

CHAPTER 6 From Labour to Conservative 1945–57

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Britain 1900–11

In 1900 there were two major parties competing for power in Britain: the Conservatives and the Liberals. There were also two smaller parties – Labour and the Irish Nationalists – which were to have an important influence on affairs. This chapter examines the progress and fortunes of these parties as they attempted to respond to the major problems facing Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century. The analysis is developed under the following headings:

- ★ Britain in 1900
- ★ The Conservative Party
- ★ The Liberal Party
- ★ The Labour Party

Key dates

1899–1902	The Anglo-Boer War	1903	Lib–Lab pact formed
1900	Khaki election victory for Salisbury's Conservatives	1905	Liberals in office under Campbell-Bannerman
	Labour Representation Committee formed	1906	Liberal landslide electoral victory
1902–5	Balfour led the Conservative government	1908–11	Asquith led the Liberal Reform programme

1 Britain in 1900

► What were the major problems and questions facing Britain in 1900?

Problems

Britain in the late Victorian and Edwardian years faced great economic, social and constitutional difficulties. These may be listed and examined as:

- the problem of poverty
- Britain's economy
- problems in industrial relations
- Britain's role as an empire
- the franchise question
- the position of the House of Lords
- the Ulster question.

KEY TERMS

Victorian Relating to the years of Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901).

Edwardian Refers to the reign of Edward VII (1901–10), but is often extended to include the early years of George V's reign (1910–14).

Constitutional issues relating to the conventions and methods by which Britain was governed.

Dedication

Keith Randell (1943–2002)

The *Access to History* series was conceived and developed by Keith, who created a series to 'cater for students as they are, not as we might wish them to be'. He leaves a living legacy of a series that for over 20 years has provided a trusted, stimulating and well-loved accompaniment to post-16 study. Our aim with these new editions is to continue to offer students the best possible support for their studies.

Governments of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras

- 1895-1902: Conservatives under Lord Salisbury.
- 1902-5: Conservatives under Arthur Balfour.
- 1905-8: Liberals under Henry Campbell-Bannerman.
- 1908-14: Liberals under Herbert Asquith.

The problem of poverty

By the early twentieth century, Britain had experienced a remarkable increase in the size and the concentration of its population (see Table 1.1). This was largely a consequence of industrialisation and was strikingly evident in the growth of towns and the formation of the great conurbations.

In the 40 years after 1871, the population in those areas very nearly doubled, which greatly increased the demand for such vital resources as water supply and sanitation. In most areas, however, the means of providing these were either rudimentary or non-existent. The result was the intensifying of such social ills as:

- overcrowding
- malnutrition
- ill-health.

It is true that central and local government in the Victorian age had begun to take measures to alleviate the worst of the conditions, but their efforts fell far short of the needs. Such welfare and relief schemes as there were in the towns and cities were wholly insufficient. It was also the case that, although wage rates had risen, they were not yet at a level where the majority of workers had sufficient surplus cash to improve their living conditions. Poverty was widespread.

The only major scheme for dealing with poverty was the **Poor Law**, introduced in an earlier age when it was believed that poverty could be contained by dealing with it on a local basis, parish by parish. However, the enormous increase in population made this system of parish relief inadequate to deal with the problem.

The grim conditions that shaped the lives of the mass of the people who lived in the towns and cities were graphically revealed in a series of carefully researched

Table 1.1 The growth of population in the conurbations

Year	Greater London	South-east Lancashire	West Midlands	West Yorkshire	Merseyside
1871	3,890,000	1,386,000	969,000	1,064,000	690,000
1901	6,856,000	2,117,000	1,483,000	1,524,000	1,030,000
1911	7,256,000	2,328,000	1,634,000	1,590,000	1,157,000

KEY TERMS

Industrialisation

The spread of manufacturing, accompanied by the movement of workers from the land into the towns and cities.

Conurbations

Concentrated urban areas of high population density.

Poor Law As amended in 1834, a scheme for providing relief by taking the destitute into workhouses where the conditions were made deliberately harsh so as to deter all but the most needy from entering them.

public reports. Outstanding pioneering studies were produced by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree; their meticulously detailed analysis of social conditions in London and Yorkshire, respectively, gave evidence of appalling squalor and deprivation.

SOURCE A

From Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, Macmillan, 1902, p. 133.

The wages paid for unskilled work in York are insufficient to provide food, shelter, and clothing to maintain a family of moderate size in a state of merely physical efficiency. And let us clearly understand what 'merely physical efficiency' means. A family living on the scale allowed for in this estimate must never go into the country unless they walk ... They must write no letters to absent children for they cannot afford the postage ... They cannot sew, nor can they join sick club or Trade union, because they cannot pay the necessary subscriptions. The children must have no pocket money ... The father must smoke no tobacco, and must drink no beer. The mother must never buy any pretty clothes for herself or her children ... If any of these conditions are broken, the extra expenditure involved can only be met by limiting the diet; or in other words, by sacrificing physical efficiency. In this land of abounding wealth, during a time of perhaps unexampled prosperity, probably more than one-fourth of the population are living in poverty.

National efficiency

The sheer extent of the poverty in Britain revealed by such stark details convinced all but a few that something had to be done. All the parties agreed that government and Parliament had a duty to tackle the deprivation that afflicted so many in the nation. This was not merely for humanitarian reasons. In 1902, it was officially reported by the army high command that nearly two-thirds of those who had volunteered to join the services at the time of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 (see page 10) had failed to pass their basic medical test.

Such revelations strengthened a widespread conviction current in the Edwardian period that Britain had to re-create 'national efficiency'. This was a term often used at the time to denote the level of well-being and health that it was felt the British people needed to achieve if their nation was to sustain its strength industrially and militarily. The notion of national efficiency was closely linked to **eugenics**, a science that attracted many adherents, particularly among **left-wing intellectuals**. A prominent voice among these was **George Bernard Shaw**, who spoke in favour of 'selective breeding', by which he meant that only couples of a high level of physical and mental health should have children.

What picture of poverty in Britain emerges from Source A?

KEY TERMS

Eugenics The science of improving the quality of the human stock by breeding out inherited weaknesses and deficiencies.

Left-wing intellectuals

Writers and thinkers who believed in radical social and economic change.

KEY FIGURE

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

Celebrated playwright and social commentator.

Charles Masterman, an influential Liberal writer, represented the basic concern of the national efficiency campaigners in Britain when he described the unhealthy conditions in which the mass of the people who had migrated from the countryside to the industrial towns now lived. He wrote of their cramped living conditions and their long hours of work, and warned that it was on this unhealthy population that 'the future progress of the Anglo-Saxon race' would have to depend.

In 1904, a specially appointed Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration delivered a formal report to Parliament. Among its recommendations were:

- the appointment of full-time medical officers of health and health visitors in urban areas
- local authorities to lay down standards of purity for all food and drinks
- regular medical examination of all school children
- urban overcrowding to be studied and addressed
- laws against smoke pollution to be introduced
- basic hygiene to be taught in schools
- local authorities to provide meals for school children.

Not all these proposals were implemented immediately, but they helped to define and clarify the problems. One particularly interesting response to the need for national efficiency was the creation of a youth movement: the Boy Scouts. Its founder, Lord Baden Powell, who expressed his ideas in *Scouting for Boys* (1908), left no doubt as to his purpose: 'Remember, whether rich or poor, from castle or from slum, you are all Britons first, and you've got to keep Britain up against outside enemies, you have to stand shoulder to shoulder to do it.' By 1914, the movement he had started had spread nationwide, and by 1920 worldwide.

While there was general agreement in Britain that the nation had to address its severe social and economic problems, there were deep disputes between the parties and also between different factions within individual parties as to how these should be tackled. The disagreements over this were to be a prominent feature of pre-1914 Britain.

Britain's economy

Between 1870 and 1914 Britain's trade and industry appeared to be shrinking relative to other countries, such as Germany and the USA (see the graph on page 5). The decline was most evident in the **staple industries**. The British industrial growth rate of 2.3 per cent was only half that of the USA. By the turn of the century, Germany and the USA had overtaken Britain in the volume of their iron and steel production. By 1910, British industrial exports made up only ten per cent of the world trade compared with figures of 20 per cent for German goods and 40 per cent for American.

KEY FIGURE

Robert Baden Powell (1857-1941)

A military hero of the Boer War, he became a popular figure in Britain.

KEY TERM

Staple industries Those enterprises on which Britain's industrial strength had traditionally been based, for example, textiles, coal mining, iron and steel production, and shipbuilding.

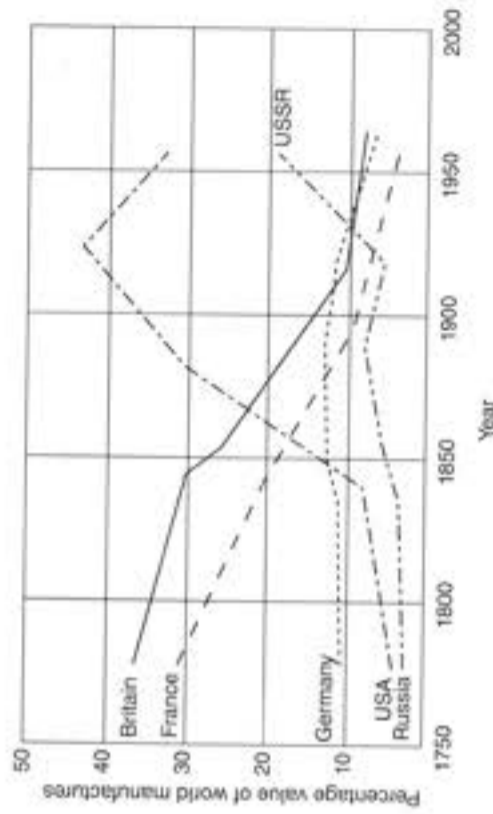


Figure 1.1 Graph showing world trade 1800-1955.

Modern revisionist historians have argued that the decline was exaggerated by contemporaries who were unnecessarily frightened by the growth of Germany and the USA. They suggest that in fact British industry was still growing healthily and was more **cost effective** than American and German industry, even though total output of those two countries was higher. Revisionists further argue that it was the First World War which caused Britain's twentieth-century industrial decline by shattering the international economy in which Britain had held such a predominant place (see page 78). While noting the revisionists' argument, it has to be emphasised that late Victorian and Edwardian industrialists truly believed that the trade figures showed that they were losing out to their American and German rivals in the open market.

New industries

The decline in the staple industries was somewhat offset by the growth in the 'new industries'. This was the term for those growing concerns and businesses which began to develop in such areas as the following:

- transport and communication
- health provision
- distributive trades
- education
- hotels and catering
- public administration.
- financial services

Already by 1910, as Table 1.2 (see page 6) indicates, these activities accounted for 44 per cent of the workforce, but, as yet, the profitability of the new industries did not make up for the losses in the staple industries. However, as the century wore on **invisible earnings** were to become increasingly important to the British economy. It was the profits from the sale of Britain's financial and insurance services and the tax revenue that came from them that helped to keep Britain solvent at critical times.

KEY TERMS

Revisionist historians Those who challenge the accepted interpretation of historical events.

Cost effective Manufactured items produced more cheaply than in rival economies.

Invisible earnings The sale abroad of services (usually in the financial sector) rather than tangible goods.

Table 1.2 Distribution of the workforce in the UK (according to the 1911 census)

Sector	Percentage
Mining	6.3%
Agriculture	11.8%
Manufacturing	32.1%
Chemicals	0.9%
Metal manufacture	4.1%
Engineering	6.7%
Textiles and clothing	12.4%
Food, drink and tobacco	2.8%
Other manufacturing	5.3%
Construction	5.1%
Gas, electricity and water	0.6%
Services	44.1%
Transport and communications	7.9%
Distribution	12.2%
Financial services	1.1%
Hotel and Catering	3.0%
Education	1.5%
Health	0.7%
Public administration	4.1%
Miscellaneous	13.6%

Problems in industrial relations

For much of the nineteenth century, the trade union movement had been dominated by the 'old' unions. But the last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a rapid growth in the number of mass-membership trade unions, composed largely of unskilled or semi-skilled workers. These 'new' unions were eager to use their collective strength in a campaign for better wages and conditions. By 1890, they had already won some major victories; the gas workers had successfully struck for an eight-hour day, and the 'dockers' tanner' (sixpence a day basic pay rate) had been reluctantly granted by the port authorities.

The employers had attempted to counter what they saw as a major threat to their interests by forming federations, aimed specifically at resisting the strength of organised labour. The scene was set for major conflict on the industrial front. So strong was the threat of industrial disruption that it raised the issue of whether it was the role of government or Parliament to intervene in worker-employer relations. This was to prove a critical question in the pre-1914 years.

KEY TERMS

'Old' unions Established organisations representing skilled workers.

'New' unions Representing large groups of workers, such as dockers, transport workers and miners.

Agriculture

As can be seen from Table 1.2, only eleven per cent of the workforce in 1911 were agricultural workers. This compared with 22 per cent in 1841 and seventeen per cent in 1861. This decline is largely attributable to a serious agricultural recession that set in in the 1870s. In that decade foreign cheap corn came into Britain in large quantities from newly developed farm land in North America, Argentina and Australia. British farmers, who could not produce crops as cheaply as they could be imported, were also hit by a series of harvest failures.

The result was that only the largest farmers made reasonable profits. Many smaller farmers left the land or had a much reduced standard of living. In many cases rural poverty was worse than urban poverty (see page 2).

Despite the establishment of a Board of Agriculture in 1889, the situation improved little over the next four decades. It was not until the coming of the war in 1914, which, by greatly reducing imports, increased demand for home-grown food, that British farming began to recover.

Britain's role as an empire

In the last 30 years of the nineteenth century Britain had rapidly increased the size of its existing empire. This was largely the result of its participation in the European scramble for Africa, which had begun in the 1870s. The Conservatives had been particularly associated with the development of this new phase of imperialism. Although there were also some Liberals, known as liberal-imperialists, who supported overseas expansion, the Liberal Party itself strongly opposed it.

By the end of the century, there was considerable dispute between and within the parties as to whether Britain should continue to pursue expansionist policies or whether the view, espoused earlier by such great Liberal figures as **W.E. Gladstone**, that imperialism was both immoral and a threat to international peace, should prevail. The two opposed viewpoints were to be bitterly and violently expressed at the time of the Anglo-Boer War, fought between 1899 and 1902 (see page 10).

The franchise question

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Britain was not yet a democracy. Nevertheless, significant steps had been taken since 1832 to extend the franchise. By 1900, some 60 per cent of adult males had the vote. The question now arose as to whether the nation should become wholly democratic. This would involve, not only the granting of full adult male **suffrage**, but also, far more controversially, the enfranchising of women. All the parties were worried over the political implications of extending the vote to the female population. For which party would women actually vote? It was a leap into the unknown. The battle over this issue became a dramatic feature of pre-1914 politics (see page 40).

KEY TERMS

Scramble for Africa Between the 1870s and 1914, the major European colonial powers, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal and Britain, separately took over large areas of the African continent.

Imperialism The acquiring of colonies principally for the purposes of prestige and economic exploitation.

Franchise The right to vote in parliamentary elections.

Suffrage Essentially the same meaning as franchise, the right to vote.

KEY FIGURE

W.E. Gladstone (1809-98)

British statesman who dominated the Liberal Party from the 1860s until his death in 1898.

It is interesting to note how modern these questions seem. They were the issues which were to continue to demand attention throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Summary diagram: Britain in 1900

- Problems for Britain in 1900**
- Poverty
 - A declining economy
 - Crisis in industrial relations
 - The disputed role of empire
 - The franchise
 - The anomalous position of the House of Lords

2 The Conservative Party

► *What was the character of the Conservative and Unionist Party at the start of the twentieth century?*

Nineteenth-century Britain had seen the rise of a powerful middle class, which had grown wealthy on the profits of commerce and industry. Much less wealthy but no less important politically were the industrial workers who had grown in number as industry expanded. The majority of the men in both these classes had gained the vote. They now had an electoral importance no party could afford to disregard.

Here it is important to stress that the term 'class' does not have a fixed meaning. As Arthur Marwick, one of Britain's most esteemed social historians, points out, classes do not belong in 'the same category as the facts of geography, demography and economics.' 'Classes', Marwick says, 'evolve and change as circumstances change.' This does not prevent our using the word in a descriptive sense; class can be helpfully applied to broad groups which experience common social and economic change. Most people in early twentieth-century Britain would have accepted that there were three major social groups or classes:

- upper classes, drawn from the traditional landed aristocracy
- middle classes who worked in trade or the professions
- people who worked for wages in industry or on the land.

These were not exact definitions, of course; there were grades within each class, particularly the middle class. It also became increasingly possible in the course of the twentieth century to move from one class to another.

The position of the House of Lords

The issue of democracy lay at the heart of another of the major controversies of the time. The **two-chamber structure** of the British Parliament meant that the House of Lords (the Upper House) was constitutionally able to block the legislation sent up to it by the House of Commons (the Lower House). In practice, it was only measures presented by Liberal governments that the Lords chose to reject. This was because Conservative peers were in an overwhelming majority in the Upper House, which enabled the Conservative Party to reject Liberal measures of which it disapproved. The most striking example of this had occurred in 1894 when Gladstone's Irish **Home Rule Bill**, having passed through the Commons, was then thrown out by the Lords. As Britain moved towards democracy, the question was how much longer the anomaly of an unelected assembly having an absolute veto over the elected chamber would be tolerated.

The Ulster question

In the nineteenth century there had been a strong movement for home rule among Irish nationalists, who wanted, as a first step to independence, the creation of a separate government in Dublin, responsible for Irish affairs. However, the demand for independence founded on the position of Ulster whose largely Protestant population were not prepared to accept an Irish settlement that gave southern Catholic Ireland a controlling hand over them (see page 45). Gladstone, the Liberal leader, had introduced Home Rule Bills in 1886 and 1893 but both had failed to pass through Parliament. His attempts had split his party and had hardened the resolve of the Unionists to reject home rule on the grounds that it undermined the unity of the United Kingdom and betrayed Ulster.

The issues and problems which have been introduced in the preceding sections may be expressed as a series of demanding questions confronting the government, Parliament and the political parties in the period between the beginning of the century and the outbreak of the Great War in 1914:

- How could poverty be tackled?
- How far should the government be responsible for running the economy?
- What were the best means of Britain's earning its living?
- How much power should the State have over ordinary people's lives?
- Should wealth be redistributed by the government's taking it from the wealthy in taxes to give to the poor?
- How far should the government be involved in industrial disputes?
- What was Britain's relationship to Ulster?
- How far should the right to vote be extended?
- Was the House of Lords in need of radical reform?
- What was the position and status of Ulster?

NEW TERMS

Two-chamber structure The elected House of Commons and the unelected House of Lords, made up of hereditary peers; to become law, a Bill has to be passed by both Houses.

Home rule A measure granting a colony or dependent region control over its own affairs.

Bill A legislative proposal that has to go through separate stages in the Commons, before going to the Lords for a similar process. When this is completed the Bill receives royal assent and becomes a binding Act.

The response of the Conservatives

The **Conservative and Unionist Party**, which had traditionally been the party of the **landed** classes, had skillfully modified itself in the nineteenth century in order to appeal to both middle-class and working-class voters. Its influential leader, **Benjamin Disraeli**, had accepted that if the party was to survive as a political force it had to adapt itself to the changes that industrialisation had brought. Disraeli's recognition of this was made clear in a series of important social reforms that his Conservative government introduced.

By 1900 the Conservatives had been in power under their leader **Lord Salisbury** for all but three of the previous fourteen years. It has been said that under him Conservatism became 'an organised rearguard action' to prevent the growing democracy of the times from becoming too disruptive. Yet this view needs to be balanced against the fact that Salisbury came to accept the wisdom of Disraeli's belief that it was possible to win over the enfranchised working classes to the Conservative side. That is why Salisbury put great stress on party organisation. It was under him that Conservatism, with its emphasis on recruitment of supporters in the constituencies, began to take its modern shape. His success in this was shown in Conservative victories in the general elections of 1886, 1895 and 1900.

The Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902

The dominant issue preoccupying Salisbury's government when the century opened was not a domestic but an imperial one: the Anglo-Boer War. The war arose from a dispute between the British and the Dutch **Boer** settlers as to who controlled southern Africa. In 1884 Britain had agreed to a division which gave it Cape Province and Natal and granted the Boers the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. However, although Britain formally recognised Boer rights of self-government in the Transvaal, it continued illogically to claim that it had authority over the region.

There is now little doubt that Britain deliberately provoked the war that broke out in 1899. For Joseph Chamberlain (see page 22), the colonial secretary, British supremacy in southern Africa was essential in order to maintain Britain's imperial strength. He held that unless Britain was a powerful empire it could not be a powerful nation. So he plotted with the aggressive British high commissioner in the Cape to make such unreasonable demands on the Boers that they would have no choice but to fight.

From the beginning there was a significant group in Britain who were deeply unhappy with the war. Referred to as 'pro-Boers', they questioned the morality of Britain's position as the aggressor who had started the war. Initially, however, the war was widely popular in Britain, and Salisbury sought to exploit this by calling an election in 1900. The Conservatives deliberately played on the

KEY TERMS

Conservative and Unionist Party

The Conservative Party had joined Unionist in its title after 1886 in order to indicate the strength of its opposition to home rule for Ireland.

Landed Referring to the people whose wealth and status derived from their ownership of substantial areas of land.

Boer Afrikaans and Dutch for farmer.

KEY FIGURES

Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81)

Conservative Party leader in the 1860s and 1870s, he had modernised the party's policies to make it electable by winning over both professional people and workers.

Lord Salisbury (1830–1903)

Led three governments (1885–6, 1886–92, 1895–1902) and was the last peer to be a prime minister; renowned for his contribution to foreign affairs.

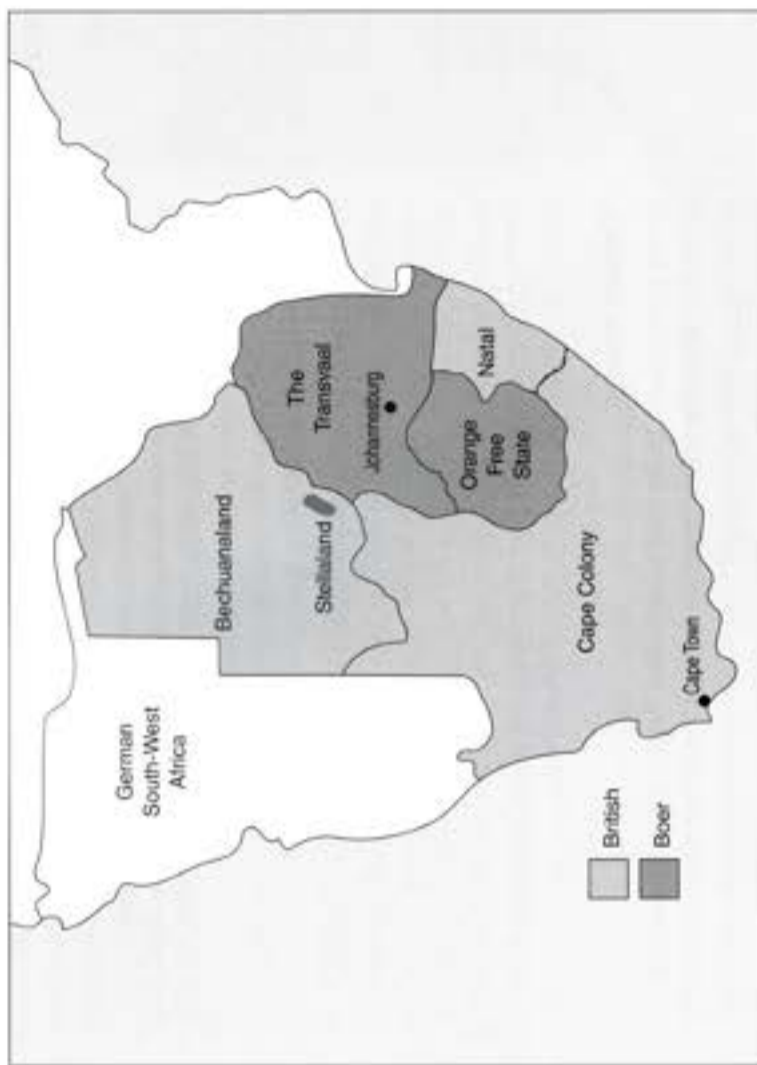


Figure 1.2 Southern Africa on the eve of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902.

patriotism of the electorate in what became known as the **Khaki** election. Salisbury's government was returned with a very comfortable majority over the Liberals (see Table 1.3).

However, from that point on things went badly for the government. Although the war was eventually won, with the surrender of the Boers in 1902, the Conservatives' handling of it proved dismal. The pro-Boers drew constant attention to the failure of British forces to win the conflict quickly. Still more unsettling for the government were the reports of the extreme measures which the British forces employed to break Boer resistance. The most notorious of these was the internment of civilians in 'concentration' camps, where the cramped and unhygienic conditions frequently led to the spread of fatal diseases. This had not been the intention, but it was the deadly outcome.

KEY TERM

Khaki British forces adopted this as the colour of their standard uniform during the Boer War.

Table 1.3 The 1900 general election result

Party	Votes	Seats	Percentage of vote
Conservatives	1,797,444	402	51.1
Liberals	1,568,141	184	44.6
Labour (Labour Representation Committee)	63,304	2	1.8
Irish Nationalists	124,586	82	2.5