

**Journal of the Canadian Historical Association**  
**Revue de la Société historique du Canada**

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Canadian Historical Association  
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Société historique du Canada

**Constructing the Citizen: The Primrose League and the  
Definition of Citizenship in the Age of Mass Democracy in  
Britain, 1918-1928**

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Volume 7, Number 1, 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031105ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/031105ar>

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**Publisher(s)**

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

**ISSN**

0847-4478 (print)  
1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

**Cite this article**

Hendley, M. (1996). Constructing the Citizen: The Primrose League and the Definition of Citizenship in the Age of Mass Democracy in Britain, 1918-1928. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 7(1), 125-151. <https://doi.org/10.7202/031105ar>

**Article abstract**

The Primrose League was a patriotic mass organisation nominally independent from, but allied to the British Conservative Party. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it politically mobilised large numbers of British women. In addition, through its social activities, the League assisted with the social integration of those holding full political rights with those who did not. The Fourth Reform Act of 1918 fundamentally altered the structure of British politics by tripling the size of the electorate and giving the vote to a significant number of British women for the first time. In this new political environment, Conservatives were concerned with countering the rising Labour Party and limiting the expectations of new voters. After 1918, the Primrose League attempted to define or construct a partisan model of citizenship. The League's model emphasised citizens' duties, individuals' civil rights and the idea of active citizenship. This campaign both helped the Conservative Party to adjust to the new political order and gave the Primrose League a new role to play in the age of mass democracy.

# Constructing the Citizen: The Primrose League and the Definition of Citizenship in the Age of Mass Democracy in Britain, 1918-1928

MATTHEW HENDLEY

CITIZENSHIP IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY GREAT BRITAIN has been a fluid concept. The political, legal and cultural definitions of citizenship have been in constant evolution. Recent scholarship has focused on key pieces of legislation, such as the Aliens Act of 1905, the Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seaman) Order of 1925 and the British Nationality Act of 1948, as important moments in defining British citizenship and nationality.<sup>1</sup> Historians of immigration have similarly been aware of the legal debates over citizenship.<sup>2</sup> The influence of the education system in constructing young citizens has also been ably examined.<sup>3</sup> Equally important, though more neglected, are the constructions of citizenship in the arena of popular politics. Outside of

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The author wishes to thank Professor Trevor Lloyd, Stephen Heathorn, Joe Behar, Andrea Smith, Michelle Hendley, Simon Devereaux and the *Journal's* anonymous readers for reading drafts of this paper. Thanks also to members of the British History Discussion Group at the University of Toronto for their comments on a presentation of an earlier version of it. Financial assistance for the research on which the paper is based was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Government of Ontario and the Associates of the University of Toronto.

1 The Aliens Act of 1905 has been the subject of earlier work, such as Bernard Gainer, *The Alien Invasion: The Origins of the Aliens Act of 1905* (London, 1972). More recent treatments include Jill Pellew, "The Home Office and the Aliens Act, 1905," *Historical Journal* 32, 2 (1989): 369-85. Recent scholarship on the 1948 Act includes Kathleen Paul, "'British Subjects' and 'British Stock': Labour's Postwar Imperialism," *Journal of British Studies* 34 (April 1995): 233-75. For recent studies examining the intersection of race and shared imperial nationality before the Second World War, see Laura Tabili, *'We Ask for British Justice': Black Workers and the Construction of Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca, 1994), and "The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925," *Journal of British Studies* 33 (January 1994): 54-98.

2 Ann Dummett and Andrew Nicol, *Subjects, Citizens, Aliens and Others: Nationality and Immigration Law* (London, 1990); J.M. Evans, *Immigration Law* (London, 1983).

3 Stephen Heathorn, "'Let us remember that we, too, are English': Constructions of Citizenship and National Identity in English Elementary School Reading Books, 1880-1914," *Victorian Studies* 37 (Spring 1995): 395-427; James A. Mangan, *Benefits Bestowed? Education and British Imperialism* (Manchester, 1987).

Parliament, popular organisations calling themselves patriotic leagues argued strenuously to define terms such as citizenship which lay at the centre of political discourse.

The decade following the creation of a mass electorate in Great Britain through the Fourth Reform Act of 1918 was a crucial period for the construction of citizenship. During this time, the British Right used the rhetoric of citizenship for its own partisan ends. This paper will focus on the ideological counter-offensive launched by the Primrose League, a mass organisation of the Right. The League constructed a model of citizenship that could be used as a political weapon in the fight against the rising Labour Party. To counter any potential advantage the newly granted political rights of citizenship might give to Labour, the League's model of citizenship emphasised citizens' duties, individuals' civil rights and the idea of active citizenship. "Citizenship" formed the core of the League's campaign to educate recently enfranchised citizens along constitutional and Conservative lines. The Primrose League's efforts helped its long-time ally, the Conservative Party, to adjust to the new world of mass democracy after 1918. These efforts also gave the League a new role to play instead of self-destructing after the turmoil of the First World War.

Citizenship is a particularly difficult concept in the United Kingdom. Under the British Constitution, the notion of "the sovereignty of the Crown-in-Parliament" has precluded more broadly based and democratic concepts of citizenship founded on popular sovereignty. This has prevented "the development of a fully-fledged citizenship based on the democratic concept of the sovereignty of the people."<sup>4</sup> Technically speaking, Britons are subjects of the Queen and not citizens in the usual sense. Despite this technicality, a flurry of recent debate has erupted around citizenship in the United Kingdom. Contemporary Britain has been concerned with such matters as instruction in good citizenship as a part of the National Curriculum, a Citizens' Charter as the guarantor of the efficient delivery of public services, calls for constitutional reform to clarify citizens' rights, and the need for "active citizenship" as the social conscience of Thatcherite enterprise culture.<sup>5</sup>

Debate over citizenship in the early part of the twentieth century was equally intense. A useful starting-point for understanding the debate over the

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4 Derek Heater, "Citizenship: A Remarkable Case of Sudden Interest," *Parliamentary Affairs* 44 (April 1991): 147.

5 Ibid., 140-56; Dawn Oliver, "Active Citizenship in the 1990s," *Parliamentary Affairs* 44 (April 1991): 157-71; Desmond S. King, "New Right Ideology, Welfare State Form, and Citizenship: A Comment on Conservative Capitalism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30 (October 1988): 792-99; Derek Heater, "Civic Britannicus Sum?" *Parliamentary Affairs* 45 (July 1992): 439-40; Katherine Fierlbeck, "Redefining Responsibility: The Politics of Citizenship in the United Kingdom," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 24 (September 1991): 575-93.

various rights of citizenship after the First World War comes from T.H. Marshall's 1949 essay "Citizenship and Social Class." Marshall argued that citizenship in the British context had three key elements: civil, political and social. The civil element of citizenship included the rights necessary to maintain individual freedom in society, such as liberty of the person and freedom of speech. The political element of citizenship included "the right to participate in the exercise of political power as a member of a body invested with political authority or as electors." The social element included "the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security . . . [and] the right to share in social heritage and live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in society."<sup>6</sup> Marshall dated the development of the most crucial civil rights to the eighteenth century and placed the formative period of political rights in the early nineteenth century. However, he argued that political rights were not directly attached to citizenship until 1918 with the concession of universal male suffrage. Social rights were not incorporated into the status of citizenship until the final creation of the welfare state after 1945.<sup>7</sup>

Marshall's understanding of the political and civil rights of citizenship forms one of the points of entry into the partisan construction of citizenship by the Primrose League. Social rights of citizenship played only a minor role in League rhetoric during the 1920s and did not enter the political mainstream until the 1940s.<sup>8</sup> The extension of political rights that accompanied the creation of mass democracy in Britain after 1918 led to a unique situation. The concept of citizenship was once again fluid, and patriotic leagues attempted to define its boundaries. Yet the attempts by extra-parliamentary groups of the Right to define constructions of modern citizenship have been largely unexplored by historians of the First World War and its aftermath. While much has been written on the "plague of leagues" before 1914 and their contribution to the political climate preceding the Great War, less is known about their role

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6 T.H. Marshall, "Citizenship and Social Class," in *Class, Citizenship and Social Development*, Seymour Martin Lipset, ed. (Garden City, 1965 [rpt]), 78.

7 *Ibid.*, 81, 85-86, 93, 121-22, 128.

8 Social rights of citizenship became crucial to the theoretical foundation of the welfare state, and important theorists included Tawney, Marshall, Beveridge and Titmuss. However, as popular politics they were of extremely limited use in the 1920s. Key works by Tawney in the pre-war period include R.H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society* (New York, 1920) and Tawney, *Equality* (London, 1931). During the war, Beveridge's report played a key role; see *Social Insurance and Allied Services: A Report by Sir William Beveridge*, Parliamentary Papers 1942-43, Vol. 4, Cmd. 6404; after the war, R.M. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (London, 1950) and *Essays on the Welfare State* (London, 1958) were of crucial importance, as was T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1950).

after 1918.<sup>9</sup> Even after the war, some patriotic leagues continued to be important forces in British politics. The Primrose League was well positioned to launch an ideological counter-offensive after 1918 for several reasons: its huge pre-war membership gave it a national presence; its predominantly female membership and long association with female involvement in politics gave it an extra advantage in approaching newly enfranchised women; and its traditional combination of politics with social activities and its supposedly independent status outside of the Conservative Party allowed it to pursue its own partisan ends using the rhetoric of citizenship while appearing to remain above the fray of electoral politics.

The Primrose League was a Victorian creation, born in the aftermath of the struggle for the leadership of the Conservative Party after Disraeli's death in 1881. The original idea for the League sprang from the mind of Sir Henry Drummond Wolff and was developed through discussions with other Conservative Members of Parliament, including Lord Randolph Churchill and John Gorst. Churchill originally wished the organisation to be "a semi secret society" for younger and more animated politicians rather than a mass organisation, but his narrow conception was soon transformed as the League was reconceptualised and developed by Wolff.<sup>10</sup>

In theory, the Primrose League was a popular organisation independent of the Conservative Party and devoted to immutable "principles," including "the maintenance of Religion, the Estates of the Realm and the unity of the British Empire."<sup>11</sup> The League took great pride in pointing out that it received no money from the Conservative Party proper, relying instead on the donations

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9 For a discussion of the most prominent patriotic leagues of the Edwardian period, see: Matthew Hendley, "'Help Us to Secure a Strong, Healthy and Prosperous Britain': The Social Arguments of the Campaign for Compulsory Military Service in Britain, 1899-1914," *Canadian Journal of History* 30 (August 1995): 261-88; Frans Coetzee, *For Party or Country: Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Popular Conservatism in Edwardian England* (New York and Oxford, 1990); Anne Summers, "The Character of Edwardian Nationalism: Three Popular Leagues," in *Nationalist and Racist Movements in Britain and Germany Before 1914*. Paul Kennedy and Anthony Nicholls, eds. (London, 1981), 68-97; G.R. Searle, "The Critics of Edwardian Society: The Case of the Radical Right," in *The Edwardian Age: Conflict and Stability*. Alan O'Day, ed. (London, 1979), 79-96; and Anne Summers, "Militarism in Britain before the Great War," *History Workshop Journal* 2 (Autumn 1976): 104-23. John MacKenzie devotes some attention to patriotic and imperial organisations, but most of his focus is on their pre-war activities; see MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion* (Manchester, 1984), 148-157. Stephen Constantine, ed. *Emigrants and Empire: British Settlement in the Dominions Between the Wars* (Manchester, 1990) mentions the role of imperialist organisations like the Victoria League in assisting imperial emigration at 82, 106, 129.

10 Martin Pugh, *The Tories and the People 1880-1935* (Oxford, 1985), 12-13.

11 *Ibid.*, 13.

("tributes") of its local branches ("habitations") and on funds provided by wealthy supporters. However, most opposition Liberal policies, ranging from Home Rule for Ireland to attacks on privilege, conflicted with its "principles," so the League seldom found itself in disagreement with the Conservative Party. Moreover, the higher levels of its membership overlapped considerably with those of the Conservatives. From the beginning, in fact, the League's two main leadership positions, that of Chancellor and the figurehead Grand Master, were always held by leading Conservatives. Indeed, the post of Grand Master was frequently held by the leader of the Conservative Party. In practice, the Primrose League served as an army of unpaid canvassers to assist the Conservative Party during elections. The electoral register had to be revised annually, and the complexities of the post-1885 franchise made the process of qualifying and registering for the vote formidable.<sup>12</sup> As Ewen Green has noted in his work *The Crisis of Conservatism*, political advantage required "Constant scrutiny of the electoral register . . . to ensure that one's supporters were not overlooked."<sup>13</sup> To secure a register of maximum value for partisan supporters, a thorough knowledge of local political and voting allegiances was required. The League served as "an ideal mechanism for ascertaining this information via its membership and social functions."<sup>14</sup>

While the League's value to the Conservative Party lay in its canvassing functions, its popularity rested on its clever manipulation of both ancient and contemporary cultural symbols. The League's best-known symbol and namesake, the primrose, was supposedly the favourite flower of Benjamin Disraeli, long-time Conservative leader and twice Prime Minister. The League's organisation and symbols were an odd blend, combining "a crusading chivalric order, such as the Templars or the Hospitallers" with "the quaintness of benefit societies like the Foresters, Oddfellows and Druids." All told, the League had an "elaborate pseudo-medieval structure" with "a panoply of knights, presided over by a chancellor and a grand ruling council of knights imperial." Among the general membership, Masonic-type emblems and badges were much in evidence.<sup>15</sup>

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12 There has been significant historical debate over the impact of this restricted franchise on support for the Conservative, Liberal and Labour parties. See Ross McKibbin, Colin Matthew and John Kay, "The Franchise Factor and the Rise of Labour," in Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford, 1994); and Neal Blewett, "The Franchise in the United Kingdom 1885-1918," *Past and Present* 32 (1965): 27-56.

13 Ewen Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism: The Politics, Economics and Ideology of the British Conservative Party 1880-1914* (London and New York, 1995), 126.

14 Ibid.

15 Richard Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury 1881-1902: Unionism and Empire* (London, 1996), 114-17; Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, 21-24. The rage for medieval symbols in Victorian society has been demonstrated in Mark Girouard's work, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven, 1981).

This quaint and colourful organisation grew to a formidable size by the beginning of the twentieth century. The possible disestablishment of the Church of England promised by Joseph Chamberlain's "Unauthorized Programme," as well as the more real threat of Gladstone's Home Rule legislation for Ireland of 1885-1886, led to an enormous growth in League numbers. Starting with barely 1,000 members enrolled in March 1884, enrolments grew to well over 10,000 in March 1885 and to over 500,000 by March 1887. This rise continued well after the Liberal split over Home Rule in 1886 and even after the Liberals' triumphant victory in the general election of 1906. The League's enrolment numbers topped 1 million in March 1891; by March 1910 they stood at 2 million.<sup>16</sup> The actual functioning membership was about one-third of the size of total enrolments by 1914, but even these numbers were impressive.<sup>17</sup> Membership in the League did not necessarily reflect any profound political commitment, but the organisation's vast size is startling. So too is the lack of attention paid to it by most political historians of the period. This seems especially problematic when one seeks to explain the Conservatives' political domination in the 20 years following Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill.<sup>18</sup>

The exact social composition of the League membership is difficult to determine. In her dissertation on the Victorian Primrose League, Elaine Sheets argues that the regional and local leadership of the League was comprised largely of nobles, professionals and men of commerce. However, although all classes were not equally represented, the rank-and-file membership was more diverse, "consisting of local notables, military, religious and professional members of the community as well as labour, agricultural and domestic workers."<sup>19</sup> What is undeniable is the League's national reach. In his book *The Tories and the People*, Martin Pugh has identified over 2,300 habitations throughout the United Kingdom in both rural and urban areas. Although many habitations did not last, it is remarkable that even skilled workers in strong-

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16 Official enrolment figures were as follows: March 1884: 957; March 1885: 11,366; March 1886: 200,837; March 1887: 550,508; March 1891: 1,001,292; March 1910: 2,053,019. Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, 27.

17 Ibid., 167.

18 The two major published monographs on the Primrose League appeared almost 50 years apart: Janet Robb, *The Primrose League* (New York, 1942) and Martin Pugh, *The Tories and the People*. An important unpublished thesis is Diana Elaine Sheets, "British Conservatism and the Primrose League: The Changing Nature of Popular Politics 1883-1901," PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1986. There is some interesting material in Beatrix Campbell, *The Iron Ladies: Why Do Women Vote Tory?* (London, 1987), Chapters 1 and 2. The first serious consideration of the League as an important political agent was by Moisei Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties*, Vol. 1 (London, 1902 [rpt. Chicago 1964]).

19 Sheets, "British Conservatism and the Primrose League," 226-27.

holds of Gladstonian Liberalism or socialism such as Newcastle, Sheffield, Walthamstow and Bradford, were involved with the League.<sup>20</sup>

The vast size of the League and its reliance on local organisation made national coordination difficult. The League's main publication, *The Primrose League Gazette*, played a central role in maintaining communications between the diverse habitations. The *Gazette* was distributed through subscriptions organised by the habitations and through general sales throughout Britain. Between 1918 and 1928, the *Gazette*'s regular features included an Empire page, reports on the work of individual habitations and regular parliamentary comment, as well as pieces on the League's political opponents entitled "What the Reds are Doing." Exact circulation figures are difficult to gauge, but by the mid-1920s about 15,000 copies of each issue were being printed, with many being sent to habitations where they would be both shared among members and distributed to individuals.<sup>21</sup>

The Primrose League's success was not solely the result of its vague principles or superior organisational skills. The League quickly grasped the importance of mixing sociability with politics. In 1902, Moisei Ostrogorski, a Russian observer of British politics, noted that the League was able to fulfil the need that lower-class English voters felt for "outward attention from persons of a higher social rank . . . by ensuring through its organization a permanent supply of civil speeches and smiles." The passage of the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act in 1883 changed the parameters of popular politics by tightening rules on electoral expenditure and other forms of electoral influence, such as treating and bribing voters.<sup>22</sup> In the aftermath of the 1883 Act, the League's social function "could be used as a safe means of electoral bribery."<sup>23</sup> Later historians of the League, such as Martin Pugh, have argued that it met many of the characteristics of a movement for social integration. It had a wide membership which, "to a large extent . . . [crossed] the boundaries of sex, class and age." That the League readily took non-electors as members and that it functioned throughout the year (not just during elections) were of key importance. Equally important, social integration for the League was not achieved merely through shared political beliefs. The League "moved beyond the political sphere and into the social life of its members."<sup>24</sup> With its fêtes, garden parties and family

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20 Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, 94, 136.

21 "The Primrose League: Annual Report of Grand Council to Grand Habitation, 1927-28"; "Report of the Finance Committee, 3 December 1925," Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaves 811, 1003-05.

22 L.M. Helmore, *Corrupt and Illegal Practices: A General Survey and a Case Study of an Election Petition* (London, 1967), 27-28.

23 Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties*, Vol. 1, 259-60.

24 Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, 41.



outings, the League offered an innocuous but important way for citizens with full political rights to mix with those who were still denied them. Ewen Green has noted that, in addition, the League offered a chance for the middle classes to mix with the local gentry.<sup>25</sup>

A vitally important accomplishment of the League was its involvement of British women in politics. The Primrose League had several partisan equivalents among its Liberal and Labour rivals, including the more serious-minded and considerably smaller Women's Liberal Federation, the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Women's Trade Union League. In all of these political movements, women were segregated or placed outside the actual official party organisation and were pressured to play down the issue of women's suffrage to avoid political divisions. However, there were several crucial points of difference between the Primrose League and its rivals. To begin with, it was far more successful at mobilising women than its opponents. Consequently, the League provided substantial opportunities for men and women to work together throughout the country, though at the cost of holding any feminist views or promoting women's suffrage. Nor was women's work in the League rewarded by a genuinely equal voice. Despite their numbers, women were excluded from the main leadership posts, such as Chancellor or Grand Master. Instead, they were segregated into their own Ladies Grand Council, which served principally as a source of steady donations to finance the League's activities.<sup>26</sup> Pugh argues that, despite the limited advances made by women in the League, it served as a vital stepping-stone to full and equal participation by women in politics. Green feels the League was particularly important in "involving both middle and working class women in the sub-culture of urban Toryism."<sup>27</sup> In an interesting article comparing Liberal women with those in the Primrose League, Linda Walker noted that the League's most distinguished contribution came not in policy or ideology, but rather in practical politics. The League helped the British public to accept the idea that average women could be active in politics – that they "could learn campaigning techniques and exercise executive functions, and that their participation should not be seen as a privilege but as a right."<sup>28</sup>

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25 Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism*, 107.

26 Linda Walker notes that, in 1886, some 26 per cent of League executive positions in English and Welsh counties were held by women. "Party Political Women: A Comparative Study of Liberal Women and the Primrose League, 1890-1914," in *Equal or Different – Women's Politics 1800-1914*. Jane Rendall, ed. (Oxford, 1987), 171, 178.

27 Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, 69; Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism*, 127.

28 Walker, "Party Political Women," 190.

Almost all of the existing historiography on the Primrose League concentrates on the last quarter of the nineteenth century, its period of largest membership and greatest impact. Yet, the League continued its activities well into the twentieth century. In 1914, it still had 950 active habitations. However, its role had to be rethought.<sup>29</sup> The Primrose League could no longer offer a means of socially integrating those citizens with full political rights with those who lacked them. After 1918, the political rights of citizenship had been established for a majority of the British population. Ensuring that these political rights were used in a manner that supported the established order and reinforced a Conservative world-view became the major preoccupation of the Primrose League.

The Representation of the People Act of 1918 set the stage for a full-fledged redefinition of citizenship. The most important suffrage Act in the creation of Britain as a mass democracy, it nearly tripled the size of the electorate from 7.9 million in 1910 to 21.8 million in 1919. Suffrage for all men over 21 was instituted, and the residency period was lowered. More strikingly, the Act granted the first significant concession to female suffrage, giving the vote to all women over 30 who "were householders, the wives of householders, occupiers of property of £ 5 or more annual value or university graduates."<sup>30</sup> Whereas the pre-war franchise represented 28 per cent of the total adult male and female population, the immediate postwar franchise represented 78 per cent.<sup>31</sup> Although equal terms of enfranchisement for men and women would have to wait until 1928, the 1918 Act ushered in a new era of citizenship.

The self-perceived mission of Conservatives of all stripes during the 1920s was to limit the expectations of the citizens of this newly created mass democracy and to ensure that the newly expanded political rights did not spell their party's extinction. The Conservative Party's response to the creation of the mass electorate has been interpreted in several ways. The traditional line has been to view the Conservative leader, Stanley Baldwin, as a consensual figure and "healer" during the social and industrial aftershocks that followed the First World War.<sup>32</sup> Bill Schwarz has taken a more critical view and looked at

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29 Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, 167.

30 Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up Women! The Militant Campaign of the W.S.P.U. 1903-1914* (London, 1974), 266; Martin Pugh, *Electoral Reform in War and Peace 1906-1918* (London, 1978), 47-164.

31 David Butler and Gareth Butler, *British Political Facts 1900-1994*. 7th Edition (London, 1994), 239.

32 Keith Middlemass and John Barnes, *Baldwin: A Biography* (London, 1969); Robert Blake, "Baldwin and the Right," in John Raymond, ed., *The Baldwin Age* (London, 1960), 25-65; John Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin 1902-1940* (London and New York, 1978), 188-215.

Baldwin's manipulation of the language of constitutionalism.<sup>33</sup> Ross McKibbin has also attacked the traditional interpretation. In his article "Class and Conventional Wisdom," he has argued that the Conservatives equated the public interest with the interest of those of the middle class and pursued a deflationary policy to their benefit.<sup>34</sup> In his article "Mrs. Maggs and Betty," David Jarvis has examined Conservative Party propaganda designed for women.<sup>35</sup> In a second critical article, "British Conservatism and Class Politics in the 1920s," Jarvis sees the 1920s as a key decade for the Conservatives' version of class politics and points to the wide-ranging concerns of party agents over the "party's suitability for democracy," as well as their "wide-ranging fear and apprehension of class politics." Jarvis notes in passing that party activists worried whether the "traditional agencies of popular Toryism [such as] the Primrose League and the working man's clubs, could provide the necessary training for modern political workers."<sup>36</sup>

It is undeniable that the Conservative Party, like the Primrose League, faced a completely transformed political landscape after the First World War. However, it is important to realise that the League was never completely abandoned by the Conservative Party. The League faced considerable competition from newer party organisations, such as the Women's Unionist Association, which seemed to offer a more direct role for Conservative women. In 1921, a conference between the party and League leadership worked out a scheme for continued cooperation between the two organisations, but some conflict continued at the grass-roots level.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the League still remained an important weapon in the armoury of popular Conservatism. From 1918 to 1925, the League's Grand Master was Lord Curzon, an important if pompous Conservative who many assumed would eventually succeed Austen Chamberlain as party leader. From 1925 onwards, the Grand Master was Stanley Baldwin, a more amiable man who became Conservative leader in 1922. Of the 10 Chancellors of the League between 1918 and 1931, six held ministerial office during the interwar period, one held office during the Second World War and another served as Treasurer of the Conservative Party.<sup>38</sup>

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33 Bill Schwarz, "Language of Constitutionalism: Baldwinite Conservatism," in *Formations of Nation and People* (London, 1984), 1-18.

34 Ross McKibbin, "Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the 'Public' in Inter-War Britain," in *The Ideologies of Class*, 259-93.

35 David Jarvis, "Mrs. Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in the 1920s," *Twentieth Century British History* 5 (1994): 129-52.

36 David Jarvis, "British Conservatism and Class Politics in the 1920s," *English Historical Review* 111 (February 1996): 59-84.

37 "Minutes of the Grand Council. 7 July 1921," "Minutes of the Grand Council, 5 June 1924," Bodleian Library, Oxford, Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 6 / 1 No. 16 1914-32. Leaves 506, 514, 702, 709.

38 Primrose League Chancellors between 1918 and 1931 who held ministerial office in the interwar period included the 27th Earl of Crawford and 10th Earl of Balcarres, the 6th Earl of

The League also began to transform itself to fit the changed political environment. While it still continued its canvassing duties at elections, and even its socially integrative functions, it also mounted an ideological counter-offensive using the idea of citizenship against the rise of the Left. Its effort began during the war itself, when the League stressed the duties of all Britons, whether citizens with full formal political rights or not. Women and girls were urged to join in the common sacrifice through such measures as savings committees and clubs, farm work, the organisation of village food societies and a needlework committee which gathered and produced items for British troops and sailors. The Primrose League cooperated in its philanthropic work with such groups as the Red Cross Society, Queen Mary's Needlework Guild, and the Soldiers and Sailors Families Association.<sup>39</sup> The League's philanthropic work drew on a well-established Victorian association of middle-class women with philanthropy.<sup>40</sup>

The League's philanthropic functions echoed its past concern over social integration. However, new concerns were also put forward. During the political debates leading to the Representation of the People Act, considerable comment was made on the potential impact of the Bill. In November 1917, an editorial in the *Primrose League Gazette* mentioned the utility of the League for training the large numbers of voters who would be enfranchised under the new Act. The editorial noted ominously that "the people will require watching over, helping and advising, more than ever, for grave problems will confront the nation, and the opportunities offered in our Habitations for guiding people's minds will be innumerable."<sup>41</sup> The League was well aware that a majority of the new voters would be women and saw a need to guide and instruct this new bloc of voters "upon sound and constitutional lines."<sup>42</sup>

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Clarendon, Sir W. Joynson-Hicks, MP (later Lord Brentford), the 5th Duke of Sutherland, the 3rd Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal and Doug Hacking, MP (Later Lord Hacking). Sir Henry Page Croft, MP, a Conservative renegade who founded the National Party during the First World War, only received office under Churchill during the Second World War. Lord Ebbisham served as Treasurer of the Conservative party. The only Primrose League Chancellors holding neither ministerial office nor a prominent party position were Sir Walter Greaves-Lord, MP and the 15th Earl of Pembroke and 12th Earl of Montgomery.

39 For a taste of the Primrose League's philanthropic activities, see "Country Meetings: How All Can Help to Win the War," *Primrose League Gazette* 24, No. 78 [New Series] (April 1916): 11 and "Primrose League Needlework Committee: Comforts for the Sailors and Soldiers," *ibid.*, 1. For an overview of the scope of wartime philanthropy of all kinds, see Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War: Britain and the Great War 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 1986), 774-75. For a study of one of the largest philanthropic efforts of the war, see: Peter Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief in England during the Great War* (New York, 1982).

40 For Victorian philanthropy and women, see F.K. Proschaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England* (Oxford, 1980) and Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Sussex, 1984), 92-97.

41 "The Editor's Letter," *Primrose League Gazette* 25, No. 97 (November 1917): 5.

42 "The New Franchise Bill," *Primrose League Gazette* 26, No. 100 (February 1918): 2.

A common conception of politics was to be fostered by the enunciation of the duties of citizenship. In a March 1918 editorial entitled "The Vote and What It Means," the *Gazette* belaboured the obvious notion that women's lives were affected, directly and indirectly, by political events, and thus women had "to do all they can to fulfill the duties of citizenship." Voting was clearly more than placing crosses on a ballot. "The vote means a great trust, a great responsibility, and that is one of the reasons why the Primrose League should be extended and developed so that many people can be taught what the vote means and use it to good purpose."<sup>43</sup> The fulfilment of the political rights of citizenship entailed considerable responsibilities, especially the need to approach voting with due consideration and seriousness. The duties of citizenship required that votes not be recorded hurriedly but that all new citizens consider all the election addresses. Without a degree of irony but with considerable partisanship, the League urged that such a perusal of election literature would lead voters to support the candidate "with definite principles who is not self-interested and who stands as representative of British Empire and as an Imperialist."<sup>44</sup> This theme was repeated even after 1918, when it was argued in a *Gazette* editorial that the future role for the League was to see that "the women's vote was kept on the right side – the side of Imperial thought and Imperial action."<sup>45</sup> To ensure that this goal was met, the League took it upon itself in 1918 to circulate a variety of pamphlets, with such worthy titles as *The Primrose League and the Woman's Vote* and *The Woman's Call to Citizenship*, for the further edification of female voters.<sup>46</sup>

In the general election of 1918, Lloyd George's Conservative-dominated coalition was re-elected by a convincing margin. Following this victory, the League continued its self-appointed mission to define the parameters of citizenship for Britain's newly enfranchised voters. This effort continued through the Conservative general election victories of 1922 and 1924, and the defeat of 1923. Efforts from 1918 to the General Strike of 1926 were particularly focused on constructing a partisan model of citizenship favourable to the Conservative cause. Several means were pursued for this educational process, including speakers' classes, a League summer school, open-air meetings and even initiatives aimed at youth who would, in due course, gain the political rights of citizenship.

Speakers' classes were particularly aimed at women involved in politics. As early as 1919, the *Gazette* noted that, despite the failure of any female

43 "The Vote and What It Means," *Primrose League Gazette* 26, No. 101 (March 1918): 6.

44 "The Vote: What I Want Before I Get It," *Primrose League Gazette* 26, No. 106 (August 1918): 4.

45 "The Bolshevik Bacillus," *Primrose League Gazette* 27, No. 112 (February 1919): 1.

46 "The Editor's Letter – the Women's Vote – Some Useful Leaflets," *Primrose League Gazette* 27, No. 109 (November 1918): 5.

candidate to be elected in the general election of 1918, women candidates had put up a good fight and had also won seats on Borough and County Councils in subsequent local elections.<sup>47</sup> Speakers' classes were seen as important in helping neophyte female candidates to master voice projection and to deal with nervousness. As citizens, women could now participate openly in politics, and no effort was to be spared to help them fulfil their new duties.<sup>48</sup> The concern over classes for women grew considerably after the Conservatives' poor showing in the election of 1923. The Conservative effort to campaign on a platform of tariff suffered a considerable set-back from Liberal and Labour rhetoric supporting free trade as the means to keep down the cost of food for the working classes. In the aftermath of this débâcle, the League made special efforts to reassure female voters. At the time of the election of 1924, the *Gazette* noted that the cry of "dear food" had cost the Conservatives a working majority in the previous election. Special efforts were made to renew the confidence of women voters, including the recruitment of women speakers and canvassers to help with the process. Still, the *Gazette* noted that "the women's vote was an unknown quality [sic] as ever it was," and that women were both infrequent in their attendance at political meetings and reluctant to ask questions. Habitations had a contribution to make to the development of women as citizens by helping them to overcome their political shyness through "systematic and thorough canvassing."<sup>49</sup> In 1925, at the suggestion of its Chancellor, the Duke of Sutherland, the Primrose League held a summer school in Torquay which continued the political education of League activists. In typical League fashion, the summer school combined social excursions and diversions with the serious business of politics. Lectures were to be mixed with debates, social events and country rambles.<sup>50</sup>

The League's efforts were echoed a year later by an institution that was open to both League and Conservative Party members. Philip Stott College was an equipped mansion at Overstone, the result of a bequest by its namesake, Sir Philip Stott (1858-1937), a successful architect and businessman who served as President of the Oldham Conservative Association. The college acted as a training ground for particularly keen Conservative supporters. Fortnightly courses were offered, firmly based on limited notions of citizenship giving students "knowledge of our historical constitution and the economic laws which

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47 Countess Markievicz (Constance Gore-Booth) was elected for the St. Patrick's Division of Dublin in the general election of 1918, but as a member of Sinn Féin she did not take her seat at Westminster. Lady Astor was elected as a Conservative in a by-election in 1919, and was the first woman to sit in the Commons.

48 Mrs. Ian Malcolm, "Speaker's Classes," *Primrose League Gazette* 27, No. 115 (May 1919): 1.

49 "The Woman's Vote," *Primrose League Gazette* 31, No. 11 (November 1924): 13.

50 "Primrose League Summer School," *Primrose League Gazette* 32, No. 8 (August 1925): 8.

govern the civilised world today." By 1927, over 1,000 students a year were paying about £ 7 for a week or weekend course, though many students had their fees paid by the local party.<sup>51</sup> Courses at Philip Stott College were described as being able to "fit [participants] for combat with an implacable foe" bent on overthrowing "our God-given freedom and privileges as citizens of the British Empire."

The composition of the student body is also of interest. The college was open to both sexes; neither age nor class and rank were to hinder attendance. The student body included army and navy veterans, workers ("colliers from Durham, cotton operatives from Lancashire, steelworkers from Sheffield") and aristocrats (including both a member of the House of Lords and "a lady of title – young and enthusiastic"). Mrs. Robbins of the Cheshire Primrose League Council, the author of one article on the college, published in the *Gazette*, claimed to be a working housewife, an occupation that was well represented among students.<sup>52</sup> Overall, however, it was evident that the college was of greater significance in the development of the Conservative Party than the League. Indeed, if anything, it usurped the educational activities in which the League felt it was most proficient.

However, the formal instruction for activists at institutions such as the Primrose League summer school or Philip Stott College would reach newly enfranchised citizens only indirectly through the efforts of their graduates. Clearly, efforts were needed to combat the doctrines of socialism directly. Accordingly, the Primrose League began a series of open-air meetings in various London parks. There was a widespread feeling that the socialists were winning the propaganda battles "by holding hundreds of Meetings every week in market places, street corners and on village greens."<sup>53</sup> Thus, Edward Doran, a well-known anti-socialist speaker, was hired by the League at an annual salary of some £ 400 to address large crowds in Hyde Park and Regents Park under the banner of the Primrose League. Doran hailed from Manchester and claimed to have held a variety of working-class occupations before the war, including train-booker, ticket-collector and signalman, as well as lead-mill operator, blacksmith's striker and warehouse clerk. After the war, he had made his way into the film industry, proceeded to freelance journalism and, finally, moved on to a position as the self-proclaimed scourge of socialism. His specialty seemed to be dealing with questions from the audience and hecklers. Doran was said to "possess a ready wit and . . . [was] never at a loss to give a prompt

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51 Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin*, 236.

52 Mrs. Robbins (Cheshire Primrose League Council), "The Philip Stott College," *Primrose League Gazette* 33, No. 6 (June 1926): 1.

53 "Annual Report of Grand Council to Grand Habitation 1924-1925," Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaf 762.

and usually satisfactory reply.”<sup>54</sup> An example of some topics at a typical Sunday afternoon session included “Capital and Labour, Ex Officers and unemployment, Soviets in Russia, Italy and the Fascisti, the Land question, Miners & Mining, State Socialism, the Housing question etc.”<sup>55</sup> Questioners’ criticisms reflected the dilemma faced by the Conservatives. Repeated questions were directed to Doran concerning the “alleged failure of the Conservative Party to introduce measures of Social reform.”<sup>56</sup>

Children were also given considerable attention by the Primrose League after the war. Building on past experience with social events, the League launched an ambitious sports programme for youth in the 1920s, culminating in a major sports festival for youth during the League’s grand fête at the Crystal Palace in 1923. There were over 1,300 entries in the sports festival and over 10,000 spectators.<sup>57</sup> Sports continued to be important for the League until the late 1920s, when funding problems caused the League to reconsider its programmes. While the League’s sports programmes lasted, their supporters often linked good citizenship and morality to sport and physical fitness.<sup>58</sup> The League also probed the question of patriotic education for the young. Between 1925-1927 several suggestions along these lines were made. Junior or “Juvenile” branches of the Primrose League had appeared during the 1890s for children aged 7-16. From the beginning, their programme included outdoor sports, patriotic songs, “first aid,” hospital cooking and instruction “in the duties and privileges of citizenship and the principles of the Primrose League.” By 1913, the League claimed to have nearly 260 Juvenile Branches with 65,000 members.<sup>59</sup>

These practices continued into the 1920s. In 1925, it was noted that the Junior Branches were believed to be an important means of teaching “the principles of patriotism and good citizenship” to the young. The League insisted that such instruction was not meant to manufacture “young Conservatives or young Liberals in the Party sense,” but the partisan nature of such instruction in citizenship might nevertheless be inferred from the absence of reference to

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54 “General Purposes Committee. Report to the Grand Council. 13th December 1923,” Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaves 664-65.

55 “Mr. Doran,” *Primrose League Gazette* 32, No. 2 (February 1925): 4; “Agency Committee Report to Grand Council. November 1st, 1923,” Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaves 653-54.

56 “Agency Committee Report to Grand Council. March 5th, 1925,” Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers. MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaf 756.

57 “General Purposes Committee. Report to the Grand Council, n.d. (with Grand Council minutes from June 7th, 1923); “Junior Branch Committee. Report to Grand Council. November 1st, 1923,” Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers., MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaves 620-22, 655.

58 See Lord Harris, “Sport,” *Primrose League Gazette* 31, No. 9 (September 1924): 7.

59 Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, 40-41.



young Labourites. The fact that children were future citizens was constantly stressed. In a few years, they would be responsible "as citizens and workers for the future of this great Empire; that they may be called upon to defend their country from the attacks of its enemies."<sup>60</sup> The League did not develop its aims for the civic education of youth to any great extent. However, it did recommend topics for short addresses for younger children on patriotic themes and stressed the importance of history "lecturettes" and textbooks in teaching the lessons of good citizenship.<sup>61</sup> For the most part, the pedagogical suggestions for children's patriotic education were quite limited. Far more time was devoted to social events for children, such as the Crystal Palace grand fête.<sup>62</sup>

Partisan constructions of citizenship had several other important elements. The threat to individual civil rights posed by the Left and the Right's call to active citizenship were other ideological weapons that were used in several ways. First, citizenship in the recently created Soviet Union was caricatured viciously. Soviet citizenship was seen as a nightmare of unlimited social rights for the community at the cost of even the most perfunctory civil rights for the individual. Second, Britons' traditional political and civil rights were much praised and were contrasted with the fate of citizenship under a future Labour government. Finally, a notion of active citizenship was put forward as a way of addressing British social problems, but purely on an individual and philanthropic basis that would be unthreatening to the social and political status quo.

The Bolshevik experiment in Russia assumed a prominent place in the dark corners of the minds of Primrose League members. Martin Pugh has argued that, after the First World War, "Bolsheviks replaced the Irish in Primrose demonology."<sup>63</sup> Strained efforts were made to link this caricatured vision with the domestic policies of British groups of the Left, such as the Independent Labour Party. According to one alarmist letter to the *Gazette*, Soviet citizenship for women had led to the abolition of monogamous marriage and private child-rearing. Such massive intrusions into the civil rights of citizenship were highlighted by the use of selected passages from Karl Pearson's 1887 work *Socialism and Sex* and Mrs. Ethel Snowden's 1907 book *The Woman*

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60 "The Junior Branch Page: The Child and Patriotism," *Primrose League Gazette* 32 No. 7 (July 1925): 13.

61 Among the recommendations were Richard Wilson's *Servants of the People: A Book of Biographies for Very Young Readers* (London, 1920); *The Citizens of the Empire* from Oxford University Press; and Hugh Oakley Arnold-Forster's *The Citizen Reader* (London, 1885) from Cassell's Modern School Series.

62 "The Junior Branch Page: History for Children," *Primrose League Gazette* 34, No. 12 (December 1927): 10; For a more detailed look at the construction of citizenship through school texts, see Heathorn, "'Let us remember'," and Stephen Heathorn, "English Elementary Education and the Construction of National Identity, 1880-1914," PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 1996.

63 Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, 184.

*Socialist* to make forced comparisons between supposed Bolshevik law on the one hand and the doctrine of British socialists (or at least the Independent Labour Party) on the other. As the author of this letter noted, "The remarkable similarity between the Bolshevik laws and the suggested laws of Mrs. Ethel Snowden and company is obvious, and it is up to the women of England to see that they can never be put in force in this country."<sup>64</sup> The ludicrousness of portraying all long-standing British socialists as ardent Bolsheviks is evident when one realises that, only a year after the quoted letter was published, Mrs. Snowden wrote a generally negative appraisal of the Russian experiment in her book *Through Bolshevik Russia*.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the League's rhetoric was undoubtedly given credibility in some minds by the generally sympathetic accounts produced by many other left-wing British visitors to the Soviet Union.<sup>66</sup>

Women's special duty in maintaining the social fabric was echoed by the Dowager Countess of Jersey, an important figure who was active in many patriotic organisations, including the Victoria League and the Ladies Grand Council of the Primrose League.<sup>67</sup> Lady Jersey stressed the power that women held through their vote, which could "make or wreck the future of their children and of those dear to them." The immediate needs for life in a prosperous (and presumably Conservative) Britain were catalogued as "More and better houses, plentiful food, steady employment for our husbands and young people, and education which will fit our children for good positions in the world." Conversely, Communism meant "houses broken up and destroyed, starving thousands, children perishing with disease, forced labour for all at such work as the Soviets choose to allot, and children taught the doctrines of hate and forbidden to learn the fear of God."<sup>68</sup>

In addition to serving up the unlikely nightmare of a Soviet Britain, the League painted a picture of the impact of a Labour government on British citizenship. One major theme was the restriction of political rights. Naturally enough, existing political rights were portrayed in glowing terms. In a speech to the League, Mr. G.T. Locker-Lampson, MP, praised the British Constitution as the "freest . . . in the world," giving Britain a free Commons, free speech

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64 "Our Letter Box: Bolshevik Laws and Socialist Doctrines," *Primrose League Gazette* 27, No. 121 (November 1919): 4.

65 Mrs. Ethel Snowden, *Through Bolshevik Russia* (London, 1920)

66 F.M. Leventhal, "Seeing the Future: British Left-Wing Travellers to the Soviet Union, 1919-32," in *Political Culture in Modern Britain: Essays in Memory of Stephen Koss*. J.W.M. Bean, ed. (London, 1987), 209-27.

67 For Lady Jersey's own account of her storied life, see Dowager Countess of Jersey, *Fifty-One Years of Victorian Life* (London, 1922). A recent biography is Violet Powell, *Margaret, Countess of Jersey: A Biography* (London, 1978).

68 Dowager Countess of Jersey, "A Call to Women," *Primrose League Gazette* 31, No. 11. (November 1924): 8.

and “a completely free press.” He made two particularly significant points. First, freedom was finite. He felt that “so far as freedom is concerned there is nothing we [Britons] have more to wish for.” Second, a Labour government would threaten existing freedoms. There were “people in this country” who wanted to abolish parliamentary government, or at least the House of Lords. The latter course of action was especially unacceptable. Locker-Lampson saw the Lords as essential for the purposes of the Constitution; it acted as a safeguard against “hasty, ill-digested legislation.”<sup>69</sup> An earlier article included a long list of punitive measures that a majority Labour government would impose, including the confiscation of capital, the abolition of the throne and the House of Lords, and the ultimate degradation of political rights – the deprival of the parliamentary vote for all people other than members of trade unions.<sup>70</sup>

The League further extended its appeal to women by articulating a vision of an “active citizenship” that could be either partisan or philanthropic. Women were frequently encouraged not to remain “passive observers” outside politics. Active citizenship could mean participation in the League, something that was supposed to appeal to women “anxious to maintain religion and patriotism, and to see their children growing up good and loyal citizens.” Past experience had shown that work for the League was especially suited to women. Playing on the concerns of many unmarried women after the carnage of the war, *Gazette* articles insisted that any woman taking up the patriotic and political work of the League would not be a “surplus woman.”<sup>71</sup> Active citizenship could also be a matter of having women ease class conflict. At a League banquet in 1920, Miss Fardell, OBE argued that women could “do away with the feeling that is supposed to exist between the classes,” and that the League, as an organisation that was open to both sexes and all classes, was particularly well suited to this task.<sup>72</sup>

Active citizenship also served as a call to social service. After the election of the Labour government in December 1923, debate arose over the need for more active participation by League members in social issues. One letter to the *Gazette* noted that the general public credited most ideas and initiatives associated with educational and social measures to the Labour Party or the Liberals. To combat this perception, Primrose League members were urged to join with Conservative representatives on Boards of Guardians, Borough Councils

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69 “The Principles of the Primrose League” [Speech by Mr. G.T. Locker-Lampson, MP], *Primrose League Gazette* 33, No. 9 (September 1926): 5.

70 “A Labour Government,” *Primrose League Gazette* 30, No. 6 (April 1923): 7.

71 Lady Roberts, “The Woman’s Page: Women v. Politics,” *Primrose League Gazette* 32, No. 10 (October 1925): 8. For the demographic imbalance caused by the war, see Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women’s Experiences in Two World Wars* (London and New York, 1987), 147-48.

72 Miss Fardell, OBE as quoted in “The Victory Banquet: Lord Harris,” *Primrose League Gazette* 28, No. 3 (March 1920): 4.

and the London County Council. League members were to serve on bodies such as care committees, boards of managers of schools, and pensions and tuberculosis committees. They were to study social problems in the press and become interested in organisations dealing with boys and girls. In all London constituencies, a League member was to coordinate social work and supply information.<sup>73</sup> A subsequent *Gazette* editorial on this theme urged League members towards active citizenship in the fields of education and social service. In education, League members were to serve on the education committees of the Co-operative Societies or on local committees of the Workers' Educational Association. In social service, members were to serve on social services committees of churches and child-welfare centres. Active citizenship further required League members to be able to defend their political ideals. Habitations were urged to have study circles trained for special work and familiar with local debating societies in order to be as ready as the socialists to participate in debates.<sup>74</sup>

What was the significance of active citizenship? The criticisms of active citizenship in Thatcherite Britain hold equally true for the 1920s. While the League's vision of active citizenship saw an active role for philanthropists, the responsibility of the state to provide social services to its own citizens was correspondingly reduced. Furthermore, active citizenship implied that the majority of "caring" activities should not be undertaken by the state, but by families or outside organisations. Such a conception put an inordinate burden on female members of society, who would then be unable to fully participate in the fruits of political citizenship.<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, active citizenship was a rhetorical device whose emphasis by the League was inconstant. The flurry of interest in participation in the philanthropic side of active citizenship usually coincided with the troughs in Conservative support during the Labour minority governments of 1924 and 1929-1931. When Conservative electoral support picked up, League enthusiasm for large-scale social service faded. Far more constant throughout the 1920s were admonitions by the League's Grand Council to the habitations not to divert League funds into charitable schemes and away from political ones.<sup>76</sup> It should be remembered that, in the 1920s, the Primrose League and the Conservative Party did not embrace quite the same definition

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73 "Our Letter Box: The Conservatives and Social Service," *Primrose League Gazette* 31, No. 3. (March 1924): 7.

74 "The Function of the Primrose League: The Danger of Micawberism," *Primrose League Gazette* 31, No. 4 (April 1924): 6.

75 See Oliver, "Active Citizenship in the 1990s," 164-66.

76 Some charitable contributions from individuals were solicited in the *Gazette*, including such causes as the Salvation Army and the appeal for the Russian Famine. However, for the most part, diversions of habitation funds were actively discouraged. See "Appeal for the Salvation Army," *Primrose League Gazette* 29, No. 2 (February 1921): 1; "Russian Famine: The National Appeal," *Primrose League Gazette* 29, No. 6 (October 1921): 1; and "Habitation Funds," *Primrose League Gazette* 34, No. 12 (December 1927): 4.

of active citizenship as do their counterparts in contemporary Britain. For the League, such a thing as "society" did exist. While citizens did not have the right to a range of social services comparable to those available in the modern welfare state, they were provided for in an ad hoc fashion by the Baldwin government's limited platform of social reforms. Conservatives, both in the League and outside it, urged voters to distinguish between socialism and social reform. They insisted, after their electoral triumph of 1924, that the Conservatives were delivering a solid and practical programme of social reform. The latter included house-building, slum-clearing and pensions. Key legislation passed by the Baldwin government included the Housing Act of 1923, the Widows, 'Orphans' and Old Age Contributory Act of 1925, the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1927, and the Local Government Act of 1929. Such reforms relied on private enterprise and contributory schemes rather than subsidies or general government expenditure and thus they drew the ire of many socialist critics. However, the League had no doubts about the efficacy and popularity of Conservative measures among British citizens.<sup>77</sup>

The final major tests for the Primrose League in the 1920s were the General Strike of 1926 and the Equal Franchise Act of 1928. Both were anticipated with considerable dread by certain sections of the membership. Nevertheless, the League survived both ordeals relatively unscathed and continued to pronounce upon the virtues of Britons' citizenship.

The General Strike was by far the most dramatic event faced by the Primrose League during the 1920s. The largest industrial conflict in British history, it lasted nine days and involved between 1.5 and 1.75 million workers in key industries such as transport, electricity and gas who had walked out in support of 1 million locked-out miners.<sup>78</sup> League rhetoric portrayed strike leaders as bent on overthrowing the entire British Constitution, while ordinary strikers were shown to have more limited motives. In the aftermath of the strike, the new Chancellor of the Primrose League, W. Greaves-Lord, KC, MP, painted it in revolutionary terms; it was "an attempt to subvert and destroy Constitutional Government and set up the dictatorship of the T.U.C., which is merely another method of describing that aim of the beloved Communist, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat." However, the main body of the strikers consisted of loyal

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77 Rt. Hon. Sir W. Joynson-Hicks, "A Policy of Social Reform," *Primrose League Gazette* 21, No. 11 (December 1924): 4; "The Primrose League: Annual Report of Grand Council to Grand Habitation 1927-28," Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaves 1003-05. On Conservative social reforms, see Clement James MacIntyre, "Responses to the Rise of Labour: Conservative Party Policy and Organisation 1922-1931," PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1986, esp. Chapter 5; David Dilks, *Neville Chamberlain, Vol. 1. 1869-1929*. (Cambridge, 1984), 310-23, 405-57, 491-587; and Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin*, 267, 271, 289-90.

78 Keith Laybourn, *The General Strike of 1926* (Manchester and New York, 1992), 1-2.

citizens without such motives. Greaves-Lord argued that they “were loyal and law-abiding men, misled by unscrupulous leaders into the belief that they were merely engaged in an ordinary industrial dispute to aid their fellows.”<sup>79</sup> The loyalty of British citizens and the subversive foreign influences behind the strike were also cited as crucial reasons for its ultimate failure. A League article argued that the strike was “the malicious attempt of the Muscovites to cripple the Constitutional Government of Great Britain.” The defeat of the strike was due to “public opinion,” which formed the basis of democratic government.<sup>80</sup>

This neatly illustrates the League’s multi-layered approach. In linking the strike to its partisan model of citizenship, the League could not admit that an industrial dispute of the magnitude of the General Strike was caused by internal structural problems with British capitalism or even by the discontent of British citizens. For the League, the strike had to have an outside cause; subversive non-citizens or an unscrupulous minority of union leaders were to blame. Those on strike were not aware of the purposes for which their interests were being sacrificed and remained, at their core, loyal citizens. Those not on strike represented Britain’s proper “public opinion” and reflected the contented majority of British citizens. This distinction echoed a similar rhetorical strategy undertaken by leading interwar Conservatives. For many Conservatives, opponents of the government’s economic policy put selfish class considerations ahead of national interests.<sup>81</sup> For the League, citizenship was a means of defending the status quo. Citizenship would never be defined in a radical fashion or based on any revolutionary example.

The General Strike also offered an opportunity for League members to practise a form of active citizenship in defence of the existing social order. Some historians, such as Barbara Storm Farr, have made vague references to preliminary contacts made by the League with other groups of the Right and far Right in making preparations against the strike.<sup>82</sup> If such contacts were made, they remain undocumented. What is certain is that the League carried on support activities for volunteers attempting to maintain essential services or law and order. The Chancellor of the Primrose League, the Duke of Sutherland, made an appeal for volunteers during the strike, and the head office of

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79 “The Chancellor’s Letter,” *Primrose League Gazette* 33, No. 6 (June 1926): 4.

80 Oliver Winton Stebbings, “Patriotism: Public Opinion. The Lesson of 1926,” *Primrose League Gazette* 34, No. 2 (February 1927): 10.

81 McKibbin, “Class and Conventional Wisdom,” 284–86.

82 Farr makes a single elusive reference to *The Patriot* of 1 April 1926, which refers to a meeting held in March 1926, chaired by Lady Sydenham of the British Fascisti and attended by representatives of 11 organisations, including the British Empire Union, the Loyalty League, the Primrose League and the Trade Unionists’ Rights League. Farr argues that they passed a joint resolution urging the Prime Minister to take measures to avert a strike, but were unable to carry out any further unified action. See Barbara Storm Farr, *The Development and Impact of Right-Wing Politics in Britain, 1903–1932* (New York and London, 1987), 59.

the League was bombarded with large numbers of telephone messages and telegrams from "members offering their services to the Government and asking for details regarding the best means of helping the country in its difficulty." A large number of resolutions was passed by habitations in support of the government during the strike.<sup>83</sup> A more precise example of the type of active support offered by the League during the strike is provided by the activities of the Grantham (Croydon) habitation. This habitation placed its organisation at the disposal of the local Voluntary Service Committee and "was entrusted with the task of recruiting the Special Constabulary at every shop in the Constituency, replacing the men who enrolled with voluntary shop assistants from the members of the Habitations." It also secured a garage that was fitted with furnishings, gas and light to fill an "urgent need" and to serve as a canteen for the "specials." The canteen was open for five days during the strike, serving over 500 "specials" per day with coffee and light refreshments, and a second canteen was in operation for 48 hours.<sup>84</sup>

In the aftermath of the General Strike, the League took an inconsistent approach towards further questions of citizenship. There was considerable debate over whether voting rights should be expanded under the terms of the 1918 Act. There was a call to reduce the existing rights of citizens who were felt to be a danger to the social order in the aftermath of the strike.

After 1926, the progressive image of the Baldwin government began to fade as its right wing gained influence. This shift was most evident in the punitive Trade Disputes Act of 1927, in the raid on the Soviet trade delegation offices (which led to a break in foreign relations with the Soviet Union) and in a revived effort among the party back-benchers to restore the powers of the House of Lords.<sup>85</sup> The Primrose League echoed this shift. In 1927, the League put forth a resolution that the boundaries of political citizenship no longer be universal among men and untied to property. The General Purposes Committee put forward a resolution to the Grand Council that "there should be a reversion to the

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83 "General Purposes Committee Report to Grand Council, June 3 1926," Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaf 852.

84 "Our Letter Box: Work during the Strike," *Primrose League Gazette* 33, No. 7 (July 1926): 10 [Letter from I.M Megarry of Grantham (Croydon) Habitation]; "General Purposes Committee Report to Grand Council, June 3, 1926," Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaves 851-52.

85 Stuart Ball, *The Conservative Party and British Politics 1902-1951* (London and New York, 1995), 81-83; Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin*, 284-88; D.H. Close, "The Collapse of Resistance to Democracy: Conservatives, Adult Suffrage and Second Chamber Reform, 1911-1928," *Historical Journal* 20 (1977): 893-918; Andrew Julian Lax, "Conservatism and Constitutionalism: The Baldwin Government 1924-29," PhD thesis, King's College, University of London, 1979 Chapter 3, "The Reform of the House of Lords, to the shelving of the matter in May 1929."

previous law, if and when a reform of the Poor Law is brought before Parliament, by which persons in receipt of Poor Law Relief should not receive the Parliamentary or Local Government vote."<sup>86</sup> This reactionary resolution undermined the legitimacy of the League's continued outreach efforts. Mr. Doran continued his open-air meetings against socialism in Hyde Park and Regents Park and even began to hold meetings at Tower Hill. While this move might be regarded as an effort to bring the anti-socialist message closer to the inhabitants of the East End, it would be an exclusionary one if those in the audience receiving poor relief were no longer considered worthy of the political rights of citizenship.<sup>87</sup>

A similarly reactionary policy was pursued with regard to the rights of trade unionists. In the aftermath of the General Strike, the Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act of 1927 prohibited sympathetic strikes or lockouts that were designed to coerce the government, ended the links between civil service organisations and other unions, and restricted the political activities of unions. From then on, the political levy raised from all unions to support the Labour Party was no longer compulsory with an option to "contract out," as had been the case since 1912. As of 1927, the political levy had to be "contracted in." This Act reversed almost a quarter-century's progress in the expansion of union rights. Rather than present it as a reactionary measure, the League recast it as a vindication of the civil rights of citizens in the face of union intimidation.<sup>88</sup>

Immediately after the General Strike, the Grand Council of the League offered its own suggestions as to the course any revised trade union legislation should take. The civil rights of citizenship were central to the League's attack on established union rights. At its core, the Grand Council felt that Parliament had to reform the law so that "the right of the individual worker to offer or withhold his labour without interference should be restored to him." To accomplish this, the Council made four suggestions. It called for protection of individual workers from victimisation and intimidation due to their political beliefs, and the prohibition of mass picketing and of the picketing of men's private residences. It also proposed direct intervention in the internal operations of unions

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86 Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 15. General Purposes Committee Minute Book 1926-53. "Minutes of the meeting of the General Purposes Committee of April 6th, 1927," Leaf 6; "General Purposes Committee. Report to the Grand Council," Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32 (April 7, 1927). Leaves 907-908.

87 See also "The Primrose League: Annual Report of Grand Council to Grand Habitation 1927-28," Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaves 1003-05.

88 For the origins of the trade union policy within the Conservative Party and the Baldwin government, see Lax, "Conservatism and Constitutionalism," Chapter 1: "The Reform of Trade Union Law, to the Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act of July 1927."



by requiring that the national accounts of trade unions be audited by certified accountants and that no future strikes be called without a secret ballot of union membership.<sup>89</sup> Although the final Act did not incorporate all of these features, the League's General Purposes Committee recommended that the Grand Council pass a resolution of congratulation to the government.<sup>90</sup> In his speech to the Grand Habitation of 1927, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill, defined citizenship in terms congruent with the new Trade Unions Act and contrasted it with the odious doctrines of socialism. British citizens were said to possess an instinctive hatred of tyranny in any form, whether autocratic, bureaucratic or democratic. Socialism was seen as the antithesis of freedom. Churchill is well known for his famous gaffe during the 1945 general election when he argued that "socialism was a threat to freedom in Britain and [a Socialist Government] would be driven to introduce some form of Gestapo . . . in order to enforce its interventionist policies."<sup>91</sup> His 1927 speech foreshadowed his later mistake. He spoke of the brutal intrusions on individual rights that the socialist project would involve. In his words, "If the Socialists gain power in any country they trample down by brutal methods or by actual terrorisms all other movements but their own." The task of all Conservatives and members of the Primrose League was clear: "To preserve the rights of citizens and the individual citizen, to preserve the broad interests of the Commonwealth, and to preserve the unity of the British Empire against Socialist attack must become for all of us, now and henceforward, the main and common purpose of political action and public life."

The passage of the 1927 Trade Disputes Act was part of that struggle. Churchill took great exception to socialist newspapers' description of the Act as a blacklegs.' He chided the Labour Party for lowering itself to hounding union members as blacklegs merely because they had sought "an elementary right to British citizenship." He conceded that the right to strike was "an indispensable, though melancholy, feature in a free community," but invoked the need to safeguard the common rights of the entire British public. Similarly, he felt that party politics had no place in the workplace. The existing political levy, which forced working men of all political convictions to remit contributions to the Labour Party, "was both an insult to the status of the manual labourer and to the conception of equal citizenship upon which this country's life is founded."<sup>92</sup> Churchill's words suggest that the post-strike League felt

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89 "Grand Council meeting of November 4th, 1926," Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers. MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaves 869-70.

90 Minutes to Grand Council Meeting of April 7th, 1927. Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers. MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaves 906; 914.

91 John Ramsden, *The Age of Churchill and Eden, 1940-1957* (London, 1995), 83.

92 Winston Churchill's speech to the Grand Habitation of 1927, *Primrose League Gazette* 34, No. 6 (June 1927): 9-11.

completely comfortable in trampling on existing union rights in the name of preserving the political rights of individuals in the greater community.

One group of individuals to whom further rights were conceded after the General Strike was that of women aged 21-30 and those over 30 who had not qualified for the franchise under the existing property restrictions of the 1918 franchise. A final piece of legislation was required to equalise the terms of political citizenship between men and women. The passage of the 1928 Equal Franchise Act provided a final episode in which the Primrose League articulated its vision of citizenship and anticipated future work in instructing a new influx of citizens with full political rights.

The Primrose League greeted this final chapter in the concession of mass democracy before the Second World War with a mixture of anticipation and dread. Grass-roots opposition to the so-called "Flapper Franchise" was received in the form of letters and resolutions from a number of habitations, including those at Alsager, Worcester and Abbots Langley.<sup>93</sup> The *Gazette* was at pains to counter popular prejudices that the new voters were young "flappers" incapable of executing the duties and responsibilities of good citizenship. It earnestly pointed out that the 1928 Act not only gave the vote to over 1.5 million women 21-25 who might be considered "flappers," but also enfranchised a slightly greater number of women aged 25-30 and nearly 2 million women over thirty. All told, the Act gave women a numerical majority of nearly two million over men.<sup>94</sup>

A key question then became how these newly enfranchised women would vote. Although there was some concern, opinions voiced in anticipation of the consequence of the 1928 Act were nothing like those of 1918. There was even some hope expressed that the younger women would add to the Conservative Party's natural constituency.<sup>95</sup> Nevertheless, as in 1918, there were fears over the fact that millions of people were being added to the franchise who presumably had "no knowledge of politics and no interest in the great questions

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93 Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 15. General Purposes Committee Minute Book 1926-53. "Minutes of the general purposes committee of June 1st, 1927." Leaves 7-8.

94 "Pointers for Speakers: Are They Flappers?" *Primrose League Gazette* 35, No. 7 (July 1928): 12.

95 This idea had an old pedigree. Lord Salisbury had always assumed that women who met the existing property qualifications for the franchise in his time would be likely to vote in favour of religion, stable family values and social conservatism. The core of his party hesitated before any such radical departure from the existing franchise; see Shannon, *The Age of Salisbury*, 350. The essentialist notion of women's inherent conservatism, held by Lord Salisbury and others, is of minimal analytical value and has been severely criticised in Murray Goot and Elizabeth Reid, "Women: If Not Apolitical, Then Conservative," in *Women and the Public Sphere: A Critique of Sociology and Politics*. Janet Siltanen and Michelle Stanworth, eds. (London, 1984), 122-36.

of Empire [and who] now determine the constitution of Parliament and the policies of our Governments." Universal adult suffrage was seen as potentially disastrous unless the new electors could be made to understand the issues before them in elections and how party programmes would affect the Empire and the institutions of the country.

Despite such pessimistic thinking, the League remained charitably optimistic at the prospect of young women entering into the full political rights of citizenship. In condescending language, the *Gazette* noted that "The idea of some people that women, especially young women, are practically ignorant and easily swayed by plausible demagogues, is a mistaken idea. Young women, given the opportunity, are just as capable as young men of understanding political questions and voting intelligently." The League's previous response to newly enfranchised voters in 1918 was to be repeated. The League was to do all it could to help male and female voters "to understand political questions and to appreciate the policy of the present Government." This political education was to be achieved through classes run by the habitations to train members in speaking, canvassing and replying to opponents. The League's permanence as an organisation whose existence was not tied solely to elections was to assist it in this task. As the *Gazette* noted,

work of this kind done before elections has a more lasting effect than an intensive campaign during elections. It is between elections that the more serious electors form opinions and part attachments and the more of these voters we can win over before the election, the fewer there will be when the election comes who will be swayed by the plausible but unsound speeches of Socialist orators.<sup>96</sup>

The immediate results of the final stage of transforming Britain into a mass democracy were disappointing to the League. The general election of 1929 resulted in a Labour minority government. Continuing high levels of unemployment, Baldwin's uninspiring campaign slogan of "Safety First," the disgruntlement of the Conservative Right over Baldwin's failure to pursue all of their agenda, the temporary revival of the Liberals under Lloyd George and the new-found respectability of the Labour Party have been invoked to explain the Conservative defeat.<sup>97</sup> The Primrose League had its own explanations. Most of them revolved around the difficulties that Baldwin's government had faced in office and its relative honesty in confronting hard choices; these were contrasted

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<sup>96</sup> "The Use of the Vote," *Primrose League Gazette* 35, No. 10 (October 1928): 6.

<sup>97</sup> Ball, *The Conservative Party and British Politics*, 81-83; Stuart Ball, *Baldwin and the Conservative Party: The Crisis of 1929-1931* (New Haven and London, 1988), 5-7, 26-45; Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin*, 292.

with the rash promises of the Liberal and Labour parties, particularly about the reduction of unemployment. Newly enfranchised citizens were said to have been beguiled by the promises of the opposition.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, the League did not break faith. It steadily prepared for the next electoral battle with Labour. Its chance came only when two further years of economic depression led in 1931 to the breakup of the Labour government and the formation of a new coalition dominated by the Conservatives. After 1931, the League continued its activities with ever-decreasing numbers, but most of its energy was consumed by imperial issues.<sup>99</sup>

The Primrose League found a new and important role for itself in the 1920s by constructing a partisan definition of citizenship that would work to the benefit of the Conservative Party. The League's model of citizenship was used as a means of educating the many British men and women who received the vote for the first time in 1918. This political education sought to limit the expectations of those gaining their political rights by tying their newly won citizenship to duties and civil rights. This campaign contrasted the League's model of citizenship with the dangerously expanded vision of citizenship offered by the rising Labour Party. Similarly, the idea of active citizenship was offered by the League as an alternative to increased government intervention as a means of assisting the underprivileged. The League's citizenship campaign made a contribution to the Conservative Party's successful adjustment to the new age of politics. The campaign also enabled the League to justify its continued existence in the new era of mass democracy after the First World War. In defining the new parameters of British citizenship, the League – far from fading away as a Victorian anachronism – found itself a new role in the 1920s.

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98 "Annual Report of Grand Council to Grand Habitation 1929-30," Bodleian Library, Oxford. Primrose League Papers, MSS Primrose League 6/1. No. 16. 1914-32. Leaf 1128.

99 Pugh, *The Tories and the People*, 188-92.