

8. Bradlaugh's parliamentary campaigns & final years (Origins of secularism & the NSS)

Video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SxnPcl_yt8

0:00:15.400,0:00:19.480

Hi. Bob Forder here.

0:00:19.480,0:00:25.700

Charles Bradlaugh's Parliamentary Campaigns and Final Years.

0:00:25.700,0:00:30.000

In 1868 Bradlaugh first stood as a candidate

0:00:30.000,0:00:37.480

in the two-member Northampton constituency, in the wake of the 1867 Reform Act.

0:00:37.480,0:00:44.020

It seems odd that Bradlaugh moved out of London, but there were reasons.

0:00:44.020,0:00:49.860

Northampton was a radical place, and was well known as a town of shoemakers.

0:00:49.860,0:00:55.940

Shoemakers always seem to be radicals. In general they were

0:00:55.940,0:01:01.640

self-employed artisans with some property, therefore many qualified for the vote

0:01:01.640,0:01:10.920

in days when less than half all men did. In 1867 Bradlaugh finished in 5th place,

0:01:10.920,0:01:19.020

but decided to persist. He returned in 1874 and lost again.

0:01:19.020,0:01:26.340

In 1880 he returned, but this time was adopted by the Liberal Party as one of their candidates,

0:01:26.340,0:01:32.640

the other being Henry Labouchere. Labouchere finished at the head of the poll,

0:01:32.640,0:01:40.840

Bradlaugh was second, and was therefore duly elected as Northampton's junior member.

0:01:40.900,0:01:46.240

Bradlaugh turned up in Westminster under the impression that he could make a secular affirmation,

0:01:46.240,0:01:52.760

rather than taking the oath to God and the Queen, neither of whom he believed in.

0:01:52.760,0:02:00.040

This was because secular affirmation was already legal in the courts.

0:02:00.040,0:02:07.320

The Speaker, Sir Henry Brand, was unsure of his ground, and put the issue to the House.

0:02:07.320,0:02:13.940

The House decided that affirmation was not in order so Bradlaugh prepared to take the oath.

0:02:13.940,0:02:22.240

He thought his seat in Parliament more important

than words that carried no meaning to him.

0:02:22.240,0:02:27.260

A group of conservatives objected
on the grounds that Bradlaugh was an atheist.

0:02:27.260,0:02:34.360

The recent 1877 Knowlton pamphlet trial
cannot have helped his case.

0:02:34.360,0:02:38.130

Those objecting included Randolph Churchill,

0:02:38.130,0:02:42.540

who, along with a group of other
conservatives, saw this as an opportunity

0:02:42.540,0:02:50.040

of embarrassing the pious Liberal
Prime Minister, William Gladstone.

0:02:50.080,0:02:57.240

The speaker ruled in their favour.
Bradlaugh was effectively banned from taking
his seat.

0:02:57.240,0:03:05.360

For the next few years Bradlaugh fought
for the right to take the oath, and hence his
seat.

0:03:05.360,0:03:10.520

Four times in the early 1880s he returned to
Northampton for by-elections,

0:03:10.520,0:03:15.140

and four times he returned to Westminster
victorious.

0:03:15.220,0:03:17.960

On one occasion he was imprisoned in the

0:03:17.970,0:03:24.090

prison room in the clock tower, but was
released the next morning, really because

0:03:24.090,0:03:28.769

nobody knew what to do with him.

Bradlaugh is the only person to have

0:03:28.769,0:03:36.920

been incarcerated there, and one has to admit
that

it was rather more comfortable than one
might expect.

0:03:36.920,0:03:42.580

Bradlaugh actually received
visitors during the evening

0:03:42.580,0:03:48.480

On one occasion Bradlaugh attempted to
force his way
into the chamber of the House of Commons.

0:03:48.480,0:03:58.080

Bryan Niblett described what happened:
"Bradlaugh, advancing purposely to the
Chamber door

0:03:58.080,0:04:02.760

where Erskine (the Deputy Serjeant-at-Arms)
stood in his way,

0:04:02.760,0:04:06.160

spoke in a commanding voice:

0:04:06.280,0:04:12.080

"I am here in accordance with the orders
of my constituents, the electors of
Northampton;

0:04:12.080,0:04:19.000

any person who lays hands on
me will do so at his peril".

0:04:19.000,0:04:23.889

Erskine replied that he had orders not
to admit Bradlaugh

0:04:23.889,0:04:26.889

"Those orders are illegal", declared Bradlaugh,

0:04:26.889,0:04:30.759

whereupon he stepped forward brushing
Erskine aside.

0:04:30.760,0:04:38.300

This was a signal for the messengers to act, and act forcibly. They grabbed

0:04:38.300,0:04:44.860

Bradlaugh by his coat, his throat and by his arms.

Bradlaugh fought back grasping one messenger

0:04:44.860,0:04:51.600

by his collar and refusing to let go.

He stood like an oak rooted to the floor of the Lobby.

0:04:51.600,0:04:56.050

These ten, tugging Bradlaugh mainly by the arms, slowly

0:04:56.050,0:05:02.520

dragged him from the Lobby, down the passage, and threw him in the Palace Yard."

0:05:03.520,0:05:12.480

Bradlaugh was exhausted, his frock-coat and silk top-hat ruined.

0:05:12.480,0:05:19.580

He was actually quite badly injured in the fracas.

His arm was damaged and in a sling

0:05:19.580,0:05:26.060

and he had to cancel all his regular lectures and other engagements for the next two months.

0:05:26.180,0:05:34.700

Outside the Palace of Westminster a huge crowd had heard the melee and charged the public entrance.

0:05:34.700,0:05:38.540

Annie Besant, who was there, pushed to the front of the crowd,

0:05:38.540,0:05:42.339

spread her arms, and successfully begged them to stop.

0:05:42.339,0:05:47.739

It seems that if she had not, the crowd may have pushed their way into the Chamber,

0:05:47.740,0:05:53.460

and would certainly have targeted the Speaker, Randolph Churchill, and Sir Stafford Northcote,

0:05:53.460,0:05:57.660

the Conservative leader at the time.

0:05:57.660,0:06:02.840

On another occasion Bradlaugh strode into the Chamber unannounced, Bible in

0:06:02.840,0:06:07.000

hand and administered the oath to himself.

0:06:07.000,0:06:11.620

All to no avail.

The one thing Bradlaugh was allowed to

0:06:11.620,0:06:17.460

do was to address the House from the Bar, which marks the entrance to the Chamber.

0:06:17.460,0:06:24.700

By speaking from there he could address MPs without actually being inside the House of Commons.

0:06:24.700,0:06:34.500

He did this on four occasions, and on the third he concluded his speech with these words:

0:06:34.500,0:06:43.039

"I have no fear. If I am not fit for my constituents

they shall dismiss me,

0:06:43.039,0:06:52.410

but you never shall.

The grave alone shall make me yield."

0:06:54.220,0:07:01.460

The aspiring artist Walter Sickert painted the scene.

This huge, magnificent portrait,

0:07:01.460,0:07:07.000

the largest piece of work that Sickert ever completed, entitled

0:07:07.000,0:07:15.280

“Bradlaugh at the Bar of the House of Commons”

now hangs in the Manchester Art Gallery.

0:07:15.280,0:07:22.520

Throughout this period Bradlaugh was involved in court cases where he always defended himself.

0:07:22.520,0:07:27.360

One of his opponents' tactics was to break him financially.

0:07:27.360,0:07:32.120

A particular issue was the fact that Bradlaugh had actually voted in three parliamentary

0:07:32.129,0:07:39.360

divisions in 1883, while his membership of the House of Commons was in dispute.

0:07:39.360,0:07:45.449

For his troubles he was fined, and attempts were made to sue. Lengthy court cases

0:07:45.449,0:07:50.759

followed and although he generally won, they involved huge time and effort and

0:07:50.759,0:07:57.719

few expenses were ever recovered. At the end of 1885 there was a general

0:07:57.719,0:08:02.070

election, and again Bradlaugh was elected in Northampton.

0:08:02.070,0:08:08.540

A new speaker, Arthur Peel, was elected, who, on taking the chair made a dramatic

0:08:09.220,0:08:15.640

and unexpected statement: “I have no authority, no right, original or delegated,

0:08:15.640,0:08:23.520

to interfere between an honourable member and his taking of the oath”.

0:08:24.080,0:08:30.980

Bradlaugh took the oath, and with it, his seat.

0:08:31.700,0:08:37.020

The Bradlaugh Case made for a field day for the cartoonists. Here's one of my favourites:

0:08:37.020,0:08:46.140

That's Randolph Churchill, with the rather extravagant moustache in the foreground.

0:08:46.240,0:08:50.660

In the five years that followed Bradlaugh earned himself the reputation being a

0:08:50.660,0:08:56.740

hard-working dedicated MP. As well as all the issues you would expect

0:08:56.740,0:09:02.260

him to become involved with, he was an advocate of Irish Home Rule, and showed

0:09:02.260,0:09:06.750

particular interest in Indian affairs.

0:09:07.060,0:09:17.360

On 21st August 1888 at a meeting in the Northampton Town Hall, two eminent Indians,

0:09:17.360,0:09:25.120

Dababhai Naoroji and W.C. Bonnerjee, asked the packed meeting

0:09:25.120,0:09:29.820

if they, as Bradlaugh's constituents,
would approve his carrying the title

0:09:29.830,0:09:37.100

"Member for India"

Of course they acceded. Later Naoroji

0:09:37.100,0:09:40.280

was to become the first Indian to sit in
the House of Commons.

0:09:40.280,0:09:46.440

Both he and Bonnerjee were to chair
meetings of the Indian National Congress.

0:09:46.440,0:09:54.120

Here we have an image of Dabardhai Naoroji in
1892.

0:09:54.120,0:10:03.180

In 1889 Bradlaugh traveled to Bombay to
attend the Indian National Congress.

0:10:03.180,0:10:11.280

He was feted as a hero, and given the honour
of
making the closing speech at the Congress:

0:10:11.400,0:10:17.420

"I would say to you men with race tradition,
caste views and religious differences ,

0:10:17.420,0:10:22.919

that in an empire like ours, that
we should seek and have equality.

0:10:22.920,0:10:28.820

Equality before the law for all,
equality of expression for all,

0:10:28.820,0:10:35.700

penalty on none,
favoritism for none."

0:10:35.920,0:10:42.260

A major issue for Bradlaugh was to return

to the issues of an Affirmation Bill.

0:10:42.260,0:10:47.360

I say return, because, in 1883, an attempt to
pass one into law at the height of the

0:10:47.360,0:10:54.440

Bradlaugh Case had been narrowly defeated.
In 1888 he introduced a new private

0:10:54.450,0:10:59.250

member's bill, which was eventually
approved on 5th December, and is

0:10:59.250,0:11:05.640

still used by many MPs today.
It's worth noting that the affirmation still

0:11:05.640,0:11:11.310

includes the requirement of MPs to swear
allegiance to the Queen. In recent years

0:11:11.310,0:11:16.830

some have been prefacing the required
statement, making it clear that they

0:11:16.830,0:11:21.920

believe their duty is to their constituents.

0:11:22.040,0:11:28.580

The Bill provoked little opposition,
not even from the bishops' bench.

0:11:28.580,0:11:35.660

It seemed that nobody wanted a repeat
of what had gone before.

0:11:36.360,0:11:47.699

Sadly, by the late 1880s Bradlaugh's health
was in decline. He was suffering from kidney
disease.

0:11:47.780,0:11:54.480

On 10th December 1890 he made his
final public appearance at the Hall of Science,

0:11:54.480,0:11:58.320

when he spoke on "The Evidence for the Gospels"

0:11:58.320,0:12:09.620

in aid of the Robert Forder Testimonial Fund, as Forder was retiring as NSS Secretary.

0:12:09.620,0:12:14.860

On 10th January 1891 he took to his bed.

0:12:14.860,0:12:23.220

On 27th January, while he lay there, a Parliamentary colleague, Dr. W.A. Hunter,

0:12:23.220,0:12:29.480

moved an expunging motion in the House of Commons. It read:

0:12:29.480,0:12:36.200

"That the Resolution of the House of the 22nd June 1880, that Mr Bradlaugh be not permitted

0:12:36.200,0:12:42.940

to take the oath or make the affirmation, be expunged from the journals of the House,

0:12:42.940,0:12:51.240

as being subversive of the rights of the whole body of the electors of this Kingdom."

0:12:51.300,0:13:00.260

The resolution was carried. Bradlaugh lay unconscious and never recovered.

0:13:00.260,0:13:09.980

He died on 30th January, unaware of this, his final triumph.

0:13:10.840,0:13:20.660

The funeral took place at the Brookwood Necropolis, to which some 4000 mourners travelled

0:13:20.660,0:13:26.860

from Waterloo by special train. Among the mourners were many MPs,

0:13:26.860,0:13:36.660

including David Lloyd George and a 22-year old

Indian law student, Mohandas Ghandi.

0:13:36.660,0:13:41.780

Despite a request that those attending should not wear mourning,

0:13:41.780,0:13:47.990

Annie Besant, always one for the dramatic gesture, attended fully veiled

0:13:47.990,0:13:54.100

and in black.

However many did wear Bradlaugh's

0:13:54.100,0:14:02.180

Northampton colors of green, white and violet.

It is interesting to note that these same colors

0:14:02.180,0:14:12.420

were the colors of the suffragettes: green for give, white for women and violet for the vote.

0:14:12.420,0:14:15.860

These were the suffragettes colors,

0:14:15.860,0:14:20.560

but they were radical colors too.

0:14:20.700,0:14:24.600

There was then something of an incident, when Bradlaugh's successor

0:14:24.600,0:14:33.020

as President of the NSS, G.W. Foote, who had not

been selected as a pallbearer by Hypatia,

0:14:33.020,0:14:37.540

tried to walk directly behind the coffin

0:14:37.540,0:14:45.340

Annie Besant intervened, elbowed him out of the way exclaiming "How dare you come between

0:14:45.340,0:14:50.160
the daughter and the dead father".

0:14:50.160,0:14:59.020
Here is Bradlaugh's grave soon after his funeral.

0:14:59.020,0:15:02.040
Sadly the site has been allowed to deteriorate,

0:15:02.040,0:15:07.940
and the bust was stolen many years ago and never recovered.

0:15:07.940,0:15:15.520
Bryan Niblett concludes his book with this moving paragraph:

0:15:15.580,0:15:20.590
The family stayed at the graveside a short while and then slowly made their

0:15:20.590,0:15:27.470
way back to Brookwoods Station ... the crowd, guided by marshals from the

0:15:27.470,0:15:34.100
National Secular Society, filed by, one by one, many weeping.

0:15:34.100,0:15:44.320
One of his supporters from Northampton cried out
"Oh Charlie, this is no place for you yet".

0:15:44.380,0:15:48.340
Many threw their rosettes into the grave until the coffin was covered by a

0:15:48.340,0:15:52.500
sea of Northampton colors.

0:15:52.529,0:15:57.539

An hour later, when the crowd was gone and the light was fading, four men from

0:15:57.539,0:16:02.599
Northampton came back to take one last look.

0:16:02.600,0:16:08.400
Here they found the gravediggers, shovelling the mound of earth back into the grave.

0:16:08.400,0:16:18.720
These Northampton men took the spades from the gravediggers and did the work themselves.

0:16:18.720,0:16:26.360
There are several memorials to Bradlaugh. I've mentioned the wonderful Sickert portrait,

0:16:26.360,0:16:30.980
and there is his grave at Brookwood.

0:16:31.110,0:16:38.850
Very recently, and not before time, a newly commissioned bust by Suzie Zamit

0:16:38.850,0:16:43.850
was unveiled within the Palace of Westminster.

0:16:43.880,0:16:50.780
This was commissioned by the National Secular Society.

0:16:51.060,0:16:57.280
There is also his statue which stands in Abingdon Square, Northampton,

0:16:57.280,0:17:03.580
which was unveiled in 1894.

0:17:04.060,0:17:08.860
Thank you for listening.
You can contact me through my email address

0:17:08.860,0:17:18.160

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