

Presidential Address

THE POLITICS OF DRINK IN BRITAIN: ANGLO-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

David M. Fahey *

We meet today [April 29, 2000] in Westerville, Ohio, once the home of the Anti-Saloon League of America. Despite the concluding words, “of America,” the League rightly regarded itself as part of an international movement against alcoholic drink. After the Eighteenth Amendment had established national prohibition in the United States, the League enjoyed the leisure to organize the World League against alcoholism to sponsor a six-volume encyclopedia which surveyed the temperance movement throughout the world.

When I explored the politics of drink in Britain in my first paper at an Ohio Academy conference, way back in 1970, my focus was narrowly British. In recent years I have decided that what happened in Britain and what didn't happen in Britain makes the most sense when examined from Anglo-American perspectives. Probably the Anti-Saloon League would have agreed.

What stand out are the similarities between Britain and the USA and their respective temperance movements. The United Kingdom was a country in which most people drank and a sizable minority did not. Let me correct this: most men drank and a sizable minority of men did not. Most teetotalers were women. The same could be said about the USA. Other than the United States, the UK was the most populous country with a large and well-organized temperance movement. In both countries teetotalers typically were evangelical Protestants. In both countries the temperance movement received support at least some of the time from “moderate” drinkers, especially middle-class drinkers. Although these “respectable” non-abstainers didn't consider alcoholic beverages sinful, they often worried about heavy drinking by men who weren't “respectable,” whether they were immigrants or racial minorities or simply working-class. Why? It was assumed that alcoholic drink aggravated worrisome social problems such

as poverty, crime, and disorder. Nearly all the time the drink problem was defined in gendered terms, a problem of men drinking.

Despite these similarities, the outcome of a century of temperance agitation was dramatically different in the two countries. Shortly after the First World War, the United States adopted a constitutional amendment for national prohibition. By this time the temperance movement in Britain had collapsed. My central question this afternoon is: why did prohibition become the law of the land in the United States but, with the partial exception of Scotland, not in Britain?

When we look for national differences to answer this question, we might as well begin with constitutional structure since it is indisputable. The American federal system allowed the temperance movement to experiment where temperance supporters were strong. Individual states enacted their own laws. For instance, in the early 1850s Maine pioneered statewide prohibition. In contrast, for the United Kingdom there was only a single Parliament. Sometimes this Parliament enacted legislation for Scotland, Ireland, and Wales which did not apply in England—for instance, Sunday closing—but this happened only when the English MP's could be persuaded to allow these special laws. And temperance strongholds within England (for example, Cornwall) never obtained legislation to permit local experiments. So, differences in constitutional structure helped the temperance movement in the USA and hindered it in Britain.

Social and cultural divergences mattered even more, but they are hard to weigh or even define. Let me suggest a few, more-or-less at random. In this afternoon's talk my focus is on England, the predominant nation within the United Kingdom. Its temperance movement was weaker than counterparts in Scotland, Wales, and the mostly Presbyterian northeastern counties of Ireland. Evangelical Protestants, who dominated the teetotal subculture, made up a far larger proportion of the population in the USA than in England. The social and religious structure in England—where at the turn of the century a landed aristocracy and a state church still exercised influence—discouraged radical reform. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union was more prominent in the United States than were women's temperance societies in England, further evidence of England's social and cultural traditionalism. English brewers exercised greater influence in national politics than did their counterparts in the United States, where many brewers could be stigmatized as German "foreigners." In England, too, there was a widespread affection for the local pub, an attitude shared by drinkers who

didn't drink there, albeit not by teetotalers. In the USA the saloon had few friends other than the men who drank there. Hardest to document but also important was the greater optimism in American public life about the power of law to reform human behavior.

In a dramatic contrast with the United States, prohibition in England became identified with only one of the major political parties—the Liberal Party—and consequently a partisan issue. Moreover, this party was weakened by the Irish Home Rule controversy in the mid-1880s, was out of office continuously from 1895 to 1905, and, even after winning a large majority in the House of Commons in 1906, could be blocked by a House of Lords overwhelmingly composed of partisans of the other major party. By the way, I will call this other party by the familiar name, the Conservative Party, although contemporaries called it the Unionist Party beginning in the late 1880s when dissident Liberals allied themselves with the Conservatives over the issue of maintaining the union between Ireland and Britain. Virtually everybody in Parliament, Liberals and Conservatives alike, acknowledged that there was a drink problem, but nearly all the Members of Parliament pledged to the solution of local option prohibition were Liberals.

All these differences invite research—every tentative answer raises new questions—but let me use this afternoon to sketch another perplexing Anglo-American contrast: the failure of English temperance reformers to unite behind the prohibition banner. Long before 1895, a year which many historians see as marking the beginning of the end for prohibition as a political issue, English prohibitionists proclaimed their weakness by asking for so little. This moderation contrasted painfully with the apocalyptic analysis of the evil to be uprooted put forward to justify prohibition.

Early in the history of the American temperance movement most reformers embraced some kind of prohibition. In England only the so-called advanced temperance party embraced even the most moderate form of prohibition, local option by referendum. Other temperance organizations, for instance, the Church of England Temperance Society, advocated less drastic solutions to the drink problem. Few Liberal politicians who pledged themselves to vote for local option prohibition in Parliament wanted a “dry” England.

I further argue that after 1895 the prohibitionists lost something that they once had enjoyed: namely, control over the terms of debate for the political discourse on the drink problem. Other strategies—such as reduc-

ing the number of public houses and experimenting with non-commercial management of public houses—marginalized prohibition.

Consider the story with a bit more chronological detail. In England prohibition entered the political debate when the United Kingdom Alliance was organized in 1853 to support what people called the Maine law, statutory prohibition pioneered by the New England state. Although the Alliance first asked for UK prohibition, four years later it beat a tactical retreat to local option to be decided by popular vote in what came to be called Direct Local Veto. Prohibitionists originally supported local option as a compromise, but they virtually forgot about national statutory prohibition after years of repeating the rhetoric about letting the people decide.

In the 1880s the United Kingdom Alliance succeeded in persuading the Liberal Party to endorse legislation to allow local option prohibition. For the Liberals this was a matter of political expediency, gilded with the ideology of local democracy. After the expansion of the suffrage in the late nineteenth century, observers estimated the number of total abstainers as anywhere from one in ten to one in seven of the parliamentary electorate. Most of them were Nonconformists in religion, that is, Protestants who did not belong to the established Church of England. Many Liberal Party constituency workers—maybe thirty per cent—were teetotalers and prohibitionists.

The strongest supporter of Local Veto in the Liberal leadership was Sir William Harcourt. Years earlier he had scoffed at temperance legislation as grandmotherly interference with the liberties of honest Englishmen, and, like nearly all members of the ruling elite, he personally enjoyed alcoholic beverages and had no intention of turning teetotaler. He wanted the Liberal Party to add Local Veto to its program in order to reinvigorate the enthusiasm of its provincial Nonconformist cadres. Harcourt persuaded a reluctant William Gladstone to accept local option prohibition as part of the Liberal electoral program.

In 1893 and 1895 Harcourt introduced Liberal government bills for local option prohibition in England and Wales. The two bills would have banned only public house and beer-house drinking, not drinking in middle-class restaurants or private clubs and not sales for off-premises consumption. Harcourt acknowledged that he himself would vote against prohibition if there ever was a referendum in the district where he lived. Harcourt's two bills died in the House of Commons without the Government bothering to bring them to a final vote. This half-hearted effort marked the high-water

mark for prohibition in English politics.

Harcourt's bills outraged the drink trade and offended ordinary people who respected the public house as the workingman's club. By the way, I use this gendered term deliberately because the controversy over drink was gendered. When the Liberal Party suffered a disastrous general election defeat in 1895, many Liberals blamed the Veto policy at least in part. Critics also argued that giving prohibition priority blocked more practicable licensing reforms.

The reaction against prohibition stimulated a turn-of-the-century debate over the drink problem. Part of the explanation why England did not turn to prohibition during the First World War, in contrast with countries as varied as the USA and Russia, lies in the rich profusion of licensing reform schemes discussed during the 1890s and early 1900s. Reformers increasingly framed the drink problem as part of the agenda for national efficiency and not one of private morality. Although police statistics suggested an improvement in working-class sobriety during these years, poverty researchers estimated that working-class families still spent from a sixth to a third of their income on alcoholic beverages. Sobered by the challenge posed by Germany and the United States, the policy-making classes in the United Kingdom wanted to end "excessive" drinking—whatever this meant—but not end drinking altogether. Teetotalers and prohibitionists lost influence as moderate reformers began to dominate the debate over alcoholic drink and hoped to remove it from partisan politics.

Many moderate reformers worried about the large number of public houses, so they advocated a reduction in the numbers of the places that sold alcohol by the drink. For instance, around the turn of the century it was calculated that in Birmingham there was a house licensed to sell alcoholic drink for every 217 persons (or one for every 140 persons over the age of fifteen). For many years the Church of England Temperance Society had made reduction in numbers the heart of its legislative program. In 1896 a Conservative government, heeding an appeal by the Archbishop of Canterbury, created a Royal Commission on the Licensing Laws.

Although the Royal Commission disagreed about a great deal, its majority and minority reports, published in 1899, agreed on reduction in numbers as the core strategy for dealing with excessive working-class drinking. This consensus inspired the justices of the peace who administered the existing law to use their discretionary power to refuse to renew

licenses in order to reduce the number of drinking places. This terrified the drink trade. In England most licensed premises had been acquired by the brewers to assure outlets for their beer, so they faced staggering financial losses if the justices refused to renew licenses simply for the purpose of reducing numbers.

The brewers demanded that the Conservative government enact a new law to protect their investments. At first prime minister A.J. Balfour hesitated. He did not want to put his government at odds with moderate reformers, who often were active members of his own party, or offend the brewers who were important Conservative supporters. Eventually, in 1904, Balfour introduced a licensing bill which he could represent as reform because it mandated a reduction in the numbers of licensed premises and so was not simply a favor conferred on the brewers. The bill established a right of compensation for non-renewal with the money coming from the license holders who retained their licenses. Since the funds for compensation in any particular year were restricted, the number of licenses to be terminated was also limited. Reduction in numbers had to be gradual. This compromise outraged many reformers who had defeated previous attempts to establish a legal right to compensation.

Soon the Liberals returned to power and in 1908 introduced a comprehensive licensing bill. Although it included Direct Local Veto, prohibition was not at its core. Instead the major proposal was for a more aggressive reduction in the numbers of public houses than Balfour's modest compensation fund had made possible. The Conservative-dominated House of Lords rejected the Liberal bill.

The Liberals did succeed in providing Scotland with local option prohibition as a result of legislation enacted in 1913 and implemented in 1920. Very few districts chose to vote themselves "dry," so the legislation was only a symbolic victory for Scottish prohibitionists. It certainly failed to advance the cause of prohibition in England.

Around the turn-of-the-century another solution to the drink question gained popularity in England: the Scandinavian system of non-commercial or disinterested management. Taking for granted that people would continue to drink, advocates of disinterested management wanted to eliminate the profit motive which supposedly encouraged publicans to persuade customers to drink more than they wanted to drink. A few wealthy friends of disinterested management, often Conservatives in politics, invested their own money in

the trust house movement, buying public houses and running them in ways to discourage drinking (which obviously limited profits). Other reformers, mostly Liberals, organized the Temperance Legislation League to lobby for legislation to permit local experiments in which all public houses in a district would be run on the principle of disinterested management.

During the First World War there were new attacks upon the drink status quo and, equally important, a political situation which weakened the ability of pressure groups to block change. Responding to a crisis which demanded sobriety, George V pledged himself not to drink for the duration of the war. Few followed the King's Pledge, and, obedient to his doctor's orders, the King himself occasionally imbibed in private. More important was the role of David Lloyd George, a charismatic politician from Wales, a temperance stronghold. He told the country that "we are fighting Germany, Austria, and drink and the greatest of these deadly foes is drink." For a remedy he looked to a national version of disinterested management and not to prohibition. He floated the idea of state purchase of the licensed drink trade in order to control and restrict it. Brewers accepted the idea of state purchase, provided compensation would be generous. It was the enormous amount of money needed for compensation which blocked the nationalizing of the drink trade.

Early in the war Parliament had created the Central Control Board, armed with unprecedented powers to cope with the wartime emergency. It was more successful than Lloyd George in reducing the consumption of drink. For instance, it reduced the hours when public houses could be open for business. Pubs had to close their doors in mid-afternoon to discourage workers from "soaking" or continuous drinking. Prewar discussions by reformers and politicians had not considered mid-afternoon closing, but in 1921, when Parliament passed a new consolidating licensing act, it retained a mid-afternoon period when public houses could not sell alcoholic drink. Only recently was this law repealed.

In the 1920s and 1930s a handful of Liberal and Labour Party politicians still supported Direct Local Veto, and national prohibition in the United States gave English prohibitionists an illusionary basis for hope of banning the sale of drink in their own country. Despite this faint afterglow, the reality was that prohibition had all but disappeared from political debate. The Nonconformists who had been the core of the temperance movement were dwindling in numbers and self-confidence. Despite the plight of the inter-war economy, the advocates of national efficiency had lost interest in the impact

of drink on the working class. At a time when national prohibition prevailed across the Atlantic in the USA, prohibition was no longer a serious political question in England even in the modest form of local option.

Had the fight for sobriety been a complete failure? Certainly, if prohibition is the standard. If reduction in the consumption of alcoholic drink is the criterion, the answer is not so negative. Per capita consumption of beer, the working-class drink, fell from over thirty-four standard gallons in the mid-1870s to as little as eleven gallons in the early 1930s. The temperance movement deserves only a small part of the credit for this dramatic decline in beer drinking, but the ironic fact remains that by the time that the United States decided to repeal national prohibition British workers had become relatively sober.

NOTE

* This paper borrows from my presentation at the American Historical Association, in January 1997, "Prohibition in Comparative Perspective," and from the manuscript of the book that I am writing, *"Too Many Pubs": The Politics of Drink in England from Gladstone to Asquith*, as well as from articles which I have published since the 1970s and others in press. For the development of my ideas, see my memoir, "Chance and Change," *Social History of Alcohol Review*, no. 34/35 (1997): 8-11.