

## Small Shopkeepers and the State: The 'Balfour' Bill of 1937

Andrew Alexander, University of Surrey, UK  
John Benson, University of Wolverhampton, UK  
Gareth Shaw, University of Exeter, UK

*It is well known - at least to those interested in the history of retailing - that small shopkeepers in Britain were remarkably unsuccessful at mobilising the power of the state in defence of their interests. Although they were seemingly as convinced as their colleagues elsewhere in the world of the threat posed by new, large-scale forms of distribution, they were unable to persuade those in power to protect them against the ever-growing, and seemingly deadly, competition of the co-operative store, the department store and the multiple store. The image drawn by Geoffrey Crossick of the small shopkeepers in Victorian and Edwardian Britain as constrained in their relationships with the state both by their lack of a clear occupational identity and by their belief in the unbending working of the market has been modified - though not overturned - by more recent studies. These tend to stress late nineteenth and early twentieth-century shopkeepers' pragmatic attitudes towards legislation, their willingness to organise in trade associations, and these associations' ability to act as lobbying organisations especially at the local level.*

*However, what was true of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain was not necessarily true of the years between the wars. Accordingly, one aim of this paper to examine whether, and to what extent, small shopkeeper identity and ideology became less narrow and parochial during the 1920s and 1930s as the threat posed by the multiples intensified. It is suggested that the leaders of small shopkeeper associations worked hard to foster regional and national organisation during this period. In doing so they sought to engender a broader perspective to their activities. Yet, even during the inter-war years, many small shopkeeper organisations remained local not just in their membership but also in the issues they pursued and, nearly always, in the solutions that they advocated. As a result some leaders of small shopkeeper associations believed that it was not enough for local trade associations to join together in regional - or even national - organisations. What was needed, some prominent officials began to argue, was for trade associations - whether local, regional or national - to be superseded by 'general' associations which represented the entire shopkeeping*

*interest irrespective of the particular trade in which they were involved.*

*Significantly, many of those calling for 'general' organisation also believed in the need to adopt more overtly political means of protecting themselves from the threats which they saw closing in upon them. Sometimes the call for political solutions did not involve much more than an appeal for individual retailers to do what they could on an individual basis. In other instances it was also associated, naturally enough, with attempts to secure the election of members of parliament who were aware of, and sympathetic to, the problems of the small shopkeeper. The most difficult task, of course, was to introduce, and place on the statute book, legislation designed explicitly and exclusively to protect the interests of the small shopkeeper. Nonetheless, the leaders of Britain's small shopkeepers associations attempted to obtain legislation penalising the multiple (chain) store, a process culminating in the introduction in to the House of Commons of the Shops (Retail Trading Safeguards), of 1937. Championed by Captain Harold Balfour, the Conservative member for the Isle of Thanet, it became known as the 'Balfour' Bill.*

*This paper argues that the introduction of the Bill reveals that the leaders of small shopkeeper organisations found it increasingly difficult to believe in the efficacy of the market. Furthermore, it is suggested that the defeat of the Bill provides a striking illustration of the leaders' difficulties in establishing a clear small shopkeeper identity, undermined as they were by a combination of occupational disunity and a widespread reluctance to support state intervention.*