Free trade versus protectionism: New South Wales, Victoria, and the tariff debate in Britain, 1881-1900

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Free trade was a central part of economic and political orthodoxy in late nineteenth-century Britain, but the period also saw the policy come under attack from advocates of import tariffs. Both sides in this debate made ample use of overseas examples to bolster their arguments. This paper examines the unique contribution of Australia, in which a free trade colony, New South Wales, was pitted against a protectionist neighbour, Victoria, in the seemingly ideal 'experimental' conditions of the New World. Free traders, determined to prove that free trade was a universal economic and political good, and eager to give their claims 'scientific' backing, saw this juxtaposition as particularly useful.

Keywords: free trade; protection; tariffs.

From the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 until the early 1930s, the United Kingdom maintained a policy of 'free trade', which in practice meant imposing import duties only on a small selection of goods not produced domestically, such as tea and sugar. The policy was not challenged electorally until 1906, after Joseph Chamberlain had steered the Unionist party towards backing tariff reform. This meant 'imperial preference', in which imports from the colonies would be taxed less than imports from elsewhere in order to solidify Britain's economic and political bonds with the Empire, combined with a manufacturing tariff to protect British manufacturers and to enable the country to bargain down the protectionist import duties of rival industrial nations. However, the perception of economic depression in Britain from around 1873 created a sustained movement against free trade amongst many farmers and manufacturers who felt threatened by foreign competition, and writers, intellectuals, and politicians who feared

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for British economic and imperial decline. A vigorous debate took place in Britain in the press and in polemical literature on the relative merits of free trade and protection, with the Liberal party leading the defence of free trade against an expanding alliance of Conservatives, imperialists, and disgruntled commercial interests.

This political questioning of free trade was reinforced by a seismic shift in economic thought in the British Isles. John Stuart Mill's ambivalent and increasingly loose attachment to *laissez-faire* prepared the way for the 'historical economists', beginning with T. E. Cliffe Leslie in 1870, and their critique of classical political economy for its over-emphasis on generalised theory and deductive methodology. All economic theory, they argued, was only relevant to certain times, places, and points of economic and social development. The historical economists advocated an inductive, historically informed approach to studying the economy, which would draw on empirical findings and take account of a nation's particular circumstances. In their view, free trade might not necessarily be suited to all nations at all times.[1]

Participants in the tariff debate drew on the fiscal experiences of a number of countries in order to bolster the case for free trade or protection. The United States and Germany, as Britain's greatest industrial rivals and fast-growing protectionist economies, featured heavily, with free traders adducing them as warnings of the economic and political dangers of adopting protective tariffs, and tariff reformers offering them as examples of how protection brought prosperity and growth.[2] Historians have so far largely overlooked the use of the Australian example in the tariff debate, however. Anthony Howe has explored the Australian involvement in the Edwardian imperial preference debate, with Chamberlain drawing on the support of colonial statesmen like Richard Seddon and Alfred Deakin, and even Australian free traders like Bernard Wise.[3] Andrew Thompson rightly notes that 'although tariff reform was pre-eminently a British political campaign, fiscal policy and argument in the colonies impinged directly upon it.' However, this statement relates more to tariff reformers' use of colonial opinions to trumpet the Empire-wide support for, and validity of, imperial preference.[4] The Empire's impact on debate over the economics of tariff policy in the late-Victorian period, rather than merely the imperial politics of Edwardian tariff reform, remains little explored, however.

In his exploration of British perceptions of the Australian economy, Craufurd Goodwin took an entirely one-sided view of the use made of the Australian example in the tariff debate. He largely neglected to take account of the political debates over economic and social issues raging in the nineteenth century, and in his eagerness to paint Britain as an arrogant imperial power which viewed Australian political economy through the lens of prevailing economic orthodoxy and the hierarchical relationship between metropolis and colonies, rather than the requirements of national development, Goodwin's idea of the 'British' view of the Australian economy is rather one-sided, for he sees only the critique made by British free traders of Australians as economic heretics.[5]

The truth is that Australia brought a unique stimulation to the tariff debate. For free traders, the juxtaposition of New South Wales, a free trade colony, and Victoria, a protectionist colony, seemed to offer the perfect conditions to provide empirical support to their claim that free trade was a universally applicable economic good. As fellow 'new countries' – settler societies having begun their economic development relatively recently, with similar geographies, histories, inhabitants, and institutions – New South Wales and Victoria appeared to be situated on a level playing field on which a fair contest between free trade and protection could take place. 'New countries', especially the United States, had generally shunned free trade in favour of tariffs as a way of building up an industrial economy, and through their example the universality of free trade as a developmental economic policy was under attack in Britain. New South Wales, however, characterised as a free trade colony though in fact it had a substantial revenue tariff covering a multitude of goods,[6] offered free traders an example of a New World community prospering without protection, thus breaking the link between protection and the impressive growth and living standards in English-speaking communities like the United States and Victoria. The colonies' pioneering work on national economic statistics allowed free traders and tariff reformers to debate the relative economic performance of New South Wales and Victoria. The Australian experience also linked in with the free trade critique of tariffs for their corrupting political influence.

The article concludes with some observations on the Australian impact on the British fiscal debate which place it in the context of contemporary imperial debate. The

intention of this study is to highlight the unique impact of Australia on a significant political and economic debate in Victorian Britain, and thereby demonstrate the importance of the bond between Mother Country and Australian colonies to the transfer of ideas and experience, and their use in the context of domestic British politics and intellectual life.

The end of imperial preference in the 1840s with Britain's turn to free trade, and the grant of responsible government to the Australian colonies in the 1850s, saw those self-governing communities, most notably Victoria, turn to protectionist fiscal policies over the course of the next two decades, with only New South Wales bucking the trend.[7] In 1866, Victoria adopted a broadly based tariff primarily intended for revenue purposes, but which simultaneously satisfied rising protectionist sentiments to build up domestic industry. Tariff changes were then made in the 1880s with more explicit protectionist intentions.[8] Conversely, in 1866 New South Wales rejected protection, adopting a revenue tariff concentrating on a select few items that approximated to free trade, with land revenues sustaining the state in the 1870s. Land became an unreliable revenue source in the 1880s, and on the back of the protectionist party's increasing electoral success in the later part of the decade George Dibbs' government instituted a protectionist tariff in 1891, before George Reid was swept to power on a platform of free trade and taxation of land and incomes in 1894.[9]

The significance of Australian tariff policies to the British debate has its roots in the first half of the nineteenth century. The cause of free trade was troubled by the ideas of one of the great Liberal intellectual heroes, John Stuart Mill. In his *Principles of Political Economy*, originally published in 1848, Mill objected to protection on several grounds, defining the importation of goods at cheapest cost as a national good which made the country more economically efficient, while deriding protectionist doctrine for its mercantilist assumptions about the inherent good of bringing money into the country. However, in one controversial passage, he made a heavily theoretical concession to

protectionism. 'The only case in which, on mere principles of political economy, protecting duties can be defensible, is when they are imposed temporarily (especially in a young and rising nation) in hopes of naturalizing a foreign industry, in itself perfectly suitable to the circumstances of the country.' Mill recognised that often a country's prevailing dominance in a certain industry is simply a result of them having entered that industry before other nations, rather than through any kind of natural advantage. Other countries might indeed be better suited than the leader, but lack its 'skill and experience'. He reasoned that entrepreneurs could not be expected to bear the risk of starting up a rival enterprise in that industry while this disparity existed. Protective duties were therefore 'the least inconvenient mode in which the nation can tax itself for the support of such an experiment.'[10]

Free traders usually criticised the 'infant industries argument' on the grounds that protection distorted investment and led to the misallocation of capital away from its 'natural' home. This, some argued, might be especially harmful to new countries where capital was scarce.[11] They also put forward the political argument that there could be no such thing as 'temporary' protection, as such a policy would simply create vested interests who would seek to sustain their fiscal privileges through corrupt political means. Mill's argument may have had seemingly little to do with an old country like Britain, whose real problem was the loss of export markets through foreign tariffs and industrialisation, rather than catching up with industrial leaders. However, free traders feared that the prosperity of new countries like the United States and Victoria pursuing infant industry policies would help to undermine free trade.

New South Wales, as a free trade community in the New World equally as prosperous as its protectionist relations, was a totem for British free traders. The Cobden Club, the organisation which spearheaded the free trade cause in this period, was in regular contact with the colony's pre-eminent free trader, Henry Parkes, during the 1870s, and these links remained strong over the rest of the century. The Cobden Club luminary, Louis Mallet, remarked that Cobdenites 'considered New South Wales as the centre and hope of the Free Trade policy in Australia.'[12] The colony's value to the free trade cause lay in its ongoing rivalry with protectionist Victoria from the late 1860s to Australian federation, and therefore the abolition of inter-colonial tariffs, at the turn of

the century. For participants in the tariff debate in Britain as much as in Australia, this economic race was of vital importance. The testing of the infant industries idea in Victoria against the 'free trade' policy of New South Wales, in seemingly ideal control conditions, appeared to free traders an opportunity to discredit even this most mild and caveat-laden form of protectionism, and therefore reaffirm free trade as a universally applicable policy of economic development and governmental purity.

George Baden-Powell brought the duel between New South Wales and Victoria to public attention in the early 1880s. A well-travelled Oxbridge graduate with civil service experience in Victoria, Baden-Powell was a passionately imperialist free trader, and from 1885 a Tory MP.[13] His paper at the British Association in 1881, followed a year later by an article and his book, *State Aid and State Interference*, established the juxtaposition of free trade and protection in the two young communities as a contest worth watching.[14] It was, he pronounced, 'a unique case – a test case – the first that history has given us, of the actual recorded results of high and low tariffs in two similarly circumstanced communities, specially interesting because they are young communities, where, if anywhere, Protection is allowed theoretically.'[15] Protection in a new country, the only realm in which a Liberal thinker had accepted protection could be beneficial, was now being tested against free trade in a similarly circumstanced neighbour.

With inductive economics and fiscal reformers biting at their heels, countless free trade writers from both Britain and Australia observed how New South Wales and Victoria were two young communities sharing similar geographic, economic, and political circumstances, making them perfect for determining how their differing fiscal systems affected growth and development.[16] 'In no other part of the world were two communities to be found peopled by the same race and so nearly alike in the character and extent of the resources under their control, and in their government and laws, which were, in fact, practically identical, except in their methods of taxation', recalled the Australian free trader and editor of the *British-Australasian*, Charles Henry Chomley, after Australian federation.[17] 'What better test could have been devised if social inquirers had had the world to choose from and had settled the details at their pleasure?', asked the economist, E. C. Robinson.[18] The laboratory environment of the Australian colonies provided the opportunity for what was seen as a genuine scientific experiment reflecting

inductive principles. Whilst historians have primarily associated induction with neo-mercantilism,[19] many free traders embraced the method in the belief that free trade could be exonerated by observing the Antipodean experiment. They naturally assumed that the results would be in their favour: empirical findings were merely to give factual support to undeniable truth. '*A priori* reasoning on so complex a subject is very properly regarded with more or less distrust', wrote Robinson, 'and if we point to our own unexampled progress in material prosperity under a free trade *régime*, it is always possible to suppose that we might have done more if our industries had been protected.' This was why the Australian experiment was such an '*experimentum cruces*'.[20] 'To separate from each other the tendencies arising from the numerous factors which influence social conditions and developments must always be difficult and frequently impossible', admitted the Australian, Max Hirsch, to the International Free Trade Congress in August 1908, but Australia was the exception.[21]

Some free traders did, however, acknowledge that comparing the performance of free trading and protectionist countries might not isolate those fiscal policies as the primary determinants of economic performance, for there might be a miscellany of other factors involved. The statistician, Robert Giffen, argued in 1882 that although the two colonies made for a good comparison as 'two countries practically alike in their economic and industrial circumstances, and in the character of their people', there were still too many causes of growth which could not easily be separated from the effects of fiscal policy. He therefore dismissed the comparison on the grounds that only one case study was insufficient to prove free trade's superiority. However, a decade later he happily used the Australian contest to critique the infant industries argument and to defend free trade.[22] Similarly, William Pember Reeves, agent-general for New Zealand and former Liberal cabinet member in the colony, warned English students not to concentrate too heavily on colonial fiscal policy, for New South Wales' inconsistent attachment to free trade and her immense advantages in coal made the experiment unreliable, whilst the real determinant of the colonies' prosperity was not fiscal policy but the price of their export staples.[23] Reeves was, of course, required to walk a tight line, in that he was a representative of a protectionist colony in Britain, but also a participant in the circles of British progressive intellectualism in which free trade dominated.

Detailed statistical comparisons usually accompanied polemical discussions on the relative merits of each colony's fiscal system, although in Britain free traders were the more eager to seize upon the figures as proof of the similar, often greater, levels of prosperity and growth under free trade as under protection.[24] Baden-Powell celebrated 'the great practical use of statistics…brought to substantiate, by the cold logic of recorded acts and facts, the reports and rumours that have been rife in these two Colonies.'[25] Through the work of official statisticians like William Archer and Henry Hayter in Victoria, and T. A. Coghlan in New South Wales, the Australian colonies were international pioneers in economic statistics, producing the world's most advanced economic data before the Second World War. Statistical innovation sprung from rivalry between the colonies, often over attracting immigrants and capital, and statistical needs arising from the greater developmental role of the state in the Antipodes. New South Wales had decided to employ a government statistician in the 1880s in order to match the statistical output of rival Victoria, and Coghlan, who pioneered, albeit crudely, national income estimates, began his official work in 1886.[26]

Due to the comprehensiveness and reliability of the census, the Australian figures for population growth, both natural and through immigration, were the crude main indicator of national prosperity. However, population growth was also considered a sign of increasing welfare and the engine of economic growth, especially in new countries. In addition, import and export statistics were readily available, and free traders adduced greater increases in New South Wales' trade volume than Victoria's as indicative of greater wealth and welfare under free trade.[27] Coghlan compiled *A Statistical Account of the Seven Colonies of Australasia* from 1890, which allowed comparisons between the colonies, and his income statistics also developed over time, benefiting enormously from the information gathered through New South Wales' income tax, introduced in 1897.[28] Consequently, the statistics which British free traders utilised began to go beyond population, both human and sheep. When Chomley updated the late Lord Farrer's *Free Trade versus Fair Trade* for its 1904 edition, he included a judicious helping of comparative statistics, including per capita income, consumption of various goods, and factories' output, employment, and wages.[29] Chomley drew on the *Statistical Account* and Australian trade magazines to show Britons that New South Wales outstripped

Victoria in population, wages, trade, output per head, and consumption, and enjoyed lower prices.[30] The Australian contest essentially compensated for the lack of reliable statistics for British national output. The difficulty of fighting a political battle on the economic worth of rival fiscal systems without such statistics was a prime motivation behind David Lloyd George's Census of Production Act 1906, and he singled out America and the colonies as successful practitioners of national production statistics.[31]

Following the end of the gold rush, New South Wales certainly overtook Victoria economically, although historians attribute this less to the direct effects of tariff policy than the former's greater debt-financed expenditure on public works and lighter taxation permitted by buoyant revenues from the sale of still-abundant land.[32] Fair traders also found other explanations for New South Wales' prosperity, and dismissed the legitimacy of the comparison, suggesting for instance that the free trade colony still had vast amounts of coal.[33] There was also much validity in their accusation that New South Wales was not really free trade at all.[34] 'An average customs duty of from 15 to 25 per cent. savours a little of heresy', wrote the fair trader, C. E. Howard Vincent.[35] Regardless, free traders benefited from the general perception and portrayal of New South Wales as a free trade colony.

Some free traders were themselves doubtful about the statistical contest in the Antipodes. Sir Charles Dilke, a Liberal imperialist sympathetic to the aims of colonial protectionism, rejected petty victories in inaccurately compiled statistics for population and public revenue as cast-iron proof of free trade's superiority, for the race was 'neck-and-neck', and both colonies had experienced depression. At most, he concluded, 'all that can be asserted is that a protective system is by no means so disturbing an element in national finance and national prosperity as was imagined, before the colonies had tried their experiments, to be the case.'[36] But most of Dilke's fiscal allies were not to be dissuaded. The Irish Nationalist, Michael Davitt, acknowledged that boom and bust had visited both New South Wales and Victoria, but maintained that the former had recovered more quickly.[37] The vast majority of free traders regarded New South Wales as a free trade 'victory', alongside Wilfred Laurier's win for reciprocity with America in the Canadian elections of 1896.[38] Furthermore, it was regarded as an inductive victory for free trade, and one that defeated the infant industries argument by the new countries' own

developmental yardstick. Goodwin regards British views of Australian protectionism as symptomatic of how colonial economic policies were measured against accepted economic orthodoxy rather than the objectives of development in those communities.

> Tariffs might be imposed by the colonists to increase the volume of urban employment, but neither the statistics of this employment nor alternative means of achieving this goal open to the colonists were examined when evaluations of tariffs were made. A wide range of information which now seems important to a fair appraisal of national policies, and which might have changed conclusions a century ago, was rejected or ignored.[39]

Goodwin's judgment is unfair, however. The nature of the debate was often constrained by the available statistics, but more importantly, free traders claimed that lower tariffs in New South Wales had encouraged industrial employment without mimicking Victoria's recourse to protection. Although this contradicted their arguments that the New World should adopt free trade and specialise in agriculture, free traders happily adduced New South Wales as proof that protection had not been responsible for Victoria's development, but rather capitalists and entrepreneurs discerning commercial advantage in establishing manufacturing there.[40] In other words, market players had done precisely what protectionists claimed the state had to do, and free trade, not protection, was the true infant industries policy. New South Wales, enthused the hardly *laissez-faire* Davitt, had 'shown that it can walk, and run, and work, in an industrial and producing sense, without the patent infants' food kind of nourishment which Victoria still demands for its trade and commercial sustenance.'[41] New South Wales allowed free traders to discredit the one scenario where, according to Mill, protection was desirable and justifiable, and thus they defended the universality of free trade.

Giffen, resenting his fellow free traders' partisan and inaccurate application of Australian statistics, drew a different conclusion, however. Rather than arguing that New South Wales had out-industrialised Victoria under free trade, he explained that neither

colony had developed substantive manufacturing industries other than those which had a purely local application and required no protection, such as tanneries and brickyards. Neither protection nor free trade had helped a new country to sustain viable factory-based industries, said Giffen, for the crucial factor was the size of a country's domestic market.[42] Indeed, free traders cleverly appropriated the United States as the epitome, rather than the antithesis, of free trade, highlighting how the country's internal market was simply an enormous free trade area ensuring prosperity great enough to overshadow the deleterious effects of protectionism.[43]

However, the prosperity of the protectionist New World countries certainly made it harder for free traders to say that tariffs were extremely economically damaging.[44] Even if free trade campaigners and politicians found the electorate receptive to statistical comparisons between New South Wales and Victoria, the fact remained that protectionist New World communities like the United States and Victoria were, for whatever reason, hardly impoverished. They presented free traders with a less easy economic refutation of protectionism than Germany, for instance, where in the Edwardian period it was alleged that the people had been reduced to eating black bread and horseflesh.[45] However, just as free traders responded to the difficult case of the protectionist yet prosperous United States by attacking the manner in which protectionist politics had corrupted democratic government there,[46] so they also highlighted how the dangerous mixture of tariffs and democracy rendered the idea of temporary protection for infant industries a total fallacy. Mallet warned in regard to Australian protection that 'no Government in the world can be trusted to confine its application to the limits originally proposed, or to abandon it when its avowed objects have been fulfilled.' The colonies were simply in danger of repeating the American experience, whereby protection for infant industries had become class-biased legislation that protected narrow interests rather than benefiting the greater good.[47] Free traders portrayed the implementation of Mill's idea of 'temporary' protection as impossible. For the Melbourne newspaper editor, Matthew Macfie, the colonial experience amply demonstrated 'that once a protective tariff is conceded by a Legislature, no bounds can be set to the demands of its supporters for increased prohibitory duties.'[48] For tariff reformers, however, the 'permanence of tariffs in new countries' of which free traders warned was not a sign of a corrupted democracy, but

rather a recognition by the colonies that protection was needed not just to defend a nation's infant industries, but also to ensure that established industries 'be worked on the largest scale and the most economical system.'[49]

This period saw the emergence of rival visions of the interconnection between empire and fiscal policy. As Britain encountered serious geopolitical and economic rivalry, educated Britons asked what the exact nature of the empire should be: a unified political and economic entity, or a body of freely associating independent nations sharing common values and purpose? Groups such as the United Empire Trade League proposed imperial preference as a means of sustaining the relationship between Britain and the colonies, and some individuals even aimed for an outright imperial customs union, akin to the German *Zollverein*. Free traders, however, countered this with a different notion of imperial unity, whereby because Mother Country and colonies shared common values they could retain independence of action in fiscal policy and other areas without jeopardising the imperial relationship.[50] 'Geographical differences necessarily induce different means for the maintenance of order, prosperity, and safety,' observed Baden-Powell, refuting the idea that diversity threatened imperial consolidation, 'but they do not do away with the fact that each state is one society imbued throughout with a national idea, a certain constitutional theory, definite commercial and industrial tendencies, and specified social aspirations.'[51] The use of Australian examples was thus somewhat paradoxical for both sides. Fair traders adduced the successes of protectionism in the colonies, yet their aim of greater imperial commercial unity threatened that very fiscal independence. Similarly, free traders criticised Victoria's tariffs, yet their vision of empire celebrated the diversity of policy-making amongst the English-speaking communities.

The free trade vision of empire entailed a heavily idealised view of the sentimental bonds uniting Britain and the colonies, but it was the imperial ideal which prevailed electorally in the early twentieth century and which the historian now explores. Australia's role in the British tariff debate demonstrates how this imperial diversity

influenced discourse in the Mother Country on a domestic issue of profound importance, and leads to a number of important broader observations regarding the Antipodean colonies' place in the minds of educated Britons. First, it teaches us of the significance of British overseas settlement to the generation of new economic ideas. Colonisation of North America and Australasia introduced to British economic discourse the concept of 'new countries', each with a 'clean slate'. These provided what Liberals and progressives perceived to be ideal experimental conditions for various economic and social policies and ideas.[52] In the case of tariff policy, Australia offered a 'scientific' test of the validity of free trade ideology. Second, and connected with contemporary understandings of the economic development of these new countries, the use of colonially produced statistics reveals the remarkable achievements of these young societies in pioneering moves towards the foundation of modern economic policy-making, the existence of reliable and comprehensive official data; and also the importance of imperial 'networks' to the transfer of ideas and information, not to mention material wealth.[53] British overseas settlement established societies with unique economic conditions that, due to the cultural and often racial affinity felt by educated Britons towards their fellow English-speaking peoples, and to the network links created by empire and language, impacted on significant economic and political debates in the Mother Country. Australian economic history, and perhaps Australian history more generally, ought to be viewed not merely on their own national terms, but also in light of the colonies' impact on discourse in Britain in this period, and similarly British history should not be separated from that of the colonies. Australia's impact on the British tariff debate therefore fits into J. G. A. Pocock's plea for a truly 'British' history encompassing the British Isles and its overseas offshoots.[54]

NOTES

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[19] Green, *Crisis*.

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[38] Robert Giffen, *Economic Inquiries and Studies*, 2 vols. (London, 1904), p. 178.

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