifically to Worcester. The area of policy in which Fairbairn was most active and effective in the House of Commons, and which provided the most obvious link between his two roles as Councillor and MP, was housing. He was well aware of the inadequate and insanitary conditions in which many of his constituents lived, both from his own observations and, from reports and representations made to him. In March 1923, as the MP for the city, he delayed his return to London to receive a deputation from several local women's organisations¹⁵ which spelled out in detail how the serious the situation was. Emphasising the effects of poor housing on health, they presented evidence of severe overcrowding, deteriorating properties and quoted 33 examples of condemned houses which could not be vacated as

¹² *Worcestershire Echo*, October 23rd 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol.1, p 21. W.R.O.

¹³ *Daily Times*, December 8th, 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p100. W.R.O.

¹⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 4th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p18. W.R.O.

¹⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, March 15th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol.2, p.149. W.R.O.

the people had nowhere else to go. Horrified at a recent proposal from the Housing Committee that empty prison cells should be used to house some of the homeless, the deputation suggested that landlords of empty properties should be put under pressure to let them and, that there should be no further delay in the new building programme. Fairbairn's reply covered several aspects of the problem going beyond the points raised by the deputation. He admitted his own frustration at the slow progress of both the Council and the government and repeated his view that local authorities should have more freedom to deal with an essentially local issue. From a practical point of view he said that the Council should be prepared to make slum properties habitable and suggested that a reduction in rates for landlords of vacant properties would encourage them to let them out. He was particularly opposed to the sale to private builders of part of any site allocated for council building and expressed concern at the rising level of rents being charged particularly for accommodation in urgent need of improvement.

The building of new council houses, which Fairbairn and the deputation saw as a priority, was an issue which demonstrates the uneasy relationship which had developed between local and central government. Under Addison's Housing Act of 1919 local authorities could apply for government grants towards building affordable houses but official approval from the Ministry of Health was required at every stage in the process. Before the number of houses to be built could be confirmed, the price and purchase of land had to be authorised and then, tenders submitted and scrutinised for final acceptance before the work could begin. Inevitably even progressive councils experienced delays. In December 1922, at a meeting of Worcester Christian Social Services Union, an organisation which had highlighted Worcester's housing problems long before, it was

announced that the Ministry of Health, having granted permission for 42 houses to be built in the city, was unwilling to approve the local tenders which had been submitted, on the grounds that they were too high.¹⁶ Fairbairn demonstrated his impatience with the situation at a council meeting in the following month when he called on the housing committee to agree on a clear policy and said that, if the builders, who were ‘playing games’ over the tenders, were unreasonable, the committee should go elsewhere.¹⁷ It was not until April that it was reported that the Housing Committee had recommended acceptance of a tender from Birmingham to build 42 houses.¹⁸ The need for ministerial permission was not confined to council housing building. When the suggestion to use vacant prison accommodation was originally made in a full council meeting, it was pointed out that approval for a similar scheme in Chelmsford had been refused in 1920. It is not clear whether the 14 ‘quite comfortable’ tenements in the prison which were in use in Worcester by September 1923, ever had the benefit of government approval. Fairbairn was not alone in expressing resentment at government interference in local affairs as many areas of policy were affected. Alderman Leicester, a respected member of the Conservative majority, is quoted as accusing the government of putting obstacles in the way of the council and asserting that ‘local brains could best evolve the means to satisfy local requirements’.¹⁹

Unable, as an opposition back-bencher, to do anything more than voice his opinions on the issue of central government intervention in local affairs, Fairbairn turned his attention to a practical problem directly affecting his constituents, taking particular

¹⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 6th 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol.2, p 9. W.R.O.

¹⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, January 23rd 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol.2, p109. W.R.O.

¹⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, April 5th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p158. W.R.O.

¹⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, March 8th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol.2, p145. W.R.O.

interest in the framing of rent control legislation in the House of Commons. With rents on existing properties rising, and the prospect that rents on newly built houses might be beyond the means of working class tenants, he spoke frequently on the subject. He achieved a minor success when his proposed amendment to a clause in the Rents (Notice of Increase) Bill, was accepted by the Attorney General as ‘useful and of practical assistance’.²⁰ Perhaps unwittingly, the minister had hit upon a phrase which characterised the way in which Fairbairn generally worked.

Fairbairn’s contribution to the debate on the Rents Bill provides a useful example of how he took ‘Worcester to Westminster’. The aim of Wheatley, who had introduced an amendment to the bill, was to establish within the legislation, some easily accessible means of appeal against increased rents on properties in need of repair. In ‘a brief and impressive speech’ in support of Wheatley’s proposal, Fairbairn said that he was speaking on behalf of Worcester, the ‘Toriest’ of councils, where ‘there are so many of these poor people who are paying a 40% increase when the repairs have not been carried out.’²¹ Wheatley’s proposed amendment, that a certificate issued by the local sanitary authority should be sufficient to exempt tenants from paying any increase until repairs were completed, was rejected by the government on the grounds that it did not provide for the landlord’s case to be heard. Fairbairn’s argument that poor people in his constituency could not afford and did not understand the proceedings at the County Court obviously made an impact on the Attorney General. Concerned primarily with the legal procedure, he was satisfied with Fairbairn’s further amendment which gave a local sanitary authority the power ‘to appoint a Committee for the purpose of this Act and

²⁰ Hansard (no date given) quoted in *Worcestershire Echo*, May 7th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol 2, p 174. W.R.O.

delegate ...to such a committee ...all or any of the powers of the authority under this Act'.²² The addition of this clause meant that, in Worcester, the responsibility for informing tenants of rent increases could lie with the Health Committee, to whom they, and presumably landlords too, might appeal directly, avoiding the delays and expense of going to a more formal hearing. Inevitably the *Worcestershire Echo* celebrated Fairbairn's achievement, reporting congratulations from his Liberal colleagues and stating that sanitary authorities and householders should all be grateful to him and 'his adviser in this matter, the Town Clerk of Worcester.'²³

Fairbairn played a very active part in discussion, as a member of the Standing Committee on the Rent and Mortgage Interest Restrictions Bill, reminiscent of his contributions to the debates of the City council in his attention to detail. His proposed amendment to enable the overseers of the poor in a parish to act as a rent tribunal was at the suggestion of the Town Clerk with whom he clearly worked quite closely. Despite the fact that his amendment was disallowed by the Chairman, Fairbairn somehow was able to make a forceful speech pointing out that if there were no bad landlords there would be no need for rent control. 'From my own experience in my own area, there are hundreds upon hundreds of cases where the full rents under the Act are being charged without the repairs being carried out, and the tenants have no remedy whatever in going to the County Court.... They hate the County Courts, but would be willing to go before a small body such as I suggest'.²⁴

²¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, May 6th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol.2, p173. W.R.O.

²² Hansard (no date given) quoted in *Worcestershire Echo*, May 7th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol.2, p174. W.R.O.

²³ *Worcestershire Echo*, May, 5th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p172. W.R.O.

²⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, June 30th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p189. W.R.O.

With typical persistence Fairbairn continued to draw the attention of the House of Commons to the need to provide housing within the means of those whom he identified as the poorer working class. His concern was that these people, who could not afford to pay over 10s a week in rent as well as rates of 5s, should be the main beneficiaries of government subsidies paid to local authorities. Warning that, ‘ I may perhaps talk of Socialism’,²⁵ he acknowledged the government’s commitment to the provision of more homes but pointed out where the current legislation was not helping the poorer workers. He claimed that in his constituency there were some private builders who, while prepared to build bigger, expensive houses for ‘well-to-do persons who ought not to benefit from the subsidy’, were not interested in building smaller homes for the working man. He warned that, if the government also continued to restrict the number of houses a local authority could build, ‘these people are not going to be catered for’.²⁶ He appealed to the Minister to ‘refrain from limiting municipal efforts’ and instead ‘do all he can to encourage them as against private enterprise’.²⁷ Later in the year he was clearly disappointed little progress had been made, saying that the Housing Act was of no benefit to the “ordinary cuss” and that the Minister of Health should be told, “your Act of Parliament is not working. Private enterprise is not moving to build houses for our people. You must let Corporations have the grant in order that they may provide what no one else will”.²⁸ On another occasion, he said, ‘it is no use crying out to the Government to do something... the proper machinery was the local authority – the City Council’.²⁹

²⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, June 22nd 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p188. W.R.O.

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ *Westminster Gazette*, October 4th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p20. W.R.O.

²⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 11th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol.1, p23. W.R.O.

Neville Chamberlain, the Postmaster General, said that the two subjects which interested the mass of the people were housing and unemployment.³⁰ Fairbairn's approach to the issue of unemployment, a matter which had also been a long-held concern on behalf of his constituents, was practical and locally focussed. At the time of his election to Parliament, the figure of 1,930 genuinely unemployed in Worcester may have been small in comparison with major industrial centres, but it was regarded as significant enough for the Mayor to call a meeting of employers in an effort to deal with the problem. Fairbairn's role became one of support for the Mayor at subsequent meetings with both the unemployed and potential employers, although there is little evidence of any real hope of dealing positively with the problem. The apparent acceptance of the situation is illustrated by the response to a practical suggestion made by Fairbairn which might have provided some temporary employment. His proposal that the council might undertake some minor public works, such as the repair of public footpaths, was interpreted as personal criticism by the chairman of the Streets Committee, rather than as a potential short-term solution to the unemployment problem³¹. In July 1923, when it was reported that the numbers of unemployed were increasing in the city, he made the point that Worcester's position was 'peculiar' as, unlike other centres, it seldom enjoyed a boom. His frustration over the housing situation surfaced once again, when he said that it was 'absurd that with houses badly needed and men and materials available that more work was not in hand'. Returning to the theme of his maiden speech in the House of Commons, he blamed a 'veritable mania' for government grants and

³⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 18th 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p79. W.R.O.

³¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, March 7th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2. P140. W.R.O.

bureaucratic delays for both the housing and the unemployment situation in the city and his advice was that self-help was best³².

Having come to the city to run a commercial enterprise, Fairbairn was always acutely aware of the importance of attracting new businesses to Worcester to provide employment and increase prosperity. As a councillor, he had actively encouraged the council to advertise the city's advantages as a possible factory site and had advocated the improvement of the Severn waterway as a means of transport as well as the preservation of its historic buildings to attract more visitors. In 1910 he had persuaded the council to publish a document in English, French and German designed to appeal to 'foreign firms anxious to share in the unrivalled advantages of this country'³³. According to the press report the 'clear and business-like recital' of Worcester's geographical position, its utilities, educational advantages and railway facilities as well as possible industrial sites and premises was 'at Mr. Fairbairn's instance'.³⁴ Perhaps because of his association with transport from an early stage in his career, Fairbairn also seems to have had a close interest in the commercial potential of the river for the economic development of the city. Among his cuttings about January 1910, is a report referring to the recommendations of a Royal Commission on Britain's waterways. Local businessmen were reported to be enthusiastic about the prospect of a link via the Severn to the industrial Midlands which, it predicted, could 'make Worcester a seaport' able 'to trade with economic advantage to all parts of the world'.³⁵ In April 1913 the council supported Fairbairn's proposal urging the government to carry out the recommendations of the Royal Commission to appoint a

³² *Worcestershire Echo*, July 23rd 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p1. W.R.O.

³³ *Worcestershire Echo*, January 29th 1910. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 2, p149. W.R.O.

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 29th, 1909. F.S. Box 5, Vol. 2, p139. W.R.O.

Waterways Board and later in that year he was appointed to the Severn Commission. It was the Severn Commission which, in September 1922, came up with the most imaginative local scheme which, it was claimed, could create employment for an estimated 2000 in the region. Fairbairn himself proposed that, 'in view of the urgent need for industrial development and the relief of unemployment', the Commission should invite the various authorities represented on the Commission to give 'favourable consideration' to the improvement of the Severn between Bristol and Birmingham.³⁶ As a result of this resolution, representatives from Birmingham, Bristol and Worcester visited Sharpness together, plans to widen the Birmingham-Worcester canal were discussed and Worcester City Council voted unanimously in favour of the idea. In his enthusiasm to promote the scheme Fairbairn had claimed that Bristol was interested and that Birmingham's earlier indifference had disappeared but, the difficulties in gaining the cooperation of several local authorities simultaneously, plus the lack of substantial financial investment and practical support, appear to have defeated this ambitious initiative.

By October 1923 when, as the city's MP, Fairbairn held a series of meetings in Worcester to give an account of his 'stewardship' to his constituents, his response to the national issue of unemployment was to advocate the traditional Liberal policy of Free Trade. He was vehement in his opposition to the introduction of protective tariffs, or colonial preference, as a solution to the problem. With reference to local industries, in particular gloves and the production of hops, he argued against treating any industry as a special case as 'it was not right to build up one section of the community at the expense

³⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, September 4th, 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2. p34. W.R.O.

of the rest'.³⁷ He added that he was prepared to defend the principle before any people in Worcester and on any platform. On another occasion he said, 'there was never a more ridiculous proposal than to interfere with our foreign trade'³⁸ as the importing of foreign goods, itself, created employment. Well before the election of December 1923 when the main issue was a return to Protection, Fairbairn had made it absolutely clear that he was, and had always had been, committed to Free Trade as the only means of reviving trade and creating employment.

Fairbairn did not neglect other aspects of his role as constituency MP. He frequently made the point that he represented all his fellow citizens irrespective of their political opinions and, his continued attendance, whenever possible, at local meetings, as well as the fact that he lived in the city, meant that he was easily accessible and in touch with local concerns. The *Worcestershire Echo* appears to have faithfully reported all his activities in the House of Commons and it is possible, indeed highly likely, that Fairbairn himself made sure the paper was aware of what he was doing. Cuttings in his scrapbooks include details of comparatively routine matters such as his arrangements for 'pairing' when he was unable to vote in a division and his attendance at formal receptions, as well as quotations from Hansard, as have been shown, when his contributions were more significant. As chairman of the local Pensions Committee, and an enthusiastic supporter of the old age pensions scheme from its introduction, he took part in the debate on the King's speech in February 1923 when he expressed regret 'that no announcement is made of the intention to remove the existing anomalies in the granting of old age pensions so as to remove the disabilities which affect those who through Friendly Societies have made

³⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 10th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p23. W.R.O.

some provision for their old age'.³⁹ This was an issue which had been raised in the constituency. Fairbairn, himself a Friendly Society member, articulated the resentment of those whose old age pension was reduced if they were receiving a weekly payment from a Friendly Society account to which they had contributed. In a later speech in the constituency, he committed himself to voting for a change in the current system. He also indicated his support for a Parliamentary campaign to amend the Pensions Act of 1920 which had adversely affected many pre-war pensioners, and he worked hard to get a select committee appointed to deal with the specific problems affecting ex-servicemen. As the long serving chairman of the National Insurance committee, he was able to use Question Time in the Commons to ask about the conditions upon which doctors served under the National Health Insurance Act. Fairbairn's concern for the interests and welfare of all his constituents, which he had demonstrated as a local councillor, is clearly reflected in his approach to the similar but wider role he held as a constituency MP. As a Liberal he always maintained that his party's policy was 'calculated to be of benefit to the whole community and not merely to one section of it'.⁴⁰

There was, however, one section of the community whose cause Fairbairn was prepared to support. In response to a deputation from Worcester Trades and Labour Council in February 1923, he promised to oppose a government bill, 'to amend the Trade Union Act of 1913'. The original Act, passed by Asquith's Liberal administration had allowed individual union members, if they so wished, to 'opt out' of contributing to their union's political fund. As, in practice, few union members had chosen to 'opt out', those unions which had voted to set up a political fund benefited from their members' silent

³⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 6th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol.1, p21. W.R.O.

acquiescence to the situation. The Conservative proposal was to require trade union members to 'opt in' to the political levy. This, of course, meant that a positive decision to contribute had to be made and the likelihood was that there would be fewer contributions and therefore fewer funds available to unions for political purposes. It is not surprising that with his father's trade union background and his own political sympathies Fairbairn's view was that unions should decide how to use their funds for themselves and that he agreed to vote against the Conservative proposal. Later in the year Fairbairn again demonstrated his willingness to oppose another attempt by a group of Conservative MPs to limit the power of the unions. In this case, the intention was to 'to put back the industrial clock'⁴¹ and repeal the 1906 Trade Disputes Act. If successful, the result would be that trade unions, once again, could be sued by employers for losses resulting from industrial action as had been established by the Taff Vale decision of 1900. On this occasion, Fairbairn announced that he intended to use the Parliamentary device of moving that the bill 'be read a second time upon that day six months' which would effectively kill off the Trade Disputes Act (1906) Repeal Bill when its second reading was put to the House.⁴² It is not clear whether Fairbairn was responsible for the death of this bill or whether it merely disappeared for other reasons. Fairbairn also gave his backing to the recognition of organisations for white-collar workers including bank and insurance officials and local government officers 'even if it emanates from the Labour party'.⁴³ Speaking from his experience 'as an employer of labour and a member of public bodies,' he said that 'the employer and public body may never suffer when they

³⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, February 15th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p134. W.R.O.

⁴⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 13th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p25. W.R.O.

⁴¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, May 5th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p172. W.R.O.

⁴² *ibid*

communicate and negotiate with representatives of their employees rather than communicating with, or talking separately to those employees.’⁴⁴

Before his arrival in the House Fairbairn had recognised that, in his position as a new MP sitting on the Opposition backbenches, there would be a limited number of opportunities open to him to make his mark. However, during his year in the House of Commons as he became familiar with Parliamentary practices and procedures, he used almost every means available to make his views known including contributions to formal debates, questions to ministers, and detailed consideration of legislation in committee. He obviously enjoyed the cut and thrust of debate and he was not afraid to comment, both in the House itself and outside, on some of the practices there which he found either odd or regrettable. As a local councillor, proud of his record of attendance at meetings, he found it ‘rather disheartening’ that ‘when the division bell rang, 300 to 400 gentlemen came in from other parts of the building’ to vote, the majority of whom had taken no part in the debate, a Parliamentary practice which he considered ‘most unsatisfactory’.⁴⁵ On another occasion he protested, ‘as one not acquainted with the practice of the House’, when he discovered that negotiation between interested parties over a particular clause in a bill had resulted in an agreement without any reference to, or consultation with, the appropriate Parliamentary committee on which he served. He made it quite clear that in his opinion, the Minister ‘should be sure that the agreement is arrived at between Members who took up the matter in Committee and not by two sets of a particular trade. It is teaching young Members a wrong view of what the House of Commons should

⁴³ *Worcestershire Echo*, April 29th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p167. W.R.O.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 4th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol.1, p19. W.R.O.

do....'⁴⁶ He was even more critical during a late night sitting when neither the Minister in charge of a bill, or the civil servant in attendance, could provide an answer to a question of fact. When it then emerged that a clause was to be repealed without anyone knowing what it said, Fairbairn said that the House was entitled to an explanation from the Minister. He added, 'I say, as a new Member, that I am astonished to find that this great Empire is governed in this extraordinary way. This could not happen in Worcester City Council'.⁴⁷

One way open to any backbencher to make his mark, which Fairbairn did not attempt, is the introduction of a Private Member's Bill. Few bills introduced by private members ever succeed in becoming law without government backing but, it was a member of the Conservative administration, Sir Joynson Hicks who suggested that Fairbairn might try. While taking part in a debate on local government finance, Fairbairn had suggested that local authorities should be allowed to establish their own municipal banks as a cheaper means of raising loans for local projects. He explained to the House how Birmingham had been granted authority by Parliament to set up such a bank in which local people could invest and receive a reasonable rate of interest. The council could then borrow from the bank at a slightly higher rate of interest, 'so that citizens are able to borrow their money from themselves at a lower rate than they get on the open market'⁴⁸. Clearly the idea appealed to Fairbairn and when he asked if the government might consider extending the right to other authorities, he received the reply, 'if the hon. Member likes to bring in a Bill dealing with it, the Treasury will give it careful

⁴⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, July 12th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p199. W.R.O.

⁴⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, June 30th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p190. W.R.O.

⁴⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, July 9th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol.2, p198. W.R.O.

consideration'.⁴⁹ No doubt Fairbairn would have relished the experience but there was no need for him to rise to the challenge as it was reported, within the same week, that a bill to set up Municipal Savings Banks had been introduced by another MP. Fairbairn returned to the subject in a later speech when he recognised that there would be little chance of its passing because it was contrary to Conservative interests.⁵⁰

In addition to his activities in the House of Commons and the city council, Fairbairn's status as an MP meant that he was in demand as a speaker at Liberal meetings outside his own constituency.⁵¹ He addressed the first, rather poorly attended, Liberal rally in Kidderminster since the war, rallied an audience of Worcestershire women Liberals to the cause and braved an outbreak of smallpox to speak in Gloucester where he made a firm declaration that there were no divisions in the Liberal party. He used these occasions to reiterate Liberal principles, to remind his listeners of the benefits of the social reforms introduced by the pre-war Liberal government and to attack the party's political opponents.

On completion of his first year in the House of Commons, Fairbairn addressed a series of meetings at various locations in Worcester, conscientiously fulfilling his promise to consult and inform his constituents of his stewardship as their MP. In the light of subsequent events, it might be assumed that these meetings were part of a campaign for Fairbairn's re-election especially as they covered most aspects of Liberal policy as well as a record of the MP's activities over the past year. When questioned in early in October about the likelihood of an early dissolution of Parliament, his reply was a

⁴⁹ *ibid*

⁵⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 20th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p26. W.R.O.

⁵¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, January 30th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol. 2, p119. W.R.O.

definite “No” with the added comment that, ‘he had never known the Tories to get out of a good job as long as they could stick to it’⁵². He presumably expected to continue to represent Worcester for some time to come and the decision to meet his constituents to explain his activities is quite consistent with what may be assumed of his concept of the role of a constituency MP. These meetings, taken together, constitute a comprehensive record of Fairbairn’s activities in the House of Commons and a robust defence of Liberal party policies. At the same time, they demonstrate his energy and ability to think on his feet. In an address to the Worcester Women’s Liberal Association, he appealed to his audience to develop the ‘quality of pity’, so that they might ‘carry out one of the first principles of Liberalism’⁵³ and keep the spirit of Liberalism alive in the city. Speaking to gatherings on street corners, whatever the weather, allowed Fairbairn to reach out to his constituents and meet them literally at the same level. His listeners appear to have welcomed the initiative and few hostile reactions were reported. Sometimes speaking twice during an evening, on each occasion Fairbairn seems to have chosen to focus on one particular aspect of policy, but readily responded to comments and questions from the crowd. Reports of these gatherings describe audiences as ‘large’ and ‘enthusiastic’ but give no indication of numbers attending.

The character and content of Fairbairn’s speeches altered over the month of October 1923 as he adjusted to the concerns of his audiences and external political circumstances. The unexpected developments during late October and November 1923, put an end to the relaxed gatherings on street corners and resulted ultimately in a formal election campaign to retain his Parliamentary seat. At the end of October Fairbairn turned

⁵² *Worcestershire Echo*, October 11th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p24. W.R.O.

his attention to the municipal election campaign supporting hopeful Liberal candidates and criticising, once again, the inertia of the city council. Although only 50% of Worcester's electorate voted in these municipal elections, the Liberals had some success and again expressed their optimism for the future at a Liberal rally held in the Public Hall in November. This rally, which was attended 'by a huge concourse of people' was clearly planned before Baldwin's surprise announcement to the Conservative party on October 25th that, in his opinion, the only solution to the long-term problem of unemployment was to introduce protective tariffs for home produced goods. The effect of this reversal of Bonar Law's previously declared policy on the Liberal party was summed up by one of Beauchamp's correspondents who wrote, 'Baldwin's speech certainly looks as if we shall have something to fight, though probably he does not mean business immediately. In any case it would help us in raising funds'.⁵⁴ A general election over the issue of Protection was inevitable in the near future and it became imperative for the Liberals to organise to defend the principle of Free Trade. The rally in Worcester, originally intended simply to commemorate a similar event held exactly a year before, provided Fairbairn and his supporting speakers with an ideal opportunity to open their campaign by rehearsing the traditional arguments against Protection. Beauchamp, a leading light in the Free Trade movement sent a message saying he had a speaking engagement in London where he hoped 'to expose the fallacies of the new Protectionist policy'.⁵⁵ Unusually, Fairbairn took the chair at the meeting and, his first concern was to establish that the Prime Minister's forthcoming visit to Worcester was to receive the freedom of the city, and not to campaign for Protection. He expressed the hope that Mr. Baldwin would 'to be

⁵³ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 10th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 2, p22. W.R.O.

⁵⁴ BP, K5i, from Sidney Russell Cooke, King's Bench Temple, October 26th 1923. Madresfield Court.

received as a Worcestershire man should be received'⁵⁶ and that Liberals would welcome him on those terms. The main address at the rally was given by Captain Wedgwood Benn, MP for Leith since 1918 who, after fulsome praise of Fairbairn as a 'tower of strength to the Liberal party', launched into an attack on the policy of imperial preference. He argued that the Liberal principles on which the Empire was founded, were sufficient to bind it together and that imperial preference was only for the benefit of the business interests. He added the comment that 'if politics was to be a matter of business, they would lower the tone of public life'.⁵⁷ Fairbairn's vote of thanks was comprehensive, showing his continued allegiance to Asquith and his commitment to Free Trade. He moved 'that this meeting of Worcester Liberals declares its unabated confidence in Mr. Asquith.... and pledges itself to support the Liberal policy which places in the forefront the principle of Free Trade.' He spoke at some length, adding his own thoughts on Liberal policies but it was left to the seconder of the motion, Colonel Albert Webb, to make the political point that, 'if there was one thing that would unite all Liberals, it was an attempt to interfere with Free Trade'.⁵⁸

Baldwin informed his Cabinet on November 13th 1923 that the king had agreed to the dissolution of Parliament on November 16th and that polling would take place on December 6th. The timing of the general election was criticised by members of all parties and Baldwin's motives have been a matter of considerable debate. The Conservatives were by no means united in favour of Protection and some certainly doubted the wisdom of another election within a year. The party's lack of preparation is illustrated in a letter

⁵⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, no date, presumed November 7th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p40. W.R.O.

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ *ibid*

⁵⁸ *ibid*

from Lord Derby, Secretary of State for War who wrote, “I think we really must put our foot down and prevent elections being sprung on us without any of those who know about election work being consulted”.⁵⁹ Asquith also considered it inappropriate to call an election at that time, but for another reason. His view, expressed in a speech quoted by Fairbairn, was that, despite the opportunity for a Liberal reunion in defence of Free Trade, it was that it was the duty of the government at a time of approaching crisis in foreign affairs to unite the nation and not to divide it.⁶⁰ Of the three main parties Labour was probably in the best position to fight another campaign at that point, having gained 82 seats in the 1922 election, and having had some by-election successes during 1923.

In Worcester Fairbairn was perhaps better prepared for the campaign than many Liberal candidates elsewhere and he began with apparent advantages. Local Liberals were united and, as the sitting MP and long-serving local councillor with a reputation for plain speaking, he was well established in the community and in regular contact with his constituents. Before the official campaign began he had, apparently quite fortuitously, already given his personal account of his activities at Westminster to many Worcester voters and had received significant press coverage as a result.

Baldwin having set the agenda for the campaign, Fairbairn, the convinced Free Trader, confidently announced on November 17th that, ‘the Free Trade party is going to win this election’.⁶¹ At his official adoption meeting on November 21st, he gave his longest speech of the campaign on the subject of Free Trade and typically, rather than rehearsing the theoretical advantages of retaining the policy, his approach was to attack

⁵⁹ Letter from Derby to Younger, December 1st 1932 quoted in COOK Chris, *The Age of Alignment*, London 1975 from CHURCHILL R., *Lord Derby, King of Lancashire*, London 1959.

⁶⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 20th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1 p50. W.R.O.

⁶¹ *Birmingham Gazette*, November 17th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p50. W.R.O.

the proposed introduction of Protection on purely practical grounds. As a loyal Liberal Fairbairn embraced the principle of Free Trade, almost as an article of faith, but his knowledge of economic theory was likely to have been limited and he left abstract explanations to others better qualified than he. Therefore his policy statement was expressed in simple and straightforward terms and related directly to the concerns of his constituents, reflecting again the way in which he identified with their interests and bearing out Wedgwood Benn's comment of Fairbairn that 'when he speaks, he speaks of things he understands'.⁶² He maintained that continued Free Trade was in the interests of all workers and that the imposition of tariffs would not stop manufactured goods coming into the country but would, instead, lead to a further increase in prices. While acknowledging the concerns of local workers, particularly those in the glove and china trades where the introduction of import duties were seen as the answer to their particular problems, he refused to regard them as a special case. He used other local examples to emphasise the point and argued that, 'if protection was given for china, gloves and leather, the people in the match trade [in Gloucester] would soon take care they had it too'.⁶³ He also pointed out that the recent improvement in export figures of cars from the Austin works in Northfield would be adversely affected by the sudden change of fiscal policy. He stuck firmly to his opinion that 'the fiscal question was not a question of one trade, but something which affected the income and expenditure of every home in the land; not only the people who were out of work but the people who were in work too'.⁶⁴

The *Worcestershire Echo* ensured that its readers were in no doubt about Fairbairn's stance on the central issue of the election campaign by printing, on November

⁶² *Worcestershire Echo*, November 7th 1923, F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p39. W.R.O.

20th, in capital letters, his declaration, ‘I have always been a Free Trader from conviction...’, emphasising, yet again, his support for the principle which he had staunchly and consistently defended throughout his political career. The accompanying report of Fairbairn’s views included a blistering attack on the failings of the Conservative government and, with reference to Asquith’s ‘ripe experience’ and ‘profound knowledge’, an endorsement of Asquith’s leadership of the Liberal party. No mention was made of Lloyd George, despite the fact that he and Asquith and some of their leading supporters had met on November 13th and formed a Liberal Campaign Committee agreeing that both groups would contribute to a common fighting fund. Fairbairn condemned the government’s switch in policy to Protection as a ‘traitorous action’, and claimed that calling an election at that time ‘proved they had not a policy which would bear examination’.⁶⁵ The combination of constant support for the principle of Free Trade and condemnation of the government’s failings in foreign and domestic policy characterised Fairbairn’s campaign for re-election.

Fairbairn’s election address published on November 27th 1923 contained little that was new. Presenting himself as ‘a Liberal and Free Trade candidate’, he invited ‘the active support of fellow-citizens of all classes to secure my re-election’. However, apart from a reference to his ‘faithful service’ as the representative of the ‘faithful city’, and a few minor adjustments to the final paragraph, this was virtually the same document as that published in 1922.⁶⁶ This may be an indication that he, and the Liberal party, had nothing new to offer or, that he did not regard his official address as a major element in

⁶³ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 22nd 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p60. W.R.O.

⁶⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 24th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p60. W.R.O.

⁶⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 20th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p60. W.R.O.

his campaign. It is also worth noting that the date of the written address is after Fairbairn had already spoken at several meetings. One of Fairbairn's greatest political assets had always been his ability to establish a rapport with an audience and he may have consciously decided that he could be more effective and have a greater impact by putting across his message to the voters personally.

On Nomination Day on November 26th, when he handed in his papers and deposit at the Guildhall, Fairbairn was accompanied by Colonel Albert Webb, who later chaired the final meeting of the Liberal campaign in the city. The other candidates were each accompanied by their party agents. From this it may be assumed that Fairbairn, having been the Liberal agent in the constituency since 1908, intended to organise his own campaign and was responsible for making his own arrangements. He embarked on a punishing programme of meetings, moving almost seamlessly from the role of sitting MP informing his constituents of his activities, to that of campaigning candidate appealing for their continued support. It was reported that, between November 21st, when the campaign began in earnest, and polling day, he had spoken at 35 meetings. For much of the campaign he adopted the approach that he had employed in the previous month, going out on to the streets and gathering his audiences as he went. In this way he could cover as much ground and reach as many potential voters as possible. Thus on one evening he spoke in the tin-workers district and, on another in 'glove country', addressing the concerns of workers in one of the city's traditional industries. These informal meetings depended almost entirely on Fairbairn's ability to attract, and hold, an audience as he was usually the only speaker. From press reports it appears that he coped competently with

⁶⁶ FAIRBAIRN R.R. *Election Address*, November 27th 1923. Special Collections Department, Arts and

questions and hecklers and responded readily to the interests of each group. However, by adopting this technique, the impression is given of a rather scattergun approach in his attack on the idea of protective tariffs. Concerned about the level of benefits he asked rhetorically, 'if he [Baldwin] is not going to let foreign goods come in, where was he going to find all his beneficial sums from?'⁶⁷ He also challenged the government's dual claim that protective tariffs would yield sufficient funds to solve the country's unemployment problems and provide for an increase both old age pensions and insurance benefits. In a series of statements resembling the modern soundbite, the government was accused of using the problem of unemployment as an excuse to change fiscal policy and the election was labelled as 'a stunt' to divert attention from a failed foreign policy. Big business which generally supported a return to Protection, and in Fairbairn's opinion, dominated affairs at Westminster, was attacked for 'taking money from the people's pockets'⁶⁸ with no regard to the interests of the whole community. On a more positive note he claimed that, the cost of living had been proven to be lower under a system of Free Trade whereas higher prices and a lower standard of living would be the inevitable consequence of Protection. Whether these meetings had any influence on voting intentions can only be a matter of conjecture. However, it might be said that Fairbairn's tactic of defending Free Trade by repeatedly stressing the disadvantages of Protection and the shortcomings of the government may have had a somewhat negative effect on local voters concerned for their future livelihoods.

Social Science Library, University of Bristol

⁶⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 22nd 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p57. W.R.O.

⁶⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 26th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol 1, p61. W.R.O.

Two days before going to the polls Worcester voters had the opportunity to hear the ‘most consistent and effective defender of Free Trade in England today’.⁶⁹ Lord Beauchamp returned to Worcester once again to support Fairbairn at the final rally of the campaign. The appearance of Beauchamp brought a note of excitement to Fairbairn’s campaign, prompting the *Worcestershire Echo*, yet again, to such superlatives the ‘greatest political demonstration ever held in the city’, ‘unparalleled enthusiasm’ and a ‘crushing exposure of tariff fallacies’.⁷⁰ Beauchamp told his audience, which filled the Public Hall and spilled out into the surrounding streets, that in Fairbairn, they ‘could not have had a better representative in the House of Commons’.⁷¹ The greater part of Beauchamp’s address focussed on the issue of Free Trade and the dangers of Protection and, in its essentials, his argument differed little from that of Fairbairn. However, as a former member of a Liberal Cabinet, his experience in government and his status in the party allowed him to introduce a broader perspective to the voters and lent greater authority to what he had to say. His speech was a confident and skilful blend of political rhetoric, economic argument and local references and, according to the *Worcestershire Echo* was well received by the capacity audience of Fairbairn’s supporters.

While the issue of Free Trade inevitably dominated the campaign, other areas of policy were not ignored. Beauchamp referred to the Liberals’ social reform programme and, as may well be expected, the problems of the old and unemployed, as well as his perennial concern about local housing, also figured in Fairbairn’s agenda. He was re-elected as chairman of the City Insurance Committee during the campaign, and he even found time to report on his attendance as a delegate at a meeting of the National

⁶⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 5th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p81. W.R.O.

Association, where he had narrowly missed election to the Executive Council by 4 votes. Social issues were addressed on November 29th when another visiting speaker, the Reverend Hooper, past-President of the Free Church Council and Methodist minister from Yorkshire spoke in support of Fairbairn. Having worked among the poor, Hooper diagnosed sickness, old age, unemployment and the loss of the breadwinner as the main anxieties of the workers and drew attention to the party's manifesto commitment to extend the state insurance scheme to cover widows and orphans. At an informal question and answer session Fairbairn explained his ideas on other policy areas such as trade union legislation, pensions and civil service pay, all matters with which he had concerned himself as an MP. It is highly likely that, on this occasion, the audience was packed with Fairbairn's loyal supporters as no hostile questions were recorded. In fact, this meeting was concluded with a particularly enthusiastic contribution from a Mrs Coombe Tennant from South Wales who 'could not believe that any city which had such a man as their Member could ever dream of parting with such a treasure'!⁷²

At the end of his year as the city's MP, Fairbairn told his constituents that 'if they wanted to be kept well posted as to what their Member was doing, they should read the *Worcestershire Echo*... because they would not find anything about him in the other paper'.⁷³ This comment may well explain why, for the period when he was an MP and during the election campaign of 1923, the cuttings in Fairbairn's scrapbooks are almost entirely from the *Worcestershire Echo*. In the past, Fairbairn had often kept reports from other sources, some of which were neither sympathetic or complimentary, but it seems

⁷⁰ *ibid*

⁷¹ *ibid*

⁷² *Worcestershire Echo*, December 3rd 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p73. W.R.O.

⁷³ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 4th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p88. W.R.O.

that when he became an MP the Conservative press simply chose to ignore his activities at Westminster and the subsequent election campaign. Certainly *Berrows Worcester Journal*, which covered events in Worcestershire as a whole, gave little space to the campaign of 1923 in Worcester, preferring to concentrate on Conservative prospects elsewhere in the county, in particular, those of Stanley Baldwin in Bewdley. In the same vein the *Worcestershire Echo* seems to have largely disregarded the activities of Fairbairn's opponents. The unqualified enthusiasm and uncritical support for Fairbairn conveyed in the *Echo's* coverage of the campaign was such that its readers might expect that he would return to Westminster with a comfortable majority.

However, Fairbairn's position as the sitting member was not as secure as it might have seemed from the pages of the *Worcestershire Echo*. A note of caution was introduced on polling day itself, with the statement, 'If sheer enthusiasm can win, Fairbairn will be returned'.⁷⁴ The use of the word 'if' implies a hint of doubt and suggests that perhaps the writer had realised that enthusiasm alone was not enough to achieve another victory. Even at this late stage in the campaign, no attempt was made to present a realistic analysis of Fairbairn's chance of success, even by drawing attention to his advantages. The final reports consist merely of further descriptions of the previous day's activities with the emphasis on the size of the crowds and the candidate's robust response to Tory attacks. The publication of a summary of his career as MP and telegrams of support from Liberal leaders, Friendly Society and other organisations plus a photograph of the Fairbairn family were all part of the paper's promotion of Fairbairn's candidacy. With such partisan reporting, it is virtually impossible to assess the relative positions of

⁷⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 6th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol.1, p88. W.R.O.

the candidates on polling day, the intentions of the voters and the reasons for the eventual outcome.

Despite his appearance of confidence, as an experienced politician Fairbairn himself must have recognised that his seat was by no means safe. His term as Worcester's MP had been prematurely cut short by the surprise election and, although he had worked hard to establish his credentials as a conscientious constituency member, it would take time to convince all those who had changed their vote in the last election to support him again. His success in the previous year had been a surprise to all and might reasonably be attributed as much to outside factors as to his own campaign. A year later the situation had changed. The Conservatives, as they had vowed to do, had put their house in order and the Labour party managed to produce a surprise candidate in time for nomination day. On the other hand, the Liberals, having been successful in 1922, had failed to confront weaknesses in their organisation which had existed for a long time. Fairbairn had recognised the need for action when he left to take his seat at Westminster in November 1922, by encouraging his supporters 'to make their organisation so strong that the seat would become known as Fairbairn's seat for as long as he lived'. His suggestion that, by the coming Christmas, 'they would have their machinery so perfect that it would be impossible for the other side to break it'⁷⁵ indicates that he saw this as a matter of some urgency. It could be argued, of course that, just as Fairbairn's time as an MP had been cut short so had the time available to his supporters to make any real progress. However, the real problem for the organisation may lie in a comment made by 'a kind

⁷⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 22nd 1922. F.S. Box 9, Vol 2, p85. W.R.O.

friend' who suggested that Fairbairn that 'won the election off his own bat'.⁷⁶ Although he claimed to disagree with this verdict he must have been aware that Worcester Liberals did, to a very large extent, depend on him. Since his arrival in Worcester at the time of the Liberal revival at the beginning of the century, he had been a major driving force within the local party. As secretary, his organisational skills had been crucial and, as a Liberal councillor he had become the voice of his party amid the Conservative majority. As the Liberal candidate in two previous Parliamentary elections he had come to be regarded as the face of his party and he had also gained the respect of his political opponents as the long-standing chairman of the National Insurance Committee. His call to his supporters to re-organise shows that he realised his election as MP would inevitably mean he would frequently be called away and would no longer be so readily available to deal with local party matters.

It is interesting to note that while long lists of names of those in the platform parties were reported at Liberal meetings, no one person habitually took the chair. This may have been a deliberate policy in the party but it did mean that there was no obvious candidate to take the lead in reorganising the local party in Fairbairn's absence. Fairbairn, who was so used to dealing with numerous responsibilities at once, does not appear to have considered delegating, or even nominating, a 'caretaker' for the task. Beauchamp, on whom it must be assumed the party had continued to depend financially, could not be expected to fill the vacuum. His involvement in national politics had made him somewhat of a semi-detached President since 1908 and, although he always put in an appearance in support of Fairbairn's Parliamentary campaigns, he was less frequently in the county and

⁷⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, January 30th 1923. F.S. Box 9, Vol2, p119. W.R.O.

much in demand as speaker elsewhere. So, it appears that, Worcester Liberals who had the advantage of having remained united at a time of division in the party nationally, lost the initiative and failed to capitalise on their candidate's success. As the *Echo* had hinted, there was no guarantee that large crowds at meetings would be translated into actual votes at the polling station, particularly when their opponents had clearly made positive efforts to recover from their earlier weaknesses.

By March 1923 the Conservatives had gone a long way towards restoring their confidence. At the annual meeting of the Worcester Conservative Council, it was acknowledged that apathy and 'want of unity, organisation and concord' had caused the party to lose the Parliamentary seat which it had held for 36 years. The organisation was declared 'rejuvenated' and it was proposed that Mr. George Crawford Greene, who 'had already been examined by several bodies connected with the organisation',⁷⁷ be adopted as the prospective candidate for the next Parliamentary election. Greene's biographical details, published in *Berrows Worcester Journal*, stressed his varied experience as a 'student, politician, sportsman, estate administrator and comrade in the Great War',⁷⁸ and claimed that he was well equipped by training, travel and family connections for the role. Apart from having made 'a most favourable impression' on the Conservative Executive Council with an 'excellent statement of his political views',⁷⁹ Greene's political experience seems somewhat limited. Born Australia in 1884 and educated in England, he returned from his estates in Australia in response to the 'call to imperial patriotism' in 1914, serving in France and Mesopotamia during the war. A JP and President of the Australian Landowners Association, he was reported as being too busy to consider

⁷⁷ *Berrows Worcester Journal*, March 24th 1923. Berrows Archive Worcester (hereafter B.A.W.)

standing for Parliament there. Since 1920 he had lived at Shipston on Stour, Warwickshire which seems to be the only basis for the claim made by the Conservatives for his local connections. No doubt the Conservatives, having reorganised and having selected their prospective candidate well in advance of the expected date of the next Parliamentary election, anticipated there would be ample time for Greene to familiarise himself with the constituency and the national political scene. The announcement of the election at the end of 1923 meant he faced an election campaign much earlier than had been expected.

To a disinterested observer the Conservative and Liberal candidates in Worcester must have presented an intriguing contrast in 1923. Fairbairn was fighting to keep the seat in Parliament which he might have expected to hold for at least a further two to three years against an opponent, new both to politics and to the constituency in which Fairbairn had lived and worked for over 25 years. Greene, the younger man by nearly 20 years, was virtually unknown to the voters whereas Fairbairn's energetic commitment to his constituents was recognised, even by his opponents. While Fairbairn stood for the party which was recently united in defence of FreeTrade, Greene was committed to advocating Protection on behalf of a party which was not unanimously in support of the policy. However the advantages did not all lie with Fairbairn and the Liberals. The constituency had generally been considered as a safe Conservative seat since the 1880s and the party held the majority on the local council. The fact that the Conservatives had managed to reorganise and select a new candidate in a comparatively short time after their defeat in 1922 indicated a positive aim to recover their previous position. In contrast the Liberals

⁷⁸ *Berrows Worcester Journal*, March 17th 1923. B.A.W.

must have appeared complacent. Above all, the proposed introduction of Protection had an appeal to workers in local industries worried by the threat of unemployment and Fairbairn's apparently unsympathetic response to the worries of these workers must have played into Conservative hands. An editorial in *Berrows Worcester Journal* under the heading 'Our Opportunity', pointed out that the 'stimulus of a distinctive and constructive policy'⁸⁰ could be extremely valuable to the Conservative party. Protection could be presented as a positive change of policy intended to benefit the workers in contrast to the Liberal defence of Free Trade which could be interpreted as typical of an Asquithian 'wait and see' strategy or, as a failure to take action to deal with a problem which was perceived to be growing.

There are comparatively few direct references to Fairbairn's Conservative opponent in the press reports of the Liberal campaign and no evidence of personal animosity. The candidates seem to have given each other a wide berth and only a chance encounter is recorded. Their supporters were less restrained and it does appear that Fairbairn's were the more active. Fairbairn did try to control these activities saying 'emphatically' that 'he did not want speakers on the other side to be disturbed Mr Crawford Greene was a gentleman who came from Shipston. Mr Fairbairn had nothing to say against him and he had said nothing against Mr. Fairbairn'.⁸¹ Under the headline 'Rough Radicalism in St. John's', 'rough and rowdy' opponents of Greene were accused of 'discreditable behaviour' in a ward 'known as a hot-bed of Liberalism'.⁸² On the other hand, the Conservatives were accused of encouraging Fairbairn's supporters to vote

⁷⁹ *Berrows Worcester Journal*, March 10th 1923. B.A.W.

⁸⁰ *Berrows Worcester Journal*, November 17th 1923. B.A.W.

⁸¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 26th 1923. F.S. Box 10. Vol 1, p62. W.R.O.

⁸² *Berrows Worcester Journal*, December 1st 1923. B.A.W.

Labour to split the Free Trade vote. Beyond referring obliquely to his youth and inexperience Fairbairn rarely mentioned Greene and concentrated on attacking the Conservative government. By and large, the contest between the Liberal and Conservative candidates focussed on the central issue between the parties and avoided personal abuse.

Fairbairn had expected, and was prepared for, a straight fight against a Conservative candidate in his defence of his Parliamentary seat. He would have been well aware that many Conservatives whose votes he had won in the last election would return to their earlier allegiance but, in the absence of any Labour challenge, he might reasonably count on the votes of the majority of Labour sympathisers in the constituency. Having always openly admitted his support for some Labour policies, he had voted with the Labour opposition on several occasions at Westminster. The sudden and unexpected arrival of a Labour party candidate was not only a surprise but could become a real threat to Fairbairn's prospects. There was now a strong possibility that he would lose the votes of Labour supporters, particularly as the party nationally had become a credible force as the main opposition party in the last Parliament. The seriousness with which the Labour intervention was regarded is reflected in number, and tone, of direct references to the Labour party during Fairbairn's campaign.

The unexpectedness of the Labour nomination is underlined by the fact that, only two days before nomination day, it was announced *Berrows Worcester Journal*⁸³ that the Labour party, had reversed an earlier decision and intended to run a candidate in the constituency. It was also reported that there had been substantial opposition to the

⁸³ *Berrows Worcester Journal*, November 24th 1923. B.A.W.

nomination within the local party and it is not clear whether it was the candidate or the decision to contest the seat to which there were objections. The candidate, Percy Williams who was 33, was an official of the National Union of Clerks at their headquarters in Sheffield and a member of the Independent Labour Party. He was reported to stand for the full Labour programme and to have been endorsed by the National Labour party. It seems highly likely that the local constituency party, for whom this would be their first Parliamentary contest, resented the imposition of an unknown outsider at such a late stage. An additional consideration may also have been the poor electoral record in the constituency of outsiders of all parties in Parliamentary elections.

Rumours had been circulated before Nomination day about the possibility of a Labour candidate entering the contest and Fairbairn had appeared somewhat irritated when he was asked about the matter. ‘ I don’t know why a Labour candidate is being nominated. ... Plenty of Labour men and trade unionists have promised me they are going to give me their support whatever happens ... this Labour candidate, whoever he may be – he is a stranger and won’t have an earthly chance of winning...’⁸⁴ Fairbairn’s initial tactic in dealing with the Labour candidate seems to have been to dismiss him as an irrelevance, commenting on more than one occasion that the Labour candidate ‘would not count’.⁸⁵ This attitude was reflected in the *Worcestershire Echo*’s headline, ‘Why is he here?’⁸⁶ In answer to Labour criticisms of his attendance and voting record in the House of Commons by ‘the newcomer’, Fairbairn took the opportunity to rehearse the number of occasions when he had supported the Labour opposition ‘in the interests of his constituents’. He reminded his audiences that a Liberal government had helped to ‘make

⁸⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 24th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol 1, p61. W.R.O.

the Labour party' in the House with the introduction of payment for MPs, saying 'it is quite obvious that Mr. Williams didn't know what went on in Parliament'.⁸⁷ Another line of approach was to appeal to the working class voter who might be inclined to support Labour. Frequent reference was made to Fairbairn's own working class background by supporting speakers using phrases such as 'he has the same aspirations as the remainder of the working classes in Worcester'⁸⁸ and 'speaking as a working man to working men'.⁸⁹ Fairbairn himself attacked Baldwin's government which 'no-one could say had done a single thing for the benefit of the working classes'⁹⁰ and, in rhetorical style, he posed and answered, the direct question, "What was the Liberal policy for the working classes?".⁹¹ Although Free Trade remained the main focus of the campaign Fairbairn and his supporters made sure that his work and concern for the interests of the working class was not ignored.

In the conduct of his campaign Fairbairn's style of electioneering may be summarised as a combination of assumed confidence, persuasion and warning. To his supporters he was ever optimistic, assuring them that the campaign was going well and that, despite presence of a Labour candidate, he could still count on the votes of many Labour sympathisers. To those who might be persuaded to change their vote, he suggested tactical voting advising those Conservatives who were unconvinced of the benefits of Protection, to vote for him and Free Trade. He actually named as an example, Kilbourne Kay, a prominent Conservative businessman, who had been conspicuously

⁸⁵ *ibid*

⁸⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 27th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p 63. W.R.O.

⁸⁷ *ibid*

⁸⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 28th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p64. W.R.O.

⁸⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 5th 1923. Box 10, Vol. 1, p85. W.R.O.

⁹⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*. December 1st 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p72. W.R.O.

absent from the party's platforms. To potential Labour voters he warned that, as Labour had no hope of winning, a vote for Williams would be wasted and could result in a Conservative victory and the introduction of Protection. In his view 'Labour ought should help me keep down the Tory machine'.⁹²

The result of the election must have been a huge disappointment to Fairbairn and his supporters. Crawford Greene had regained the seat for the Conservatives having won 10,971 votes representing 50.9% of the total vote and a majority over the combined votes of the other two parties of 413. With 9,743 votes Fairbairn's share of the vote had slipped to 45.3% compared with 52% in the previous year. The Conservative lead over the Liberal total was 1,228. Fairbairn's only consolation can have been that Williams only managed to gain 815 votes, representing a mere 3.8% of the total. However, the most galling point for Fairbairn must have been that he could not directly attribute his defeat to the intervention of the Labour candidate. Even if the Labour votes were added to the Liberals' total, the outcome would remain the same and all Fairbairn could say was that the Liberals had only lost 400 votes which they could hope to recover in the future. When the result of the election in the country was finalised, Fairbairn's personal sense of loss must have been all the greater as the reunited Liberals had gained 80 seats overall and his was one of 38 Liberal seats lost. The Worcester result stands, as it had in 1922, as an example of a constituency apparently unaffected by national trends in party politics.

In *The Age of Alignment*,⁹³ Chris Cook cites Bath and Hemel Hempstead as constituencies where the Liberals won 'freak' victories in 1923 and he also refers to

⁹¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 29th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol.1, p67. W.R.O.

⁹² *ibid* p65

⁹³ COOK Chris, *The Age of Alignment: Electoral Politics in Britain 1922-1929*. London, 1975, p172

Trevor Wilson's quotation from the *Manchester Guardian*, 'It is curious how many Liberal successes there have been in places which have cathedrals.'⁹⁴ Worcester, a cathedral city, had had its freak result, against the national trend, with Fairbairn's victory in 1922 but only a year later, the constituency had returned to what may be described as its customary position. Despite Fairbairn's experience and best efforts as an MP and his vigorous election campaign, he was defeated by a combination of a 40 year record of Conservative representation, his opponent's superior organisation, a policy appealing to those who feared unemployment and his own party's failure to maximise its potential voting strength. Liberals had attended his meetings in record numbers but, perhaps assuming they had nothing to fear from their inexperienced opponents, had failed to support their candidate in sufficient numbers on polling day. Fairbairn's warning at the end of the campaign, that 'the Returning Officer would not count cheers, but only ballot papers',⁹⁵ showed that he was well aware of the danger of complacency. His immediate comment after the count that 'I am afraid that too many of us thought that the Member was safe',⁹⁶ highlights a major weakness of his campaign. Neither the *Worcestershire Echo* or *Berrows Journal* made any attempt to analyse the reasons for the result but both confined themselves to partial commentary. *Berrows* could rejoice in the Conservative success as 'a matter of satisfaction and pride'. Greene was congratulated on having won against an opponent 'with the advantage of possession, and with exceptional electioneering energy and experience'. His victory 'must be considered a great

⁹⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, December 8th 1923 quoted by WILSON Trevor, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-1935*. London 1966, p279.

⁹⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 5th 1923. Box 10, Vol. 1, p85. W.R.O.

⁹⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 7th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p91. W.R.O.

achievement to have won a clear majority in a 3 cornered fight.’⁹⁷ The *Echo*, having expressed sympathy for Fairbairn’s loss of his seat after such a short time, claimed that Greene’s victory had been achieved by promises of work and a reduction in the cost of living, both of which were impossible to deliver. The comment was then added that Greene and his party, having lost its overall majority in the House of Commons, should be grateful that they were released from the task of carrying out their ‘foolish and delusive pledges.’⁹⁸ The only reference to Fairbairn’s personal reaction appeared in an untitled column of observations: ‘Mr. Fairbairn was also noticed, and he was wearing his usual keen expression, and was so cheerful that one did not know quite what to think’.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ *Berrows Worcester Journal*, December 8th 1923. B.A.W.

⁹⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 7th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p90. W.R.O.

⁹⁹ *ibid* p91.

Independent Liberal

1924-1941

The general election result of 1923 raised more dilemmas for the parties than it had solved. The most significant outcome was that the Conservatives under Baldwin had lost their overall majority in the House of Commons. Having lost 108 seats and gained only 20, mainly from the Liberals and including Fairbairn's seat, the party now had 258 MPs representing 38% of the total vote. Labour became the second party with 191 seats and 30.7% of the vote while the Liberals were in third place with 158 seats and 29.7% of the vote. The verdict of the editor of *Berrows Worcester Journal* was that the electorate had 'withheld a mandate for Protection and have given a mandate for nothing else' and that the voters could also 'be deemed' to have rejected both the Socialist and Liberal programmes.¹ On the other hand, all three parties could claim considerable support for their policies, the situation in which they found themselves was both fluid and uncertain. Baldwin continued as Prime Minister for a further six weeks during which the parties considered their positions and how they might turn the situation to their own advantage. After much debate and manoeuvring within and between the parties, in January 1924 the Liberals supported a Labour amendment to the King's speech to defeat the government. Baldwin was forced to resign, resulting in the formation of the first, minority, Labour Government under Ramsay MacDonald.

In Worcester, Fairbairn refused to be humiliated by the loss of his Parliamentary seat. During the campaign he had said, 'If I am defeated I shall not run away the next

¹*Berrows Worcester Journal*, December 15th 1923. B.A.W.

morning. You won't get rid of me by voting me down'² and this defiant tone continued. On the day after the declaration, he made it clear that he had no intention of retiring from public life, telling supporters, 'I want you to understand that this is not the first time I have been defeated. I know how to take a licking'.³ However, it seems that rumours about his health and his future began to circulate. *Berrows Journal* reported on December 8th that he was obviously tired although only five days later, his 'active participation' at a Council meeting was used as evidence that 'the rumour that he is seriously ill has no foundation'. He was said to be suffering only from a cold and 'throat weakness, common to most of those who took a prominent part in the outdoor election campaign'.⁴ By the middle of January it appears that he was back to business as usual although speculation about his future evidently continued. In February the *Worcestershire Echo* reported that there might be 'disappointment in some quarters' that 'a very interesting rumour has no foundation in fact' and that 'Mr Fairbairn has not accepted "a splendid appointment" in another town.' Fairbairn himself denied all knowledge of the story and added, 'I have not the slightest intention of leaving the city'.⁵ The fact that he had already indicated to local Liberals that, if invited, he would be prepared to stand as a candidate again is further evidence of his intention to stay.

Fairbairn, like all those involved in party politics in 1924, would have been well aware that the minority Labour government was unlikely to survive for long and that another general election could be called at any time. Speaking to women Liberals in Worcester in January 1924 he declared that 'progressive forces had not been diminished'

² *Worcestershire Echo*, December 1st, 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol.1, p 71. W.R.O.

³ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 7th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p 91. W.R.O.

⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 12th 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol.1, p 96. W.R.O.

⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, February 13th 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol.1, p 113. W.R.O.

and that 'it needed only improved organisation and further education in Liberal principles to secure a renewal of the confidence expressed by the vote in 1922'.⁶ While Fairbairn was clearly referring to his own situation in Worcester, this diagnosis could be said to be appropriate for the Liberal party as a whole. Unfortunately the party proved incapable of following such useful advice. The reunion of the party to defend the principle of Free Trade during the 1923 election campaign proved to be largely cosmetic. The mutual distrust between Asquith, still the official leader of the party, and Lloyd George continued, as illustrated by Sir Edward Grigg's comment in March 1924: 'There is no sign at present of any real understanding between Asquith and L.G'.⁷ The two men's differing and fluctuating attitudes towards the Labour administration meant that the party lacked both positive leadership and a clear sense of direction in the Commons, and in the country. Further animosity and financial embarrassment was caused by Lloyd George's refusal 'to allow Mr. A's side of the organisation to get hold of any of the National Liberal funds'.⁸ This fund, which Lloyd George had accumulated during his term as Prime Minister, was estimated as a possible £3 million by Vivian Phillips who later became the Chief Whip for the party.⁹ Lack of consultation between Asquith and Lloyd George, and the party's failure to develop distinctively Liberal policies, led to criticism of the leadership such as that of C.P. Scott writing to Charles Hobhouse in November 1924: 'What we need of course above all is a sane but courageous social policy. There is not one of the party leaders who can be trusted to supply it. It will have to come from the

⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, January 19th 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p104. W.R.O.

⁷ Grigg to Bailey, March 20th 1924. Grigg papers quoted in WILSON Trevor, *The Downfall of Liberal England, 1914-1935*, p303. London 1968

⁸ Grigg to Bailey, a week later than above. Op.cit.

⁹ JONES J, Graham, 'Honiton, Dumfriesshire and the Lloyd George Fund'. *Journal of Liberal History*, 49, Winter 2005-6, p5.

body of the party – from people like yourself.’¹⁰ Unable to present themselves as a united party with coherent, progressive policies, and without the financial resources to improve their organisation and educate the voters, the Liberals were ill-prepared to fight another election.

Fairbairn, detached from the difficulties at Westminster and back on his home ground, continued to promote the cause of Liberalism, as he saw it. Although he thought that the ‘Labour attack at the election was in the worst possible taste’, he announced to the Worcester Liberal Association that ‘he preferred the present Labour government to the last Conservative one’.¹¹ Pointing out where Liberal and Labour policy coincided, he indicated that he did not mind who carried out Liberal principles. He took the view that just as Labour supported Free Trade, so he had always supported Trade Unions and had frequently voted with the Labour opposition at Westminster. In his view, Liberals could support any social measures that Labour might introduce and he congratulated Wheatley, with whom he had worked on the Housing Committee at Westminster, on becoming Minister of Health.

Apart from supporting a Lib-Lab candidate in a municipal by-election in January 1924, there is no evidence in Fairbairn’s scrapbooks of further activity among local Liberals for the next six months, despite the possibility of a general election at any time. This could be attributed to the fact that Fairbairn, to whom the local party looked for a lead, was fully occupied with his other work, or it could have been that he too was affected by general malaise in the party and the failure of its leaders to provide any guidance to constituency organisations. However in June, references appear in his

¹⁰ Scott to Hobhouse, November 19th 1924, Scott Papers quoted in COOK Chris, *The Age of Alignment; Electoral Politics in Britain, 1922-29* p228. London 1975

scrapbooks to the 'Great Liberal Campaign', which according to Cook¹², was initiated by Lloyd George to revive activity within the party. Local associations were encouraged to hold meetings 'to keep the public (and particularly young people) well informed as to the policy of the Liberal party'.¹³ Another way of reaching out to young people was the provision of scholarships to the Liberal Summer School. These schools, which became a regular feature in the Liberal calendar in the 1920s, provided participants with the opportunity to hear prominent speakers and take part in serious political discussion of current policy debates within the party. In July 1924 it was announced in the press that one of Fairbairn's sons, Eric, who 'acts as assistant secretary to the Worcester Liberal Association',¹⁴ had won a scholarship to the Liberal Summer School in Oxford, an experience which he was to repeat in 1928. It is also interesting to note also that, during the summer of 1924, Beauchamp was involved in a serious effort to raise funds, presumably for the coming general election campaign. Among his correspondents in September 1924 were several prominent Liberals including Sir Alfred Mond, Viscount St. Davids and Walter Runciman pledging substantial donations to the party. On paper headed the 'Great Liberal Campaign', with the slogan 'Peace, Security, Progress' underneath, Beauchamp is named as Treasurer, Sir Alfred Mond as Chairman, and the names of several MPs are included as members of the Executive Committee. An accompanying list records promises made by June 25th with notes added, presumably by Beauchamp, indicating whether the promises had been fulfilled by September 15th. Names marked with a 'X' had presumably failed to deliver, one person was listed as

¹¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, January 29th 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p105. W.R.O.

¹² COOK p232

¹³ *Worcestershire Echo*, June 25th 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol 1, p146. W.R.O.

¹⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, July 19th 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p155. W.R.O.

having refused to pay a promised £50 and Mond himself, who had promised £1000, was recorded as having only paid £500. According to the figures recorded, sums ranging from £100 to £1800 were donated reaching a total of £7800.¹⁵ This fund was, presumably, quite separate from Lloyd George's Fund which eventually contributed £50,000 to the election campaign. Both Mond and Runciman had indicated to Beauchamp their opposition to the Russian Treaty to which Macdonald and the Labour government was committed. It was over this issue that the Conservatives and Liberals combined to defeat the government in October 1924 and precipitated the third autumn general election in as many years.

Earl Beauchamp, now leader of the party in the House of Lords, once again returned to Worcester to support Fairbairn's campaign. Speaking at the Liberals' opening demonstration he commented that 'we are having too many General Elections', and warned that voters would lose interest 'if they were going to be appealed to year after year'. He commended the Liberals as a steadfast party and Fairbairn as a candidate, who preached 'the same old doctrine of Liberalism' as he had 25 years earlier. He was at pains to point out that the Liberals 'are still as we always were – the reforming party'¹⁶ while both the Conservatives and Labour had changed their policies. At the same meeting, Fairbairn reiterated his continued loyalty to Asquith and encouraged his audience to join in his mockery of Conservative calls for stability. It was only at the end of his speech that he addressed the issues about which he had always been most concerned. He demonstrated, yet again, his commitment to social reform, a consistent feature of Liberal

¹⁵ BP, L3ii. from H.F. Oldman, Secretary, Great Liberal Campaign. September 16th 1924. Madresfield Court.

¹⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 18th 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p172. W.R.O.

policy, and called for the extension of the National Insurance benefits, widows' pensions, employment and the provision for affordable housing for the poor.

A comparison of the election addresses of the three candidates in the Worcester, to some extent demonstrates the relative strengths and weaknesses of their parties.

Fairbairn's address, as in 1923, differed only in the detail from that produced in the two previous campaigns. It could, of course, be argued that this was itself an example of Liberal consistency but, to the voters looking for solutions to their problems, it could appear as a failure to develop new policies. References to the 'reckless' election of 1923 and the 'folly' of 'the Socialist Prime Minister's Russian guarantee' show that the document had been brought up to date, but it was largely a restatement, much of it in the same words, of well - established Liberal policies and principles. Free Trade, support for the League of Nations, peace and the reduction of armaments, social reform, reduced rates, lower prices and land reform all featured in general terms along with a call for 'a change to honesty in politics and common sense in administration'. Fairbairn's Conservative opponent, the sitting MP, Crawford Greene, had made some changes from his previous election address. Still committed to Protectionist measures, he called for a Royal Commission on food prices, the initiation of a contributory scheme for old age pensions and safeguards for key industries. His positive support for Baldwin and the Conservative party, 'to combat the evils, dangers and possibly, crimes of Socialism' is emphasised whereas, in Fairbairn's address the lack of any reference to the party leadership may be seen as significant. Percy Williams, the Labour candidate for the second time, also made a point of his support for his party's leader, the Prime Minister. His appeal to voters a year earlier had been to 'Give Labour a Chance' but, after ten

months in power, he could now claim that ‘Labour can govern’, focussing in particular on Wheatley’s Housing Act which was already regarded as the major legislative success of the Labour government.¹⁷

When the results were declared on October 29th, they were devastating both for the Liberal party and for Fairbairn. Asquith, the official leader of the Liberals, had lost his seat, the party had won just 40 seats and their share of the total vote had sunk to 17.8%. One of Beauchamp’s correspondents who had written on October 29th that ‘Liberal stock seems to have been rising the last few days’, wrote two days later: ‘What a disaster! My most pessimistic prediction was 77 and most optimistic 134. Everybody seems sorry about Asquith... The defeat of MacDonald would have made up for a lot’.¹⁸ The Conservatives had won 412 seats giving them an overwhelming majority over the Labour party which, although their total vote had risen to 5.4 million, was reduced to 151 seats in the House of Commons

Fairbairn could, and did, claim that Liberalism was not yet dead in Worcester as he had managed to retain his position as second in the poll. However, compared with the 1923 election when the total constituency vote was virtually the same, Fairbairn’s share of the vote had fallen to 28% and, with 6,139 votes he had lost 3600, of which 2,000 had gone to Labour. Greene had polled 11,956 representing 56% of the votes, an increase of 6%, and Williams’ share had risen from 3% to 15% with 3,272 votes. Unusually, Fairbairn commented in public on the result at a meeting only three days after polling day. Speaking with heavy irony, he said that ‘we have at last got a strong and stable government’, which should be able to carry out its election promises and he warned that

¹⁷*Election Addresses*, 1924 from Special Collections Department in the Arts and Social Science Library, University of Bristol. Ref DM 668.

‘I am going to keep on reminding the people of Worcester about those promises.’¹⁹ He attributed the Conservative victory to fear of ‘the Socialist and Bolshevik bogeys’ and advocated Liberalism, which ‘contained the brains of the House of Commons’ as an alternative to Socialism. Ever optimistic, he suggested the formation of a Young Liberals’ League, which the *Echo* reported was enthusiastically received and a ‘nucleus of the League was soon formed’.²⁰

The return of a Conservative government with an overwhelming majority in 1924, though disastrous for the Liberal party, meant that it could reasonably be assumed that the country was unlikely to be disrupted by yet another general election, at least for the foreseeable future. Fairbairn, who had resumed his local activities after his defeat in 1923, could now, in these more settled circumstances, devote all his time and energy to local matters. His position as a public figure in Worcester largely stemmed from his membership of the City Council and although his term as an MP had been short-lived, the experience of politics at Westminster must inevitably have broadened his perspective and increased his standing on the local scene. Although he stood as the Liberal candidate in three later parliamentary contests, his main concern, and the focus of his attention for the rest of his career, lay in the work he did in Worcester. His activities during the period between 1924 and 1929 demonstrate how he aimed to give practical effect to his Liberal principles in the local context at a time when the party, nationally, was in the doldrums. Despite the fact that his was permanently a minority voice, there were few aspects of the work of the council about which he did not have an opinion. His influence as a member of numerous Council committees, chairman of the National Insurance Committee,

¹⁸ BP, L3ii. Letter from Edgar Hirst, October 31st 1924 (presumed). Madresfield Court.

¹⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 31st 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p177. W.R.O.

member of the Severn Commission and potential Parliamentary candidate, was considerable. His nomination as an Alderman in 1927 was an indication that his contribution was recognised and that he had gained the respect of his fellow councillors.

The responsibilities of local authorities had increased substantially since Fairbairn had first been elected to the council and he had been closely involved in the implementation of government policies on behalf of the council. He continued to demonstrate his concern for the well-being of the poorer members of the community, taking particular interest in the provision of housing, employment and education. To Fairbairn, local government was the means by which local opinion could be heard and decisions made by those familiar with local circumstances. Having been an enthusiastic supporter of the Asquith government's reforms he recognised and accepted the need for measures taken by central government, particularly during the war, but he was quick to uphold the powers of the local authority whenever he felt it was under threat. When, in 1928, a proposal from the Home Office could have resulted in Worcester losing its independent police force, Fairbairn successfully urged his fellow councillors to unite to express their disapproval saying it was 'of the utmost importance that the local government of the country should be maintained'.²¹ On another occasion, in connection with the work of the National Insurance committee he was quoted as saying that, 'there seemed to be a desire to destroy interest in local government', which 'would be a great disaster'.²²

As a member of the City council of 48, 37 of whom were Conservatives, and the rest a collection of Liberal, Labour and Independent members, Fairbairn often found

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, January 4th 1928. F.S. Box 11, Vol.1, p61. W.R.O.

himself speaking as a lone voice. He was frequently frustrated at what he considered to be the inertia of ‘a do nothing Council’²³ and by a lack of initiative on the part of those he described as ‘not bad fellows but very bad councillors’.²⁴ He would show his impatience by resorting either to outspoken criticism or to positive proposals intended to spur them into action. Voter apathy worried him but he dismissed the idea of compulsory voting as an infringement of liberty and difficult to administer. Speaking on behalf of a Liberal candidate in a municipal by-election in 1926, he said he ‘wondered whether there was a real interest in municipal elections or whether he was justified in his theory that electors did need something to arouse them to take an interest in public affairs’.²⁵ It had obviously been suggested that this particular campaign was a waste of time and money but Fairbairn made it clear that, ‘if they wanted good government they should have a strong and efficient opposition’.²⁶

Fairbairn’s concern for efficiency in the local administration and his practical approach, as well as his willingness to consider innovation, is illustrated by a ‘startling suggestion’ that he first put to the Worcester Ratepayers Association.²⁷ He suggested that the Town Clerk should become the ‘Town Manager’ whose primary task would be to ensure greater coordination between local government offices and thus save money. Fairbairn did not claim this as an original idea as a similar scheme had been adopted in Leeds, but he did not let the matter drop and returned to it a year later. Although no action was taken, at a time of financial difficulty in 1927, a positive step was taken

²² *Worcestershire Echo*, March 24th 1927. F.S. Box 10, Vol 2, p181. W.R.O.

²³ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 31st 1923. F.S. Box 10, Vol 1, p35. W.R.O.

²⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, December 2nd 1927. F.S. Box 11, Vol 1, p53. W.R.O.

²⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, March 13th 1926. F.S. Box 10, Vol.2, p86. W.R.O.

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, May 24th 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p139. W.R.O.

towards improved coordination when he persuaded the council to set up a committee to oversee departments' overall spending. Fairbairn had always taken the view that it was the duty of the council to promote the economic well-being of the city by encouraging the development of local amenities and providing employment. However, nothing appears to have come of his proposal, in December 1928, that the council should contribute to the drainage and development of further sports facilities at Pitchcroft and no more is known of another of Fairbairn's recommendations to set up an aerodrome in Worcester.

However, as a member of the Severn Commission, he was marginally more successful in persuading the Council to support efforts to develop the river as an alternative means of transport, at least in principle. Although the financial commitment was minimal, he was at least, able to hold up Worcester as an example to other local authorities who had proved reluctant to commit themselves.

During his term as MP Fairbairn had had much to say in the House of Commons on the issue of housing. He been able to draw attention to the deficiencies in existing housing legislation and, in particular, its failure to provide housing for rents which the poorer members of the community could afford. Addison's Act of 1919, the first attempt to address the problem, was superseded by Chamberlain's Act of 1923 which, Fairbairn argued, had resulted in the sale of houses by private builders rather than the provision of houses for rent. In Worcester there had been virtually no progress in this area and, in 1924, a report by the chairman of the Housing Committee was able to demonstrate how serious the situation had become in Worcester. Only 191 houses had been built, presumably since 1919, and although there were plans for more, 'nothing had been done

for those of their fellow citizens who could not afford to pay rents²⁸ of over 7/6d per week. Under the 1924 Housing Act, passed during the term of the minority Labour government, the Exchequer undertook to grant a subsidy of £9 for each house built for rent, for 40 years. Rents would be controlled and subsidised from the rates. Despite the argument that the later Act ‘provided greater subsidy than any other Act and Worcester would not be just to her own citizens not to take full advantage while it was available’²⁹, the proposal to proceed under the terms of 1924 Act was rejected by the council. Debate centred on the implications of the Act and opponents, claiming to be non-political, asserted that the Act would lead to further government interference, put ‘a stranglehold on themselves’ and, if adopted by the whole country would, mean the end of private enterprise.³⁰ One speaker went so far as to say that ‘he wasn’t going to vote for binding themselves to official control in the abominable way suggested by the 1924 Act.’³¹

No doubt Fairbairn had some sympathy with those who feared further government interference but, at the same time, his priority was clearly to ensure that some positive practical action should follow the debate. He was able to establish that the simple substitution of ‘the 1923 Act’ for ‘the 1924 Act’ in the original motion was acceptable to its opponents and then proposed a compromise. He ‘moved that the Council approve of the principle of the 1923 Act and make a contribution (not exceeding a penny rate) to enable houses to be let at lower rents’.³² This amendment was passed, with only 2 votes against. In proposing the amendment, he reminded members that building under the terms of the 1923 Act would double the council’s costs, which would indicate that

²⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 18th 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p180. W.R.O.

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

Fairbairn himself preferred the original proposal. However, at least, the council had agreed, in principle, to a contribution from the rates towards the provision of houses with lower rents. This small success was followed up with a letter to the press stressing the urgency of the problem and repeating that local action had been far too slow and timid.³³ Within 3 months the council, realising that the 1924 Act would ease the burden on ratepayers, agreed to build a proportion of its houses in accordance with its terms.

Between 1920 and 1930 it was estimated that the population of Worcester increased from 49,000 to 52,000.³⁴ The provision of adequate housing remained a pressing problem and statistics reveal that progress continued to be slow and demand continued to outstrip supply. In March 1925 the estimate of new houses required was 1085 and, in the previous year, the total number built by a combination of the council, private enterprise with a subsidy and private enterprise without a subsidy, was 103. By September 1929, 907 houses had been built, still falling short of the ten-year old target of 1045. Over the period, the number on the waiting list for new houses seems never to have fallen below 600. These numbers do not take account of those living in overcrowded or slum accommodation who would ultimately need rehousing or, those who had not applied to the council on the assumption that they had little chance of success. In 1930 the chairman of the Housing Committee, speaking to a Conservative audience, said his position was ‘onerous and unpleasant’³⁵ and he admitted that the city had a history of a shortage of housing. He blamed Lloyd George’s Land Act, which, he claimed, had put an end to the building of cheap houses before the war. The war itself had inevitably

³² *ibid*

³³ *Worcestershire Echo*, January 3rd 1925. F.S. Box10, Vol. 1, p190. W.R.O.

³⁴ *Daily Times*, October 3rd 1930 F.S. Box 11, Vol. 2, p147. W.R.O.

³⁵ *Daily Times*, December 30th 1930. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 1. 2, p168.W.R.O.

interrupted all speculative building and the city had never caught up. However, government subsidies under the 1924 Act had demonstrably lowered the cost of building to the council and he could report that the target of 1045 houses had now been met.³⁶ It was also noted that government loans to the city amounted to £645,000 and, £27,000 had been advanced to individuals as mortgages.

Fairbairn had frequently criticised the council's timidity and lack of drive, with some cause, but finance was undoubtedly a major factor in dealing with Worcester's housing problems in the 1920s. Much of the existing housing in the city was sub-standard and previous councils had done little to use the powers they had to encourage improvements. Although government finance was now available, it took time to materialise and councillors were understandably reluctant to take decisions which might lead to a rise in rates. There were also other calls on local funds. In 1926, at one council meeting, it was agreed to spend £58,000 on the purchase of the tram system and £33,000 on the electric mains, at the same time as the acceptance of tenders to the tune of £24,960 for house building.³⁷ The acquisition of land for building at a reasonable price was difficult as owners raised the price at the first sign of the council's interest. Fairbairn himself faced a dilemma in 1927 when the council proposed to buy land which, under an Act of 34 years earlier, had been designated as allotments, not to be taken for another purpose. As chairman of Worcester Allotment Holders Association, he was expected to oppose the proposal but, with his concerns for the health of those living in overcrowded conditions, he voted for the resolution.

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, April 17th, 1926. F.S. Box 10, Vol.2, p90. W.R.O.

It was the health of the poorer working class, and their inability to pay the rents charged, that motivated Fairbairn to campaign on their behalf. He argued, in ‘an impassioned plea for the poor’,³⁸ that housing was a health, not a financial issue as the provision of houses, even at low rents, would cut spending on health. He met strong resistance to any suggestion that some rents might be reduced at no loss to the council as those who considered that there was ‘too much misplaced and unnecessary public assistance’³⁹ were in the majority. He opposed the selling of unprofitable council houses to tenants ‘at the expense of poorer people who were waiting for homes’,⁴⁰ on the grounds that the council should not be aiming to make a profit. He was congratulated by a Labour councillor on his ‘first step to a thorough conversion to Socialist ideals’⁴¹ when he proposed that houses with three bedrooms should be let on the same basis as those with two, at 1/9d per room. On another occasion he proposed building some houses for people selected on medical grounds at a rent of 7/- per week. The Housing Committee remained unconvinced of the need for cheaper houses. The connection that Fairbairn drew between improved housing and health is best shown with a proposal he made in 1930. He formally moved, in a full council meeting, that the duties of the Housing Committee should be transferred to a sub-committee of the Health Committee. As the Ministry of Health was ultimately responsible for housing this was not an outrageous idea and Fairbairn presumably hoped that the priorities of a health committee would be different. Needless to say this was defeated and, instead, seen as a slur on the reputation of the Housing Committee.

³⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, October 3rd 1928. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 1, p145. W.R.O.

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, June 15th 1927. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 1, p3. W.R.O.

⁴¹ *Worcestershire Echo*, September 2nd 1929. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 2, p49. W.R.O.

Fairbairn's experience as chairman of the local National Insurance Committee since its formation, must have given him an insight into the difficulties of the poor well beyond that of his colleagues on the council. His knowledge of the intricacies of the system must have been invaluable, not only to the local committee but also, to the Executive of the National Association of Insurance Committees to which he was appointed in 1925. This appointment indicates recognition beyond the local scene. It is worth remembering, at this point, that Fairbairn was not paid for the work he did as chairman of the Insurance Committee as he made absolutely clear, when questioned about costs. He replied that room hire for meetings was 10/6d, a small staff was paid but all committee work was strictly voluntary and, 'I have been Chairman for 12 years and I have received nothing yet'.⁴²

The work of the National Insurance Committee included the payment of statutory benefits, the appointment and oversight of the doctors' panel, the maintenance of standards in the provision of drugs and the control of the finances. When the scheme was set up, local committees had been left to devise their own working practices, within the terms of the Act, and had been allowed some discretion in the provision of additional services. By the 1920s, several sub-committees had been set up, reporting on their different areas of responsibility to the monthly meeting of the full committee. The proceedings of these meetings were regularly reported in the press with details of numbers insured and moneys spent. A suggestion, made in 1925, that bi-monthly meetings would be sufficient, was dismissed by Fairbairn as 'not in the public interest'. Much of the work of the committee was routine but, on several occasions in the 20s, Fairbairn and the committee found themselves at odds with the newly created Ministry of

⁴² *Worcestershire Echo*, September 24th 1925. F.S. Box 10, Vol.2, p40. W.R.O.

Health. Supervision of local Insurance Committees was only one of the responsibilities of the Ministry, set up in 1919, with the aim of achieving greater of uniformity of provision. The increased use of the Ministry's powers to inspect, adjudicate and regulate, almost inevitably led to tension. The recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Health Service, which sat between 1924 and 1926, added to fears for the continued existence of the local committees in their current form.

One of the Ministry's concerns was to monitor the spending of local committees and in March 1924 it was announced that Worcester's 'excessive prescribing' was to be investigated. Worcester was spending 5d per person in comparison with other Midlands' committees where the average was 3d. In support of the doctors, Fairbairn's response was say that the medical men were trying to get people back to work.⁴³ The Ministry appears to have taken no further action at that time but, in 1927, the situation was more serious. There was a national crisis over the rising cost of the Drug Fund and Worcester's costs had remained higher than elsewhere. Asked for the views on the proposal to hand over the Drug Fund to the pharmacists, Fairbairn's committee, while admitting their costs had risen, rejected the idea stating that scrutiny of prescriptions should stay with the appropriate sub-committee. They did, however, undertake to issue a circular to their panel doctors with suggested economies. A query from the Ministry, about the use of distilled water in prescriptions for panel patients on the grounds of cost, was answered by the committee with a resolution which made it clear that there should be no discrimination between panel and private patients.⁴⁴ In 1926, the provision of drugs and appliances in Worcester was judged by the Ministry to be 90% 'fairly accurately

⁴³ *Worcestershire Echo*, May 1st 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol.1, p134. W.R.O.

⁴⁴ *Daily Times*, March 26th 1925. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 2, p7. W.R.O.

dispensed'. Some 'undue excess of several of the ingredients' was noted and attributed to carelessness, but was not considered harmful. Cost was yet again recorded but not criticised.⁴⁵ In the previous year, Fairbairn had expressed his irritation at having to send samples of prescriptions away for testing instead of to the County Analyst with the comment, that this was another example of London bureaucracy taking powers from the local people.⁴⁶

Doctors who treated patients under the National Insurance scheme were appointed by, and answerable to, the local committee but in the case of a dispute, doctors were entitled to appeal to the Ministry for adjudication. During the period considered two such disputes occurred which demonstrate how relations between the committee and the Ministry could become strained. The first case arose when two doctors were judged, by the Committee to have ignored agreed procedures when they failed to inform their panel patients of a change of address. The committee proposed to send out notices and charge the doctors, who then applied for permission to appeal to the Ministry. Fairbairn, who clearly saw this issue as a challenge to the authority of the committee, wrote to the press: 'I venture to hope that in view of the long established reputation of this area for efficient administration, the Ministry will decline to grant an appeal.'⁴⁷ He also made a formal protest against outside interference. The doctors' appeal was allowed and an enquiry was carried out by a local official of the Ministry. Whether this official was particularly tactless, or whether Fairbairn was simply not willing to co-operate, is impossible to determine, but he strongly condemned the methods used as 'unwise and unfair.' He went on to say that if the gentleman came again he would not appear before him and he had

⁴⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, June 24th 1926. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 2, p105. W.R.O.

⁴⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, May 28th 1925. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 2, p23. W.R.O.

never been treated as rudely by a public official.⁴⁸ From tone of this outburst, it may be assumed the Ministry found in the doctors' favour.

Four years later it was the finances of the Insurance Committee which were affected by a ministerial verdict. An allegation of excess prescribing had been made against one particular Worcester doctor who, it was thought, was likely to appeal to the Ministry. Fairbairn was determined that the matter should be dealt with by the local committee which, he said, 'would see that prescriptions for panel patients were not cut down simply because they cost more money than somebody in Whitehall thought they should. I would like the Worcester Committee to be one of the first to take the issue up. Members of Insurance Committees may as well stay at home if they simply have to register the decisions of someone else.'⁴⁹ The committee duly met and the doctor, who was fined £5, immediately appealed to the Ministry. The decision of the committee caused a stir locally. The Worcester Trades and Labour Council condemned the fine as not in the interests of the patients and, a petition was drawn up demanding that the decision be reversed as the action of the Committee had 'caused the panel patients grave alarm'.⁵⁰ Fairbairn, who said of the doctor involved that he 'desired not to be under the government of the committee, nor any government but his own', reiterated the efficiency of the Worcester Committee and refused to be moved. The Ministry's final decision, to withhold £30 from the money available to the Insurance Committee, was announced when Fairbairn was away in London. Although the vice-chairman may not have been as outspoken as Fairbairn, he accused the Ministry of ignoring the committee and treating it

⁴⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, June 26th 1924. F.S. Box 19, Vol.1, p146. W.R.O.

⁴⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, November 27th 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol.1, p185. W.R.O.

⁴⁹ *Worcestershire Echo*, March 31st 1928. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 1, p84. W.R.O.

⁵⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, July 25th 1928. F.S. Box 11, Vol.1, 133. W.R.O.

with contempt. It was quite clear, though, that the committee could do nothing about the Ministry decision. Supporters of the doctor wrote to the Minister and arranged a public meeting to organise a collection to raise the £30 but, at the following meeting of the committee, Fairbairn established that the matter should be dropped. At this meeting, on November 29th 1928, Fairbairn was, once again, re-elected as chairman and commented that he had considered resigning after such a 'trying year' but he was concerned about possible future changes affecting the committee.

Between 1924 and 1926 a Royal Commission on National Health Insurance sat to consider what measures might be taken to move towards a more uniform and universal system of benefits. Fairbairn strongly supported the general aim and 'looked forward to the day when, not only the insured person, but also his wife and family should be included in the benefits' and added, 'if services were coordinated, authorities must be coordinated'.⁵¹ However, the Commission did not meet his expectations and when the Majority and Minority Reports were published in 1926, he rejected the recommendations in both. Although, according to Fairbairn, local insurance committees had not been consulted through their Association, the BMA had let its views be known through the publication of a memo. The doctors suggested the abolition of all local National Insurance committees and proposed that National Insurance and Public Health should become the responsibility of a sub-committee of the local authority, elected as other committees were. Implicit in this proposal was the exclusion of the Approved Societies from the system. The final recommendations in the Minority Report of the Royal Commission were substantially the same as the doctors had advocated. The Majority Report also focussed on the Approved Societies but, perhaps recognising that they

constituted a powerful lobby, here the recommendation was that all their surplus funds should be amalgamated in order to achieve a fairer distribution of funds overall. Fairbairn found himself opposing the recommendations on two counts: as a local councillor and as an active member of the Friendly Society movement. As a councillor, he took the view that the local authority already had enough to do and that insurance should remain separate from the rates. As a member of a Friendly Society, he felt strongly that the money paid to the societies should continue to be managed by their representatives and he saw benefits as the right of the insured, secured by their contributions. The fact that he had been responsible, as chairman, for the successful establishment, guidance and defence of the local Insurance Committee for 15 years, must also have influenced his attitude to any possible change. In the event, the Minister, Neville Chamberlain, recognised the strength of opposition to any change in the composition of the committees, so the recommendations were not adopted. As Fairbairn himself said cynically, ‘economy is at the back of it all’.⁵²

In 1927, on two occasions, Fairbairn’s position as a public figure brought him unwelcome publicity. On March 14th, the editor of the *Worcestershire Echo* wrote, ‘Among the risks that are run by men who give themselves to the public service is that of becoming the target for virulent and senseless attack’. It was revealed that Fairbairn had been subjected to a barrage of abusive letters for over two years about a decision he had made, when acting as arbitrator, over an insurance appeal. He was reluctant to take action against the writer but, he acknowledged the distress caused to his wife and daughters and, on the advice of the Town Clerk, he instigated a charge of libel in the City Magistrates

⁵¹*Worcestershire Echo*, September 25th 1924. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 1, p165. W.R.O.

⁵²*Worcestershire Echo*, January 28th 1926. F.S. Box 10, Vol.2, p75. W.R.O.

Court. The defendant, most of whose evidence was incoherent and ‘tried the patience of the court’, used his appearance to air his grievances while freely admitting he had sent more than 1500 offensive letters to Fairbairn and other prominent figures. Eventually, he was persuaded, by the court, to be bound over to be of good behaviour. The prosecution waived their costs and Fairbairn was congratulated by the *Echo* for adopting such a lenient course and for the ‘generous spirit in which he tempered the magistrates’ decision against the offender.’⁵³ No more was heard of the matter.

A summary of Fairbairn’s career, including a list of the public positions he held at that time, appeared in the *Worcestershire Echo* in September 1927 with the comment that the list ‘almost makes one giddy’.⁵⁴ It appears that Fairbairn rarely refused a position when it was offered but, he hit the headlines when he rejected the invitation from the Council to become an Alderman in the city. The *Worcestershire Echo* had, several times in the past, campaigned for Fairbairn to be made an Alderman but the Conservative majority had always ignored or voted against the idea. As an alderman, he would no longer have to seek re-election and would be accepted as a senior and permanent member of the council. The fact that, this time, the Conservative majority had voted to make the offer indicates that Fairbairn’s public work had at last been recognised. His refusal of the honour was unexpected and unprecedented. His reasons for his decision were both personal and political. While he acknowledged the compliment he had been paid, his initial reaction, that the offer was ‘so belated that the merit of it ... was not so great as it otherwise might have been’, may have seemed ungracious but was, perhaps, justified. Referring to his position as a councillor, he said that, ‘having been trained in democratic

⁵³*Worcestershire Echo*, March 14th 1927. F.S. Box 10, Vol.2, p178. W.R.O.

principles', he valued the fact that he was a member of the council 'by the voice of the electors'.⁵⁵ In a significant alteration to a press report in his scrapbook where he was described as a 'representative of the city', he had substituted, 'representative of the community'.⁵⁶ Later, speaking as the prospective Liberal candidate, he observed that 'it had been said, and rightly so, that aldermen seemed to lose their sense of responsibility to the public'.⁵⁷

Fairbairn, however, did not refuse to become an officer of the Society of Certificated and Associated Liberal Agents. Credited with securing representation for party agents on the Executive Committee of the National Liberal Federation, he was unanimously elected a Fellow of the Society in March 1927 'for long and meritorious service'.⁵⁸ Within a very short time he was elected Chairman of the Society which then gave him a seat on the Board of the Management of the Gladstone Benevolent Fund for Liberal Agents, ex-officio membership of the Executive of the National Liberal Federation and of the Administrative Committee of the party. He held the position for two years. Although the fact that the number of Liberal agents had decreased considerably after the 1924 election might appear to detract from Fairbairn's election to national office, his arrival did coincide with Lloyd George's accession as leader, and a series of by-election victories for the party. With improved organisation and the injection of Lloyd George's money, morale improved and the party seemed to revive.

⁵⁴Quotation from the *Liberal Agent*, July edition (1927 assumed) in *Worcestershire Echo*, September 24th 1927. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 1, p 32. W.R.O.

⁵⁵*Daily Times*, October 4th 1927. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 1, p35. W.R.O.

⁵⁶*Worcestershire Echo*, October 4th 1927. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 1, p35. W.R.O.

⁵⁷*Worcestershire Echo*, October 11th 1927. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 1, p41. W.R.O.

⁵⁸*Worcestershire Echo*, March 18th 1927. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 2, p179. W.R.O.

In Worcester too, there were signs of renewed activity in the Liberal party in the summer of 1926. It is interesting to note that it was at social events organised by local Liberals, rather than a political meeting, that Fairbairn took the opportunity to speak on party policy. To Gloucester Liberals on an outing to Madresfield Court Gardens, he encouraged members to stick to their beliefs and ‘do their part in helping to keep the Liberal flag flying’.⁵⁹ At a garden fete in Kidderminster in September 1927, his theme was that if people were instructed about Liberal policy, they would give the party their support. The *Worcestershire Echo* played its part in raising the profile of the party locally by reproducing articles from other publications. From *Outlook* a profile of Earl Beauchamp by E.C. Roberto drew attention to Beauchamp’s role in reuniting the party and his position as the leader of the ‘real opposition’ in the House of Lords.⁶⁰ This was followed by a tribute to Fairbairn, “Our New Chairman”, from the Liberal Agents’ publication giving a detailed account of Fairbairn’s career. The article finished with a reference to the ‘splendid backing ‘ Fairbairn received from the *Worcestershire Echo* which ‘secures for him a public platform so woefully lacking in many other places’!⁶¹

Fairbairn launched his campaign for the next general election early in 1928, reminding his audience of the earlier “great Liberal campaign” of 1903 in the city. This time he was supported at the meeting by Lord Elmley, Beauchamp’s son and heir, himself a prospective Liberal candidate in East Norfolk. At his first appearance in Worcester as a political speaker, Elmley’s role seems to have been merely to introduce Fairbairn. Fairbairn chose to deliver a major political speech reminding his listeners that Liberalism was based on sound principles and criticising the Conservative government

⁵⁹*Gloucester Citizen*, July 5th 1926. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 2, p106. W.R.O.

⁶⁰*Worcestershire Echo*, March 19th 1927. F.S. Box 10, Vol. 2, p179. W.R.O.

for broken promises and the Labour party's proposed surtax. Calling for a reduction in rates, about which he said 'there was no more rotten system of finance than the present rating system', his main theme was the taxation of landowners whose land had increased in value. 'Liberal policy would enable them to say to owners of land that had improved through the expenditure of an authority - the increased value belonged to the community'.⁶² This was an issue about which he felt particularly strongly and he argued that this was a matter of national interest affecting all towns and cities. In July 1927 he had attempted to persuade the council to support a call for increased powers to 'raise revenue for local developments from land values created by the growth, industry and public expenditure of the community'.⁶³ Unfortunately, when it was learnt that his resolution was similar to a pamphlet said to have emanated from the Liberal party, the motion was defeated by the Conservative majority. Although this was clearly a matter for Parliament, Fairbairn raised the issue again in November 1928 when he produced more facts and figures and this time he was defeated by only 4 votes.

Land policy was the subject of one of a series of policy documents published by the Liberals between 1925 and 1929. Identified by the colour of their covers, these publications represented an attempt to redefine Liberal policies in a changing context, by a group of experts many of whom had been involved in the party's annual Summer Schools. The "Yellow Book", in 1928, provided a detailed analysis of Britain's industrial problems, with some proposals to remedy them, but was criticised as an economic treatise rather than a practical policy. It was the "Orange Book", with its title "We can Conquer Unemployment" which Lloyd George was able to use as the centrepiece of the

⁶¹*Worcestershire Echo*, September 24th 1927. Box 11, Vol. 1, p32. W.R.O.

⁶²*Worcestershire Echo*, January 14th 1928. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 1, p66. W.R.O.

Liberal campaign in 1929. In a special supplement for Liberal Monthly Newspapers, called "*Speeches of the Month*", included in Fairbairn's scrapbook, Lloyd George's speech launching the Liberal campaign on March 1st 1929 is reproduced in full. Of greater significance for the present study is the fact that one of Fairbairn's speeches is reported immediately after that of Lloyd George. There is no indication of the date of the speech and much of it was for local consumption but Fairbairn's recent retirement after two years as Chairman of the National Association of Liberal Agents may have influenced its placing. Surprisingly, in a speech addressed to the Worcester Women's Liberal Association, there was no special appeal to new women voters beyond an attack on local Conservatives' protest against their government's proposal to extend the vote to women over 21. Referring to the Liberal proposals to solve unemployment the comment, that the policy 'was not Mr. Lloyd George's scheme' but one 'thrashed out in detail' with the help of a large number of eminent Liberals, may indicate that Fairbairn still harboured some doubts about Lloyd George as leader. He did, however, admit that Lloyd George had 'electrified the nation, wakened up everybody, and made the country realise that there was a real live party in its midst'. Optimistic of the chances of the Liberals who had 'among its leaders some of the finest brains in the country', he concluded that there was every probability of the Liberals forming a government.⁶⁴

Reference to the Liberals' great programme and the party's able leaders, as well as to Fairbairn's local credentials and his reputation as a fighter, was made again by members of the Liberal Association Executive Committee when his adoption as the party's Parliamentary candidate was proposed in May 1929. Once again, Fairbairn had

⁶³*Worcestershire Echo*, July 6th 1927. F.S. Box 11, Vol.1, p15. W.R.O.

⁶⁴*Speeches of the Month*, April 1929. F.S. Enclosure in Box 11, Vol. 2. W.R.O.

the support of Beauchamp who said, at the opening of the campaign, he ‘did not think he would be fulfilling his duty if he allowed a General Election to pass by in Worcester without offering his services to Mr Fairbairn’.⁶⁵ Unusually Beauchamp confined himself to generalisations about policy and it was left to Fairbairn to make a major, and wide-ranging policy speech. On this occasion, in contrast to his usual informal style, he seems to have set out to cover all the main policy points included in his printed election address. Perhaps he felt that people should be fully informed about the distinctive policies which the Liberals had to offer at this election. Nevertheless, the speech was still generously scattered with swipes at both the government and the local Conservatives. Having appealed to ‘all classes’ and emphasised the party’s ‘practical plans for restoring national prosperity’, his written address opened, as did his speech, with a call for peace, support for the League of Nations and a reduction in the purchase of armaments.⁶⁶ This was followed by an attack on the government’s economic measures, particularly the policy of ‘safeguarding’ certain industries, and a firm commitment to a return to unqualified Free Trade. In his speech he was able to elaborate on the need to develop the roads, which ‘happened to be national property, while the railways were private’ and he put in a special plea for the improvements to the river Severn, which, he added, also belonged to the public. As Chairman of the Severn Commission, he reported that a direct appeal for funds for a new dredger to the Prime Minister, a fellow member of the Commission, had resulted only in ‘a lovely letter, full of consideration, full of sympathy’ from Mr. Baldwin, but no promises.⁶⁷ In his written address he stressed the need for ‘a proper

⁶⁵*Worcestershire Echo*, May 10th 1929. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 2. p13 W.R.O.

⁶⁶FAIRBAIRN, R.R. *Election Address*, May 1929. Special Collections Department, Arts and Social Science Library, University of Bristol.

⁶⁷*Worcestershire Echo*, F.S. May 10th 1929. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 2, p15. W.R.O.

system of co-ordination of traffic', which could be developed 'to the great advantage of the West Midlands'. Rating reform, the taxation of increased land values, more affordable housing and practical plans to deal with unemployment were all causes for which Fairbairn had fought for most of his political career. He concluded his speech by saying, 'I am in full favour of the policy of the Liberals. I have no reservations. I am an out-and-out and thorough Liberal' His formal written address ended with an endorsement of Liberal policy with the words, 'the essence of the Liberal spirit is that it sets the well-being of the community as a whole above the interests of particular section or classes.'

In later campaign meetings Fairbairn returned to his characteristically more combative style, dismissing criticisms that had labelled the Liberal programme for unemployment as a 'pick and shovel' policy and claiming that experts such as Maynard Keynes had proved the policy to be practicable and financially sound. According to the *Worcestershire Echo* Fairbairn, in contrast to his opponents' 'meagre following', was accompanied by a happy crowd of enthusiastic supporters on Nomination Day. The paper obviously considered it important to demonstrate Fairbairn's appeal to all classes by recording that all the voting members of his family signed his nomination form, along with magistrates, trade unionists, Severn fisherman, china workers and even some Conservatives. Crawford Greene, who was standing for the Conservatives for the third time, had only 49 signatures on his nomination form while Labour's new young candidate, Kenneth Lindsay had 15.⁶⁸ Messages of encouragement for Fairbairn from leading Liberals including Lloyd George, Herbert Samuel, John Simon and Earl Beauchamp, who drew attention to the revival and unity of the party.

⁶⁸*Worcestershire Echo*, May 21st 1929. F.S. Box 11, Vol.2, p21. W.R.O.

Voting took place on May 30th and, despite the increase in the electorate as a result of the 1928 Reform Act and the fact that there were 500 constituencies in which there was to be a three way contest, the *Annual Register* reported that, nationally, there was a ‘complete absence of excitement’.⁶⁹ This also appears to have been the situation in Worcester where the election was described as very quiet. The result, announced at 2.10am to a small group of bystanders, reflected the national picture for the Liberals. For the first, and only time, Fairbairn came third in the poll. With 6,588 votes his proportion of the total vote had dropped to 23.5% almost the same as the Liberal vote nationally. Greene had regained his seat, but lost his overall majority with 13,182 votes representing 47.2% of the total votes cast compared with 56% in the last election. It was Kenneth Lindsay, the Labour candidate, who ‘came to give Worcester a shake up’ whose achievement was most noteworthy. He had succeeded in increasing the Labour vote by 14% to 29.3%, ‘in a city which is soaked in Conservatism’,⁷⁰ having taken votes from both his opponents, just as his party had done in the country as a whole. Having defeated the Conservatives who were reduced to 260 MPs, Labour, as the largest party in the House of Commons with 287 MPs, was able to form its second minority government. The Liberals, despite having increased their percentage of votes, remained in the position of the third party with 59 seats. In Worcester, Fairbairn was said to be too tired to comment on the result but the *Echo* commented that he had been attacked by both the other parties and had been liable ‘to abuse and misrepresentation for adopting a course that was approved by the great majority of his fellow citizens’.⁷¹ Once again, having put considerable effort into a general election campaign, Fairbairn resumed his local

⁶⁹*Annual Register 1929*, p45 quoted in POWELL, David, *British Politics, 1910-35*, p 152. London 2004

⁷⁰*Worcestershire Echo*, May 31st 1929. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 2, p22. W.R.O.

responsibilities without dwelling on his defeat, at least in public. In September 1929, he was presented with a cheque to which, it was reported, all classes had subscribed, in tribute to his 'sterling qualities' especially as a Liberal candidate.⁷² The sum he received is not recorded.

A short article in the *Birmingham Evening Despatch* published on May 30th 1930 posed the question, 'Does the fact that a man holds a number of offices at once militate against his work in any one of them?' The question was followed by a list of positions then held by Fairbairn and the comment that, at the age of 63, 'he has ever been "full of pep"' and 'for public work he has a consuming zeal'. In fact, soon after his general election defeat in 1929 Fairbairn did relinquish two positions. He resigned the chairmanship of the City Pensions Committee after 12 years and, after April 1st 1930, with the abolition of the old Poor Law authorities, the position as a Poor Law Guardian, which he had held since 1926, ceased to exist. However he continued to serve as a City magistrate, Chairman of the Severn Commission, a member of numerous Council committees and schools' governing bodies but his most visible role remained that of chairman of the National Insurance Committee. Fairbairn himself claimed later that the Worcester committee was the 'most efficiently managed in the country', and that 'the public have benefited by the way in which we have managed our administration'.⁷³ He demonstrated the importance that he attached to this work when he said, in 1933, that he 'felt a sense of satisfaction that he had been spared 21 years to preside over this important body'.⁷⁴ Described as 'one of the most capable Chairmen of Insurance Committees' and

⁷¹ibid

⁷²*Worcestershire Echo*, September 14th 1929. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 2, p41. W.R.O.

⁷³*Daily Times*, December 1st 1932 (presumed). F.S. Box 12, Vol. 2, p13. W.R.O.

⁷⁴*Worcestershire Advertiser*, July 29th 1933, F.S. Box 12, Vol. 2, p30. W.R.O.

‘a recognised authority on the working of National Insurance’⁷⁵ he was by no means complacent. Speaking on the 21st anniversary of the formation of the committee, he acknowledged the improvements in health services since 1912, but he took the opportunity to call for the further extension of benefits and services. He called on employers and industrialists to take a more active part in the work, as well as in local government, so that all sections of the community were involved. In his conclusion he expressed his long-held belief that ‘any expenditure in preventing illness is an investment’.⁷⁶ Although the constitution of the Insurance Committee was changed in 1936, Fairbairn continued as chairman up to, and including, his term as Mayor of Worcester in 1940-41. On his re-election to the position in 1940 he referred to his insurance work as his hobby!

By the time of Fairbairn’s next general election campaign in 1931, several events had occurred which affected the conduct of his campaign and its eventual result. At a local level, the closure of the *Worcestershire Echo* in January 1930, and the decision of Earl Beauchamp in 1931 to retire from public life and live abroad, robbed Fairbairn of the crucial and prestigious support which he had always acknowledged, and may well have come to take for granted. At Westminster, further fragmentation within the depleted Liberal party and the extraordinary sequence of events leading to the formation of a National government under Ramsay MacDonald in August 1931 had changed the political landscape beyond recognition.

The closure of the *Worcestershire Echo*, along with the *Worcester Herald* and the *Worcestershire Chronicle* at the end of 1929, meant that press coverage of any activities

⁷⁵*Daily Times*, October 19th 1933. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 2, p31. W.R.O.

⁷⁶*Worcestershire Advertiser*, October 21st 1933. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 2, p33. W.R.O.

of the local Liberal party was considerably reduced. The editor and manager of all three papers, Mr. W.G. R Stone, also happened to be the secretary of the Worcestershire Liberal Council and, throughout his career, Fairbairn could always be confident that his, and the Liberal party's, activities would be reported both extensively and sympathetically. The editor of the *Echo's* rival publication, the *Daily Times*, which had consistently supported Conservative interests, expressed regret at the 'passing of contemporaries',⁷⁷ but significantly failed to mention the *Echo*. Fairbairn would have been well aware that he and his party would receive far less attention in the local press in the future and the disappearance of the *Echo* may also be a reason for the marked decrease in number of cuttings in his scrapbooks after 1930. Such publicity as Fairbairn and the Liberals did receive came from a variety of sources, such as a photograph of a presentation at the Birmingham Liberal Club at which he was present representing the Midland Liberal Agents' Society.⁷⁸ A report from an unidentified paper of the annual meeting of the Worcestershire Liberal Council in July 1930 quoted a letter of apology for absence from Earl Beauchamp, reminding members to continue the fight for Free Trade, the threat to which had 'never been so serious since 1900'.⁷⁹ With the benefit of hindsight it is possible to attribute a valedictory tone to Beauchamp's letter of apology to the annual meeting in the following year when he wrote: 'Please tell our Worcestershire friends that I wish them well in their political activities. The times are anxious ones for Liberals'.⁸⁰ Although it was announced at this meeting that the Earl's health was causing concern, and that he had gone abroad for the cure, there was no indication that his

⁷⁷*Daily Times*, July 4th 1929 (*sic*) – presumed a misprint for 1930. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 2, p87. W.R.O.

⁷⁸*Birmingham Gazette*, October 10th 1929. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 2, p65. W.R.O.

⁷⁹ Unidentified newspaper cutting, July 26th 1930. F.S. Box 11, Vol. 2, p137. W.R.O.

⁸⁰ *Daily Times*, July 20th 1931. F.S. Box 11, Vol.2. p190. W.R.O.

absence would be permanent and he was re-elected President of the organisation, with Fairbairn as Treasurer. Beauchamp resigned from the leadership of the Liberals in the Lords in 1931 and, apart from a brief appearance in Worcestershire for the funeral of his second son, he lived abroad until his death in 1938. The fact that the Worcestershire Liberal Council continued to elect him as President each year, in his absence, may be an indication of his continued financial support.

Fairbairn's declaration, at the beginning of the 1931 election campaign, that he was standing as an Independent Liberal and Free Trader was obviously intended to make his position quite clear to the electors at a time when the political situation was particularly confusing. After the election of 1929, as the third party at Westminster the Liberals were in a particularly difficult position and Beauchamp's comment of 'anxious times for the Liberals' was no exaggeration. Lloyd George's policy, as leader of the party, was to cooperate with the minority Labour administration, as long as Liberal interests were not compromised. However this tactic failed to hold the party together for long and in June 1931, Sir John Simon and two other Liberal MPs who were prepared to abandon the principle of Free Trade and willing to support the Conservative opposition, resigned the party Whip. From this point they were known as the Liberal Nationals or Simonites. The failure of the Labour government to agree on a policy to deal with the financial crisis of August 1931 led to a split in the party and the formation of a National government under Ramsay Macdonald. Having lost the support of the majority of his own party, MacDonalld appointed a Cabinet of individuals from all parties including two leading Liberals, Sir Herbert Samuel and Lord Reading, as Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary respectively, appointments which were approved by Lloyd George, who was ill

at the time. In his message to Worcestershire Liberals in July, Beauchamp had written, 'were I there I would always support Mr. Lloyd George and the majority of the party in the House of Commons'⁸¹ but by the time MacDonald called a general election in October the political situation had changed. Quoting the opinion of the party chairman, Ramsay Muir, that 'we cannot hope to do well in this election, the dice are loaded against us', Trevor Wilson's verdict at this point was that 'the Liberals had entirely lost their bearings.'⁸² The Parliamentary party was now effectively split into three groups: the Simonites, the official Liberal party under Samuel and a small group led by Lloyd George, opposed to the election and broadly in sympathy with the Labour party. The differing stance of each faction towards the National Government, and the other parties, as well as Lloyd George's refusal to provide financial support for the official Liberal campaign, did not augur well for the party's election prospects. In the event, the Liberals were able to field only 160 candidates. While both the Simonites and the official Liberals supported the National Government in principle, of the 41 Simonite candidates, 35 were unopposed by the Conservatives. In contrast, the official Liberals, opposed to Conservative protectionist policies and also anti-Labour, faced Conservative opponents in 81 out of 112 seats. The choice facing the ordinary provincial voter must have been bewildering.

In Worcester the election campaign became a three cornered contest. Both Fairbairn and his Conservative opponent, Crawford Greene, claimed to support the National Government but there was a marked difference in their views. Fairbairn, just as he had supported the government for the good of the country in 1914, so, in 1931,

⁸¹ *ibid*

⁸² WILSON Trevor, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914-1935* London 1966 cit. p398

announced that he was 'in full support of the Prime Minister and the Liberal Ministers in the National Government, in all the efforts necessary to remedy the present serious financial situation.'⁸³ However, he also made it clear that he remained an advocate of Free Trade and therefore, in this case, his support was conditional. Greene, on the other hand, described as 'the only unequivocal supporter of the Government',⁸⁴ favoured tariff reform as a means of solving the financial crisis. Fairbairn challenged Greene's right to call himself a National candidate as he had been elected as a Conservative on a minority vote in 1929 and therefore did not hold the seat by the will of the voters of Worcester. Fairbairn also felt it necessary to explain his own position to voters in relation to different groups within his own party. In answer to questions, he said he was not a "Simonite", he 'denied that the section of the Liberal party to which he belonged had agreed to a pact to withdraw from contests against the Labour Party'⁸⁵ and brushed aside a query about Lloyd George. Recognition as a National candidate by Sir Herbert Samuel was publicised at Fairbairn's final meeting of the campaign but, in view of his declaration of independence, this too could prove to be conditional.

In the past Fairbairn had indicated his sympathy with Labour policies and had made no secret of the fact that he had been invited to be the Labour candidate 'on more than one occasion'⁸⁶. However, in 1931 circumstances were changed and, his reasons for his refusal to stand as a Labour candidate show a realistic appraisal both of himself and of the political situation. His declaration, "I am too independent to be a Labour candidate", was followed up by the statement, 'I am not a Socialist'. His appreciation of the wider

⁸³ FAIRBAIRN R.R. *Election Address*, October 1931 from Special Collections Department in the Arts and Social Science Library at the University of Bristol.

⁸⁴*Daily Times*, October 26th 1931. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p9. W.R.O.

⁸⁵*Worcestershire Advertiser*, October 24th 1931, F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1 p1. W.R.O.

issues is demonstrated by his statement: 'I do not think it would be wise for this country to elect an extreme Socialist Government, not because I am afraid of what the Socialists would do, but because I am afraid of what the world will think of it owing to the serious financial position in which we are at present.'⁸⁷ Fairbairn's Labour opponent, Hubert Bolton, who came late on the scene from Gloucester, conducted a particularly aggressive campaign against both Fairbairn and Greene. Opposed to the National government and regarding MacDonald as a traitor to his party, Bolton claimed that a Liberal vote would be wasted as the party was dead and that the Conservative policy of Protection was a disguised 'attack upon the wages and standard of life of the workers'. His declared aim 'to make the workers of Worcester class conscious'⁸⁸ and his claim that Socialism provided the only alternative to the capitalist system which had collapsed, may well have alarmed Worcester voters and played into the hands of Greene whose campaign focussed largely on the advantages of Protection and the dangers of Socialism.

In his election address, which was short and to the point, Fairbairn responded to Bolton's approach by appealing to his 'fellow citizens of all classes'. He called for unity at a time of national emergency, 'as during the Great War', and committed himself to 'resolute' opposition to the introduction of any additional taxes on food which would make matters worse for those 'already suffering from increased taxation and reduced earnings'. He 'resented' those, presumably the Conservatives, whom he accused of exploiting the situation for political purposes, and asked the voters 'to regard my

⁸⁶ibid

⁸⁷ibid p3

⁸⁸ ibid

experience and reputation as justifying my claim to represent you'.⁸⁹ He returned to all these points at his campaign meetings, emphasising the need for unity and criticising the government for calling an election when it 'should have been using the time in considering how best to put the financial position of the country in order.'⁹⁰ He even harked back to the events of 1908 when, blamed for the election petition and forced out of his job, he had made 'personal sacrifices in order to maintain his position against Tory oppression'.⁹¹ Despite the confident tone of his statement that 'I am better qualified than either the gentleman from Gloucester or the gentleman from Australia (Greene) to represent you in Parliament', other comments made at his meetings reveal that the local Liberal organisation lacked the resources to support his campaign. His announcement that 'he was not sending round bodies of canvassers because he had not got them' and his appeal to his friends 'to use every influence they had to promote the cause of Liberalism'⁹² indicate his awareness that he was very much on his own. The description, in the *Daily Times*, of the Conservatives' 'very efficient transport department in full swing' on polling day, is in marked contrast to Fairbairn's admission that he did not have the "election machinery" that his Conservative opponent had.⁹³ In view of these admitted disadvantages it is all the more remarkable that Fairbairn regained second place in the poll. The *Daily Times*, commenting on the fact that Fairbairn had received over 6000 votes in each of the last three elections, quite justifiably attributed the result to 'a fairly stable and largely personal following'.⁹⁴ The Conservative, Crawford Greene, increased

⁸⁹FAIRBAIRN R.R. *Election Address*, October 1931. Special Collections Department, Arts and Social Science Library, University of Bristol.

⁹⁰*Worcestershire Advertiser*, October 24th 1931. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p2. W.R.O.

⁹¹ *ibid* p2

⁹² *ibid* p2

⁹³*Daily Times*, October 26th 1931. Box 12, Vol. 2, p 7. W.R.O.

⁹⁴ *Daily Times*, October 28th 1931. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p11. W.R.O.

his poll by over 3000 and, with 61% of the vote, achieved the overall majority for which he had campaigned. The Labour vote fell by almost 50% and Bolton narrowly missed forfeiting his deposit. The Worcester result reflected the national picture and the *Daily Times* could reasonably claim ‘a vote of confidence and a free hand’ for the Conservative-dominated National Government. 554 MPs supported the National Government of whom 469 were Conservatives. The official Labour party, most of whose leaders lost their seats, was reduced to 52 MPs while the Liberal groups, including the Simonites, held 72 seats. The Liberal vote was reduced from 23.6% in 1929 to 10.9%.

With the election of the National government, the introduction of protectionist measures became inevitable despite the inclusion in the Cabinet of Liberal and Labour ministers committed to Free Trade. While the Liberal Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, was prepared to support the government’s proposals, Samuel, Home Secretary and now leader of the Liberals, and Philip Snowden, the former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer and now Lord Privy Seal, were not. Anxious to maintain unity within the government, MacDonald allowed Samuel and Snowden an ‘agreement to differ’ so that they could disregard the principle of Cabinet responsibility and speak against government policy in Parliament. Import duties on manufactured goods were introduced and passed in stages but the decisions made at the 1932 Ottawa Conference to establish a system of imperial preference for the Dominions went too far for both Samuel and Snowden. Snowden wrote to Samuel, ‘As far as I understand... we have given up entirely our fiscal autonomy,’⁹⁵ and Samuel’s response to MacDonald’s plea to remain in the government was to say that, under the Ottawa agreement, ‘the right of the House of Commons to

⁹⁵ Samuel Papers, Snowden to Samuel, 3rd August 1932 quoted in STANNAGE Tom, *Baldwin Thwarts the Opposition, The British General Election of 1935*, London 1980, p 90.

amend fiscal duties.....shall be severely restricted. We regard this as unconstitutional and altogether inadmissible.’⁹⁶ The National Liberal Federation opposed the Ottawa Agreement on similar grounds and contacted local Liberal associations for their support. At a meeting of Worcestershire Liberals in July 1932, when Fairbairn described the agreement as ‘revolutionary and dangerous’⁹⁷ it was agreed to support the Federation’s campaign.

Although Samuel and the official Liberals resigned from the government in September 1932, they remained on the government backbenches for a further year until, under pressure, both from Liberal MPs and from the party in the country, Samuel was persuaded to join the opposition. Although this move was welcomed by Liberals in the South West in the hope that it would ‘save Liberalism from disintegration,’⁹⁸ it has since been argued that Samuel’s action had the effect of formalising Liberal divisions, preventing any future Liberal revival in the 1930s.⁹⁹ According to Trevor Wilson, the Liberal party ‘failed to recover the *raison d’etre* which it had lost when the National Government ceased to be national’.¹⁰⁰ The Liberal dilemma was summed up by J. A. Spender in 1934 when he said: ‘We must get into the minds of the public some clear idea of Liberal policy as distinguished from both Toryism and Socialism’.¹⁰¹ In fact, the party published two documents, *Address to the Nation* and *The Liberal Way* in 1934, covering several areas of policy including peace, industry, agriculture and the constitution.

⁹⁶ Quoted in BOWLE John, *Viscount Samuel, a Biography*, London 1957, p293, reference S.P (presumed Samuel Papers), no reference number given

⁹⁷ Paper not identified, July 27th 1932. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p 24

⁹⁸ *Cornish Guardian*, November 9th 1933 quoted in TREGIDGA Garry, *The Liberal Party in South-West Britain since 1918*. Exeter 2000, p66.

⁹⁹ DUTTON David, ‘1932: A Neglected Date in the History of the Decline of the Liberal Party’, *Twentieth British History*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2003

¹⁰⁰ WILSON Trevor, *The Downfall of the Liberal Part, 1914-1935*. London 1966 p 407

¹⁰¹ Quoted in STANNAGE op cit. p98

At a time when the party at Westminster seemed to have lost its way, Worcestershire Liberals continued to hold their annual meetings. Worcestershire Liberal Council in July 1934 welcomed *The Liberal Way* as a ‘text book of Liberalism’ and ‘a well thought-out and clear statement of policy’ for which ‘a good many Liberals had been clamouring for a long time’.¹⁰² The mood at this meeting appears quite positive, encouraging those with Liberal sympathies to ‘ensure that the Liberal spirit shall be ever ready... and keep alive its political principles.’¹⁰³ Peace and a speedy return to Free Trade were described as ‘essential’, but not ‘at the moment under special consideration’ while electoral reform was seen as urgent. An address from the Secretary of the Midland Liberal Association covered policy and practical matters in preparation for the next election. Bewdley Liberals, in particular, were encouraged to raise money, recruit keen men and women, and find a candidate, preferably from the area, to stand against the leader of the Conservative party, Stanley Baldwin. Another indication that local Liberals were preparing for the next election was the appearance in the Worcester press of several notices, presumably placed by Fairbairn as agent, reminding supporters to ensure that their names were on the electoral register.

Meanwhile the Worcester Conservative Association was preoccupied with its own internal financial and organisational problems. Failure to collect subscriptions on a regular basis, as well as a lack of competent financial management, resulted in a substantial overdraft in 1930 which was paid off by Crawford Greene, the sitting MP. Having acted as a guarantor for the Association in the following year to the tune of £500, Greene then paid a further £500 towards the repayment of a further overdraft of £700 in

¹⁰² *Daily Times*, July 19th 1934. F.S. Box 12, Vol 1, p86. W.R.O.

¹⁰³ *ibid*

1932. Clearly the Association had come to rely on Greene's financial support and when he indicated that this could not continue, it was decided to dissolve the organisation and draw up a new constitution. This proved a long and difficult process. In March 1934 it was reported that the party was still in existence but there was still no organising body. Members were warned that 'if a General Election came now, they would be in a very difficult position ... There was a definite danger in not bringing the whole affair to a final issue'.¹⁰⁴ Two attempts to reconstitute the Association having been declared illegal, and despite a circular issued by Central Office in April 1935 advising constituency associations to prepare for a general election, it was not until June 1935 that a new constitution was in place and new officers were elected. In October the minutes of the Executive Council recorded satisfaction with 'progress made since reorganisation',¹⁰⁵ and a credit balance of £25. There is no evidence to indicate the Liberals made any political capital out of Conservatives' difficulties, probably because their own organisation was itself fragile, depending largely on the initiative of a relatively few individuals.

With their prospective candidates for the coming general election in place well before the Conservatives had sorted out their affairs, both Liberal and Labour groups appeared better prepared than their rivals in 1935. The Labour party's new candidate, the fourth in as many general elections, could at least claim a local connection having married a Worcester girl at St. John's church in Fairbairn's ward. James Ferguson, a railwayman, described as one of the pioneers of the Labour movement in Kidderminster, had been a Councillor there since 1928 and, like Fairbairn, one of his major interests was housing. As for the Liberals, in answer to its own rhetorical question as to who would

¹⁰⁴*Daily Times*, March 6th 1934. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p 81. W.R.O.

¹⁰⁵Worcester Conservative Association, Minutes of Executive Council, October 23rd, 1935. W.R.O.

stand for the party in the coming election, the *Worcester Evening News* answered, “Mr Richard R. Fairbairn, of course.”¹⁰⁶ Just as Fairbairn’s nomination was taken for granted, so was that of Crawford Greene, the Conservative sitting member, although it was not until two days after Baldwin’s announcement of the election date that Greene was formally adopted as the party’s candidate. No reference to the recent difficulties faced by local party was made at this meeting.

In his analysis of the 1935 election Stannage¹⁰⁷ makes the point that, in the absence of opinion polls, any study of pre-war elections must inevitably rely heavily on press reports and party manifestos. This means that while the main interests of the candidates may be deduced from these sources, it is difficult to determine with any accuracy the issues of most concern to the voters. The *Worcester Evening News* clearly saw its role in 1935 as one of providing information to encourage participation in the electoral process. The very full, and apparently even-handed coverage of the campaign, in marked contrast to the partisan reporting of earlier elections in which Fairbairn was involved, provides a useful comparison of the candidates’ priorities, approach and style. Full reports of the candidates’ adoption meetings and their eve of poll rallies were published, and each candidate was given the opportunity to present his views at some length. These articles appearing on three consecutive days were all given the same treatment in the paper and readers were advised to study the policies carefully. The declared aim was ‘to help all parties in their campaigns; at the same time to be a guide and medium for men and women in these most vital days of our nation’s history’.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶*Worcester Evening News*, February 21st 1935. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p93. W.R.O.

¹⁰⁷ STANNAGE Tom op.cit.p153

¹⁰⁸*Worcester Evening News*, November 7th 1935. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p108. W.R.O.

Well before the election campaign, an interview with Fairbairn published as a news item provides a more measured and coherent account of his particular brand of Liberalism than may be gleaned from campaign speeches. He made it quite clear that, in his opinion, his views on Liberal principles had remained constant over 25 years and that he was convinced that Liberalism was a reasonable alternative to Socialism and ‘the so-called National Government’. He believed that the mass of people in the country was Liberal-minded, that Socialism was ‘an impractical policy under our present constitution’ and that the National Government was to be criticised for its record on unemployment, rising prices and increasing centralisation. In light of his repeated commitment to Liberalism, it worth noting that in his election literature Fairbairn’s party affiliation is barely mentioned. There was only one direct reference to Liberal policy in his newspaper article while it does not appear at all in the main text of his election address. It is possible that Fairbairn decided that as he supported much of the National government’s policy and, apart from a predictable call for a return to a policy of FreeTrade, as the Liberals had little distinctive to offer, there was little to be gained by stressing his party label. Instead, he conducted a highly personal campaign as ‘the only man really fitted to represent you’,¹⁰⁹ with the emphasis on his long record of service in local government and his previous experience as an MP. Taking a similar line to that he had adopted in 1931, he said, ‘I will work for all parties provided that the interests of Great Britain come first’.¹¹⁰

The 1935 election was held against a background of international tension. From the beginning of the year, repeated appeals from Abyssinia to the League of Nations for support in a territorial dispute with Italy had failed to produce any positive action. Both

¹⁰⁹*Worcester Evening News*, November 4th 1935. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p100. W.R.O.

¹¹⁰:*ibid*

Britain and France were preoccupied with matters closer to home and, as there was no attempt to stop him, Mussolini's actions became more aggressive making it obvious that a full-scale invasion was planned. In June, Stanley Baldwin succeeded MacDonald as Prime Minister and, at the end of the month, the results of the Peace Ballot, in which over 11 million people had voted, were published indicating overwhelming support for the League of Nations. It is generally agreed that this poll was a major factor contributing to the government's decision to reconsider its position. In September the British government committed itself to collective action through the League of Nations to deal with the Abyssinian situation, although what form that action should take was still undecided. On October 3rd Italian forces invaded Abyssinia and on October 23rd Baldwin announced that the general election would be held on November 14th.

Stannage's assertion that from July to November 'it would appear that the foreign policy of the National Government was conditioned by electoral considerations, and vice versa',¹¹¹ would seem to be quite apt. Certainly the opposition parties would agree. Baldwin had delayed announcing the election date until he could claim that 'the policy of the whole country' was the whole-hearted support of the League of Nations.¹¹² Both Labour and Liberal parties accused Baldwin of exploiting the international situation for party advantage and, according to the *Manchester Guardian*, the opposition parties 'assumed that the motive is to snatch a new lease of power for the Conservative Party by calling a "khaki election"'.¹¹³ The Liberal party in its manifesto later made the additional point that as all parties agreed with the government's support for the League of Nations

¹¹¹STANNAGE Tom, op. cit. p123.

¹¹² *Daily Times*, October 26th 1935. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p98. W.R.O.

¹¹³*Manchester Guardian*, October 11th 1935 quoted in STANNAGE Tom, op cit p134

an election was unnecessary.¹¹⁴ Incidentally, on October 19th at a party rally attended by the Prime Minister, Worcester Conservatives were given prior warning of the imminent election when Baldwin said: 'It was only yesterday that I made up my mind that in the present circumstances it would be impossible to delay the election'.¹¹⁵

While there was general consensus that international peace and national security could best be achieved through support for the League of Nations, there was considerable divergence of opinion and emphasis over defence, unemployment and social reform. The main issue over which the parties were divided was defence. The National Government had come to the conclusion that the country's defences were inadequate to fulfil its obligations as a member of the League of Nations and that it was a matter of urgency to rectify the situation. Despite the Government's assurance that 'the defence programme will be strictly confined to what is required to make the country and the Empire safe'¹¹⁶ both opposition parties feared the development of an arms race. Labour, while affirming support for the League of Nations, argued that 'the best defence is not huge competitive national armaments but the organisation of collective security against an aggressor and the agreed reduction of national armaments everywhere.'¹¹⁷ The Liberals, whose declared aim was also the preservation of peace and national security, took the view that 'panic expenditure in arms is not the road to peace'.¹¹⁸ On the domestic front unemployment was the main issue. The Government, claiming that the situation had improved since 1931, took the opportunity to announce several initiatives during the campaign to reduce unemployment further, and of course it was clear that increased defence spending would

¹¹⁴*Daily Times*, October 26th 1935. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p98

¹¹⁵ STANNAGE Tom, op. cit. p124

¹¹⁶ STANNAGE TOM, op. cit. p156

¹¹⁷ *ibid* p157

create further jobs. The Labour party attacked the Government's record on unemployment as 'Four Barren Years' and campaigned, in particular, for the abolition of the Means Test which was described as humiliating and unjust to the unemployed who needed additional financial support. To the Liberals, the abolition of tariffs, quotas and subsidies would be a major step in dealing with the problem. They also called for reconstruction and development on the lines introduced by Lloyd George in 1931. All three manifestos included sections on housing, education and health, measures which, in his address, Fairbairn said 'will shortly arise involving definite action by Municipalities'.¹¹⁹

The views of the three candidates in Worcester reflected the differences between the parties at a national level although the contrasting responses of each individual to the issues are worth consideration. Fairbairn appealed to Worcester voters as he had done in previous campaigns, because 'I know more about the needs, the conditions, the wishes and the aspirations of fellow citizens than can be known by any candidate brought in from a distance'.¹²⁰ Having always put peace and security as his priority for the country, and described as a '100 per cent League of Nations man',¹²¹ Fairbairn questioned the need for further spending on defence. However, he did not dwell on the subject, perhaps because it was contentious, or possibly because it was an area of policy with which he was not familiar. Instead, he concentrated on what he did know, such as the Liberal policies for reconstruction and the return of Free Trade. In contrast Ferguson, the Labour candidate, a newcomer to the constituency, had to introduce himself and his party's

¹¹⁸ibid p158

¹¹⁹FAIRBAIRN R.R. *Election Address*, November 1935 from Special Collections Department in the Arts and Social Sciences Library at the University of Bristol.

¹²⁰*Worcester Evening News*, November 8th 1935. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p113. W.R.O.

policies and also to try to convince the voters that Labour could not be blamed for the financial crisis of 1931. He dismissed the Liberals as irrelevant and concentrated on national reconstruction and improved social services. He used his newspaper article, which was particularly well constructed, to present a list of specific proposals to the voters, including adequate universal pensions at 60, a reduction in the working week, free secondary education for all and the abolition of the Means Test. A section on the need for more housing for rent showed an awareness of Worcester's perennial problem and a reference to his wartime service was clearly designed to appeal to other ex-servicemen. He, like Fairbairn, claimed to be 'a 100 per cent' supporter of the League of Nations but warned that a policy of competitive armaments had 'never saved any nation or given security'.¹²² Greene made his support for the Government's plans for defence quite clear. but failed to mention the League of Nations in his election address, and the subject was also missing from his newspaper article. It was revealed after the election, that Greene had been unwell during the campaign and this may have been the explanation for leaving much of the speech- making to others. Earl Howe, 'the famous racing motorist', opened the Conservative campaign and Greene himself spoke only briefly. This was also the case at his final rally when he confined himself to an attack on the Labour candidate and a defence of the Means Test. His newspaper article, where he had the opportunity to explain policy in more depth, was couched in very general terms and shorter than those of his opponents. Most space was devoted to the dangers of Socialism and, only in the last two paragraphs did Greene consider current policy matters, advocating Protectionist measures 'to protect working people' followed by a series of disconnected statements

¹²¹ *Worcester Evening News*, November 14th 1935. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p118. W.R.O.

¹²² *Worcester Evening News*, November 7th 1935. F.S. Box 12, Vol.1, p108. W.R.O.

such as, 'We propose to obliterate slums. We have done much. We shall do more.'

Almost as an after-thought was added, 'We propose to put the defence forces of this country in such a position that no nation dare attack us with impunity'.¹²³

How far the personal contribution of each candidate, affected the outcome of the election can only be a matter for conjecture. It was Ferguson who said during the campaign that 'much depends on the candidate'¹²⁴ and his own campaign appears to have been positive, focussed and business-like, though perhaps lacking in excitement.

Apparently confident at meetings he had a good grasp of his party's policies, which he presented efficiently. However, the number of platform supporters was small and it was acknowledged that the party 'had to remove that indifference and apathy for their people not going to record their vote', whereas 'our opponents make it a religious duty to go to the poll'.¹²⁵ Greene, who fully expected to win the seat for the fifth time, also warned of the danger of apathy or over-confidence, presumably fearing his share of the vote might be reduced. Platform parties at his meetings were noticeably larger, and more prestigious than those of his opponents, but the impression gained from newspaper reports is that his own performances during the campaign were somewhat lack-lustre and indifferent. It would appear that Fairbairn, by far the oldest and most experienced candidate, conducted the most lively campaign, always loyally supported by the Chairman of the Worcester Liberal Association and 'other prominent supporters'. Fairbairn freely admitted, 'I am fighting this election without much money or organisation',¹²⁶ but he was still an effective speaker, able to attract and interact confidently with a large audience. 'Wild

¹²³ *Worcester Evening News*, November 9th 1935. F.S. Box 12, Vol.1, p114. W.R.O.

¹²⁴ *Worcester Evening News*, November 4th 1935. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p104. W.R.O.

¹²⁵ *ibid* p102.

¹²⁶ *ibid* p100.

excitement' was reported at his eve of poll rally where he claimed that this time, his "jubilee candidature"¹²⁷ twenty five years after 1910, he had 'his best chance ever' of success.¹²⁸

When the results were announced, Fairbairn's optimism proved, once again, to have been unfounded although he could take comfort in the fact that he had actually retained his position as second in the poll and, his share of the poll had risen from 24.6 % in 1931 to 26%. With 6,885 votes, he was one of the few Liberals in a three- cornered contest who had increased his total vote. Samuel and the entire front bench of the Liberal party, except Sir Archibald Sinclair, had lost their seats and the number of Liberal MPs in the House of Commons had been reduced to twenty. Ferguson's third place in the poll does not reflect his achievement as he had managed to regain a substantial number of the votes Labour had lost in 1931 and, with 23.3% and 6,152 votes he had given Fairbairn a close run. It was Ferguson's misfortune that Fairbairn could still rely on the stable and largely personal following identified by the *Daily Times* in 1931. The Labour party had revived overall with 154 MPs. Claiming victory for the National Government and celebrating his fifth election success, Greene said 'since 1923, Worcester has always been right'¹²⁹ but, if he had taken time to analyse the result, he may have been less triumphant. He had lost 3,000 votes, his share of the vote was reduced from 61% to 50.7%, 400 fewer people had voted and, his overall majority of 361 was lower even than it had been in 1923. He could, of course, celebrate the victory of the National Government with 435 seats, 388 of which were held by Conservatives.

¹²⁷ *ibid* p101

¹²⁸ *Worcester Evening News*, November 14th 1935. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p118. W.R.O.

¹²⁹ *Daily Times*, November 15th 1935. F.S. Box 12. Vol. 1, p121. W.R.O.

The election of 1935 was the eighth and last Parliamentary contest in which Fairbairn fought. Having been defeated yet again at the age of 68, he might have been expected to consider reducing his commitments, or even retiring from public life, but he appears to have been as heavily involved in a variety of activities as he ever was. Although his scrapbooks after 1935 contain few press reports of routine meetings, such as those of the Council or the National Insurance Committee, they still include reports of significant events which give an indication of the scale of his activities. Fairbairn's 40 year membership of the Hope of Worcester Lodge of the Friendly Society of Oddfellows had been celebrated in 1933 with a concert and presentation when it was said 'the time will come, the time was passed, when the work he had done for the city would be recognised'.¹³⁰ Between 1935 and his death in 1941, Fairbairn received public recognition for his contribution to the local community in a variety of ways.

The change in the content of Fairbairn's scrapbooks may, in fact, be the consequence of further changes in the local press as much as his increasing age, although there are conspicuously more obituaries than in previous volumes. From 1929 most of Fairbairn's cuttings came from the Conservative *Daily Times*, occasionally from the *Worcestershire Advertiser* and the weekly *Berrows Worcester Journal*, while the *Worcester Evening News* provided the most detailed coverage of the 1935 election campaign. In 1937 the *Daily Times* became the *Worcester Evening Times* but was, later in the same year, amalgamated with the *Evening News*. The owners of the new publication, to be known as the *Worcester Evening News and Times*, aimed 'to use our greater strength always in the promotion of public welfare' and to be 'entirely independent of

¹³⁰*Worcestershire Advertiser*, April 29th 1933. F.S. Box 12, Vol.2, p22. W.R.O.

any other company or group.’¹³¹ It was claimed that the new company, which also owned *Berrows Journal*, would be guaranteed a net sale in excess of 25,000 copies daily.¹³² How far these changes affected Fairbairn’s selection of cuttings is impossible to suggest but the treatment of political matters by the local press was certainly less partial than at the beginning of his career.

Worcestershire Liberals did not fade away as might be expected after the party’s disastrous national result in 1935. There was quite a flurry of activity in 1936, presumably in response to an attempt from London by the new leader of the party, Sir Archibald Sinclair to mobilise Liberal opinion. Rather late in the day, considerable efforts were made to keep the party alive, by promoting its policies as an alternative to Socialism and encouraging members to reorganise and recruit. Fairbairn appears to have assumed the role of rekindling enthusiasm by calling for positive action among party members and telling his audience ‘the cause of Liberalism is worth fighting for’ ... ‘we are here to inspire the people of this constituency to take an active interest in the government of their country... [and] to educate them in Liberal principles’.¹³³ Dingle Foot, Liberal MP for Dundee, at a meeting in Malvern in June 1936, spoke of ‘the continued vitality of Liberalism’ and criticised government foreign policy in detail, advocating the strengthening of the League of Nations. Party reorganisation and ‘a new start of the Liberal party’¹³⁴ were the themes for a conference of representative Liberals from the county in November. One direct result of this meeting was the appointment, in following April, of the first organiser to unite those with Liberal sympathies in the area, a move

¹³¹*Evening News and Times*, November 1st 1937. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p173. W.R.O.

¹³²*World’s Press News*, October 21st 1937. F.S. Box 12, Vol.1 attached to p172. W.R.O.

¹³³Paper unknown, presumed date - July 1936. F.S. Box 12, Vol.1, p138. W.R.O.

¹³⁴*Daily Times*, November 10th 1936. F.S. Box 12, Vol.1, p146. W.R.O.

with which Fairbairn did not agree. Perhaps not surprisingly, he considered it important that each constituency should continue to have its own agent which, by this time, was a luxury that the party could ill afford. Policy matters were addressed in February 1937, when a list of demands was drawn up including the strengthening of the League of Nations, the reduction of artificial trade barriers and the defence of democracy, as well as a call to 'end the insane competition in armaments'.¹³⁵ At a meeting of the Worcestershire Liberal Council in September 1937, where the chairman made the observation that 'it needed pluck to be a Liberal these days', Fairbairn gave what appears to have been his last major speech on behalf of the party. His theme was liberty. Warning his audience not to trust either the Tories or Socialists if they wanted to retain their liberty, he said: 'We Liberals stand first for peace and then for liberty'. He went on to defend his Radical principles and criticised the National government, claiming that people were afraid of Socialism as an alternative. Having appealed for financial support, he said the 'Liberal party is on the move' and then called upon his audience to 'send it on a march'.¹³⁶ Fairbairn's continued commitment to the Liberal party was demonstrated a year later when he agreed to stand for Parliament yet again, 'if you can't find a better man'.¹³⁷ However this may also be seen as an indication that there was a lack of any new blood coming forward to take his place.

For the period between 1935 and 1941, Fairbairn's scrapbooks contain several obituaries of opponents, colleagues and supporters all of whom had some significance in his career. In July 1936 the death was announced of Lord Wargrave who, as Edward

¹³⁵ *Worcester Evening News*, February 23rd 1937. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p159. W.R.O.

¹³⁶ *Worcester Evening Times*, September 13th 1937. F.S. Box 12, Vol.1, p166 and *Worcester Evening News* of the same date. F.S. Box 12, Vol 2, p123. W.R.O.

¹³⁷ *Worcester Evening News and Times*, November 7th 1938. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p182. W.R.O.

Goulding, had been MP for Worcester from 1908 to 1922. Fairbairn's Conservative opponent in 1923, the Hon. Henry Lygon also died in 1936. Prominent Liberals, Richard Cadbury, one of the petitioners named on the Worcester Election Petition of 1906, died in 1935 and Colonel Webb, who had chaired numerous Liberal party meetings, died in 1938. The long-standing honorary secretary of the Worcestershire Liberal Association and former editor of the *Worcestershire Echo*, Mr W.G.R. Stone, died in 1938 but the death of Earl Beauchamp, also in 1938, must have had the greatest impact on Fairbairn. Although Beauchamp had lived abroad since 1931 and there is no evidence of any direct contact for several years, he was still titular President of the Worcestershire Liberal Council and it must be presumed that he had continued to provide some financial support to the organisation. Without that support dating from 1903, it is highly unlikely that the local Liberal organisation would have revived so spectacularly and, almost certain that Fairbairn would never have been in a position to devote his life to local politics or to stand for Parliament. Obituaries for Beauchamp from the *Worcester Evening News and Times*, the *Birmingham Post* and the *Manchester Guardian*, in Fairbairn's scrapbooks cover Beauchamp's political activities from local, regional and national perspectives.

Fulsome tributes to Fairbairn's 'long, multitudinous and meritorious services',¹³⁸ and 'his exceptional character, extraordinary understanding, wonderful knowledge of municipal affairs and capable administration',¹³⁹ published in the local press in January 1937, could easily have been mistaken for obituaries. Both papers celebrated Fairbairn's acceptance of the position of Alderman which, in the opinion of the *Daily Times*, would

¹³⁸*Daily Times*, January 6th 1937. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p154. W.R.O.

¹³⁹*Worcester Evening News*, January 6th 1937. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p154. W.R.O.

be 'regarded with satisfaction by the citizens generally'.¹⁴⁰ Ten years after Fairbairn's unprecedented refusal of the honour, it was clearly felt that his long service as a member of the Council should be appropriately recognised. Both papers reflected that Council debates were now much less acrimonious than in Fairbairn's early days and, according to the *Daily Times*, they 'spar rather as partners in the public service than as rivals in the ring'.¹⁴¹ It was suggested either that mutual respect had developed with 'passing of time' or that the presence of women members had been a calming influence. However, the *Evening News* expressed the hope that Fairbairn would not lose his "fighting spirit" 'even though that same fighting spirit in the past did the fighter, it seemed, untold harm'.¹⁴² As an Alderman, Fairbairn became a permanent member of the Council and would no longer have to fight in municipal elections but it appears he was still ready to do battle if necessary. A cartoon published in February 1940, shows Fairbairn as a Cavalier 'girding his loins' and turning the Council Chamber into a 'battle arena' with his 'war cries',¹⁴³ all on behalf of ratepayers. (*Fig. 3*)

It seems likely that Fairbairn never did consider the possibility of retiring from public life and with the outbreak of war in 1939, there was plenty to do. By the autumn of 1939 he was a member of the city's Wartime Emergency Committee, as he had been in World War 1, and he had acquired a further position as the Chairman of the Air Raid Precaution Committee. In this role he, once again, showed the ability both to anticipate possible needs and to initiate appropriate action. According to a profile published in *Berrows Journal* under the title, *Worcestershire Wartime Personalities*, Fairbairn had

¹⁴⁰ *Daily Times*, January 6th 1937. F.S. Box 12, Vol.1, p154. W.R.O.

¹⁴¹ *ibid*

¹⁴² *Worcester Evening News and Times*, January 6th 1937. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p155. W.R.O.

¹⁴³ *Worcester Evening News and Times*, February 2nd 1940. F.S. Box 12, Vol 2, page not shown. W.R.O.

been the driving force in organising air raid precautions well before the Munich crisis in 1938. As the result of his leadership, Worcester was ‘in the front with organisation, depots and equipment’ and Worcester people had been among the first to receive gas masks delivered to their doors.¹⁴⁴ By November 1939 Fairbairn had completed 40 years as a member of the City Council and, in the following July, it was announced that he had been nominated as Mayor of Worcester for the coming year.

In the absence of any personal papers it is impossible to deduce whether Fairbairn had ever had any ambition, or had ever considered the possibility, of becoming Mayor of Worcester but it seems improbable. The Mayoralty was, by custom and practice, in the gift of the Conservative majority and, as was pointed out in the press at the time, Fairbairn was the leader of the least powerful political party. Also, in the absence of any alternative candidate, it was not unusual for a Mayor to serve for more than one term, the current holder having held office for three years. However, in 1940, the war and Fairbairn’s age altered the circumstances. In May, with the formation of Churchill’s wartime coalition, party politics had been temporarily suspended and it was reasonable to suggest that Fairbairn’s nomination was ‘in line with the present national attitude to all the old divisions in party politics’.¹⁴⁵ The fact that ‘he has never seemed a man who could be influenced by the narrow dictates of the [party] machine’¹⁴⁶ was also seen as a point in his favour, as was his long record of public service in the city. It was clearly considered high time that “Dicky” Fairbairn, at the age of 73, ‘had long earned this compliment and this recognition’.¹⁴⁷ However, it appears that, at the time of his formal election as Mayor

¹⁴⁴ *Berrows Worcester Journal*, November 4th, 1939. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 2, p153. W.R.O.

¹⁴⁵ Newspaper not named, July 1st 1940. Box 12, Vol. 3, p1, W.R.O.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid*

¹⁴⁷ *ibid*.

in November 1940, there was some concern for Fairbairn's health. The fact that he was said to be 'daily increasing in vigour and showing more of the old "R.R." spirit',¹⁴⁸ is an indication that he had been ill at some point since July. This assumption is supported by a further comment, made at the Council meeting, expressing the hope that he 'would have health and strength that would enable him to carry through the great task they asked him to accept'.¹⁴⁹ Later it was acknowledged that Fairbairn's colleagues 'hoped that the honour of the Mayoralty might revive or rally his strength, or prove some consolation to him'.¹⁵⁰ Mrs Fairbairn who up to this point had taken little part in public life and whose health was described as 'not robust', expressed her determination to fulfill her duties as Mayoress, 'as fully as her health allows'.¹⁵¹ The impression gained from such comments would indicate that perhaps there was some awareness that the offer of the Mayoralty was somewhat overdue.

Although Fairbairn himself admitted that he had feared at one time that health might have prevented him taking office,¹⁵² his first month as Mayor appears to have been particularly strenuous. As well as remaining Chairman of the National Insurance Committee, he was re-elected as Vice Chairman of the West Midlands Joint National Insurance Committee, continued to chair the Wartime Emergency Committee and, in addition to the routine engagements expected of the Mayor, acquired further responsibilities in connection with wartime measures. Still prepared to take the initiative and concerned for families in the city affected by the war, he announced, in his formal acceptance speech, that he intended to set up a Mayor's Distress Fund, similar to that

¹⁴⁸*Worcester Evening News and Times*, November 7th, 1940. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 2, p159. W.R.O.

¹⁴⁹*Worcester Evening News and Times*, November 9th, 1940. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 2, p161. W.R.O.

¹⁵⁰*Worcester Evening News and Times*, October 18th 1941. F.S. Box 12, Vol 3, p4. W.R.O.

¹⁵¹*Worcester Evening News and Times*, November 8th, 1940. F.S. Box 12, vol. 2, p159. W.R.O.

with which he had been involved in the first World War. Fairbairn's formal nomination and election as Mayor, at which he had the support of the whole Council, was not without drama. One member objected to the election of two women to the positions of High Sheriff and City Chamberlain. As both women appear to have been experienced councillors and well qualified to take civic office, and the office of High Sheriff had already been held twice by a woman, the objection was quickly quashed.¹⁵³ Fairbairn's reaction to this situation is not recorded, and perhaps as the incoming mayor he necessarily remained silent, but he had made his views on female members on the Council known in 1937 when he said, 'in my opinion, the lady members of the City Council have more than justified their appointmentby their close attention their duties and their active interest at all times, which cannot honestly be said of some of their gentleman colleagues'.¹⁵⁴

Fairbairn's programme of official engagements was inevitably full at the beginning of his Mayoral year. In the first week, he attended a civic lunch in honour of the retiring Mayor, the full Council meeting at which he was elected, paid an official visit as the Chief Magistrate to the Courts and on each occasion made a short speech. On Remembrance Day he laid a wreath on the War Memorial and led the procession to the Cathedral for the Mayor's Sunday service. This service was somewhat different from usual in that there were no military representatives and few ordinary citizens in the congregation. Instead, a large number of civil defence organisations were represented in uniform and 'served to indicate the measure of the city's preparedness'.¹⁵⁵ This was also

¹⁵² *Worcester Evening News and Times* (presumed), November 14th 1940. F.S. Box 12, vol 2, p162. W.R.O.

¹⁵³ *Worcester Evening News and Times*, November 9th 1940. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 2, p159. W.R.O.

¹⁵⁴ *Worcester Evening Times and Times*, February 2nd 1937. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 2, p108. W.R.O.

¹⁵⁵ *Worcester Evening News and Times*, November 18th 1940. F.S. Box 12, Vol.3, p2. W.R.O.

demonstrated when Fairbairn accompanied the Regional Officer of Home Security who, deputising for the Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, inspected Worcester's Auxiliary Fire Service and A.R.P. depots. The Mayor of Worcester's Distress Fund was launched at the end of November to relieve distress in the city resulting from the war. A committee was set up, which Fairbairn intended to chair, to coordinate contributions and to oversee the distribution to those in need. He had rejected requests from London, and other cities, for subscriptions to their funds on the grounds that Worcester was their priority. The next entry in Fairbairn's scrapbook is a brief notice, on December 30th that the Mayor, who had spent Christmas in a nursing home, 'had spent another fairly good night and his condition is quite satisfactory'.¹⁵⁶ Whether the activities of the previous month had proved too much for Fairbairn and he was actually ill, or whether he was just in need of a rest after a busy schedule, is not known.

From the evidence in his scrapbooks it is not possible to deduce how far Fairbairn's health affected his ability to fulfill his duties as Mayor during 1941, although references to an improvement in his health appear in reports in the summer of that year. Between December 1940 and his death in October 1941, cuttings in the final scrapbooks seem to be limited to just a few significant events rather than a chronological record. This may be an indication that either Fairbairn was ill or too busy, or even too tired to collect all reports. If this was the case, it is most likely that the entries were selected and added later, perhaps by a member of his family. The choice of cuttings is in itself interesting. As might be expected, presentations made to Fairbairn as Mayor are included, but surprisingly at a time when party politics had been suspended, the only other reports refer to the activities of the local Conservative and Liberal parties.

¹⁵⁶*Worcester Evening News and Times*, December 30th 1940. F.S. Box 12, Vol.2, p165. W.R.O.

Although it was extremely unlikely that a general election would be called during the war, both parties were aware they should plan for the possibility. There had been little or no activity among the Liberals for some time and Fairbairn himself told the Midland Liberal Federation in Birmingham on March 8th 1941 that he had not attended a political meeting for four years.¹⁵⁷ However, in July he took the chair at the annual July meeting of Worcestershire Liberals where he said that Liberalism was ‘on the upgrade’ and Liberals were urged to keep their organisation alive. The prospective Liberal candidate for Bewdley was more specific saying, ‘We cannot have a permanent peace treaty made before there is a general election and the country has had an opportunity to choose the kind of Parliamentary representatives it wants’.¹⁵⁸ In 1941, with the death of Lord Coventry, the Conservatives were in need of a new President. Crawford Greene, the MP, came forward with a plan which, he suggested, would result in Fairbairn’s personal supporters voting for the Conservative candidate. He made the assumption that Fairbairn would not stand again and proposed that Earl Beauchamp, who had been a Liberal MP from 1929 until 1938 when he had inherited the title, should be asked to become President and ‘give a lead to Liberal opinion’. Earl Beauchamp accepted the invitation making it quite clear that his action ‘was in conformity with the principle adopted in wartime of all political parties pulling together as a single unit’.¹⁵⁹ Fairbairn’s response was to announce that he was still on the list of Liberal candidates and although his health ‘may not be so good as it was, I may still finish up with another election’.¹⁶⁰ When the election eventually took place in 1945, the nomination of a Liberal candidate had a

¹⁵⁷ *Worcester News and Times*, March 10th 1941. F.S. Box 12, Vol 3, p2. W.R.O.

¹⁵⁸ *Worcestershire News and Times*, July 28th 1941. Box 12, Vol.3, p5. W.R.O.

¹⁵⁹ *Worcester Evening News and Times*, May 23rd 1941. F.S. Box 12, Vol.3, p3. W.R.O.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid*

significant effect both on the campaign and the final result.¹⁶¹ It might, therefore, reasonably be argued that Fairbairn's influence, and a portion of his loyal following, had some impact on the later campaign.

'Proud to have an Oddfellow as chief citizen',¹⁶² Worcester Oddfellows, who had celebrated the fortieth anniversary Fairbairn's membership in 1933, marked his election as Mayor with a further presentation in 1941. However, the most prestigious honour awarded to Fairbairn was the Council's unanimous decision, in July, to confer upon him the Freedom of the City, 'in the sunset of a life crowded with public service'.¹⁶³ Introduced by the Deputy Mayor, the proposal was endorsed by a generous tribute by the Conservative leader, who said that 'no-one had rendered more eminent service to the City than Alderman Fairbairn', a man 'peculiarly fitted for civic government'. Commenting on Fairbairn's health he said that 'he had surprised everybody.....they were all very pleased that his health had improved to such an extent that he had been so well able to carry out the responsible duties of Mayor'. Fairbairn received the Honorary Freedom of the City in a ceremony at the Guildhall on September 18th 1941, where he was formally welcomed by two other Honorary Freemen, Mr. C.W. Dyson Perrins and Earl Baldwin of Bewdley. It was just a month later that the *Evening News* announced his death on October 18th under the headline, 'The City's Loss'.¹⁶⁴ Eight mayors attended his funeral in the Cathedral. In his address the Mayor's chaplain, in paying tribute to Fairbairn's sense of

¹⁶¹ MYLECHREEST D. 'A Close Run Thing: The General Election of 1945 in Worcester'. Unpublished MA Independent Study, University College, Worcester 2000.

¹⁶² *Worcester Evening News and Times*, (date presumed - May 1941), F.S. Box 12, Vol. 3, p3. W.R.O.

¹⁶³ *Worcester Evening News and Times*, July 2nd 1941. F.S. Box 12, Vol 3, p5. W.R.O.

¹⁶⁴ *Worcester Evening New and Times*, October 18th 1941. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 3, p4. W.R.O.

duty and honesty, said, 'an honest man in public affairs is always an asset to the community'.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ *Worcester Evening News and Times*, October 18th 1941. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 3, p4. W.R.O.

A Singular Liberal: An Assessment

Richard Fairbairn's election as Worcester's MP in 1922 coincided with a major shift in the balance of the parties in the House of Commons. As a result of that election the divided Liberals lost their position as the second party in the House of Commons to Labour and Fairbairn, as one of the few new Liberal MPs, joined Labour members on the Opposition benches. When Fairbairn lost his seat in 1923 the Liberals, reunited in defence of Free Trade, regained some seats in the Commons but Labour's increased strength confirmed its position. With the formation of Labour's first minority government in 1924 the chances of a Liberal recovery became increasingly remote. The rise of the Labour party is just one factor to which the decline of the Liberal party has been attributed.

The debate over the reasons for and the timing of the Liberal decline in the first half of the twentieth century continues. The focus of recent research has moved away from the strength or weakness of the party in Parliament to an examination of constituencies and regions where Liberalism survived, and even flourished, into the 1920s and 30s. These studies have shown local circumstances as a major influence in determining political choices and attitudes. In his study of Norwich, a two-member constituency, Doyle has described the Liberal party's success in general elections in Norwich as 'almost unparalleled in England'. In his view the continued existence of a tight-knit dissenting middle class elite ensured the return of one Liberal MP in all

contested general elections between 1901 and 1935 with the ‘ironic exception of 1923’.¹ In the rural South-west where the Liberals recovered seven seats in 1929, Tregidga came to the conclusion that ‘Liberals could only win those seats where local factors had prevented or delayed the rise of Labour’.² His further observation of the region in the 1930s that ‘the personal appeal of individual candidates could influence the outcome of an election in urban and rural divisions’³ carries clear resonances for the situation in Worcester. Labour had been slow to organise in Worcester and it was not until 1929 that a young and charismatic Labour candidate presented a serious challenge to Fairbairn. This was the first and only occasion when he came third in the poll. In the general elections between 1924 and 1935, support for the Labour party in the constituency fluctuated considerably while Fairbairn consistently polled around 6000 votes representing about 25% of the total. How far these results may be attributed to Fairbairn’s personal reputation or whether they reflected support for Liberal policies it is impossible to determine. As the face of the party in the constituency Fairbairn had kept Liberalism alive but, as he was well aware when campaigning, his standing in the community and record of long service could also influence voting behaviour.

When Fairbairn became a councillor in Worcester in 1899 he introduced an alternative voice which had been missing from Worcester politics for some time. Liberalism appears to have been dormant, if not invisible, in the city during the 1890s and Fairbairn’s impatience to get things done brought a new, and sometimes unwelcome, element to the council’s business. With his trade union background and radical

¹ DOYLE Barry M., ‘A Conflict of Interests? The Local and National Dimensions of Middle Class Liberalism in Norwich 1900-1935’. *Parliament and Locality 1660-1936*, ed. DEAN David and JONES Clyde, Edinburgh 1998, p.132

² TREGIDGA Garry, *The Liberal Party in South-West Britain since 1918*. Exeter 2000 p. 50

connections, it was inevitable that Fairbairn was drawn into the politics of the left. He made an immediate impact on the political life of Worcester but, without the support of Earl Beauchamp, he may well have remained a lone voice. Beauchamp, a former mayor of Worcester at the age of twenty- four, came from a family of Tory landowners but the coincidence of his surprise conversion to Liberalism with Fairbairn's arrival in Worcester resulted in an injection of new life and excitement into the local party. It was the combination of Fairbairn's energy, Beauchamp's money and the cause of Free Trade which resurrected Worcester Liberals at the same time as a national revival within the party.

It may be said that Fairbairn pulled Worcester Liberals into the twentieth century by introducing the ideas of the 'new' Liberalism to them. As a councillor he became a spokesman for the poorer members of the community whose welfare, wages and living conditions were a constant concern throughout his career. As a Liberal, his support for the traditional Liberal principles of 'peace, retrenchment and reform' and Free Trade may almost be taken for granted but ideas evolving from discussions among radical groups, such as the Rainbow Circle, appeared to offer a chance of achieving change for the better. The new Liberalism, which represented a change of emphasis from nineteenth century *laissez faire* towards more positive action to alleviate social problems by the state, was a policy with which Fairbairn could identify. His initial role in Worcester was that of organiser, rather than policy maker but his public endorsement of the introduction of Old Age Pensions and Lloyd George's Budget demonstrated his commitment to the new thinking. There appears to have been little, if any, resistance to these new ideas among local Liberals and how far this was due to excitement generated by Beauchamp's

³ *ibid* p.74

hospitality, Fairbairn's powers of persuasion, or mere inertia, is impossible to judge.

Beauchamp appears to have been willing to support local activities but his responsibilities elsewhere inevitably limited his personal involvement in the local party and it seems likely that, as time went on, Fairbairn was increasingly taking the lead in policy matters.

The National Insurance Act of 1911 perhaps best epitomises the new Liberalism, and Fairbairn, in action. While central government retained overall control, committees set up by local authorities were allowed some discretionary powers in the implementation and day to day running of the scheme. Fairbairn's position as the chairman of the local committee gave him the opportunity to use these powers to create a scheme which was regarded as a model for others. His administrative skills and his command of detail was recognised beyond the immediate area. His long-term membership and involvement in the Friendly Society movement, in addition to his Liberal principles, may well explain his commitment to insurance issues. In his position as chairman of the National Insurance committee, Fairbairn was able to put his Liberal principles into practical effect and, it may be said to have been his most tangible and positive achievement.

Unlike some Liberals, Fairbairn accepted the need for greater central government control at the time of a national emergency. His willingness to undertake a wide variety of extra responsibilities during war-time demonstrates his concern for the community as well as his sense of patriotism. However, when the war was over, his strenuous defence of local decision-making, as opposed to direction and intervention from the centre, became a constant theme in the 1920s and 30s. Again this is in tune with his Liberal philosophy.

Fairbairn's faith in representative government as a guarantee of personal liberty was central to his Liberalism. One of the reasons he gave for his refusal to become an Alderman was that he preferred to be an elected member of the council. When Lloyd George proposed to fight the 1918 election as the leader of a continued coalition government, Fairbairn felt betrayed by the man he had once regarded as his hero. In his opinion, Lloyd George had abandoned his Liberal principles and to Fairbairn this was unacceptable. In his election address in 1918 Fairbairn omitted any reference to the Liberal party and, implicit in the document was his rejection of Lloyd George and his continued loyalty to Asquith as leader of the party. He was not prepared to compromise his principles for political expediency. Once again Worcester Liberals followed his lead, as they did two years later when they accepted, without question, his resolution to support the decision made by Asquith's supporters at Leamington in 1920, to reject fusion with the Coalition Liberals.

At the beginning of his career Fairbairn's political ideas had much in common with the emerging Labour party and perhaps, in a different environment, he might have even joined the Labour party. Always a Liberal, he was not afraid to admit his support for specific Labour policies, particularly in the election campaigns in 1910 and 1918, and he let it be known that he had been invited to stand as a Labour candidate on more than one occasion. He had always refused. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as an MP he voted with the Labour opposition. Fairbairn's relationship with the Labour party changed as the political circumstances changed. When he first arrived in Worcester, he could expect the votes of any progressive voters and, although a definite commitment was not always made, this situation continued until 1923. This was the election in which Fairbairn lost his seat and

Labour contested Worcester for the first time. The Labour intervention on that occasion was not the cause of Fairbairn's defeat but it could be presumed that there would be a Labour candidate in future campaigns. Fairbairn's sympathies towards the Labour party appear to have faded after he had seen a Labour government in action and he was highly critical of Labour's foreign policy in 1924. In 1931 his declaration that he was too independent to be a Socialist, and his concern for the effect on world opinion of another Labour government, ended any real possibility of any future cooperation. As Labour's policies became more distinct, Fairbairn's attachment to his Liberal values appears to have become more entrenched. His continued optimism and frequently expressed hopes for the future of the party, despite a national picture of declining numbers and withering organisation, are features of his later years.

Fairbairn's one victory in a general election campaign may be regarded as the highlight of his political career. He was undoubtedly a conscientious constituency MP representing his constituents' interests by using his position to take 'Worcester to Westminster' and ensuring that Worcester was informed of his activities in Parliament. However, as an Opposition backbencher he could only play a minor part in the business in the House and the question arises as to whether he had any serious parliamentary ambitions. Although he did have connections outside Worcester through the Liberal party, National Insurance and the Liberal agents' organisation, his interest and his focus were limited largely to Worcester. His seat had been won primarily because of his opponent's weakness and, having spent a comparatively short term as an MP, he seems to have accepted his defeat after one year with equanimity. The impression gained from his career after Parliament is that he could be more effective and more comfortable in the

smaller arena. Fairbairn's experience as an MP was not wasted. On his return to Worcester he was as busy as ever and, although the Conservatives continued to dominate the council numerically, they appear to have been more willing to listen to Fairbairn's views, and even take his advice. His period as an MP had undoubtedly added to his authority and he was prepared to speak out against the encroachment of central government into local affairs. With time, divisions between the parties became less marked and Fairbairn's contribution both as a politician and an efficient administrator was invaluable to the council.

Fairbairn's commitment to his Liberal principles was a consistent feature of his whole career. The driving force behind the revival of the Liberal party in Worcester, he was largely responsible for the survival of the party in the city up to his death in 1941. As a young man he had adopted the ideas of the new Liberalism and devoted his considerable energies to the practical application of those ideas. Through his numerous activities he touched the lives of many in Worcester and he earned the respect of his political opponents as well as his supporters. He is still remembered as 'good old Dickie' even by those who never met him. It was once said that he could have been a successful businessman or a lawyer but he appears to have had no greater ambition than to improve the conditions for the people of Worcester. If he had harboured ambitions to hold high office, he could have joined the Labour party, but he refused to compromise his political beliefs and condemned those who did. With a relatively small body of loyal supporters, and after 1931 with little money or organisation, he fought for his particular interpretation of Liberalism. To the politically ambitious Fairbairn's horizons may appear somewhat limited but this may have been dictated as much by circumstances as by personal

inclination. Financially dependent on the Liberal party from 1908, he did not have the means, or the connections, to seek higher office and with the collapse of the party's organisation in the 1920s, opportunities were scarce. Always aware that Worcester Liberals looked to him for a lead, he seems to have been content to put his Liberal principles into practice within his adopted city where he could make his voice heard and be more effective in the local community. Fairbairn's career in Worcester, along with those of his contemporaries elsewhere such as Raymond Jones⁴ and Hayden Jones⁵, demonstrates how, through the efforts of a committed individual, Liberalism was able to survive at a time of national decline. Fairbairn provided his own verdict when he said of himself that 'as an old Radical ever since he took an interest in politics ... he was determined to shew (*sic*) his friends in Worcester what one man could do'.⁶

⁴ HUNTER IAN, 'At the Heart of the Party.' *Journal of Liberal History*, 46, Spring 2005. (Raymond Jones 1883-1948 Constituency organiser, election agent and Parliamentary candidate.)

⁵ JONES J. Graham, 'To Hold the Flag: Sir Henry Hayden Jones 1863-1950' *Journal of Liberal History*, 50, Spring 2006. (Jones, a Welsh Liberal MP 1929-1945, was also a county councillor for 61 years and ran his own business).

⁶ *The Malvern Gazette*, July 11th 1936. F.S. Box 12, Vol. 1, p138. W.R.O.

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APPENDIX CONTENTS

1. Fig. 1. Richard Robert Fairbairn 1867 – 1941
2. Fig. 2. Councillor Fairbairn as portrayed in the local press in 1934
3. Fig. 3. From Richard Fairbairn's scrapbook