Pushful Joe

Chamberlain was a middle class family’s child in London.

He took prizes in math and French at school

But school ended at sixteen, when his father forced him into the family business, the making of Spanish leather boots and shoes.

Two years later his father pulled him into Birmingham, to help in’ a new concern, set up by him and his uncle, a metal-screw factory.¹

18 years he spent screw-making, but when he retired in 1872, at 36, he was tremendously well to do.

Two thirds of all the metal screws made in England, his firm made.

He now could put his attention on other things.²

Those were the prospects of radical reform.

Already, he had become the champion of public education for all.

Keep in mind, in 1870 that just about half the 4.3 million school-age children got no schooling at all.

¹ Massie, Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War, 233.
² Massie, Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War, 233.
Another million went only every now and then.  

Go to Birmingham; you find ragged kids running wild in the streets.

For Chamberlain, there was a solution: make all schools free and all schools compulsory.

Already. Birmingham had elected him head of the Board of Education.

And he had become a lobbyist to the Prime Minister, speaking for a delegation from the National Education League.

Retired as he was, he had time to become mayor of Birmingham.

Three years he spent at it – but they were well spent.

By the time he left, he had a political machine that couldn’t be broken, and would elect him for the rest of his life.

No one was fool enough to challenge his leadership there

He was “the King of Birmingham.”

The nickname fitted, from the way he dressed.

the monocle, and pale,
clean shaven gentleman’s face.

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elegant cutaways and top coats
Red cravat drawn through a gold ring
very day, a fresh orchid in his buttonhole.
Gold rimmed monocle on black ribbon for his right eye.⁵

Yet this genteel looking man was, in fact, very radical indeed.

Once, he had been a republican.

And an earnest critic of the House of Lords.

“The Divine right of Kings – that was a dangerous delusion, but the divine right
of peers is a ridiculous figment. We will never be the only race in the
civilized world subservient to the insolent pretensions of a hereditary
caste.”⁶

Lord Salisbury, responding to attacks, called him “a Sicilian Bandit.”

And a little more courteously, Chamberlain invited the Lord to try a picnic
not at some nobleman’s seat in the country, but at Hyde Park.

“I will promise him that he will have a larger meeting than he ever
addressed, and that it will be quite unnecessary for him to go to
the expense of any fireworks.”

The two men even made veiled threats of beating each other up and breaking each other’s heads.\textsuperscript{7}

Chamberlain was also a man, for all his outward show, stunted by tragedy.

He married twice as a young man.

Each marriage was blissfully happy, and painfully short before his wives died in childbirth, producing sons.

All the pity for other people as individuals drained out of him.

Who could possibly have suffered, as he had suffered?

In 1876, only 40, he was elected to Parliament.

MP’s were surprised to find such a radical was such a gentleman.

And well informed on every subject.

Nobody understood housing, education or sanitation so well, or what bad conditions did for the life of the poor.

His speeches were always logical, clear, passionate.

And he had a fascinating voice.\textsuperscript{8}

Four years later, and Gladstone found he couldn’t do without Chamberlain’s support. Chamberlain wanted, and got a Cabinet place as President of the Board of Trade.

\textsuperscript{7} Massie, \textit{Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War}, 232-33.

\textsuperscript{8} Massie, \textit{Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War}, 235.
There he was one of the most ardent social reformers – until Gladstone’s Home rule bill.

Chamberlain broke with the Liberal party and led the radical Unionists over to the Conservative side.

He could do it. After Gladstone, he certainly was the most popular Liberal leader in Britain.

If he had stood by Gladstone, he would have perhaps been his successor in the party and very possibly Prime Minister.

Now, he had thrown away his chance, and never would get it back. 9

But that didn’t slow or stop him. He became the most dangerous and vituperative enemy of the Grand Old Man.

Ten years he spent in the wilderness. But they were not years wasted.

The Conservatives must bid for his support, too – and the price was social reform.

In 1891, Lord Salisbury’s government put through free education for all children in the United Kingdom.

And Chamberlain offered the first bill ever offered in Parliament, for old age pensions.

Nor were they wasted at home.

On a diplomatic trip to America, he fell in love with the daughter of Secretary of War Endicott, and embarked on a third happy marriage, and one that lasted his life through.

Home life was one of his only real pleasures.

He didn’t hunt or yacht or golf or play tennis.

But he raised orchids and was proud of it, and built him more statelier greenhouses, always adding to it, so that there would be more room for more plants.

... experimenting and crossing hues and sizes

And many of his greatest accomplishments ended in his lapel button hole.¹⁰

A dozen greenhouses for orchids...

A dozen more for azaleas, begonias, primulas, and ‘mums.

It makes you wonder about this cold-eyed man, with an imperturbable mask of a face –

never riled

never rude without a lot of careful forethought....

Was there something rather unexpected behind that mask –

something as vulnerable as those orchids ... or
something as exotic?

Here’s something that made you wonder even more.

When, in 1895, the Tories came in, they were ready to make room somewhere around the
Cabinet table for Joe.

The choicest seats – was his to command:

Treasury
Foreign Office
Home Office

Chamberlain chose none of them. His pick?

.... the Colonial Office!

Colonial Office?

That’s like asking to be Runner-Up to Miss Congeniality.

It’s like a guest being invited into his greenhouse for orchids
and asking for a black-eyed Susan!

It’s an office for losers.... the nicknames tell everything about
the holders of it –

“Peter Woggie” Salisbury

“Twitters” Carnarvon.
You can’t do foreign policy – that’s the Foreign Office’s business.

You can’t handle Inja – that’s the India Office’s business.

You can’t even write anything people will read about it.

That’s Rudyard Kipling’s business.

You can’t do ANYTHING: the Treasury keeps the purse-strings tight.

What was Chamberlain thinking of?

Maybe the answer lies in his nickname, “Pushful Joe.”

Everybody else who was Anybody had Ancestors to fall back on.

The Duke of Earl don’t need to prove himself to anybody.
   He’s simply a very ripe fruit on a very stately family tree.

   He can trace his forbears back to a Protoplastic Globule.

But Joe... he’s the Screw-Maker-Shoemaker’s son.

   born to the purple of commerce.

Politics still is the gentleman’s hobby ...
   not the shop-clerk’s other line of work.

You could just fit into the Liberals.
   But among the Tories?
You’ll never mix – never really belong.

... unless you’re truer to the Union Jack than any of ‘em.

Is it sheer coincidence that the two biggest outsiders the Tory party ever found room for – the two Radicals who turned Tory – and just about the ONLY ones who could get away with wearing a monocle...

were the two biggest Imperialists –

Dizzy

&

Pushful Joe?

Or was it proof of that other rule: that the harder and more cynical a public man looks, the more you know that what he’s trying to hide is that soft core –

a core of the Romantic, arrant, wild, whimsical, heroic?

... and a Romanticism that doesn’t worry about obstacles.

What it likes is the Grand Splash –

the magnificent Gesture?

That, too, sounds like Disraeli.

And that, too, fits Joe Chamberlain.