THE ISSUE OF PARLIAMENTARY REFORM IN ENGLAND DURING THE 1820s

Thesis submitted

for the degree of M.Phil.

by

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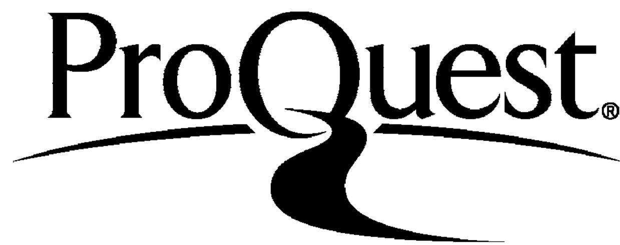

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to determine how far parliamentary reform remained an important issue, and what arguments were offered for and against it, during a decade which did not produce the sort of major agitations in favour of the measure seen in 1816-19. Particular events and general trends characteristic of the decade are examined to see what effect they had on a reform debate which, though never the overriding obsession of the nation, did not disappear altogether.

It is shown how the Queen Caroline affair, the largest mobilisation of anti-government opinion between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the Reform Bill crisis, both provided a platform for reformist argument and to some extent directed attention away from purely political issues.

Another section focuses on the effect of the severe agricultural distress of the early twenties on farming and landlord opinion and demonstrates that for a time at least reform was both widely discussed and widely supported in this sector of the community, in particular at the series of county meetings held in the first halves of 1821, 1822 and 1823.

The attitude of the parliamentary Whig party to the issue is also examined, and their continuing difficulties

over establishing a universally accepted party consensus on how, and even whether, parliamentary reform should be adopted as 'official' party policy are stressed.

In a section dealing with the attitudes of the working classes and those who sought to influence them, the relationship of reform with such ideas and activities as Infidelity, Co-operation and trades unionism is looked at, and an attempt is made to gauge the extent to which Radicalism, or at least political feeling, revived during the severe slump in the textile-producing areas in 1826-7.

Other important and interrelated facets of the period - the "liberalisation" of the Tory Government from 1822, the debate on Catholic Emancipation, the spread of education, the wider diffusion of general and political knowledge by mass print media expanding in size and sophistication, and the apparent increasing assertiveness of public opinion - are also dealt with, and the double-edged nature of their effect on the case for reform illustrated.

The several attempts at partial representative or electoral change are described and their role in the contemporary reform debate is assessed, as are the initiatives on the closely related subjects of economical reform and retrenchment in government.

The general conclusion of the study is that reform in the twenties by no means sank into oblivion. Conditions

were against its assuming dominating importance, probably the most influential of those conditions being the comparative prosperity of the decade. However, several influential publicists for whom reform was "the one thing needful" continued to be active, and the mass enthusiasm of 1830-2 did not spring from nothing.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE NOTES

Add.	- Additional Manuscripts, British Library
CJ	- Commons Journals
Brougham	- Brougham Collection, University College, London
Ellice	- Ellice Papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh
Fitz.	- Fitzwilliam (Milton) Papers, Northants Record Office
Grey	- Grey Papers, Dept. of Palaeography and Diplomatic, Durham University. Detailed references are not given for this collection as much of it was to be re-catalogued soon after I consulted it.
1 PD	- First series of Hansard's Parliamentary Debates
2 PD	- Second series of Hansard's Parliamentary Debates
3 PD	- Third series of Hansard's Parliamentary Debates
Sinclair	- Sinclair of Ulbster letter-books, Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh

All volume numbers are given in small Roman numerals.

All printed sources published in London unless otherwise stated.

Note: Viscount Castlereagh, who acceded to the Marquisate of Londonderry in 1821, is referred to by the former title throughout, except in some quotations.

INTRODUCTION

As far as the issue of parliamentary reform is concerned, the 1820s have usually been seen as a period of prosperity-induced quiescence, even apathy, wedged between two short periods of intense agitation (1816-20 and 1830-2), the second of which was more widespread and hence, with the help of 'high political' events, successful.

During the twenties, it seems, the political nation became obsessed with 'Corn, Cash and Catholics', especially the last-named, whilst the working class, 'born', according to Harold Perkin, in that first post-war period of reform agitation, found other channels of expression in trades unionism, Co-operation and the Free Thought and Infidelity of Richard Carlile and the Zetetic societies. None of these areas of activity necessarily precluded belief in the Radical programme of universal suffrage, annual parliaments and the ballot, but their emphases were not on formal political reform.

J.C.D. Clark, has insisted that after the Napoleonic wars "religion, not representation, increasingly emerged as the main object of popular demands for legislative social change" and, like several other historians, he has repeated unchallenged J.W. Croker's erroneous assertion of 1831 that between 1824 and 1829 no reform petition was presented to the House of Commons. "... the issue

sank into oblivion," concluded Clark with resounding exaggeration.[1]

Such views cannot simply be written off as the offspring of a distorted historical perspective, since, by judicious selection, a similar picture can be derived from the writings and speeches of prominent contemporaries. For instance, Lord John Russell, discussing in May 1827 the relevance of reform to the ministerial changes of that year, asserted that "he had found a great lukewarmness on the subject throughout the country".[2] In a different part of the reforming spectrum, James Mill noted in 1826 that "during recent years, in the course of which the nature of the composition of the House of Commons has become better understood, and its inherent incompetency to the business of good government has become an opinion more deeply impressed, and more widely diffused, the efforts on the part of the people to procure the requisite alterations in the mode of forming the House have almost ceased and the demand for parliamentary reform is scarcely heard".[3]

A different sort of reformer again, T.J. Wooler, seems by 1824 to have reached a state of great despondency.

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[1] J.C.D. Clark, English Society 1688-1832. Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the 'ancien regime' (Cambridge, 1985), p.388.

[2] 2 PD, xvii, 543-4, 3 May 1827.

[3] Westminster Review, vi, No.xii (October 1826), p.267.

His Final Address in the last volume of the Black Dwarf was such a powerful expression of disillusionment on the part of one of the most effective Radical journalists of the time that it is worth quoting at length:

> "In ceasing his political labours, the Black Dwarf has to regret one mistake, and that a serious one. He commenced writing under the idea that there was a PUBLIC in Britain, and that public devotedly attached to the cause of parliamentary reform. This, it is but candid to admit, was an error. Either there is no public, or that public is indifferent upon the subject. It is true, that hundreds of thousands have petitioned and clamoured for reform; but the event has proved what their enemies asserted, and what the Black Dwarf treated as a calumny, that they only clamoured for bread. And if they were only stimulated by hunger, and the influence of despair and distress upon the animal passions, they were not reformers, but bubbles thrown up in the fermentation of society. The exceptions to this remark will not be offended with its freedom, as it carries its own justification in the proof. It would be idle to say more. The majority has decided, in its cooler moments, for 'things as they are'. The minority must abide the result of its decision. A mere by-stander would only waste his breath, by offering unrequested advice; and though words cost nothing, time is too valuable to be always thrown away.
>
> The Black Dwarf, therefore, ceases to advocate a cause in which he has served and suffered, without fee or remuneration, for a long time."[4]

Of course, the yardstick Wooler used to gauge interest in parliamentary reform was outward agitation, and the Six Acts, passed late in 1819, and later, as the Address complained, cheap food, prevented before 1830 any real recurrence of the agitation of the immediate post-war years.

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[4] Black Dwarf, preface to vol. xii (1824).

But political issues are not simply about large public meetings and strident speech-making. James Mill, in the extract quoted above, described the other side of the coin: the largely silent yet growing conviction of the necessity of reform. Other reformers also comforted themselves in times of political quietude with the belief that their ideas were making steady progress. Major John Cartwright, for instance, told B.M. Beverley in July 1824 that "although that cause does not at present produce any very conspicuous popular exertion, and in two certain Houses experiences no encouragement, convinced I am, that it is working well in a diffusion of true political knowledge".[5] Similarly, James Losh expressed the conviction in 1826 that "the day cannot be very distant (profound as the present calm seems to be) when the people of this great country will feel and remedy the present absurd and disgraceful mode of election of what are called their Representatives."[6]

Contemporary comment on the progress of reformism was not limited to utilitarian articles, the letters of a venerable Radical or the diary of a Whiggish Unitarian. In a well-known letter, J.W. Croker told Robert Peel that he found that at tables "where ten years ago you would

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[5] Frances D. Cartwright (ed.), The Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright (1826), p.263.

[6] Edward Hughes (ed.), Diaries and Correspondence of James Losh, ii, p.40, 7 February 1826. In Surtees Society Publications, clxxiv (1963).

have no more heard reform advocated than treason, you will now find half the company reformers - moderate reformers, indeed individually, but radical in a lump."[7] Peel himself had expressed the view at the beginning of the decade that reform could not be delayed more than seven years.[8] Around the same time, another anti-reformer, J.W. Ward, later Lord Dudley, wrote to Bishop Copleston of his uneasiness about the "progress that reform is making, not only among the vulgar, but persons, like yourself, of understanding and education, clear of interested motives and party fanaticism..."[9]

It was impossible for nineteenth-century Whig-Radical historians to resist the temptation to ascribe the triumph of reform in 1832 to a long, steady build-up of public awareness which at length hardened into a quiet conviction in the vast majority of the population. Even before the final victory, Thomas Macaulay urged this view: "If ever there was in the history of mankind a national sentiment which was the very opposite of a caprice - with which accident had nothing to do - which was produced by the slow, steady, certain, progress of the human mind, it is the feeling of the English people on the subject of Reform."[10]

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[7] Louis J. Jennings (ed.), The Croker Papers (1884), ii, p.52, Croker to Peel, 1 February 1822.

[8] Ibid., i, p.170, Peel to Croker, 23 March 1820.

[9] Edward Copleston (ed.), Letters of the Earl of Dudley to the Bishop of Llandaff (1840), p.247, April 1820.

[10] 3 PD, vii, 307, 20 September 1831.

In similar vein, Harriet Martineau produced an extremely optimistic survey of the progress of reformism after the war in her History of England during the Thirty Years Peace. For her, reform replaced victory over Napoleon as the great object of national striving, with only Lord Liverpool's ministry not being in on the secret: "...the English nation now began to rouse itself for its immortal struggle to become the representative commonwealth that it professed to be."[11]

John Cannon, writing 120 years after Martineau and avoiding her excess of hindsight, nevertheless accepted the view of the twenties as a time of steady progress, a time when reform was changing from a crusade into an accepted creed. He thus interpreted the peroration to Canning's famous speech against Russell's 1822 reform motion as the words of a man who knew in his heart that he was fighting in a lost cause.[12]

The apparent paradox of the twenties - 'lukewarmness' contemporaneous with a growing rational enthusiasm - is partly resolved if we do not treat the period as a unity. Most of the instances of the positive side of the question quoted above come from the early part of the decade, when a General Election, Radical trials, the Queen Caroline

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[11] History of England during the Thirty Years Peace, i, Bk.ii, pp.268-70 (2 vols., 1849,50).

[12] John Cannon, Parliamentary Reform,1640-1832 (Cambridge 1973), p.183.

Affair and agricultural depression combined to keep the political temperature fairly high and to convince many that soon every disinterested Englishman would be a reformer. The number of reform petitions presented to the Commons peaked in 1823 at twenty-three, and there then followed what seems like a marked falling away in interest, reflected not only in the presentation of only two petitions in 1824 and one in 1825, but also in the fizzling out of the county-meeting campaign as the farmers pulled out of trouble and began to share in the nation's comparative prosperity.

It is a historical commonplace that times of economic well-being are not conducive to loud and widespread demands for political change. Thus the 'prosperity' of the twenties takes its place alongside the liberality of ministers as one of the two main shorthand explanations of the low profile of reform during most of the decade. However, the idea of the prosperous twenties has to be treated with a little caution. For many deriving their livelihoods, either directly or indirectly, from agriculture, the first part of the decade was anything but prosperous and, even though that very fact meant cheap food for consumers, 1826 was a year of great difficulty for many northern industrial workers as slump hit the staple textile industries following the financial disasters of late 1825.

Nevertheless, contemporary comments on prosperity are numerous enough, particularly from the years 1824 and 1825, to mark at least part of this decade off from

the really desperate hardships of 1817 and 1819, which produced the most potent demonstration of popular reformism yet seen. Conversely, in 1824 and 1825, general reform was scarcely mentioned in or out of doors, and petitions for it nearly dried up.

Sir Archibald Alison, the nineteenth-century historian, saw a close connection between the size of the currency in a given year, which he took as the main economic indicator, and the number of reform petitions:

Year	Petitions	Currency (£)
1820	0 (6)	34,145,385
1821	19	30,727,630
1822	12 (19)	25,658,600
1823	29 (23)	27,396,544
1824	0 (2)	32,761,152
1825	0 (1)	41,049,298
1826	0 (2)	33,611,141
1827	0 (5)	31,493,250
1828	0 (3)	28,394,497
1829	0 (1)	28,501,456
1830	14	26,965,090[13]

[13] Alison, History of Europe from the Fall of Napoleon to the Accession of Louis Napoleon (Edinburgh and London 1853-9), iv, p.203. Figures in brackets give the actual number of petitions presented, as opposed to the totals quoted by Alison.

It may be doubted whether these figures show a very close relationship, but the idea that periods of comparative inflation reduce competition for a share in the national 'cake' and therefore damp down the social strife that could be an important catalyst for reform demands is generally acceptable.[14]

Though ministers had told the suffering farmers to rely mainly on Providence rather than government intervention to see them through their difficulties, it was natural that the government and its supporters should take credit for better times and ram home the political advantage over their opponents. Two particularly trenchant examples of this came during what might be termed the 'high noon' of twenties prosperity, the first half of 1825. "What is become of their predictions," the Tory Leicester Chronicle wrote mockingly of the reformers, "that without Reform of Parliament, commerce would never extend, agriculture never revive, and that the country must have a speedy downfall?" The 'evils' of the electoral system remained, "yet the prosperity of the country courts even SIR FRANCIS BURDETT himself into smiles and congratulations... the public wealth, industry, virtue, and intelligence of the country are sufficient to secure prosperity, to keep Parliament to its duty, and check all important abuses, without resorting to the metaphysics

[14] See Harold Perkin, The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880 (1969), pp.343-4.

of JEREMY BENTHAM, the constitutions of MAJOR CARTWRIGHT; the prophecies of ROBERT HALL; or the blacking brushes of HENRY HUNT."[15]

A more lengthy expression of Tory complacency came from John Miller in his Quarterly Review article on the "Past and Present State of the Country".[16] Miller saw Britain as enjoying a wholesome economic equilibrium in which "if none of the great interests of the community are elevated with prospects of extravagant gains, none of them are suffering under severe privations."[17] Reformers would ideally have liked all interests to be suffering at once, but at least when one of them was enough political animosity was generated, either against other interests or the government, for there to be a receptive audience for their ideas. Now, however, Miller believed that such "abstract politicians" had had the ground taken from beneath them. "We cannot discover that those great reforms, which they have advocated and represented as indispensable pre-requisites, have had any share in guiding us to our national prosperity." The monarch still retained his prerogatives; the peerage was still hereditary and retained its judicial functions; the Commons was not purified and no dis-franchisement had taken place, save in one or two cases

[15] Leicester Chronicle, 8 April 1825.

[16] Quarterly Review, xxxii, No. lxiii (June 1825), pp.160-97.

[17] Ibid., p.160.

of blatant corruption; the large estates had not been divided or the titheholders disappropriated; the law courts were still regulated by the 'barbarous' common law, and unpaid magistrates still executed their JP duties without help from a new system of codification.

> "If the state to which we have arrived without the aid of the reformers be such as to satisfy the public that theirs was not the kind of reform which we needed, it may possibly induce the reformers themselves to agree to suspend the practical adoption of these schemes till a century or two more shall have given time for a further trial of the constitution under which we have proceeded so far in our auspicious course."[18]

Reformers were naturally anxious to protest against such galling self-confidence on the part of their opponents. Their usual response was to claim that prosperity had been achieved despite, rather than because of, the present state of the constitution, and that it sprang from the ingenuity and industry of a people who might have achieved much more under a better system. Thus, at the 1824 Southwark dinner, Burdett "admitted that the country enjoyed comparative ease at present, to what it had for some years past", but he added that, thanks to the National Debt, the country was not as prosperous as it should have been.[19]

Attempts might be made to distance the case for reform from purely economic matters. Russell, for instance, professed to believe that "the prosperity of the country,

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[18] Ibid., pp.196-7.

[19] Times, 23 June 1824.

or its occasional sufferings, were, in a commercial point of view, not materially affected by the state of the representation in that House."[20] However, to make such statements was effectively to throw up the opportunity to make political capital during times of recession. The leading Radical publicists knew that they had to address themselves, both in bad times and in good, to what was happening to people's pockets and stomachs, as well as advocating reform on high constitutional grounds. They could insist on the superficiality of prosperity. Wooler, for example, described it with typical vividness as "the mere covering of a bog with verdure."[21] In 1822, he had shown that he saw grounds for hope that better times would not necessarily put reform out of people's minds when he wrote a mocking letter to the Manchester magistrates, Hulton Ethelstone and Hay in which he pointed out that people flocked around the liberated Henry Hunt "as naturally as before, though bread is cheap, and the time of delusion has passed away!"[22] However, despondency about the quietude of the times soon became the hallmark of his commentaries and of those of other reformers. "Experience tells us", Wooler wrote in 1824, "that give the multitude bread, and bear a little with their humours in matters that are immaterial, and priests and kings may lead them

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[20] 2 PD, xv, 657, 27 April 1826.

[21] Black Dwarf, 1 June 1824.

[22] Wooler's British Gazette, 5 December 1822.

by the nose as they please."[23] England was now

> "The land of the Canning, the Sidmouth and the Eldon
> And all is now ill-done that used to be well-done!
> The people are dull as their masters would have them,
> And lie down to be tied as their betters enslave them."[24]

By June, Wooler was expressing his doubt as to whether, in view of the "torpor" of the people, he could fill even a monthly number of the Black Dwarf. The issues which stirred the people in the past still existed, but the people had settled for quietude.[25]

Such complaints were echoed from several parts of the reforming spectrum. As early as 1821, Richard Carlile was growling that "at present, there is an apathy so disgraceful, that our enemies think of us, and speak of us, as altogether cowed and beaten."[26] Burdett also remarked upon the tameness of the times[27] and, soon afterwards, Henry Brougham described the political consequences of such tameness to Grey: "... you know when stocks are above ninety, and corn bears a fair price, reasoning to the country, at least to the land and trade, is labour lost."[28]

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[23] Black Dwarf, 4 February 1824.

[24] Ibid., 25 February 1824.

[25] Ibid., 1 June 1824.

[26] Carlile, To the Reformers of Great Britain, 13 October 1821, p.6.

[27] Burdett Papers, D94, ff.34-5, Burdett to his wife, 11 January 1824.

[28] The Life and Times of Henry, Lord Brougham. Written by Himself (London and Edinburgh 1871), ii, pp.464-5, 26 January 1824.

Prosperity was naturally always politically bad for oppositionists since they were forced to work against the grain of the public disposition and could not so confidently go on the offensive. There was thus a grain of truth in the assertions of anti-reformers that their opponents welcomed hard times as the only conditions in which they would be heard, though reformers could retort that they were only glad in that the people would be roused to demand measures which would prevent them ever suffering severely again.

Thomas Attwood was thus something of an exception among reformers in unequivocally putting economic improvement before political. He told the Birmingham public meeting of 8 May 1829 that he had devoted himself for twenty years to the consideration of national distress and its proper remedies "for I have considered it as a question of the greatest possible importance - so important that even parliamentary reform seems inferior when placed for consideration beside it. I am, indeed a radical reformer; but I want to see the country prosperous - that will place our feet upon firm ground, and when we have effected that, I will then go hand in hand with my fellow townsmen, if they wish for my assistance, in the endeavour to obtain a radical reform." Several gentlemen had refused to sign the requisition to the High Bailiff, thinking it better that distress should continue and produce reform. Attwood, however, believed that "reform, under the present distress, would end in revolution, which every man must

wish to be averted. When the question of the currency is disposed of the people will have prosperity."[29] To which it could justifiably have been retorted, in the light of recent experience, "and then they will forget about reform."

Such was the conclusion Wooler drew. He did not attempt to conceal his dislike of prosperity under the unreformed system. "Let the people eat and drink, and they will be quiet," he wrote acidly. "Mr Canning has discovered this secret; and he will cultivate his advantage as long as he can. Are not those who endeavour to make the people comfortable under his system, forwarding his objects and consolidating his power?"[30]

Wooler did not show much faith in the 'March of Mind' here, but one reforming response to prosperity was to claim that it facilitated reasoned discussion. This was a point made by Russell when introducing his 1822 reform motion,[31] and one of the two reform petitions of 1824, that from the City of London, observed that "the Ministers of the Crown having stated that the country was in a condition of unexampled prosperity, the Petitioners humbly conceive that the objections usually raised against

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[29] Causes of the Present Distress. Speech of T. Attwood, Esq., at the Public Meeting, held in Birmingham on 8th May 1829 for the purpose of considering the distressed state of the country (Birmingham 1829), p.4.

[30] Black Dwarf, 4 February 1824.

[31] 2 PD, vii, 52, 25 April 1822.

the investigation of this subject in times of war and calamity must now fall to the ground."[32]

Yet the "ministerial tale" of "comfort and congratulations, happiness and prosperity, resources and dignity"[33] was very difficult to combat, and even as late as 1829, after a fair dose of prosperity interspersed with hardship, the Bolton Chronicle, in urging that Catholic Emancipation should encourage efforts for reform rather than be used as an excuse to do nothing further, had to regret that "the working classes appear benumbed in their wonted energies; the middling ranks have abandoned the question from despair, and those who have the power and ability to be the champions of our wrongs, are, either from a hopelessness of rousing the spirit of the people, or from less reputable causes, become totally inactive."[34]

As we have seen, reform petitions did not in the last three years of the twenties reach anything like the levels of the first four, but reform gained a higher profile than it might have done in the later years thanks to the debates, both in and out of doors, on the East Retford and Penryn disfranchisement bills, which, though Radicals like Cobbett derided such manifestations of piecemeal reform, and no ministerialist thought the issue important

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[32] CJ, lxxix, 374, 17 May 1824.

[33] Black Dwarf, 25 February 1824.

[34] Bolton Chronicle, 2 May 1829.

enough to occasion the loss of Huskisson to the Cabinet, stimulated the growing industrial towns, especially Manchester and Birmingham, to formulate in detail their thoughts on urban representation.

As will be seen, the disfranchisement of Grampound, Penryn and East Retford were not the only piecemeal reform measures to be attempted in this decade. If we use a definition of parliamentary reform sufficiently wide to take in any tinkering, however minor, with the electoral system, then the twenties were certainly not without interest.

It also pays to look beyond generalities when considering other aspects of these years. The Catholic Question was admittedly a dominating issue, but it should not simply be regarded as swamping all consideration of a wider reform; in some instances it furnished a platform for the discussion of general and particular aspects of the latter measure.

Similarly, the 'liberalisation' of the Tory Cabinet after 1822 might appear to have stifled the reform debate, or at least to have reduced comment upon reform to occasional guffaws of triumph from its opponents. It certainly put critics of the representative system in a weaker position, but this did not prevent criticisms being made with particular reference to the phenomenon of 'liberality', and hence the reform debate was given an aspect which it had not really had before.

The lack of working-class reform agitation (in comparison with 1816-19) and the vital role of the decade in the development of labour organisations and of such ideas as Co-operation did not mean that workers simply forgot the Radicalism which many of them had enthusiastically espoused in the post-war years. Their heads were not mere vacuums into which 'non-political' men like Owen could introduce their ideas completely unmodified. The 'old Radical' assumptions about the role of the state and of the working classes in it could not be so easily erased.

This is not, though, simply a study of the extent to which reform was supported in these years. It is also an attempt to show how and why the issue was <u>discussed</u>. It is true that increasing support for the measure was likely to nurture debate upon it, but even when that support appeared to have fallen off it was, as we have seen, a matter for comment by men on both sides of the question.

CHAPTER ONE

QUEEN CAROLINE: CATALYST OR DISTRACTION?

The Queen Caroline Affair, that almighty rumpus which began with the Queen's return to England in June 1820 and continued throughout that year with her trial for alleged immoral conduct during her continental 'exile' and persisted even after her death with a dramatic affray at her funeral, occupies an ambiguous place in the history of reform. On the one hand, it was a marvellous opportunity for the Radicals, stunned by the Six Acts and the arrests of Hunt and others, to unleash their organisational and journalistic gusto in a cause which decorated purely anti-government sentiment with popular royalism, old-time chivalry, scandal, and, as T.W. Laqueur has illustrated, more than a little melodrama.[1] On the other, thanks partly to those very decorations and partly to the victory of the dropping of the Bill of Pains and Penalties, it may have pushed reform to the back of the minds of those whom the Radicals sought to 'educate'.

Several historians have been aware that the affair may not have been an unmitigated blessing for the cause of reform. G.D.H. Cole, for instance, acknowledged that it rallied the reformers and brought the ruling classes into contempt, but he added that "it is a moot point whether

[1] T.W. Laqueur, 'The Queen Caroline Affair: Politics as Art in the Reign of George IV', Journal of Modern History, liv (1982), pp.417-66.

the momentary success was not purchased at the expense of partly side-tracking the Reformers' efforts."[2] W.E. Saxton was in no doubt that the pre-occupation with mere scandal during the Queen's trial made the majority of people far less interested in parliamentary reform and the plight of some Radical leaders. The trials of Cartwright and Wooler in August, for example, received comparatively little coverage, except in the Black Dwarf.[3]

There is nevertheless no shortage of contemporary Radical expressions of delight about the affair. Two remarks in William Cobbett's letters to his son James in America clearly illustrate the change wrought in Radical morale by the Queen between the beginning and the end of 1820. On February 12, in the immediate aftermath of the Six Acts, Cobbett wrote:

> "People are so cowed down, so timid, so afraid, and as we cannot move an inch with the press without bail being continually demanded of us, we can do hardly anything. People are afraid to read, and afraid to be known to be friends with those who endeavour to make a stand for the country."

On December 24, over a month after the abandonment of the Bill of Pains and Penalties, Cobbett was crowing: "All is triumph here for the people. The change must come now."[4] Sources close to Cobbett felt that the affair

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[2] G.D.H. Cole, The Life of William Cobbett (1924), p.251.

[3] W.E. Saxton, 'The Political Importance of the Westminster Committee of the Early Nineteenth Century, with special reference to the years 1807-22' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh 1957), ii, p.173.

[4] Add. 31127, ff.5, 18.

had done wonders for his personal popularity. In December 1821, for instance, his warm welcome from the farmers of Norfolk was seen by his daughter Anne as showing "what we owe and shall always owe to the poor Queen, for many places where Papa was received with unbounded admiration he would not have dared to show his nose before the Queen's cause turned so many hundreds of hearts from the side of the government."[5]

Richard Carlile, who greatly differed from Cobbett in general approach, completely shared his sentiments respecting the Queen. In his A New Year's Address to the Reformers of Great Britain, he asserted that the Spanish Revolution, together with "the triumph of the Queen over the conspiracy against her life and honour, have conjointly worked us half a revolution." Carlile was even affected by the epidemic of chivalrous rhetoric: "Her Majesty has no less than four or five million knights who are ready and willing to defend her from the gigantic tyranny which oppresses her."[6]

Hunt, irreconcilable to Carlile's views and often squabbling with Cobbett, nevertheless matched both in Queenite enthusiasm, whilst an observer in Lincoln, in a letter to J.C. Hobhouse in which he questioned Hunt's

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[5]Lewis Melville, The Life and Letters of William Cobbett in England and America (1913), ii, p.197, Anne Cobbett to James P. Cobbett, 27 December 1821.

[6]A New Year's Address to the Reformers of Great Britain, 1 January 1821, pp.3, 13.

disinterested patriotism, also expressed an exaltation to which the target of this criticism would have subscribed: "This city has undergone an amazing change lately, the Queen's business has brought the scattered rays of liberty to focus..."[7]

The affair provided the ideal occasion for a defiant gesture to authority after acts of suppression in that it used as a rallying-point a member of the highest echelon of the ruling class, and a 'much-injured woman' at that. It was that factor which, in the view of Thomas Hodgskin, gave the movement such 'éclat' and induced persons to come forward "who would never have signed an address or moved a hand for the sake of their own rights", or to resist the tax-gatherers.[8] It could be argued that as long as the 'poetry' or chivalry of the affair drew such men into mass agitation against the government there would be ample opportunity to 'radicalise' them so that they would in future defend their own rights. Yet, at this distance, the agitation still appears to be less in the mainstream of historical development than the unalloyed demand for the Radical programme culminating at St. Peter's Fields in August 1819. That was a straightforward democratic challenge, whereas the Queen's affair, as Calhoun put

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[7]Add. 36459, f.4, James Hawkes to Hobhouse, 24 July 1821.
[8]Add. 35153, f.178, Hodgskin to Francis Place, 17 October 1820.

it, revealed "the ambiguous nature of the ideology of England's popular rebels."[9] There were those who saw no difference between the two campaigns, yet in the Queenite agitation there was a sense of 'alternative loyalism',[10] a loyalism which Cobbett would have seen as the traditional generosity of the British people as opposed to the narrow-minded oppression of the Pitt system.

The Government, of course, made no such distinctions, allowing the Radicals not a vestige of attachment to any traditional figure of authority and seeing them as merely using the affair, which kept alive disaffection which would otherwise have faded, as a cover for their revolutionary designs, just as universal suffrage had served them the previous year. Provincial reports to Home Secretary Sidmouth confirmed this view. In June, Colonel Fletcher of Bolton reported that "the arrival of the Queen has considerably revived the before drooping hopes of the Radicals. The late movements in London,

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[9] Craig Calhoun, The Question of Class Struggle. Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution (Chicago 1982), p.8.

[10] An example of the expression of such sentiment was a placard, printed by William Benbow in 1820, headed "Proposal to Murder the Queen". This referred to a paragraph in the Morning Post of 26 June in which the Queen, the only obstacle to a settlement, was urged to yield to the Universal Good, "we care not whether as a Martyr or a Criminal." The placard accused this article's author of high treason and dwelt at length on Caroline as the "lawful, real Queen of the country." (HO 40/14). In November, a parody of a loyal address was circulated in Southampton in which the "conspirators" against the Queen, rather than the Radicals, were cast in the role of enemies to the constitution (HO 40/15).

arising from that event, together with the expected movements on the continent, they flatter themselves will pave the way to Revolution."[11] In the following month, William Chippendale, an Oldham magistrate, expressed the belief that, due to their natural hatred of royalty, the Northern Radicals had been slower to take up the Queen's cause than might have been expected.[12] One of Fletcher's spies, 'Alpha', reported around the same time that at a Radical meeting in Manchester at James Bradshaw's old workshop, Johnson, in the chair, assured his listeners that he would not complain if the government, having decided that a Queen was unnecessary, drew the inference that they could do without a king also.[13] Alpha probably embroidered his reports, but at the very least they reflect what the government chose to believe.

Sir Archibald Alison thought that the Queenites foresaw similar results whatever the outcome of the business:

> "If her innocence were proved they would gain a triumph over the King, force upon him a wife whom he could not endure, overturn his Ministers, and perhaps shake the monarchy; if her guilt, they would gain the best possible ground for declaring on the corruption which prevailed in high places, and the monstrous nature of those institutions which gave persons of such character a lead in society."[14]

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[11] HO 40/13, Fletcher to Henry Hobhouse, 13 June 1820.

[12] HO 40/14, Chippendale to Sidmouth, 22 July 1820.

[13] Ibid., 'Alpha' to J. Langshaw, 11 July 1820.

[14] History of Europe, ii, p.549.

This was naturally not a pleasing situation for loyalists. For them it was particularly exasperating that the affair should have cropped up just when improving economic conditions would normally have quietened popular politics. "... were it not for the proceedings respecting the Queen, which fill them with expectation of making a common cause with the Whigs," wrote Fletcher of the Radicals, "their hopes of Revolution would have been lower than at any time for these twelve months past."[15] But the ambiguous nature of the movement, the fact that it did not present a uniformly threatening face, is brought out in the remark of Edward Bootle Wilbraham that "Radicalism has taken the shape of affection for the Queen, and has deserted its old form, for we are all as quiet as lambs in this part of England, and you would not imagine that this could have been a disturbed county twelve months ago."[16] This was the sort of development R.J. White had in mind when he saw the affair as restoring the nation's good humour.[17] On the other hand, the Whig Sir James Mackintosh coincided with worried government supporters in believing that the country was in danger, though he naturally blamed the instigators of the proceedings rather than those who exploited the feelings aroused by them:

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[15]HO 40/14, Fletcher to Sidmouth, 9 September 1820.

[16]Charles, Lord Colchester (ed.), The Diary and Correspondence of Charles Abbot, Lord Colchester (1861), iii, p.164, Wilbraham to Colchester, 12 September 1820. Wilbraham was referring to Yorkshire.

[17]R.J. White, From Waterloo to the Crystal Palace (1973), p.3.

> "Had a Cabinet of Revolutionists deliberated on the best means of spreading dispositions favourable to their cause, to the lowliest villages - to the quietest provinces - to districts where the sound of our political divisions had never before penetrated; - had they been desirous of securing a long impunity to libels, and an unrestrained licence to popular meetings - had they been devising the most effectual expedients for at once inflaming and emboldening the populace of great cities, - they could not have imagined any measures more suitable to their purpose, than the proceedings of the first Session of the first Parliament of a new reign."[18]

The affair certainly added weight to both Radical and Whig propaganda for parliamentary reform "by exhibiting", as the Examiner sardonically put it, "the representative and the represented in the most aimiable state of opposition imaginable."[19] Several members of both Houses were either newly converted to reform or had their conviction of its necessity hardened. For instance, during the debate occasioned by Wyvill's presentation of the City of York petition, Pascoe Grenfell described how he had never been prepared to risk the many good points of the constitution by entertaining uncertain schemes of change, but his belief that the House of Commons always acted in unison with public opinion had been shaken by the defeat of the motion to restore the Queen's name to the Church of England liturgy. He was thus now on the

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[18] Edinburgh Review, xxxiv, No. lxviii (November 1820), p.464 (footnote).

[19] Examiner, 4 February 1821.

look-out for "some gentleman of weight and consideration" to come forward with a moderate reform plan which he could support.[20] George Philips agreed that the liturgy vote "had made more reformers than any other within his knowledge",[21] and Alexander Baring warned that if the discrepancy of opinion between parliament and people over the Queen continued "it would do more to condemn the manner in which the House of Commons, as at present constituted, was formed, than all the speeches which had been delivered by all the demagogues from the beginning of time."[22] Similarly, Creevey told Miss Ord: "I keep to my creed that this blackguard, foolish war with the Queen will eventually ruin the Ministers and produce some great change in the House of Commons."[23]

The affair may have aided that sure steady build-up to 1832 which Whig historians were so fond of describing, but the affair's immediate effect on reform's place on the political agenda was by no means as wholly beneficial as the above quotations suggest. Lord Holland, whilst accepting that it "ripened, if it did not sow, seeds of what fortunately became wholesome reforms", also complained that it "diverted all attention from the real interests

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[20] 2 PD, iv, 223-4, 31 January 1821.

[21] Ibid., 224.

[22] Ibid., 226.

[23] Sir Herbert Maxwell (ed.), The Creevey Papers. A Selection from the Correspondence and Diaries of the Late Thomas Creevey, MP (1903), ii, p.10, Creevey to Miss Ord, 29 January 1821.

of the nation" and that the Queen's arrival "adjourned all incipient reform on the business of Grampound."[24] General as well as piecemeal reform had to take a back seat, for John George Lambton postponed his major motion in the belief that neither the House nor the country could be got to take an interest in anything other than the Queen.[25] Spencer Walpole, looking back seventy years, also thought the public mind unable to concentrate on more than one major issue at a time: "the demand for Radical reform ceased, because men forgot to agitate for reform in their desire to agitate for the Queen. From June to November the attention of the legislature and of the country was fixed on one all-absorbing topic, and almost every other subject was either passed over in silence or forgotten."[26]

A satirist had the imprisoned Hunt complaining:

"This woman's a terrible evil
To folks in the very same line;
I wish she were gone to the devil,
'Till then, I shall ne'er again shine."[27]

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[24]Lord Stavordale (ed.), Further Memoirs of the Whig Party, 1807-1821. With some Miscellaneous Reminiscences, by the third Lord Holland (1905), pp.276, 282.

[25]2 PD, i, 881-2, 6 June 1820.

[26]Spencer Walpole, A History of England from the Conclusion of the Great War in 1815 (1890), ii, pp.94-5.

[27]Anon., The Radical Harmonist; or, a Collection of Songs and Toasts given at the late Crown and Anchor Dinner, collected by Old Tom of Oxford (1820). Sir Francis Burdett welcomed Hunt's incarceration: "... could anything have been more providential for the Queen than Hunt's being shut up and out of the way? What would it not have been worth to Ministers to have had him heading all the public meetings?" Add. 47222, ff.46-7, Burdett to Hobhouse, 22 October 1820.

Although this was an incorrect picture of Hunt's views and the author saw both him and Queen Caroline as Radical mischief-makers, it contains a gleam of truth in that, with Hunt's eclipse by the Queen, 'straight' reformism gave place to an agitation which, whilst reform was central to it, contained other distracting elements. Even Cobbett, perhaps unwittingly, let slip a hint in his writings that he was aware of this sense of distraction. He was usually adamant that the people's vision was clearly focused, stressing that if the Queen "were to issue an expression of her anxious wish that the people would support a Ministry, that would refuse them Reform; even the Queen would not succeed in such an undertaking."[28] Yet, in his general history of the period, he noted how the people's interest in the affair diminished as they "began to occupy themselves with the business of obtaining a parliamentary reform."[29] The Queen's business might have convinced many of the need for such a reform, but the suggestion here is that while it was still in progress it prevented anything of that sort being started.

It was all very well for Hobhouse to write in his diary that "I own I do not think the matter of much importance except so much as it might aid the progress

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[28]Political Register, 20 January 1821.

[29]Cobbett, History of the Regency and Reign of King George IV (1830, 34), ii, paragraph 454.

of reform",[30] and for Wooler to echo him by declaring that "the whole contest has derived all its importance from its placing the necessity of Reform in so conspicuous a light",[31] but other elements also contributed to the massive interest which was generated. It is arguable that for many the affair was simply a delightfully scandalous soap opera and was of interest solely for that reason. The issues at Peterloo were clear; a large mass of people had gathered - lawfully or unlawfully, peaceably or with the intention of violence - to demand universal suffrage, annual parliaments and the ballot, and they had been forcibly dispersed at the behest of the magistrates. The Queen's affair presented the people with ludicrous Italian witnesses and tales of illicit liaisons to direct their attention away from the stern constitutional issues which were held to be at stake, and the agitation was bigger than any in favour of the simple call for reform before 1830. Hodgskin thought it a pity that the people did not campaign so enthusiastically for parliamentary and economical reform, "but these are abstract questions and do not interest the feelings like the distresses of a woman."[32]

On the other hand, it could be argued that Radical publicists harnessed these other elements

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[30]Add. 56541, f.41, 10 June 1820.

[31]Wooler's British Gazette, 7 January 1821.

[32]Add. 35153, f.184, Hodgskin to Place, 28 November 1820.

in order to reinforce their general political message, for instance by making it clear that it was the same hand of persecution, that of the boroughmongers, at work against both the reformers and the Queen. According to George Ensor, the chivalrous defence of female purity was unimportant. The Queen's guilt, he reckoned, was of little concern to the people: "... the cry of no popery - the corn bill - the spies, the plots, the reeking field of St. Peters at Manchester, the six bills against liberty of the press - these were the advocates which silently and vociferously conquered for the queen."[33] Yet there is still the feeling that for many the affair was about individual personalities rather than systems. In the view of Henry Fox Bourne, this was perceived by the Benthamite editor of the Morning Chronicle, John Black, whose journal was the only respectable daily which did not espouse the Queen's cause because Black "was too much of a philosopher and too anxious to distribute even-handed justice to be diverted by popular clamour or fickle sentiment from that pursuit of serious reforms and that exposure of vital abuses to which he had pleged himself and his journal."[34]

"Triumph is as much to be feared as defeat," commented Philipp Von Neumann on the ministerial view

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[33]Ibid., f.195, Ensor to Place, Postmarked 15 December 1820.

[34]H.R. Fox Bourne, English Newspapers. Chapters in the History of Journalism (1887), ii, pp.4-5.

of the affair, "the first would be of advantage to the radical party."[35] Two episodes in the Queen's saga clearly illustrated the corollary of this position: that, as far as the friends of reform were concerned, more capital could be made from defeats than from victories. Many of the reactions to the defeat of the liturgy motion suggest increased fervour for reform, rather than despair, springing from indignation. Harriet, Countess Granville reported to Lady Morpeth that the Whigs' language on this occasion was "that parliament and the nation are at issue and that revolution must follow, the House of Commons persisting in supporting the present government."[36] Mackintosh went as far as to say that through the vote the majority of the Commons had declared war against the people.[37]

But on 10 November of the previous year, the people had gained a great victory when the ministers abandoned the Bill of Pains and Penalties. The Queenites obviously could not let this go without a great deal of crowing, yet in hailing the victory of public opinion over government machinations they invited the retort that since the existing system had shown itself open to the influence of that

[35] E. Beresford Chancellor (ed. and trans.), The Diary of Philipp Von Neumann, 1819 to 1850 (1928), i, p.39, 6 October 1820.

[36] Hon. F. Leveson Gower (ed.), Letters of Harriet, Countess Granville, 1810-1845 (1894), i, p.204, Granville to Morpeth, February 1821.

[37] 2 PD, iv, 397, 5 February 1821.

opinion they ought to be content with it. W.R.Brock saw the dropping of the bill as one of a series of victories, including the defeat of the Property Tax in 1816, "won by public opinion over a Government which commanded the King's favour, a majority in both Houses and all the resources of the spoils system."[38] Those with reform foremost in their minds were anxious that, amid the euphoria, the correct conclusions were drawn. Samuel Whitbread, at a Mermaid Tavern meeting in January 1821, rejected the claim that the failure of the bill had shown reform in the Commons to be unnecessary. The whole affair had, he said, underlined not only the power of the people but also that to be heard they were obliged to speak for themselves. The success of the Queenite agitation could be carried over to the reform campaign.[39] Reformers could point out that the obnoxious measure had still been passed by the Commons on third reading, the small majority being the effect of a public pressure which it would hardly be practical to mobilise on such a massive scale every time a contentious issue arose.

"'Thank God, the country is saved', is written in every face and echoed by every voice," wrote Macaulay from Cambridge to his father. "Instead of curses on the Lords, on every post and every wall is written, 'All is

[38]W.R. Brock, Lord Liverpool and Liberal Toryism (2nd edn., 1967), p.108.

[39]Times, 16 January 1821.

as it should be' - 'Justice done at last'."[40] Reformers of different types were aware that such joy and contentment threatened to swamp their political message. Hobhouse was quite clear on this issue: "Well done," he wrote in his diary of the victory, "though her triumph has put off that of radical reform."[41] James Mill, writing to Ricardo, went into more detail: "For my part, I am not sure whether I ought to be pleased or not. There is but one fundamental good to this country at this time, and that is, the showing what an aristocracy essentially is. The present inquiry has done much towards that greatest of ends, but a good deal still remains to be done."[42]

Alpha's report of a celebratory meeting at Bolton suggests that such misgivings were shared by some working-class Radicals, although the differences of opinion which the spy portrayed again underline the affair's ambiguity. At the meeting, Jeffery Taylor proclaimed: "This day will be the first step to annual parliaments, universal suffrage and election by ballot. This day will change the face of Political matters." But the view of John Roper was more in tune with that of Hobhouse. He complained that "it was a loss to the radicals her being acquitted

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[40]Thomas Pinney (ed.), The Letters of T.B. Macaulay (Cambridge 1974-81), i, p.148, TBM to Zachary Macaulay, 13 November 1820.

[41]Add. 56541, f.99, 11 November 1820.

[42]Piero Sraffa and M.H. Dobb (eds.), The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo (Cambridge 1951-73), viii, p.291, Mill to Ricardo, 13 November 1820.

at this time, for the result would be a union of Whigs and Tories whereas the late proceedings caused a union of Radicals and Whigs. But now Radicals would be brought into contempt by both of them. The proceedings against the Queen gave ample pretext for any measures that Radicals might adopt but now Cobbett would be crying out 'justice and the constitution for ever'... and we should hear nothing but praise bestowed upon the peers..." The dropping of the bill was "merely and for no other motive than a plausible covering, for the abominable deeds of the 16th of August." Roper believed that if Peterloo had hastened a "reckoning day" by ten years, this would retard it by twenty. He rejoiced at the boroughmongers' defeat, but not until cheap and liberal government was established would he "shake hands with the Ruling Powers" and give up Radicalism. His speech was met with great applause.[43]

On the other hand, the dropping of the bill seemed to have given a great boost to reform's prospects by apparently pushing the Whigs to the verge of office. The party was not committed as a whole to reform, but several prominent members were coming to see the necessity of its adoption, both from a general conviction and an awareness that Whigs in power could not attempt to overrule or conciliate public opinion (whose power was so clearly demonstrated during the Queen's affair) without it. The affair did provide them with political ammunition, yet

[43]HO 40/15, 14 November 1820.

it also highlighted their disunity and left some of them sharing with ministerialists the view that it had harmed their public image.

When the trouble was brewing, Grey was typically hesitant about exploiting it. His view of party favoured a comparatively loose structure and, as on the issue of reform itself, political necessity seemed to dictate that action be left to individuals. "There could be nothing I think more prejudicial to us, than the appearance of making use of such a question, either one way or the other, for party purposes."[44]

Even later in the year, when Whigs entered the fray by arranging county meetings, Grey was regretting to Sir Robert Wilson that Queenism should be largely limited to the lower and middle ranks. "Such a state of things, if pushed to extremity can only produce one of two results; either a democratical revolution or the destruction of our free constitution."[45]

However, this popular feeling was also a reason why the Whigs wanted to become involved. Holland admitted that there were always problems to be faced when arranging county meetings, but, he told Fitzwilliam, "in the meanwhile if gentry do not stir radicals will, and parish meetings headed by demagogues and orators [will] have all the merit of

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[44]Add. 51553, f.148, Grey to Holland, 12 April 1820.

[45]Add. 30109, f.141, Grey to Wilson, 5 December 1820.

expressing what the body of the people feel, and thus acquire all the power which taking the lead in matters on which there is much popular feeling must give them."[46] Such Radical-led meetings, Holland argued, would give the government grounds for claiming that the Queen was linked with disreputable elements, who in turn would be furnished with "motives for disuniting themselves more than ever with the property and institutions of the country."[47] Lord Darnley displayed similar Whiggish pre-occupations when he declared, with specific reference to the Queen's business, that "the voice of the country is with us, and seems to call for its natural leaders, the constitutional Whig aristocracy." It was a question of who the people would look to in times of danger.[48]

Naturally enough, the party and its friends wanted not only to avert danger but also to exert as much pressure as possible on ministers. Daniel Sykes wrote to Fitzwilliam in December 1820 telling him that there had never been a better time for a Yorkshire meeting.

> "I hold the late unconstitutional proceedings about the Queen to be but a small item in the catalogue of grievances for which ministers are answerable. It is however that on which the public mind is entirely fixed at present, and where we might be sure of the co-operation of the body of the County."[49]

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[46] Fitz. 'B' Series, Box 13, Folder 2, Holland to Fitzwilliam, 5 December 1820.

[47] Ibid., 7 December 1820.

[48] Grey, Darnley to Grey, 2 February 1821.

[49] Fitz., 102, f.52, Sykes to Fitzwilliam, 14 December 1820.

Fitzwilliam, like Holland, wanted to unite all shades of opinion in the deprecation of further proceedings against the Queen by avoiding in the requisitions and petitions any calls for the dismissal of ministers or for reform. However, in Yorkshire, the reformers refused to sign the petition because of this omission and the meeting never took place. Wooler thought he knew what the Grandees were up to. The Queen's closely identifying herself with the cause of reform, he wrote, "has given great umbrage to many of the Whig leaders; and has lessened their zeal in her behalf very considerably."[50]

But whatever the intention of Fitzwilliam and others, reform could not be shut out at these meetings. For instance, at the Middlesex meeting of 8 December, held pursuant to a requisition calling for the dismissal of ministers and congratulating the Queen, Mills of Bristol, seconded by Cartwright, moved an amendment to the proposed address calling on the king not to bring in new ministers who had not pledged themselves to reform. George Byng opposed the amendment because it did not acknowledge MPs as legal representatives and might be offensive to the monarch. Joseph Hume agreed that the word 'illegal', as it applied to parliament, should be omitted, but he strongly preferred the amendment to the original address because it went to the root of the problem. Byng insisted on the exclusion of reform since the county was divided

[50] Wooler's British Gazette, 28 January 1821.

on that issue but united in support for the Queen and dismissal of ministers. At length, an amended version of Mills' address, seconded by Hume, was carried.[51]

David Ricardo played a similar role to Mills at the Gloucestershire meeting of 30 December by contending that the address ought to have gone further and urging the necessity of reform, though he did not move an amendment.[52]

In all, of the thirteen meetings called specifically to consider the dismissal of ministers, Queen Caroline or both in late 1820 or early 1821, nearly all, according to contemporary reports, saw some sort of discussion on reform, and three, those in Bedfordshire (12 January 1821), Middlesex (16 January 1821), and Cornwall (6 March 1821) were pursuant to requisitions which linked the Queen's affair with reform.

For the Whigs themselves, the affair did not yield all that it at one stage seemed to promise. Tierney had thought that once the business was disposed of few MPs would be prepared to support Liverpool's government. "The decided majority of the House of Commons I am thoroughly satisfied would rejoice in their removal."[53] That such an event did not take place was probably due

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[51]Times, 9 December 1820.

[52]Ibid., 1 January 1821.

[53]Grey, Tierney to Grey, 12 June 1820.

to the fact that many shared the sort of fears expressed by Huskisson when he wrote of the danger, in the event of the government being defeated over the Queen, of the formation of "a new administration, many of them Reformers by principle, and all conscious that they owed their elevation to the triumph of the Queen, the Radicals, and the Press, that they had forced themselves upon the King by an event which had humbled him to the dust."[54] In the following month, Lord Binning reported how the opposition forces had caused a closing of ranks on the other side:

> "The Whigs have as usual overshot the mark - and have rendered themselves more unacceptable than ever to the King - and I have not the least doubt that they and their friends the Radicals will now display so much indecent acrimony and violence that all men who dread a change or a revolutionary spirit will be desirous of supporting the government."[55]

In making a similarly optimistic assessment the following January, J.W. Ward unwittingly touched upon one of the key reformist grievances which the affair highlighted: "That the government will be out-debated is certain, but I am everyday more persuaded that there is very little danger of their being out-voted. It is said that their country gentlemen are very firm."[56] It was precisely because the Queenites allegedly had the

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[54]Add. 38742, f.64, Huskisson to Granville, 23 October 1820.

[55]Ibid., f.132, Binning to Huskisson, "Monday" (November 1820).

[56]Granville Papers, PRO 30/29/6/7, ff.1251-2, Ward to Granville, 11 January 1821.

best arguments on their side but were being opposed (and were ultimately thwarted) by government influence in the Commons that reformers both in and out of doors were able to make as much capital as they did. However, at the general level of party politics, the defeats of the liturgy and censure motions were to be wholeheartedly welcomed by the government and its supporters, without any misgivings as to what views of the political system they might encourage. Huskisson was pleasantly surprised by the 310 majority against the liturgy motion. Even he had not realised how far the Whigs' conduct "would operate to induce the country gentlemen to shrink from the avowal of those sentiments which they have most loudly proclaimed out of doors. However it must be remarked that their alarm has been much increased by the recent conduct of Lord Grey and others at County meetings."[57]

Before the defeats in the Commons, Russell could still take a bright view of the effect the affair had had on his party and, by extension, on the cause of moderate reform. It had, he told Tom Moore, "done a great deal of good in renewing the old and natural alliance between the Whigs and the people, and weakening the influence of the radicals on the latter."[58] However, when the dust had finally settled and office had not been gained nor

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[57]Add. 38742, f.171, Huskisson to Canning, 30 January 1821.

[58]Lord John Russell (ed.), Memoirs, Journal and Correspondence of Thomas Moore (1853), iii, p.172, 24 November 1820.

moderate reform effected, Mackintosh was decidedly glum about his party's position: "We have lost such help as we received from the Radicals and the Queen. The odium of both connections remains."[59]

How can the Queen Caroline affair be categorised? John Stevenson regarded it as the last great popular agitation in which London took the lead.[60] Certainly all the most memorable events of the saga took place in the capital, and, in the eyes of some observers, general interest was not as great in former hot-beds of 'sedition' such as the Lancashire textile towns, despite the activities of local Radicals. Chippendale reported that a delegate meeting had been held at Oldham where it had been resolved that deputies should be sent out through the disaffected areas to take the temperature of opinion on the Queen. He was not, however, fearful of the result, believing that most people in his area were not "under the strange delusion that prevails to such an extent in the Metropolis."[61] In the view of another magistrate, J. Lloyd, events in London would decide what happened in the north. "I do not hear that much interest is taken here to make the Queen's affair the new pretext for disaffection," he wrote from Stockport, "but the conduct of the Radicals will mainly depend on

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[59]Add. 51653, f.128, Mackintosh to Holland, 18 December 1821.

[60]John Stevenson, 'The Queen Caroline Affair', in John Stevenson (ed.), London in the Age of Reform (Oxford 1977), p.117.

[61]HO 40/14, Chippendale to Sidmouth, 22 July 1820.

the ignorant and intemperate rabble you have in London, excited by more distinguished enemies of the king and the present government."[62] Thomas Sharpe believed that interest was low in Manchester, noting the absence of allusions to the subject in wall-chalkings in the town,[63] and James Norris reported that, according to the borough-reeve, not more than fifty people were present at any one time at the reading on St. Peter's Fields of the Queen's answer to the Manchester address, despite advance publicity.[64]

Improved economic conditions could well have had something to do with such comparative apathy, together with a sort of 'moral exhaustion' after the unsuccessful democratic challenge of 1819 and the abortive 'General Rising' of April 1820. Craig Calhoun reckoned that the agitation was most prominent in the southern rural areas, where the previous parliamentary reform movement had been weakest.[65] It is difficult to determine whether this denoted any ideological difference between the two phases of agitation. It could be that the call for the Radical programme, unlinked with any affection for a member of the ruling orders, had a more powerful appeal to workers whose experience of industrial change and urbanisation had fostered in them a desire for political self-sufficiency.

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[62]Ibid., Lloyd to H. Hobhouse, 12 August 1820.

[63]Ibid., Sharpe to Sidmouth, 13 August 1820.

[64]Ibid., Norris to Sidmouth, 26 October 1820.

[65]Class Struggle, p.108.

However, the championing of some one of royal rank did not mean that metropolitan working-class Radicals were looking to their 'natural leaders', witness their acute distrust of Brougham and the Whigs in general. Iowerth Protheroe has clearly shown that the affair enhanced the London artisans' view of their own importance as a political force, a sentiment which fostered their radical reformism.[66] The affair may have had little to do with working-class revolution (E.P. Thompson took little notice of it in The Making of the English Working Class), but it was an important episode in the emergence of an uncontrolled press and an assertive public opinion which gained its great victory in 1832.

[66] Iowerth Protheroe, Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London: John Gast and His Times (1979), pp.132-55.

CHAPTER TWO

AGRICULTURAL DISTRESS AND COUNTY MEETINGS

In the early twenties, the prosperity which home food-producers had enjoyed in the war years came to an end. The harvest of 1820 was in places an extremely good one, and by July 1821 the wheat price had fallen to around fifty shillings a quarter. This merely compounded the problems of areas like East Anglia, Sussex and Kent, where yields had been low. Prices rose a little in expectation of a poor crop in 1821, but late improvement in the weather and therefore in yields further depressed the market.[1]

In the eyes of contemporary observers, those who suffered most were small occupiers with little capital and those who had bought land at times of high corn prices and could not manage in the subsequent period of falling prices and dear money.

The distress was widespread enough to produce a dissatisfaction on the part of agriculturists with government policy which took the form of attendance at county meetings, formation of protectionist associations and support for the opposition in the Commons. It also included the first major rural reform movement since the Wyvillite Associations in 1779-80, as landlords and farmers

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[1]Boyd Hilton, Corn, Cash, Commerce: The Economic Policies of the Tory Governments, 1815-1830 (Oxford, 1980 edn.), p.98.

came to suspect that a system which had long been their friend was betraying them.

Historians have differed as to the significance of this landed disgruntlement to the story of reform. Travis Crosby has asserted that the farmers "flirted temporarily" with reform but nothing came of it "for it represented a fit of pique more than a deeply felt conviction."[2] On the other hand, Harriet Martineau fitted the phenomenon neatly into her picture of the run-up to 1830 by suggesting that the carrying of the Reform Bill by a substantial section of the agricultural interest owed something to conversions in the early twenties.[3] This was a line followed by W.B. Elvins in his local study of Cornwall, in which he saw the retrenchment and reform resolutions passed at the 1822 county meeting as marking the yeomanry's decisive and lasting conversion to reform.[4] The Duke of Bedford would have approved of this analysis. "The manufacturing classes may take up political subjects lightly, and abandon them as readily," he told Grey in 1822, "not so the farmers and yeomanry."[5]

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[2]Travis L. Crosby, English Farmers and the Politics of Protection, 1815-1852 (Hassocks 1977), p.16.

[3]Thirty Years Peace, i, Bk. 2, p.267.

[4]W.B. Elvins, 'The Reform Movement and County Politics in Cornwall, 1809-52' (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Birmingham 1959), p.17.

[5]Grey, Bedford to Grey, 11 April 1822.

Bedford was not alone in believing that agricultural distress would have important political results. In the same month, Cobbett expressed the belief that Sir Thomas Lethbridge's complaints about falling rents and about 'Peel's Act' (the resumption of cash payments in 1819) adding to the weight of taxation were far more significant for the cause of reform than Lord John Russell's recent motion and irrelevant speech.[6]

Whigs and Radicals were not the only ones to notice important changes in rural opinion. As early as March 1820, Huskisson was worried about the yeomanry's "soreness on every subject connected with expense and clamour for economy... Whilst this is the state of the yeomanry, the infection of Radicalism, which is prevalent in the towns, is gradually making its way into the villages."[7]

Some of the more excitable friends of the government had soon come to fear the dire consequences of the 'infection' spreading not only to the villages but also to the country houses. Thomas Grenville lamented to the Duke of Buckingham that some country gentlemen

> "who were steady anti-reformers have suffered themselves to be galled by Cobbett into attributing the pressure of their rents to inadequate representation in Parliament, though it has no more to do with their rents than with those of the Cham of Tartary. Yet these blockheads all profess that they do not wish to change the

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[6] Cobbett's Collective Commentaries, 27 April 1822.

[7] Add. 38742, f.9, Huskisson to Arbuthnot, 24 March 1820.

> Government, though they are doing all that they can to annihilate them. The danger is a pretty serious one, for, with the connexion that Opposition holds with the Radicals, and the daily pledges they give to the tenets of these people, it is probable that the extensive changes that would immediately take place, would have very much the effect of an entire revolution in the government of the country."[8]

That such dramatic changes did not take place might justify the conclusion that the gentry's espousal of reform was a mere 'empty-pocket' effusion which lasted only as long as the distress. Such a sceptical view was being voiced whilst the distress was still prevalent. The Morning Chronicle, for instance, asserted that, in the event of a price rise, the agriculturists, then calling for economy and retrenchment, "will be equally ready, as in 1817, to vote additional taxes, to suspend the Habeas Corpus Act, and to suppress the radical rebellions that will then break forth."[9]

These remarks illustrated the way in which much Radical and reforming comment on the distress took the form of belabouring the past misdeeds of the landed interest. Cobbett, for instance, condemned the farmers for having aspired to too plush a lifestyle when times were good for them.[10] Joseph Hume, in rejecting the landowners'

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[8] Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, Memoirs of the Court of George IV (1859), i, p.291, Grenville to Duke of Buckingham, 4 March 1822.

[9] Morning Chronicle, 13 February 1822.

[10] Political Register, 28 June 1823. Mrs Arbuthnot was unwittingly in harmony with Cobbett on this point. See F. Bamford and Duke of Wellington (eds.), The Journal of Mrs Arbuthnot, 1820-1832 (1950), i, p.139, 2 February 1822.

attacks on other interests, firmly told Sir John Sinclair that "the calamities of the country are not owing to the predominance of jobbers, contractors and other speculators, but they arise from the corrupt influence of the landed aristocracy who have so long supported public profusion the most wanton, in which they have too largely participated."[11] It was the landed interest, the Radical argument ran, which had fostered the monster of the Pitt system, and that system was now turning against them. Both Wooler and Cobbett were prepared to allow the new converts to reform into the fold, but, as Wooler put it, "the gentry must have time to understand these principles; for they have been wrapped up in their prejudices too long, to be expected to throw them off at once."[12]

Some gentlemen were not prepared to throw off their 'prejudices' at all. Edmund Wodehouse, for example, complained at the Norfolk and Norwich Pitt Club dinner of 1822 that at agricultural meetings "the theme which came most home to them [the agriculturists] was scarcely touched on at all; when they heard much of 'parliamentary reform', much of the 'Manchester Massacre', and the 'Murdered Queen'; but while such hackneyed topics, and a hundred-times contradicted misrepresentations were rung in the ears of the farmer, his distresses were neglected, or artfully made subservient to factious purposes."[13]

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[11] Sinclair, RH4/49/3, viii, 31 January 1823.

[12] Black Dwarf, 29 January 1823.

[13] Morning Chronicle, 22 October 1822.

Even those who were favourable to reform could argue against its being mixed up with the issue of distress because they feared it might divert attention away from the need for immediate relief. 'L. Junius Brutus', in a letter to the editor of the Suffolk newspaper, the Bury Post, whilst subscribing to the reforming diagnosis of distress, argued that "the delay of any lengthened discussion on such a subject as reform would infallibly neutralise the application of any relief." Such a delay would ruin many farmers. "True it is that the confidence of these farmers has been abused: that their patience has been exhausted enough to make them despair of obtaining redress without reform; but let their voices be loud and strong, and they must be heard."[14]

As M.J. Birch has shown, the farmers first organised themselves under the stimulus of distress by forming Webb Hallite protectionist Agricultural Associations which, though they were significant in being attempts to give the agricultural interest a unified voice in the state, were in their own eyes unpolitical.[15] Yet there does seem to have been a subsequent shift away from protectionism and towards the more 'political' stance of blaming the distress primarily on excessive taxation or 'Peel's Act'.

[14]Quoted in Times, 18 February 1822.

[15]M.J. Birch, 'From Desperation to Conciliation: Agricultural Depression and County Politics, 1816-31' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge 1978).

In 1822, Cobbett remembered how in November 1820, when he had proposed a meeting in London of farming delegates from each county, "the follies of Mr Webb Hall were raging throughout the land; and there appeared scarcely any hope of awakening the farmers to a due sense of their own danger." But now such a meeting was unnecessary because "Webb Hall's nonsense is blown to air" and even 'Gaffer' Gooch's Suffolk had petitioned for reform.[16] Of course, not every farmer and landlord instantly became a reformer, some never did, but the fading popularity of protectionism could nevertheless be seen as significant. When reformers preached to protectionists, they were attempting to correct the latter's delusions, to set their thinking on an altogether different track; but when agriculturists began to complain about 'Peel's Act', tithes, poor rates and taxation, they were to some extent speaking the same language as the reformers and it could be hoped that they would be more readily recruited to the cause.

Such a feeling was strengthened when Canning, in his famous speech in 1822 to his Liverpool constituents, assured the suffering agriculturists that there was nothing the government could do to cure their malady.[17] He was, as Brougham pointed out, delivering the same 'submission-to-Providence' advice as was delivered to starving workers

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[16] Political Register, 2 February 1822.

[17] Morning Chronicle, 31 August 1822.

in the immediate post-war years.[18] The Times thought that in doing so he was playing with political fire. Reform and retrenchment, the paper declared,

> "are laid deep in the public mind. Rhetoric is a feeble engine wherewith to shake them; and before the dawn of another harvest there is not a country gentleman (excepting he be a placeman) throughout England, to whom Mr Canning's lecture on the virtue of patience will not have sounded like a very troublesome and immodest exhortation."[19]

It was this prospect of widespread alienation from the government which fired the Whigs' out-of-doors attempts to exploit the distress. Agriculture's problems were only one element in the preparations for the major series of county meetings in 1821, but for the Whigs, who were worried about the erosion of their county power, they seemed to provide an ideal platform. In January, Edward Maltby told Milton that distress had taken over from Queen Caroline as the prime concern of the Yorkshire upper yeomanry and that local Tories were reported to be advocating reform and warning that it would be carried by violence if not effected constitutionally.[20] But, as far as Yorkshire was concerned, the question of reform was seen to be so difficult to handle that the opportunity which political and economic developments afforded to mobilise county opinion against the government was spurned. A major problem was that the reforming zeal of the inhabitants

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[18] Edinburgh Review, xxxvii, No. lxxiv (November 1822), pp.381-2.

[19] Times, 31 August 1822.

[20] Fitz., 104, f.4, Maltby to Milton, 11 January 1821.

at large did not seem to be shared by many of the county's 'natural leaders'. As an acquaintance of Sir Francis Lindley Wood put it: "... the great people want a county meeting with no mention of reform, the little people will have no meeting in which reform is not to be brought forward, and hence no meeting at present will be attended at the same time fully and respectably."[21]

Depending on one's point of view, reform was either the bane or the <u>sine qua non</u> of effective co-operation at the meeting. Bryan Cooke told Fitzwilliam that

> "if there is a county meeting the question of reform of Parliament is sure to come forth and probably will become the leading question. If so, into how many parties do we split and will not the anti-reformers be out-vociferated by the reformers mixed up and joined by the clamour of the revolutionists?"

Since the Whigs were themselves divided on reform, why should this bone of contention be brought forward when there was a chance of forming a Whig administration?[22] At the same time, however, William Strickland was pointing out a very different way to avoid the same problems. He urged Fitzwilliam to consider "whether it be not necessary to go somewhat further to meet the sentiments of those who might otherwise bring forward resolutions which might divide and distract the meeting."[23]

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[21] <u>Ibid</u>., 102, f.36, Wood to Fitzwilliam, 2 December 1820.

[22] <u>Ibid</u>., f.38, Cooke (MP for Malton, 1808-12) to Fitzwilliam, 3 December 1820.

[23] <u>Ibid</u>., f.40, Strickland to Fitzwilliam, 3 December 1820.

These two letters might be taken as a classic illustration of the Whig dilemma: should one avoid a contentious issue like reform altogether or make a move to adopt it and hence make it less dangerous? On this occasion in Yorkshire, the dilemma proved impossible to solve and no meeting was held there in 1821, prominent county reformers like Walter Fawkes and Sir George Cayley refusing to sign a requisition which did not mention their favourite subject.

Nevertheless, sixteen county meetings did take place in England in the first four months of 1821 and the results were not discouraging as far as reform was concerned. In Bedfordshire, both Bedford and Lord Holland urged the necessity of reform[24] and they were joined by Grey in Northumberland a few days later. Grey affirmed his commitment to a "total change in the system of government" in which reform was to be a main feature, though its exact position in the order of priorities "must be determined by considerations of expediency at the time."[25] The slightly hedging nature of this declaration might have been a matter for regret for some,[26] but at the Wiltshire meeting, Robert Gordon, the Cricklade MP, welcomed Grey's statement of intent as proof that the Whigs were now openly coming forward in favour of reform.[27]

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[24] Times, 13 January 1821.

[25] Tyne Mercury, 16 January 1821.

[26] See, for example, Liverpool Mercury, 19 January 1821.

[27] Times, 19 January 1821.

The meeting at which Gordon spoke was seen by the Times as a particularly significant indicator of public opinion, for it showed what a mass of respectability was now arrayed in the popular cause. "An immense crowd of well-dressed substantial-looking yeomen, headed by two of the first Peers of England, five MPs, and seventeen county Magistrates, would have been more than a match for any force that ultra-loyalism could muster in the open field."[28] The requisition for the meeting had expressed attachment to the constitution and had deprecated further proceedings against the Queen, and resolutions to that effect were almost unanimously carried. Thomas Calley, expressing his doubt as to whether he was within the terms of the requisition, began to talk of the representation in the House of Commons, but, having been met with a cry of 'Order!', he desisted and merely attacked ministers. However, as we have seen, Gordon touched upon reform and Burdett saw no reason why it should not be discussed.

Reform was also raised at other meetings where the requisition had not specifically mentioned it. In Hampshire, for instance, a meeting ostensibly solely about the Queen gave Alexander Baring the chance to declare himself a moderate reformer, whilst in Cambridgeshire, where the requisition only mentioned the need for the dismissal of ministers, Lord Dacre, among other things,

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[28] Ibid., 20 January 1821.

complained to a reported audience of two thousand about the interference of ministers in the freedom of election, citing Castlereagh's involvement in the selling of seats. Similarly, in Surrey, where the requisition had called for an end to the Queen Caroline proceedings in order that parliament should be left free to consider domestic distress and foreign affairs, the latitude allowed by the High Sheriff enabled several of the speakers to dilate on various methods of parliamentary corruption.[29]

The most decided triumphs for reform (i.e. its embodiment in the final resolutions, address or petition) naturally came at those meetings - in Bedfordshire, Middlesex, Cornwall, Suffolk, Devon and Cumberland - where it figured in the requisition. Whereas elsewhere attempts to have reform included in general declarations were unsuccessful, in Devon the position was reversed, an amendment designed to confine the resolutions to the subject of distress being negatived.[30]

It all amounted to an impressive display of anti-ministerial sentiment,[31] but the government weathered

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[29]Ibid., 13 and 17 January, and 3 February 1821.

[30]Ibid., 10 April 1821.

[31]Five of the meetings came as a result of wholly loyalist (i.e. ministerial) requisitions which took the form of simple declarations of attachment to Church and King and deprecations of the spread of sedition and blasphemy in which criticism of the Whigs and their supporters was clearly implied. The anti-ministerial side triumphed completely in Oxfordshire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, whilst in Cheshire and Shropshire the carrying of the loyalist addresses was hotly disputed.

the storm, despite their assurances to the exasperated country gentlemen that they could do little to help them. By the summer, Grey was despondent. The opposition, he told Lady Holland, "has proved itself unable to take advantage of the most favourable crisis in public opinion, that has ever existed since I came into Parliament."[32]

However, in the first half of 1822, the distress again gave the opposition an out-of-doors platform, and reform seemed to be coming increasingly to the fore. The requisitions of the last four meetings of 1821 had specifically mentioned reform, and this greater prominence for the issue was continued in the following year, when ten of the eighteen requisitions included it, in five of which it stood alone. It would appear, then, that the vision of the requisitionists was now more focused and that an increasing number of them saw no further need to attempt a diagnosis of their troubles and were anxious to proceed to the known remedy. It was reported, for instance, that the requisition for the Kent meeting had been signed "by a great number of persons who had never called themselves Whigs and who were once enemies of Reform."[33]

Even where reform was not in the requisition, it could still become one of the elements in the official

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[32]Add. 51553, f.171, 1 July 1821.

[33]Evans' and Ruffy's Farmers' Weekly Journal, 17 June 1822.

decisions of the meeting. At the January Norfolk meeting, for instance, a reform amendment to Alderman Thurtell's original resolutions, which had complained about 'Peel's Act' and the malt tax, was easily carried.[34] Reform also triumphed, eventually, a fortnight later in Suffolk, where Sir Henry Bunbury's original resolutions, though they called for cheaper government, did not advocate reform specifically. When a Mr Merest did so, he was met with "cheering, intermingled with some disapprobation." He was joined by Lord Henry Fitzroy, the Duke of Grafton, and Joshua Grigby, who moved the appropriate resolution. However, the High Sheriff refused to accept this and attempted to put the resolution recommending that the other seven original ones, which had been carried by acclamation, be embodied in a petition. When at length he succeeded, only twenty voted in favour of a 'reformless' petition. The meeting was dissolved, but another requisition was rapidly drawn up and presented to the High Sheriff, resulting in a second meeting at which the reform resolution was carried easily.[35]

Events followed a somewhat similar pattern at the Devon meeting on 1 February. Again reform was not in the matter presented for initial consideration. Earl Fortescue's petition called for lower taxes and retrenchment but submitted to "the wisdom of those whom the constitution

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[34] Manchester Guardian, 19 January 1822.

[35] Times and Morning Chronicle, 31 January 1822.

has vested with the legislation of the whole kingdom." Again this did not go unchallenged. The Honourable Newton Fellowes proposed a reform amendment and was seconded by a Dr. Tucker, who made a powerful speech attacking the Tory system. Lord Clifford opposed the amendment in the interests of unity and because it was foreign to the intentions of the requisitionists, of whom he was one. However, several speakers supported it and, though the original petition was carried by acclamation, so was the reform rider, by a large majority.[36]

In Surrey, where Cobbett was in attendance, the High Sheriff refused to put a reform resolution, and the original 'reformless' petition was negatived by a large majority. As in Suffolk, moves were then made to get a second meeting (in this case held a fortnight later) where a petition including a call for reform was adopted.[37]

Except in the special case of Middlesex,[38] none of these meetings saw any prolonged discussion of the precise nature of the parliamentary reform which was needed. Since the idea of adopting reform at all could still cause dissension, it was natural that reforming speakers should want to avoid further disunity by refraining from advocating

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[36]Times, 4 February 1822.

[37]Times and Morning Chronicle, 5 and 19 February 1822.

[38]Meetings in this county tended to be simply debates between moderate reformers like George Byng and Radicals like Major Cartwright. They cannot be classed with the others as expressions of the various concerns of largely agrarian communities.

any particular plan.[39] The meetings thus for the most part conveyed a sense of moderation, of men sinking their particular differences in favour of a great general principle. Thus the Times saw the Bedfordshire meeting, which had been both highly respectable and decidedly in favour of reform, as a vital contribution to the task of removing the ground from under the revolutionaries, whom the paper still feared might seduce the farmers.[40]

The fear that the suffering agriculturists might be induced to endorse what the Times and others regarded as unreasonable doctrines was born out in Kent, where Cobbett got a clause added to the petition calling for the reduction of the National Debt interest following a reform.[41] This outcome, Cobbett's first major triumph at a county meeting in the twenties, naturally caused quite a stir. Lord Clifford's astonishment at Cobbett's victory was, according to George Spater, "a monument attesting to the passing of influence based solely on family, rank, and property. It was a groan that foretold the ultimate success of the reform movement."[42] This

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[39] At the May Norfolk meeting, the Cobbettite Sir Thomas Beevor, in asserting that "every man had a right to a voice in framing those laws which he was bound to obey", seemed to be advocating universal suffrage, and his resolutions, which were carried unanimously, called for a radical reform, though no specific plan was mentioned. Morning Chronicle, 13 May 1822.

[40] Times, 22 April 1822.

[41] Ibid., 12 June 1822.

[42] George Spater, William Cobbett: The Poor Man's Friend (Cambridge 1982), ii, pp.417-18.

is a shade over-portentous, but there is no doubt that the Radicals were able to derive satisfaction from the proceedings. Hunt was delighted that Cobbett's success had galled both factions in the House of Commons, though he did point out the illogic of calling on parliament to reduce the National Debt interest after it had reformed itself, since then it would not be the same body.[43]

The Whigs, of course, were embarrassed most by Cobbett's amendment, as was made clear during the recriminations in parliament which followed Honywood's regretful presentation of the petition.[44] In deflecting the charges that the Whigs were to blame, Lord John Russell had to admit that county opinion had taken a turn of which he could not approve. He denied Sir Edward Knatchbull's claim that nine-tenths of Kent freeholders opposed the amendment. Unfortunately, many solid men were in such a bad economic state that they clutched at any proposal for relief. Castlereagh, no doubt pleased to have been furnished with some ammunition after the cumulative effect of most of the county meetings had seemed to bode ill for his government, expressed the hope that the petition would make reformers "pause before they attempted to break down the existing forms of the representation of the country, and place it in a state in which meetings like that of the county of Kent, might send mandates to that

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[43] Henry Hunt, Memoirs (1820, 1822), iii, To the Radical Reformers, 22 June 1822, p.9.

[44] 2 PD, vii, 1079, 14 June 1822.

House, so inconsistent with all the principles of justice and sound policy."[45]

However, the events in Norfolk in early 1823 showed that some at least had not heeded the warning. The requisition for the county meeting did not mention reform,[46] although one aspect of the reforming programme was even adopted by Alderman Thurtell, whose resolutions called for the abolition of sinecures and worthless places as well as complaining of the inadequacy of the relief so far provided by the government and doubting ministers' commitment to effective action.

Cobbett, of course, went much further. His petition complained of the monopoly of establishment emoluments achieved by a few families since the Septennial Act and contended that the reduction of interest on the Debt and the 'equitable adjustment' of all other contracts, public and private, would be of no avail until this monopoly, which also entailed the domination of the legislature, was ended. Reform was thus necessary to implement the appropriation of Church property, the reduction of the army, the abolition of sinecures and the sale of Crown

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[45] Ibid., 1082.

[46] According to Sir Thomas Beevor (who was, of course, disgusted by the plan), the requisitionists had pledged not to bring reform forward only in the hope that this concession would prompt Tories to help arrange a reform meeting at another time. Richard Mackenzie Bacon, A Memoir of the Life of Edward, third Baron Suffield (Norwich 1838), p.170, Beevor to Suffield, 18 December 1822.

Lands. Immediate relief was to be afforded by suspending for a year all distraints for rent, tithes, mortgages, bonds and annuities, and the repeal of the taxes on malt, hops, leather, soap and candles. These far-reaching proposals co-existed in the petition with some very respectful language directed at parliament and an affirmation of support for the constitution of King, Lords and Commons. In all, it was a package that seemed very much to the taste of the Norfolk yeomanry, for its carrying by a large majority was repeated after T.W. Coke had asked for the vote to be taken again.[47]

Reform was to some extent overshadowed in this petition by the hugely controversial measures Cobbett expected it to promote, but several reforming commentators still felt that the main result of Cobbett's victory would be damage to the reforming cause. "Shew to every man," wrote Francis Place,

> "that his property in the country, whatever its denomination, would be perfectly secure, in the hands of a reformed Parliament, and you may hope for his concurrence as a reformer. But if instead of doing this you are silly enough to petition the House to rob one half of the nation, you necessarily throw that half into the hands of Ministers."[48]

The Globe and Traveller believed that the ministerial papers were delighted with the Norfolk outcome because it enabled them to say that if reform and economy were

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[47] Times, 6 January 1823.

[48] British Luminary, 12 January 1823. In Place Collection, Prt. 39, iv, f.276.

demanded, "Cobbett will ask for confiscation, therefore keep within the Ministry's leading strings, and maintain virtual Representation and the virtual Sinking Fund."[49]

The meeting also seemed to some to be the clearest illustration of a process which had already attracted much attention. "I consider it", wrote J.G. Lambton to Sir Robert Wilson, "as emancipating public opinion from Whig leading strings and Tory go carts, and teaching the freeholders, hereafter, to judge and act for themselves..."[50] This 'emancipation' of yeomanry opinion, entailing a rejection of the authority of the 'natural' county élite, was a very significant product of the distress of these years. As Crosby has pointed out, a landlord would be slow to turn out an efficient, improving farmer simply because their political views did not coincide.[51] Periods of depression highlighted the economic muscle of such tenants and enhanced their political self-confidence. The possible consequences of this were neatly illustrated by the Examiner in a retrospective and prophetic piece entitled "1818 and 1822, in two dialogues between a Norfolk landlord and one of his tenants." In 1818, the landlord, receiving ample rent, forces the tenant to vote for Wodehouse when he favoured Coke. In 1822, however, the tenant forces

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[49] Globe and Traveller, 18 January 1823.

[50] Add. 31110, f.122, 9 January 1823.

[51] English Farmers, pp.1-2, 8-9.

the landlord to vote for Coke and another reformer by threatening to quit the farm.[52]

The writer was using a little poetic licence here, but the basic point about autonomous farming opinion is a fair one, and it could be applied outside Norfolk. In the case of Devon, for instance, Lansdowne was implying that political opinion in the county was split along social lines when, at the end of 1822, he told Holland that the forthcoming reform meeting there would really put to the test the strength of feeling on the issue, since there was a large body of independent yeomanry in the county and the major resident proprietors were almost all hostile to reform.[53]

Cobbett's triumph in Norfolk was reversed a fortnight later at Hereford, where he failed to get his petition passed as an amendment to Potteshall's original resolutions, which did not mention reform. A Mr Charlton then moved resolutions which, inter alia, called for a place bill but said nothing of a more general reform. Amid some confusion, Potteshall's resolutions were withdrawn in favour of Charlton's, which made Cobbett's amendment no

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[52] Examiner, 24 June 1821.

[53] Add. 51687, f.23, 29 December 1822. For a description of the way in which reforming gentry like John Colman Rashleigh and the Reverend Robert Walker stimulated a heightened political awareness among the rural middle classes of Cornwall to the eventual frustration of the county's mainly Tory political élite, see Edwin Jaggard, 'The Parliamentary Reform Movement in Cornwall, 1805-26', Parliamentary History, ii (1983), pp.113-29.

longer applicable. Cobbett failed to get another hearing and therefore withdrew.[54]

The Times was delighted,[55] but Henry Hunt soon demonstrated at the first Somerset meeting that the threat from 'extremists' had not yet been removed. In response to the original petition, which called for retrenchment and the modification of the tithes and the poor law but not reform, Hunt introduced a Cobbettesque production which also urged retrenchment but was given a more distinctly popular hue by its call for universal suffrage and the repeal of indirect taxes and the Game Laws. In the face of the High Sheriff's intransigence, Hunt was forced to withdraw his reform clause, but the rest of his petition was carried by a large majority, whilst the original one only received forty to fifty votes.[56]

Fear that men like Hunt would be able to exploit distress in such a way contributed to efforts to get a definitive statement of temperate reform from England's largest county. The need seemed pressing, but the Yorkshire meeting was long in the brewing.

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[54] Times, 20 January 1823. However, Cobbett later claimed that it did not matter what petition was carried. The point was whether the "land people" had accepted his doctrines, and he reckoned that they had done so. Most speakers had called for a reduction in the National Debt interest and every article in his Norfolk petition had been endorsed by some one. Political Register, 25 January 1823.

[55] Times, 20 January 1823. The report of the 'Signal Defeat and Disgrace of Cobbett' even began on the front page.

[56] Manchester Guardian, 1 February 1823.

One of the reasons for the delay was a hesitancy in some quarters about working with the scheme's chief promoter, Walter Fawkes. Fawkes, who had been a Yorkshire MP in 1806-7, was a solid sort of gentry reformer who could hardly be described as a revolutionary, but he had been a prominent member of the Hampden Club and an associate of Burdett, and there still existed a suspicion that he would go too far and disgrace all those attending the meeting. To allay such fears, Fawkes sent to Milton in July 1822 a copy of his printed reform circular to the inhabitants of Yorkshire, along with a handwritten note stating that his views did not extend beyond householder suffrage, triennial parliaments and the disfranchisement of small boroughs. In his accompanying letter, he trusted this would "exclude all extravagant theorists from the meeting."[57]

However, despite this moderation, Althorp was still not happy. He told Milton that he did not wish to attend the meeting since he was sure that he could "do no good where Fawkes takes so prominent a part..." All that could be hoped was that no mischief would be done. Those who attended would have no chance of benefitting the cause and risked being implicated in any violent language.[58] Sir John Swinburne had some sympathy with such views, but he regretted any delays in staging the

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[57]Fitz., 182, f.5, July 1822.

[58]*Ibid.*, B13, folder 5, 13 October 1822.

meeting because they would "injure the cause of moderate reform, increase the manifold evils that made such a reform called for, and render the attainment of it more and more difficult, and strengthen that party, no matter under what appellation, whose object was and is, not reform, but revolution."[59] The problem in essence was that the meeting's long gestation period arose from a concern to secure moderate unanimity, yet it also seemed to imperil that goal.

At this stage, Wooler was beginning to lose his patience with the Whigs,[60] but his optimism returned at full blast when the meeting was finally called for 22 January 1823, 2423 freeholders worth, it was claimed, a total of £10 million, having signed the requisition. "The Reformers," declared Wooler, "have now greater means at their disposal to give effect to their sentiments, than they have ever had..."[61]

The meeting differed from most of those that had hitherto been held in being convened to consider reform in its own right and not being primarily occasioned by economic difficulties. The first of Fawkes' resolutions

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[59]Grey, Swinburne to Grey, 22 November 1822. In August, Fawkes had held a meeting in York where an organising committee of thirty-nine had been appointed. This met on 1 November. Leeds Mercury, 24 August and 9 November 1822.

[60]Wooler's British Gazette, 3 November 1822.

[61]Black Dwarf, 15 January 1823.

expounded the 'checks and balances' theory of the constitution, whereas the resolutions at other meetings had usually begun with a description of distress before leading on, if they did at all, to a call for reform. In Fawkes' resolutions, the usual complaint against heavy taxes followed, but there was no specific reference to agricultural distress.

It was therefore clear that the debate on reform was to be on general constitutional grounds rather than being inspired by the temporary difficulties of a particular interest. Several of the speeches ranged beyond fiscal and economic policy, and there were lengthy appeals to history both by Fawkes and by the anti-reforming Yorkshire MP, James Stuart Wortley. As had been hoped, controversy between reformers was avoided, even Wooler agreeing to accept Fawkes' general resolutions, which were carried by all but about half a dozen of the six thousand reported to be present at the meeting's height.[62]

These proceedings were generally welcomed by all but the most die-hard Radicals. Burdett, for instance, urged that "all reformers should lay aside all differences of opinion, and enlist under the banner of Yorkshire, headed by Lord Milton, whose honest and able speech at the meeting does him immortal honour. How unlucky Canning

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[62] Manchester Guardian, 25 January 1823, and Black Dwarf, 29 January 1823.

is getting in his escapades in his last Liverpool speech on the subject of Reform!"[63]

However, the friends of moderate unanimity could not claim the final victory. At the second Somerset meeting, Hunt defeated the attempt to bring that county into the Yorkshire movement by getting a Radical petition passed to the chagrin of the meeting's organisers, and then, in his native county of Surrey, Cobbett carried an amendment for the reduction of the interest on the National Debt.[64] In the eyes of moderates, the cause of reform seemed to have been thrown once more into jeopardy after the success in Yorkshire. The Times, having lauded the sagacity of the Herefordshire men and taken it as an indication of the general state of opinion, now attacked the "abject, disgraceful, if not knavish stupidity" of those who had allowed Cobbett to triumph again. The Surrey petitioners had alienated opinion because 'equitable adjustment' would be taken to mean the principles Cobbett adopted in his private financial dealings and reform would be thought to entail filling parliament with Cobbettites.[65]

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[63] James Grant (ed.), Memoirs of Sir George Sinclair (1870), p.193, Burdett to Sinclair, 28 January 1823. In his 1822 Liverpool speech, Canning had talked of turning his words "on the dying embers" of reform. Brougham thought that his jibes had strengthened the resolve of the organisers of the Yorkshire meeting. Edinburgh Review, xxxvii, No. lxxiv (November 1822), p.407.

[64] Times, 30 January and 11 February 1823.

[65] Ibid., 11 February 1823.

The day before Cobbett's Surrey victory, the moderate-Radical struggle had taken another, and, if the account of the voting in the Times is to be trusted, a more decided turn in Hertfordshire. Here the petition was similar to the Yorkshire one in not advocating a specific reform plan. A Mr Fordham moved an amendment calling for representation co-extensive with taxation, which could have been taken to mean universal suffrage since everyone paid indirect taxes, and annual parliaments. He believed that this would lead to a sale of Crown Lands and Church property. The amendment was strongly opposed by Lord Dacre and Sir John Sebright, who warned his hearers not to commit the same folly as the Norfolk petitioners. The warning was heeded, and Fordham's amendment attracted only three votes. Yet even the original petition was too strong for the High Sheriff, who withheld his signature. Nevertheless, the Times was content again; it hailed the Hertfordshire result as "another instance of the happy triumph of constitutional principles and moderate reform, over furious, stupid radicalism on the one side and corrupt servility on the other."[66]

But, not long afterwards, the Cambridgeshire meeting, where Cobbettite resolutions were carried by acclamation, showed that this could not be the final word on the matter. However, in Hampshire, where both of the flies in the Whig ointment, Cobbett and Hunt, were present, Cobbett's

[66] Times, 10 February 1823.

petition was rejected in favour of a more conventionally reforming one.[67]

This was the turn of the tide, since Radicals had little success at the remaining meetings of 1823. In Huntingdonshire, a Cobbettite petition, in which reform seemed more of an afterthought than usual, was roundly defeated,[68] whilst in Essex, reform failed to get endorsed at all, D.W. Harvey withdrawing an amendment which, besides calling for reform, also advocated retrenchment and a revision of the civil and criminal codes.[69]

At Lincoln, Sir Robert Heron, after attacking extremism, proposed triennial parliaments and a vote for every freeholder, copyholder and householder, though the petition itself mentioned no plan. Cartwright, in one of his last public appearances, moved a standard Radical amendment but was defeated by an immense majority.[70]

In Devon, where the last reform meeting of all in this series was held, the complete unanimity was not even ruffled by an amendment to the unspecific reform

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[67] Ibid., 15 February and 3 March 1823.

[68] Ibid., 8 March 1823.

[69] Globe and Traveller and Times, 21 March 1823.

[70] Times, 28 March 1823. Heron seems to have been sorry that there was any need for such a vote: "At Lincoln, old Cartwright attended and divided us by a radical amendment, in which I had the mortification to see him seconded by my friend Colonel [William] Johnson." Heron, Notes (1851), pp.147-8.

petition. So this phase in the story of reform ended with three to four thousand Devonian throats giving three cheers for the brave Spaniards.[71]

By July, the King's speech on the prorogation of parliament could speak of the "gradual abatement of those difficulties under which the Agricultural Interest has so long and so severely suffered."[72] However, as William Smart pointed out, by December the wheat price had fallen back to under fifty-one shillings. Nevertheless, there was not another series of county meetings in 1824, and there was a general feeling that agricultural distress was passing away. Smart attributed this to the fact that rents and wages were being adjusted to the new conditions, for the modification of contracts made during the period of debased currency was not a measure solely advocated by Cobbett.[73]

Although moderate reformism triumphed at more meetings than Radicalism in 1823, as in the previous two years, moderates had to face the fact that no plan had really come close to being accepted in parliament, and, what was worse for the Whigs, the ministers were still in place. Sir Robert Heron, writing the Yorkshire-led movement off as a failure in the spring of 1823, blamed

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[71] Times, 14 April 1823.

[72] 2 PD, ix, 1544, 19 July 1823.

[73] William Smart, Economic Annals of the Nineteenth Century, 1821-1830 (1917), pp.143-4.

the people of England because they took "but little interest in questions regarding their own rights." Although the cause of reform was gaining ground in the Commons, "the fear of radicalism on one side, and the equivocal aid of Hunt and Cobbett on the other, at present paralyze our exertions."[74] The subsequent 'paralysis' of comparative prosperity among the farming community would be still more inimical to political agitation in the countryside.

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[74] Notes, pp.147-8.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WHIGS: TROUBLED APPRENTICESHIP

The attitude of the Whig party to reform during the 1820s, a decade which formed part of what Austin Mitchell called their "fifteen year period of preparation and apprenticeship",[1] before 1830, was an amalgam of opposition, conviction, enthusiasm and agonising. This mix of emotions arose on the one hand from the perception of reform as being potentially vastly beneficial both for the party and the nation at large, and on the other from a fear of its being fraught with danger for both. The acuteness of this dilemma precludes us from simply setting down the twenties as the period when the Whigs were converted en masse to the reform which they implemented in 1832.

Stated baldly, the main factors pushing the party towards reform were: the 'Foxite' part of their tradition, which stressed popular rights and preservative renovation; the impossibility of a Whig administration surviving or even being formed without the full public backing which it was thought only a specific reform pledge would secure; the related belief that the system was biassed in favour of Toryism.[2] Counting against a decisive stance on

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[1]Austin Mitchell, 'The Whigs and Parliamentary Reform before 1830', Historical Studies (Australia and New Zealand), xii (1965-7), p.22.

[2]Mrs Arbuthnot reckoned that "the Opposition feel that under the present system they have no chance of getting in [and] they would alter the Constitution in any way which would enable them to turn their adversaries out." Journal, i, p.160, 26 April 1822.

reform, especially in the mind of the tortured Grey, were, firstly, the diversity of Whig opinion. This ranged from the enthusiasm of Henry Grey Bennet and the Duke of Bedford, through the more doubtful support of some one like Holland, to the outright opposition of Earl Fitzwilliam. Secondly, there was the extreme unlikelihood of George IV accepting as ministers a party pledged to reform. Thirdly, there was the fear of becoming identified with violent Radicals.

For Grey, the 1820s began with a clear demonstration of the strength of public feeling on reform. In January 1820, Charles Bigge[3] reported to him that Dr. Thomas Headlam believed that a Newcastle Fox Dinner could only do good if Grey and MPs who attended declared for reform.[4] No doubt the memory of the Fox Dinner in early 1819, at which Grey had given a speech which had failed to satisfy more advanced reformers, was still quite fresh.[5] But Grey still felt unable to change his tune, with the result that the dinner was dropped for 1820, "and thus forever." Apparently, Grey's declaration with respect to reform "that I could hold no other language... than that which I have lately held in parliament, and at former meetings of the same sort"[6] had not been enough for J.G. Lambton

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[3]A leading Northumberland Whig and improving landlord. See Richard Welford, Men of Mark 'twixt Tyne and Tweed (London and Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1895), i, pp.283-7.

[4]Grey, Bigge to Grey, 3 January 1820.

[5]See Tyne Mercury, 5 and 12 January 1820.

[6]Add. 51553, f.137, Grey to Holland, 23 January 1820.

and others, who had urged that without some strong reforming talk the meeting would do positive harm.

The dropping of the meeting may have spared Grey some embarrassment for the moment, but the increasing importance of the reform issue which it seemed to demonstrate left him distinctly uneasy about public opinion. Nothing would satisfy the swelling demand for reform, he lamented to Holland, but "a general change of a much more extensive character than either you or I could approve."[7]

In December, he outlined a plan to Holland which he thought would be the minimum acceptable to reformers out of doors and in the party, though its comparative boldness may well have startled Holland. It should be proposed, thought Grey, to shorten parliaments to at least five years, to admit copyholders to vote for counties, and to give a hundred members taken from the worst boroughs to the large towns and the most extensive counties. The Whigs' exclusion from office, an inevitable consequence of their adopting this plan, would strengthen their position with the public and enable them to force the Court's hand.[8]

However, the position was not quite as simple as that. Grey could not ignore the views of such an important party member as Fitzwilliam, one of the greatest Whig boroughmongers and something of a martyr as a result

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[7] Ibid., f.149, 12 April 1820.

[8] Ibid., ff. 167-8, 6 December 1820.

of his dismissal from the lord lieutenancy of the West Riding for organising a protest meeting against Peterloo. Whilst being attached to rational liberty and in particular objecting to military interference in civil affairs, Fitzwilliam did not see that the electoral system in which he had such a big stake was particularly to blame for government misdeeds. He was prepared to support the disfranchisement of convicted venal boroughs, but he thought that any more general reform measure would arouse contention rather than remove it, for prejudice of one sort or another would prevent the work of correction being undertaken justly or equitably.[9]

As this letter to Grey implied, even Fitzwilliam did not think the electoral system perfect, but his stance illustrated the conservative streak which existed to a greater or lesser extent in most Whigs. Even Lord John Russell recalled that in adopting reform "it behoved the Opposition to be very cautious; indeed, I had, like many others, somewhat of a superstitious reverence for a system which seemed entwined with our liberties, and almost linked with the succession to the Crown."[10]

Sir James Mackintosh displayed such caution when, in November 1820, he published his thoughts on reform in the Edinburgh Review.[11] The article, taking the form

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[9]Grey, Fitzwilliam to Grey, 10 December 1820.

[10]Lord John Russell, Recollections and Suggestions (1875), p.33.

[11]Vol. xxxiv, No. lxviii, pp.461-501.

of an appraisal of Russell's speech in December 1819 in favour of transferring the elective franchise from corrupt boroughs to unrepresented great towns, displayed some fairly typical Whig preoccupations. The new constitutions in Europe, thought Mackintosh, had increased the importance of the subject, and "the progress of discontent and agitation at home renders its consideration of immediate and paramount urgency."[12] The deplorable political polarisation of the post-war years and its accompanying social dislocation led one initially to despair of any compromise "between those who petition for universal suffrage, and those who refuse to disfranchise Grampound!"[13] However, hope was to be derived from the existence of moderates on both sides: reformers recoiling from their Radical associates, and government supporters "heartily sick of the measures of the last four years" and willing to turn out ministers in order to restore harmony.[14] According to Mackintosh, these moderates ranged from those who would give the franchise of delinquent boroughs to the neighbouring hundreds to those who favoured new electoral districts and householder suffrage. This wide definition of the nation's saviours may have increased their numerical strength, but it seemed to make Mackintosh's hoped-for agreement between the majority of them more difficult to achieve.

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[12] Ibid., p.461.

[13] Ibid., p.464.

[14] Ibid., p.465.

Mackintosh's plan went beyond the minimum 'one-borough-at-a-time' piecemeal approach in that he advocated the immediate addition of twenty MPs for the richest and most populous unrepresented places, "with such varieties, in the right of suffrage, as the local circumstances of each community might suggest, but in all of them on the principle of a widely diffused franchise."[15] However, Mackintosh criticised Lambton's more ambitious plan because he thought it departed from constitutional practice and entertained dangerous general principles.

Such conservatism, in the view of James Losh, ensured that the article would not be widely welcomed. Mackintosh seemed to be "feeling the pulse of the Reformers, by proposing a plan which might suit what is called the Whig faction, but which, in my opinion, would by no means satisfy the good sense of the nation at large, or remedy the corruption and extravagance which have so deeply infected the government of this country."[16]

Lambton's plan went further, but even it did not satisfy some out-of-doors observers,[17] and it also caused some quite serious internal party problems. Lambton did not share Grey's preoccupation with the need to conciliate

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[15] Ibid., p.469.

[16] Diaries and Correspondence, i, p.126, Diary, 21 January 1821. In Surtees Society Publications, clxxi.

[17] See, for instance, a letter to Lambton from the General Committee of the Friends of Reform of Newcastle, Sunderland, Shields and the borough of Gateshead, Black Dwarf, 2 February 1820.

conservative elements within the party by avoiding a commitment to reform, and he reacted vehemently to Holland's description of his proposal for householder suffrage as "as bad as revolution."[18] At the City of London Tavern Dinner of April 1821, he explained the motivation behind his reform initiative in a way which combined an expression of party loyalty with a still stronger outburst of impatience against some of his colleagues:

> "... when he saw, that year after year, the great and paramount question was neglected; when he saw that no individual connected with that party to which he had attached himself, and to which he was proud to belong, was willing to come forward and assure the people that he sympathised in their sufferings",

and when the middle classes "were reproaching their representatives for the indifference and apathy with which they treated the subject", he had resolved to draw up his motion.

Other Whigs at the meeting shared Lambton's zeal. Nugent, for instance, warned the Whig leadership that if they abandoned reform he would "act as strenuously for their overthrow as he now did for their support."[19] He and Lambton clearly had no qualms about associating with the MPs for 'Radical Westminster', Sir Francis Burdett and J.C. Hobhouse, whereas in the previous year even Lambton had asked Grey whether he ought to attend Samuel Whitbread's

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[18] Leonard Cooper, Radical Jack. The Life of John George Lambton, first Earl Durham (1959), p.72.

[19] Times, 5 April 1821.

election dinner, given that Burdett and Hobhouse would attend and have their healths drunk. Lambton was quite keen to go, but "at the same time I should be sorry and so would Tavistock to show any signs of coquetting or drawing near to Burdett and his crew."[20]

In April 1821, however, Hobhouse could exclaim in his diary: "What a change since last year, when scarcely a Whig would speak to Burdett and me!"[21] Although a disgusted Francis Place was coming to see the Westminster members, especially Burdett, as little better than the Whigs he detested, by associating with them Lambton, Nugent and Whitbread could still have been represented as having put loyalty to reform above loyalty to party, measures before men. This was a step which Grey, to whom party labels still meant a great deal, could not take, or at least he recoiled from taking as the litmus test of a party's sincerity its attitude to one issue alone.

The closer co-operation between the Westminster men and some Whigs certainly did not mean that reform had ceased to be problematic for the party. Mackintosh, for instance, confessed himself to be "very perplexed by Lambton's motion. If it be for Inquiry I believe that I must vote for it to avoid being thought an enemy of

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[20] Grey, Lambton to Grey, 25 April 1820.

[21] Lady Dorchester (ed.), Recollections of a Long Life, by Lord Broughton (John Cam Hobhouse). With Additional Extracts from his Private Diaries (1909), ii, p.145, Diary, 4 April 1821.

Reform. But speaking is very difficult for me on this question so brought forward. Yet how am I to be silent?"[22]

The speech Lambton gave when introducing his motion contained the elements common to most Whig assessments of the state of the country. Mackintosh could have subscribed wholeheartedly to Lambton's view of the "awful and portentous" state of the times and the increasing political acuteness of the masses, for example.[23] Lambton's attacks on the large standing army and Britain's tacit support of European despotism were also standard Whig fare. Neither could there be much contention among reforming Whigs about the baneful effects of Crown influence, direct nomination and bribery. It was when Lambton came down to the specific remedies of enfranchising copyholders, leaseholders and householders, disfranchising all venal, corrupt and decayed boroughs and recurring to triennial parliaments[24] that room for dissension was opened up. Richard Martin went as far as to claim that if government MPs left the opposition to vote alone on the motion it would be beaten by a big majority.[25] This may not have been completely fair, but there were certainly doubts on Lambton's side of the House. Both George Abercromby and Milton, for instance, pledged support for

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[22]Add. 52182, ff.83-4, Mackintosh to John Allen, 10 April 1821.

[23]2 PD, v, 361, 17 April 1821.

[24]Ibid., 371-5.

[25]Ibid., 436.

a committee of inquiry into the state of the representation, but Lambton's plan went a little too far for their taste.[26]

This was the position of most MPs, although on the second day of the debate Daniel Sykes did actually complain that the proposed franchise would be too narrow in that it would shut out all artisans who were not householders, and David Ricardo regretted that the ballot had not been proposed.[27]

Shortly after Ricardo's remarks came the debacle. Canning, who had been widely expected to give a set-piece anti-reform speech, instead announced that in the absence of Lambton and the principle advocates of both sides of the question he would abstain from speaking and go along with the general disposition of the House to divide,[28] with the result that, in a piteously thin House, the motion was defeated 43:55, whilst its sponsor and some of his main associates were dining at the home of Michael Angelo Taylor.

The Times tried to put a brave face on it: "What! only 55 votes for the present constitution and organisation of the British Parliament?"[29] But there was no hiding the fact that the outcome, even if it had been an unfortunate accident, had been acutely embarrassing to

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[26] Ibid., 431-2, 438.

[27] Ibid., 444, 449, 18 April 1821.

[28] Ibid., 453.

[29] Times, 19 April 1821.

Lambton and his reforming friends. Hobhouse tried to cheer the sulking Lambton up by telling him that "the Westminster Reformers were not in the least hurt at the fate of the motion."[30] Lambton regarded this as the first word of comfort he had heard for a long time, though the lack of hurt felt by some one like Place over the motion's fate was more likely to have arisen from its being yet another demonstration of the inability of Lambton's social order to do anything worthwhile for the people.

The motion thus probably did more harm than good to the Whigs. Either the shuffling conduct of the bulk of the party could be contrasted with the shining zeal of "that excellent young man, Mr Lambton",[31] or the defects of the scheme could be attributed to that trammelling Whig mentality from which Lambton had been unable to break free. The public relations disaster of the final division disillusioned Lambton to such an extent that Hobhouse, looking back twelve years, was able to write: "In 1821 for some pique in the House of Commons, he gave up actively supporting parliamentary reform."[32]

However, a far more respectable show was made in the vote on Russell's less ambitious resolutions in May. Russell asked the House to accept that gross bribery

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[30]Add. 56542, f.22, Diary, 23 April 1821.

[31]Liverpool Mercury, 27 April 1821.

[32]Burdett Papers, D69, f.45, Hobhouse to Burdett, 28 November 1833.

and corruption went on in borough elections, that newly rich and populous places should be granted representation, and that a select committee ought to be set up to consider the best means of effecting this and to suggest better methods of inquiry into corruption.[33] Although these resolutions were beaten by 124:155, at least the fiasco of the previous month had not been repeated, and the Times was able to hail the result as a triumph and a good augury for moderate reform.[34]

It did not, however, induce Grey to make a decisive stand. In June, Bedford complimented Holland on his apparently increasing zeal for reform but also complained of Grey's supineness on "the only subject on which the people are anxiously alive." A decisive reform pledge was needed from the Whigs, thought Bedford, in order to meet a situation in which "the great body of the people - the middle classes, farmers, tradesmen, artisans, manufacturers &c" were convinced of the necessity of the measure and "wholly without confidence in any public men."[35]

By the time Russell's second reform motion of the twenties became imminent in early 1822, Grey was sure that merely "nibbling" at reform would not be adequate, but he was still anxious to know whether Russell's plan

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[33] 2 PD, v, 605, 9 May 1821.

[34] Times, 11 May 1821.

[35] Add. 51663, f.19, Bedford to Holland, 14 June 1821.

had the sanction of the cautious Holland.[36] Fitzwilliam, despite having been shown by Milton analyses of Commons divisions which proved that the government was dependent for its majorities on the votes of MPs for small boroughs, was still as sceptical about reform as he had been in 1820,[37] and another old 'grandee', Lord George Cavendish, told Russell that "he never knew the question of parliamentary reform brought forward without doing harm to the party."[38]

However, despite this rather difficult background, Russell sounded some quite confident notes in the debate on his motion on 25 April. For instance, the country's state of internal tranquillity, often seen by contemporaries and later historians as evidence that people had forgotten about reform, was for Russell beneficial in that it afforded "opportunity for ample and undisturbed discussion." That reform could no longer be identified by its opponents with dangerous doctrines was shown by the fact that recent petitions did not exclusively recommend any one plan, whereas a few years earlier all petitions had prayed for universal suffrage. It was clear, thought Russell, that the people asked for reform "as a cure for abuses existing,

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[36] Add. 51554, f.5, Grey to Holland, 9 February 1822.

[37] Grey, Fitzwilliam to Grey, 24 March 1822.

[38] Recollections and Suggestions, p.41. Tierney told Russell "that the notes to members usually sent out when a party motion was in contemplation, could not be allowed to me on the question of reform." Ibid.

and not as a fanciful, untried measure, of which in their own minds they have some vague conception."[39]

After the eulogy of the middle classes without which no Whig pronouncement on reform was complete, Russell launched into a detailed examination of Britain's industrial and commercial growth and the increased availability of books and education, especially that for the lower classes.[40] Contrasting with this paean to 'improvement' was Russell's suggestion that elections could be scrapped altogether without injury. If the great landed proprietors were MPs, he contended, they would be, provided they were exposed to public criticism, a better safeguard for liberty than the present House because those with a large stake in the country would never do anything against the declared sense of the public.[41]

Russell's aristocratic heritage was clearly in evidence here, but his actual proposals showed that he had made a decisive advance in his reform ideas. One hundred new MPs were to be added, sixty for the counties

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[39] 2 PD, vii, 52-3. This apparent 'rise of moderate reform' was largely explained by the fact that most petitions were now coming from distressed agriculturists gathered at, for the most part, well-managed county meetings, rather than from the comparatively prosperous urban working classes.

Later in the debate, Robinson agreed that former Radicals had gone over to moderate reform, but he saw this as a reason for the House not to be in a hurry. It should wait to see whether people would change their minds still further. Ibid., 105-6.

[40] Ibid., 55-8.

[41] Ibid., 61.

and forty for the great towns, whilst the hundred smallest boroughs were each to be deprived of one member to make room. Russell explained that he had previously believed that reform could be effected gradually by the punishment of proven corruption, but he had not received the full co-operation of the House in his attempt of the previous year to get a committee to consider the means of legally convicting corrupt boroughs. He was therefore forced to try "to obtain from the House, in the gross, that reform which they were unwilling to effect by gradual and unpretending means."[42]

Given the nature of Russell's plan, the defeat of the motion by 164:269 was a very encouraging result for the reformers, the minority being the largest for a reform measure since Pitt's motion in 1785. It led a letter-writer to the Times to predict that the number of reformers in the Commons would go on increasing every year[43] (Folkestone had publicly added himself to the list during the debate), and even John Wade thought it demonstrated the progress reform was making "in the most unfavourable soil."[44]

However, Russell had not really been able to avoid the perennial Whig predicament of falling between two

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[42]Ibid., 79.

[43]Times, 27 April 1822.

[44]John Wade, Key to the Lower House. Given in Simon Maccoby (ed.), The English Radical Tradition, 1763-1914 (2nd edn., 1966), p.97.

stools. Whilst Cobbett, who was probably representative of Radical opinion generally, thought the motion had been another example of Whiggish moderate reforming humbug,[45] some of Russell's close associates might regret that he had gone so far. Lord William Russell, for instance, though he indicated his willingness to vote for whatever Lord John might propose and stressed his preference for a Radical reform to none at all, nevertheless regretfully added that "I don't think you will now ever do any good, with the old jog trot plan you would have done a little good."[46]

As well as the differences of emphasis among Whigs about the precise form any party reform plan should take, there were also doubts in the minds of some about the whole idea of placing the measure at the head of the list of priorities. "I am convinced", wrote the Earl of Ellenborough, who had pledged his support to Grey in November 1822, "that it is easier to carry the measures which are looked forward to as the happy consequence of Reform, than Reform itself..."[47] Grey probably had a great deal of sympathy with such a view. "Is reform," he had asked Sir Robert Wilson in November 1822, "to be

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[45] Cobbett's Collective Commentaries, 27 April 1822.

[46] Rollo Russell (ed.), The Early Correspondence of Lord John Russell (1913), i, Letter 69, 22 June 1822.

[47] Grey, Ellenborough to Grey, 20 January 1823.

made the exclusive object, at the expense of everything else; or is there a possibility by more prudent councils, applied to objects more immediately practicable, and of the greatest importance... of striking an effectual blow against a system, which nothing but the intemperance of a party in opposition, could have enabled to go on so long?"[48]

The fear of being identified with this intemperate party, in other words the Radicals, was another factor diminishing Whig enthusiasm for reform, or preventing it from developing at all. It is true that the existence of supposedly violent Radicalism had been an important agent in the promotion of reformism among the Whigs, since there seemed to be a need for the party to assume more decidedly its traditional role of giving temperate guidance to the people's impulses. Bedford, for example, hoped Holland would acknowledge "the good effects of men of rank, and station, and property in the country, coming forward to take the cause of reform out of the hands of weak and designing men, and by their efforts giving confidence to the country, and restoring the constitution, instead of suffering it to be pulled down and destroyed by unhallowed hands."[49]

But the same conditions could push other men in a different direction. Fitzwilliam regretted the mooting

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[48]Grey, Grey to Wilson, 24 November 1822.

[49]Add. 51663, f.42, Bedford to Holland, 18 November 1822.

of reform, in the form of Russell's 1822 motion, "from the conviction, that to the Whigs as a party, it is most injurious, as involving in their return to power the hazard of an attempt to re-model so important a member of the Constitution as its elective franchises..."[50] Similarly, Lord Carysfort reckoned that the way Russell had been put forward for the Huntingdonshire election in 1820 "may deter some who with a view to the independence of the county would support Lord John, but who will not like to be implicated, even in the mere fancy of others, in his politics, particularly in Reform of Parliament, which is sure to be thrown in his teeth and... he never will be able, at least before the election, to vindicate himself from all the extravagances of the maddest demagogues."[51]

There was always the nagging fear for some Whigs that too vigorous an espousal of reform might rob them of possible support from timid 'floating voters'. The Radical alarms certainly gave scope for misrepresentation of the Whigs by their enemies. A pamphlet of 1820, for instance, condemned the temerity with which the Whigs

> "have attempted to lay open the fabric of the constitution, and to let in upon it the sifting breeze of reform, while there was no motive to the rude experiment, and could be no justification of the ultra-philosophical undertaking - all these things are profoundly treasured up in public remembrance, and must insure for the Whigs no small portion of the honour or the shame which belongs to the real authors of the present agitations."[52]

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[50] Grey, Fitzwilliam to Grey, 4 April 1822.

[51] Fitz, 100, f.15, Carysfort to Milton, 11 February 1822.

[52] Anon., On the Causes of the Present Discontents, with strictures on the Politics of the Last Number of the Edinburgh Review (Edinburgh 1820), pp.24.

By 1823, however, the threat of Radical insurgency, and hence the opportunity for anti-reforming authors to pen such calumny, had faded. Lord Normanby, when seconding Russell's reform motion of that year, told his opponents that "they must now deal with the question itself, unassisted by adventitious circumstances."[53] Russell's plan was the same as that of the previous year, with the addition, which he had simply forgotten in 1822, of the provision of compensation, probably from a public fund, for disfranchised borough voters. Once again, he faced attack from both directions. Sir Edward Hyde East believed that the representative system had become popularly based since the Revolution, the Grampound transfer to Yorkshire being the latest example of this process. The number of forty shilling freeholds had grown thanks to the increase in the country's wealth and the depreciation of money. There was therefore no need for any change.[54] Ricardo, on the other hand, thought Russell should have gone further by proposing the ballot.[55]

The motion was defeated 169:280, and, although just over thirty of its supporters had not appeared before in a reform minority in the twenties, the result did not bear out the predictions of the previous year that the numerical gap between reforming MPs and their opponents would steadily narrow.

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[53] 2 PD, viii, 1273, 24 April 1823.

[54] Ibid., 1277-8.

[55] Ibid., 1281.

It is difficult to escape the general conclusion that the Whigs' dealings with reform in the first four years of the decade had been largely unprofitable to them, for the party had failed to get themselves into office and to convince influential out-of-doors commentators of their sincerity. In July 1823, Grey, as if looking back on a completed political phase, told Wilson that he considered a change of ministry no longer practicable, adding bitterly: "... it was so some time ago; and was prevented by staking everything on the question of reform &c, and will be so again, if a chance should offer."[56] Britain now entered a period of quietude which led Grey to complain that the state of the country "is as dull and monotonous as anything can well be considered to be. There is no public question which excites, no public feeling which produces any sympathy, no public prospects which can engage one in future speculations."[57] As Lansdowne remarked airily to Holland, "the prosperity of the country has driven reform almost out of the heads of the reformers. As you know, it never had a great place in mine."[58]

In 1826, after two inactive years, Russell resumed his efforts to get some principle of general reform

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[56] Grey, Grey to Wilson, 15 July 1823.

[57] Ibid., 19 August 1824.

[58] Add. 51687, f.41, 17 January 1824.

recognised by the House. This time he was influenced by the researches of Thomas Creevey, who had decided that a detailed historical analysis of borough franchises was the best foundation on which to base an argument for reform. "My own impression," Creevey had told Brougham in 1823, "is that an accurate parliamentary history of the boroughs would be fatal to the system."[59] The ultimate product of his labours, Letters to Lord John Russell upon his notice of a Motion for Parliamentary Reform, published early in 1826, was praised by the Times for bringing "unlooked-for novelty to the discussion of a question, which those persons who are familiar with it only under its ordinary aspects, turn away from as from a barren and exhausted scheme."[60]

Creevey himself thought he was adding a new dimension to the reform case. Arguments for the measure, he asserted,

> "have been founded too exclusively upon those facts, which are within every man's observation, respecting the nature and exercise of the elective franchise, whilst little or no reference has been had to the law of the case, or, in other words, to the original formation of the House of Commons, and the true and real objects for which it was so formed."[61]

Creevey's main source was the collection of parliamentary writs printed by Prynne under Charles II, from which he concluded that in many cities and boroughs

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[59]Add. 52179, f.37, 21 August 1823.

[60]Times, 1 February 1826.

[61]Letters, p.2.

the right of election had been 'usurped' by mayors, aldermen and other functionaries at the expense of the inhabitants at large, who had been vested with the franchise by the original writ of Edward I which had created the House of Commons. This writ had never been revoked and therefore the inhabitants of every returning city and borough ought to demand to be allowed to exercise the rights which were still their's under law. "The first and great object," declared Creevey, "is to direct the attention of the people of England to this practical and only means which they themselves possess, to procure a reform in our House of Commons."[62]

Creevey's approach bore fruit when, on 26 April, Russell introduced a petition from Rye for the extension of the franchise in that town beyond the twenty-six men currently holding it. The voting rights, it was claimed, had been usurped seventy years earlier by the family of the present 'manager', Dr Lamb, and documents had shown that every inhabitant had the right to vote on payment of a fine.[63]

The speech Russell made the following day when introducing his reform motion clearly showed the influence of the Letters, and Hobhouse also used the borough

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62 Ibid., pp.52-4.

63 2 PD, xv, 636-47.

'usurpation' argument later in the debate. But, despite such scrupulously legalistic arguments, and despite Lord Francis Leveson Gower's admission that "the evil of radical reform, which, in 1817, afforded to the opposers of an honourable baronet [Burdett] much of argument or pretext, is now silent, if not suppressed",[64] Russell's motion went down by 123:247. The minority was markedly smaller than that of 1823 and only contained about ten new names.

This was the last general Whig reform initiative of the twenties. In the following year, Lord Liverpool was afflicted by the illness which ended first his political existence and then his life. The consequent accession of Canning to the premiership gave some Whigs the opportunity to show that the absence of a reform pledge by the government was not an insuperable obstacle to their taking official posts. They might have claimed that the climate of public opinion had changed since the early twenties, when several Whigs joined the Radicals in believing that the people were nearly all reformers and would have to be satisfied. As we have seen, Russell, though he did not join Canning himself, did not want an issue on which the people were 'lukewarm' to be a sticking-point to the formation of a liberal ministry. 1827 was certainly a quiet year as far as reform petitions went, and reform seemed no longer to enjoy quite the place in Whig

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[64] _Ibid._, 705-6.

preoccupations that it had done when the annual totals of petitions were well into double figures.

Yet, although several of the Whigs' problems about reform did not yet seem to have been solved, the twenties had seen detailed formulations of Whig reform ideas and had in a sense clarified that party's idea of itself as the 'middle men' who, by instigating temperate change, would avert revolution. This was to be a vital factor when Grey and his colleagues found themselves elected on a reform 'ticket' in 1831 and proceeded to carry out their mandate.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PIECEMEAL APPROACH

The term 'parliamentary reform' in this period did not solely mean proposals which were general in that they had a nationwide application and dealt with the whole range of problems connected with political representation. These general plans were made up of components which were on several occasions considered singly during the twenties and which generated almost as much discussion of wider principles as the more far-reaching schemes. They could, as with the proposals for dealing with the corrupt boroughs of Grampound, Penryn and East Retford, entail wholesale change in particular locations, or, like the bills for the registration of city and borough voters, they could make adjustments to one aspect of electoral practice which would apply throughout the system. A third type of measure, of which the proposal to fix the Sussex county polling place at Lewes was an example, dealt with particular problems in particular localities. Such measures might seem comparatively trivial, but they were obviously important to those who would be affected by them. The second bill on the Sussex polling place, for instance, brought forth no fewer than fifty petitions in favour and forty-one against.[1]

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[1] CJ, index to vols. lxxv-xcii, p.485.

Abraham Moore, during the second reading of the Grampound bill, asserted that "every change effected, [either] in the mode of returning members, or in the mode of exercising that elective franchise, by virtue of which they were sent to that House, was a species of parliamentary reform."[2] Although contemporaries may not always have made the conceptual link between the minor measures and those grand plans which called forth Canning's flights of oratory, from a historian's perspective one can argue, for instance, that, although the bill to regulate the poll at Preston borough had nothing to do with the formal extension of the franchise, a shortening of parliaments or the representation of 'new' interests, in its intention to make the election more convenient it was a distant relative to that thoroughly reforming measure, the introduction of the ballot. The prevention of the application of corporate funds to election purposes, the disfranchisement of a rotten borough, and the general enfranchisement of leaseholders and copyholders were all basically changes to the system, regardless of whether they were thought of as purification or revolution.

Many of the piecemeal measures were seen by their supporters as being in the former category. The implication could be that an essentially virtuous body (parliament) was taking action (for which it deserved credit) to eliminate a blemish. This assumption of virtue naturally irritated

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[2] 2 PD, i, 518, 19 May 1820.

the friends of a more throughgoing reform. Thus J.C. Hobhouse, during the debate on Lord John Russell's general reform motion in 1826, called for the abolition of the bribery law on the grounds that it only encouraged perjury. The buying and selling of seats, he declared, should be openly avowed and the House should "have done with the mean, dishonest, unprofitable fiction, that arrays us in the borrowed robes of purity and independence."[3] Similarly, when in May Russell resumed his attack on electoral impurity in the form of three resolutions whose aim was to create a more effective system for the consideration of petitions complaining of malpractice,[4] he faced the charge that there was an essential inconsistency underlying his initiative. Hudson Gurney did not think Russell's proposed machinery would work well and, having urged that the "absurd and inoperative" bribing and treating acts should be revised instead, he declared that "there was not a member in that House who did not pay for his seat, either in meal or in malt."[5] This brought self-righteous denials from 'purity' zealots like Matthew Wood, Sir Robert Wilson and Sir Matthew White Ridley, but it could not have been claimed that their shining example was followed everywhere.

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[3] Ibid., xv, 691, 27 April 1826. Hobhouse was not, however, anxious to be thought of as an intransigent extremist, and, thus motivated, he had expressed support for Russell's bill against bribery and corruption during its second reading in March. Ibid., xiv, 1368, 14 March 1826.

[4] Ibid., xv, 1402-3, 26 May 1826.

[5] Ibid., 1408.

Exactly half of the 124 members who voted supported the resolutions, and the Speaker gave his casting vote in their favour.[6]

In the view of the Taunton Courier, Russell's success had weakened the position of the extreme reformers. The fact that the resolutions had been carried at all, and still more on the eve of a General Election, showed "that the popular voice is not so unheeded in that Assembly as crafty or noisy declaimers would have believed." It also showed, in the view of this paper, that there was a general conviction in the House that some reform was necessary.[7]

Although the 1826 General Election did not encourage the view that such action by the House could have a dramatic reforming effect on events in the constituencies, Russell reaffirmed his faith in the piecemeal approach when, temporarily inconvenienced by not having a seat, he asked Althorp to move the resolutions in the new parliament.[8] "... the Reformers in general," he wrote, "have never made sufficient estimate of the support they could receive, or set a sufficient value on the objects they might

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[6] Ibid., 1410.

[7] Taunton Courier, 14 June 1826.

[8] Lord John Russell, Letter to Viscount Althorp on the Resolutions of the Late House of Commons respecting bribery at elections (1827).

obtain, by a vigorous attack on particular abuses."[9]

Fired by this philosophy, Althorp and others continued to propose relatively minor adjustments to the electoral system, which, though they aroused little out-of-doors excitement, at least demonstrated that some politicians were trying to get to grips with the "nuts and bolts" of reform. Reaction to these attempts from reformers outside the House usually fell into two categories: general, sometimes cautious, approval, or outright scorn. The carrying of Althorp's motion for a select committee to consider the mode of taking the poll at county elections[10] produced good examples of these two types of reaction. On the one hand, the Bolton Chronicle believed that "any system of improvement ought to be received with satisfaction by the country, because we may hail it as the precursor to a more extensive correction of the abuses which exist

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[9] Ibid., p.13. The resolutions urged that when a petition which challenged the return of a member made within the previous eighteen months contained sufficiently specific allegations, a day should be appointed to take it into consideration and that day should be made known in the place concerned. There should then be appointed a select committee of inquiry, thirteen members to be chosen by lot and two appointed by the House. In his Letter to Althorp, Russell explained that his plan was designed to alleviate the problems of expense a petitioner might experience when complaining about bribery, and to end the immunity enjoyed by a candidate if he merely waited for fourteen days after the election before giving bribes. Letter, p.3. Peel invited Althorp to embody the resolutions in a bill so that more discussion could take place, but Althorp, thinking that a bill would have no chance of getting through the Lords, withdrew the resolutions altogether. 2 PD, xvi, 110, 22 November 1826.

[10] 15 March 1827.

in our representative system."[11] On the other hand, Francis Place was thoroughly cynical about the measure. Hobhouse, one of the committee members, asked him to draw up a plan for taking the Middlesex poll at various places in order that the expense and duration of the election might be diminished.[12] Place obliged, but he noted in his diary that he thought it wasted effort,

> "for the committee will recommend nothing to the House which can be of any use to the nation, and if they were to recommend anything useful the House would reject it. I see no reason why the purses of a set of rich landowners should be spared, they have no desire to make elections free... It is of little consequence how or where the poll is taken as long as open voting is practised."13

It was certainly true that the sponsors of piecemeal measures showed little desire to proceed rapidly to the sort of system which would have satisfied men like Place. For instance, Althorp, when introducing his bill for the reduction of election expenses, especially those of boroughs, declared that "the House should apply themselves to the redress of those evils after this manner, one by one, and step by step; for that mode of proceeding would enable them to understand the position in which they were placed with respect to these objects."[14] Nugent was also keen to show that he would do nothing alarming. No one, he

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[11] Bolton Chronicle, 24 March 1827.

[12] Add. 35146, f.75, 19 March 1827.

[13] Ibid., 20 March 1827.

[14] 2 PD, xvii, 676, 8 May 1827. See also Brougham's remarks, ibid., 680.

believed, whatever his views on abstract theories of representation, could object to his plan for the registration of voters in cities and boroughs. It was a practical measure to answer "those who charged the friends of reform with always bringing forward wild and visionary plans..."[15] Similarly, Daniel Sykes described his proposal for an inquiry into the state of the representation in districts and cities corporate as "not of a character to frighten even the most timorous opponent of reform."[16]

However, there were always some who were easily frightened. Frankland Lewis urged Sykes to bring in a bill rather than move for an inquiry, since the latter proceeding

> "would introduce the consideration of the entire state of the representation; and neither the House nor the country should imagine, if they recognised the principle laid down by the hon. gentleman, that they could find any mode of shutting the door which that inquiry would open into all the reasons of state propriety, and convenience, on which the representation of this country was founded."17

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[15] Ibid., xix, 868, 872, 22 May 1828.

[16] Ibid., xviii, 1106, 11 March 1828.

[17] Ibid., 1107. Sykes was addressing himself to quite an important anomaly. In eight districts which had been separated from their counties - Lincoln, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Coventry, Gloucester, Chester, Carmarthen, Worcester, and Sykes' own constituency of Kingston-upon-Hull - the freeholders could vote neither for knights of the shire nor for burgesses. Porritt pointed out that they were thus worse off than the freeholders of Manchester or Leeds, who could vote in Lancashire and Yorkshire. E. Porritt, The Unreformed House of Commons (Cambridge 1903), i, pp.18-19.

As well as voicing a reluctance to set a possibly dangerous precedent, opponents of these partial measures might also pose as the defenders of popular rights. Thus, D.W. Harvey, though a reformer himself, commented acidly that "it was quite the fashion of modern reformers to relieve members of parliament from expenses by curtailing the few existing rights of the electors - a plan to which he would never assent."[18]

These two strands of opposition - a straightforward fear of setting the general reform ball rolling and a sometimes seemingly paradoxical populist stance - were both well represented in the Grampound, Penryn and East Retford debates. It is to those which we must now turn.

Grampound

"We all expected it to be treated with derision... Suddenly, Lord Castlereagh yields this question (as far as it goes) of radical reform. It does little, but promises much!"[19]

The declaration by Castlereagh in the Commons on 14 December 1819 that he would not object to Russell's bringing in a bill for the disfranchisement of the corrupt

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[18] 2 PD, xviii, 1235-6, 21 March 1828.

[19] Sir Robert Heron, Notes, p.110, 25 December 1819.

Cornish borough of Grampound[20] was one of the more surprising political events of that year. It also seemed to augur well for agreement between the parties on the necessity for positive action against this and future cases of proven corruption and for a consequent defusing of the issue of reform following the violent confrontation of the immediate post-war years. Tierney believed that this government concession had irritated violent Radicals but, he claimed, the "sound and rational reformers" had hailed it "as the forerunner of an improvement in a small degree (for very small he admitted it was) of the state of the representation."[21]

Yet 'thin-end-of-the-wedge' fears, a constant feature of debates on even the mildest measures of partial reform, had already been aroused in those who were to the right even of ministers. John Rickman, for example, deplored "the apparent concession to the Whig scheme of parliamentary reform... For the plan cannot but extinguish all boroughs in succession... Yet I am afraid both Lord Castlereagh and Mr Canning are not unfavourable to an

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[20] 1 PD, xli, 1114. Russell also moved that all boroughs of proven corruption should be disfranchised, with the innocent voters being allowed to vote in the county; that the largest counties, or towns with a population of over 15,000, should receive the forfeited franchises; and that the House should consider further means of detecting and preventing corruption. Ibid., 1106-7. Castlereagh expressed support for the principle of giving the franchise of corrupt places to more deserving bodies but did not think that Russell's mode of re-allocation could be universally applicable.

[21] 2 PD, i, 496, 19 May 1820.

experiment, which very experiment will take away all ground of argument against going further, and will soon produce revolution and thereby in succession a military government of course."[22] However, when detailed discussion of the measure began, it soon became clear that ministers were not going to be as flexible as Russell hoped or as Rickman feared.

Russell was naturally keen to dispel any feeling that he was doing something dangerous in attempting to enfranchise Leeds at the expense of Grampound.[23] During discussions on the bill's second reading, he told the House that members for places which were then unrepresented might "carry into the House their undigested notions of parliamentary reform; but they would naturally turn their eyes to that House, where their sentiments would be delivered - where their voice would be heard, instead of seeking their object by dangerous and illegal ways..."[24] Castlereagh, however, preferred the more established remedy of giving the borough's franchise to the neighbouring

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[22] Orlo Williams (ed.), Lamb's Friend the Census-Taker. The Life and Letters of John Rickman (1911), p.214, Rickman to Southey, 10 January 1820.

[23] He was not dogmatic in his desire that Leeds should benefit. When submitting his motion for leave to bring in the bill, he stated that his main aim was to get the principle of transference of the franchises of convicted boroughs recognised and established by parliament. If that happened he was not concerned what voting qualification for Leeds was fixed upon or indeed whether Leeds was enfranchised at all. 2 PD, i, 238, 9 May 1820.

[24] Ibid., 487, 19 May 1820.

hundreds. If the bill went to the Lords in its present form, he believed, the Upper House would be called upon to recognise the general principle of parliamentary reform.[25]

Yet by no means all opponents of general reform thought they would be committing themselves too far in supporting the measure. J.W. Ward, for instance, "would not, for the sake of a small amendment, introduce a sweeping precedent; but where he saw no danger of setting a pernicious precedent, he would not renounce a clear benefit." The granting of separate representation to the manufacturing interest would, he believed, also benefit the landed interest, which would then have the county members to itself. He certainly did not see himself as pandering to extremist demands: "He was not sanguine as to the effect of this bill on those who asked for that which, if granted, would overthrow the constitution."[26] Littleton, however, shared Russell's more optimistic view of the measure's effect on out-of-doors opinion, suggesting that it "might preserve the country for ages to come against the danger to be apprehended from revolutionary sentiments."[27]

The carrying of Stuart Wortley's motion for the insertion of a £20 voting qualification for Leeds was a watershed in the bill's history. Russell, despite his

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[25] Ibid., 493.

[26] Ibid., iv, 591-2, 12 February 1821.

[27] Ibid., 601.

earlier professions of indifference as to the exact form of the measure, surrendered its conduct to Wortley, though he denied that he was motivated by disgust. Others, though, were certainly disgusted. The transformed measure, complained the Leeds Mercury, would "render Leeds little better than a close borough, under certain predominant ministerial and local interests."[28] No doubt Lord Liverpool would not have been unhappy if he could have believed this to be the case, but in fact he was dismayed that the principle of enfranchising a town should have been accepted by the Commons at all, even with such a high qualification.[29]

That principle did not ultimately prevail, for the Lords preferred the seemingly safer remedy of granting the two Grampound seats to Yorkshire. This was in a sense a victory for constitutional conservatism, but the Duke of Bedford was not too despondent. Lord John, he told Holland, had obtained an acknowledgement of the principle of reform from both Houses, "and the election of two members by a rotten borough has been abrogated by a purely popular representation. This is an important point gained, as being the first step to an efficient and salutary reform."[30]

[28] Leeds Mercury, 10 March 1821.

[29] Canning MSS, Huskisson to Canning, 20 February 1821. Quoted by J.E. Cookson, Lord Liverpool's Administration, the Crucial Years, 1815-22 (Edinburgh 1975), p.306.

[30] Add. 51663, f.19, 14 June 1821.

Hindsight encouraged nineteenth-century historians to follow this general line. "Thus was the foundation laid of the great fabric of parliamentary reform," intoned Sir Archibald Alison of the Grampound disfranchisement, "ten years before the empire was shaken to the centre by the superstructure being raised."[31] Harriet Martineau saw men who, like Ward, supported the bill but opposed general reform as being "unaware that they were now securely involved in a movement against which they had formerly protested."[32]

More recently, John Cannon has seen the outcome of the Grampound business as being for the Tories "one more chance missed of reducing the growing pressure for reform by an agreed non-party policy of phased withdrawal from exposed positions."[33] However, the anti-reforming hardliners were probably right in thinking that no piecemeal measure, whatever its form, would have succeeded in stilling the clamour of extremists. The fact that some anti-reformers supported disfranchisement with this very aim in mind put Radicals on their guard. The proponents of "phased withdrawal" were thus mistaken in their hopes, not, as the hardliners believed, because they encouraged further demands by establishing precedents, but because what they

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[31]History of Europe, ii, pp.443-4.

[32]Thirty Years Peace, i, Bk.2, p.270.

[33]Parliamentary Reform, p.180.

did was seen by the Radicals as being worse than useless. "Will you look patiently on," demanded Hunt of the inhabitants of Leeds, "and suffer Mr Stuart Wortley and my Lord John Russell to impose these £20 a year petty despots over you, and let the printer, old Baines, elect a member for Leeds, and call the shoy-hoy your representation? Forbid it justice and common decency! The worst member that ever sat for Grampound would be better than this."[34]

It is interesting that Hunt yoked Wortley and Russell together in villainy, perhaps not without justification given Russell's readiness to modify the proposed franchise in order to get something passed. Hunt was perhaps a little hard on Baines, though, since a pamphlet published at the Mercury office was equally scathing about the Grampound bill.[35] The type of reform it embodied, the author asserted, would take five hundred years to affect ministerial majorities, if it was ever effectual at all.

> "Besides, whilst other boroughs are notoriously as corrupt, and whilst seats are bought and sold, it is manifestly an act of injustice to the good folks of Grampound; for if, in selling their votes to the best bidder, they endeavour to reimburse themselves as well as they can for the taxes they pay, and which they perhaps imagine their representatives may try to get a share of, how is their sin greater than that of the potwalloper of any other dirty borough who plays exactly the same game?"36

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[34] Memoirs, ii, To the Radical Reformers, 11 April 1821, p.5.

[35] The Parliament and the People; or the Absolute Necessity of an Effectual Reform in the Commons House of Parliament, demonstrated from the Events of the present Session of 1821 (Leeds 1821).

[36] Ibid., pp.39-40.

This defence of the rights of corrupt voters by reforming authors was one of the devices by which thorough reformers exposed the alleged hypocrisy, or at least the unconscious inconsistency, of moderates or Tory 'concessionists'. It was, of course, the continued existence of corruption tacitly sanctioned by the House unless it became too blatant, in which case it would arouse spurious indignation, that rendered piecemeal reform unsatisfactory. Radicals were alive to the game, and hence Cannon's "phased withdrawal" never had any chance of conciliating them, especially since, even if enough cases of corruption were discovered, only two or three boroughs could have been dealt with in each parliament.

The editor of the Leeds Intelligencer was able to put quite a cogent case against his town receiving any separate franchise at all. In the introduction to an account of the 1826 Yorkshire election, the first after the granting of two additional members, he described how the corporation and respectable inhabitants of Leeds were satisfied with their influence in the county's representation and therefore saw no real benefit in having members of their own. In addition, the other manufacturing towns of the West Riding would have been jealous, and they could not have claimed the good offices of members solely responsible for one town. The four MPs for Yorkshire increased the influence of Leeds and other manufacturing towns and strengthened the ties of manufacture, trade and commerce (in which most of the voters were involved)

with the landed interest (from which most of the candidates were drawn).[37]

This pamphlet was written from a partisan position, but it is nevertheless a valid indication that the eventual outcome of the Grampound business by no means aroused universal disgust in Leeds or a sense that the landed interest had 'triumphed' over the manufacturers. The ideal of aristocrats and country gentlemen as disinterested representatives of a variegated constituent body had been vindicated and that, in the opinion of conservative commentators, could be welcomed by everyone. Thomas Tottie,[38] however, believed that the way had been opened for a different sort of representation. In future Yorkshire elections there would, he thought, "be so much difficulty in selecting four [candidates] from the landed interest, that will be satisfactory to the merchants and manufacturers, as to lead them to consider, if some that are more fit for their purpose, cannot be selected from among their own body."[39] This was to be borne out in 1826 with the election of the Leeds flax master, John Marshall. Grampound at least left that progressive legacy.

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[37] _An Historical Account of the Late Election for the County of York_ (Leeds 1826), pp.3-5.

[38] Leeds Unitarian solicitor and a Yorkshire Whig election agent.

[39] Fitz., X1609, folder 5, Tottie to Milton, 22 November 1821.

Penryn and East Retford

In several ways, the debates, both in and out of parliament, on the best mode of dealing with the corruption of these two boroughs constituted a re-run of those on Grampound. Once again anti-reformers were split into one group which saw the enfranchisement of large towns as a means of heading off further demands and another which opposed on principle any concession, and once again the charge was made that the House was dishonestly making an example of those who were no more guilty than others. An elector of Penryn, for example, expressed the hope that Russell would desist from his "crusade" against the borough. "It appears to me, my Lord, you are too squeamish about what you call bribery; and that you think more of a few pounds being given in presents to the poor Electors of Penryn, by their Independent REPRESENTATIVES, than you do of ten times the amount being distributed, in the way of places &c, to the electors of a CLOSE BOROUGH." Disfranchisement of Penryn would diminish still further the popular representation of the country.[40]

The burgesses of East Retford defended themselves in a similar way to their brothers of Penryn. They attacked "the partial measure of disfranchising our Borough without adequate judicial proofs, while the general state of the

[40] West Briton, 14 March 1828.

representation over the Empire was allowed to remain flagrantly defective - the attack upon the Dwarf, East Retford, while the Giant - the present corrupt system - stalked unchallenged."[41]

All the arguments for timely concession which the more liberal Tories (and moderate reformers trying to attract their support) had aired so extensively during the Grampound discussions were pressed into service once more. Palmerston, for instance, believed that the enfranchisement of large towns "was the only mode by which the House could avoid the adoption, at some time or other, of a general plan of reform."[42] Similarly, Croker feared that if the opportunity of enfranchising at least one town were not taken "we shall have a great and I think, not unfounded, outcry. The crowd in and out of the House will exclaim that the popular side has no longer any hope of gradual reform, and will renew the cry for radical reform with more effect." Subtler analysts would accuse the self-styled traditionalists of a real innovation upon a constitution designed to share the representation between town and country. However, Croker suspected that the plan he supported as an anti-reformer, the enfranchisement of both Manchester and Birmingham,

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[41] Fitz., 125, f.3, some Retford electors to Milton.

[42] 2 PD, xix, 1538, 27 June 1828.

"would be thought too reforming",[43] and this was certainly justified with regard to the recipient of the letter, Robert Peel.

Peel believed that the wholly "urban option" would accelerate general reform rather than retard it. "Many specious arguments," he claimed,

> "had been resorted to to recommend the invariable transfer of the elective franchise in such cases as the present, to great towns; but if those arguments were pushed to the extent to which they were susceptible, the conclusion would be, that parliament ought not to wait for the opportunity which the discovery of corruption in a borough afforded; but ought to admit great towns immediately to the elective franchise."[44]

In suggesting the compromise solution of giving the Penryn franchise to a town whilst throwing East Retford to the neighbouring hundreds, Peel claimed to be upholding the constitutional principle of doling out equal shares of newly available franchises to town and country. However, Mackintosh pointed out that all the most recent cases (Aylesbury, Shoreham, Cricklade and Grampound) had benefitted the landed interest and he could therefore declare that, on the very same principle, "under the head of reform there is an immense arrear due to the manufacturing and commercial interests."[45]

Nicolson Calvert, however, could not accept that the manufacturing interest was in such a plight or that

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[43]Croker Papers, i, p.410, Croker to Peel, 14 March 1828.

[44]2 PD, xix, 811-12, 19 May 1828.

[45]Ibid., xviii, 1290, 21 March 1828.

the landed interest had had things all its own way. His lament during a later debate gave a clear insight into his motives for moving that the committee be instructed to substitute the hundred of Bassetlaw for Birmingham in the Retford bill: "... the agricultural interests were dwindling away daily, and ought to be supported. Even the county members for Yorkshire were as much the representatives of the manufacturing as of the agricultural interests."[46] It was this sense of grievance which led some to see the main point of the Penryn and East Retford debates as being to decide whether the landed interest would recover some lost political ground or whether it would fall even further behind the already ascendant interests connected with the towns. J.C.D. Clark, in true revisionist style, has played down the importance of the growing industrial centres in parliamentary politics, pointing out that for decades commercial centres like Liverpool preferred aristocratic MPs because the latter took an impartial attitude to local economic interests and their connections made them better lobbyists.

> "Only in the light of extreme radical principles of personal representation did the mushrooming centres of population appear as a major and real grievance; and those principles were entertained only by a few. Contemporaries within the traditional order did not therefore have nearly as sharp a perception of technological-industrial developments transforming an 'old society' as have most subsequent historians. The new was still viewed through the eyes of the old, and recognised as generically similar."[47]

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[46]Ibid., xix, 799-800, 19 May 1828.

[47]English Society, p.369.

However, if this view were accepted unreservedly it would be difficult to explain why the Penryn and East Retford cases generated as much contention as they did. It is certainly not true that only the advocates of universal suffrage were worried about the unrepresented towns. It can be conceded that the likes of Russell and Charles Tennyson, who introduced the bill for the enfranchisement of Birmingham, were mainly concerned with the representation of interests rather than numbers, but population could also be given as a reason for enfranchising great towns, as it was, for instance, in the preamble to the Grampound bill. More generally, Clark's analysis fails to acknowledge that the debate on political influence could often set the two great interests of town and country in opposite sides of the scale and even take them as representing different political values. Admittedly, even a reformer like Russell could present a cheerful picture of integration when he considered the unreformed electoral system. Its different parts, he wrote, "are all so blended together; the towns have so much influence on county elections, and landed proprietors so much influence in the neighbouring city or town, that one kind of members does not feel much jealousy of another kind."[48] But the reality did not always conform to the ideal, at least not in the eyes of some. The remarks of Calvert quoted above might be

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[48] An Essay on the History of the English Government and Constitution, from the reign of Henry VII to the Present Time (1823 edn.), p.343.

taken to illustrate how the manufacturing interest was seen to have gained a position of influence within the old system, but they also convey a feeling that the landed interest was under threat from less venerable groupings.

Clark's point about the usefulness of aristocratic MPs to commercial towns has its value, but what Manchester wanted by 1827 was, according to the Guardian, "the introduction into Parliament of men intimately and practically connected with the cotton manufacture."[49] The leypayers' meeting of May 1827, which marked the start of Manchester's representation campaign, showed that concern over the unenfranchised position of great towns was not the sole preserve of those who favoured "extreme radical principles of personal representation." The requisition had been signed, noted G.W. Wood, by "gentlemen differing from each other on almost all the great subjects of public discussion, but perfectly agreeing on this." This was certainly no radical, or even general reforming, meeting. "All who hear me are aware that it is to our representative system, that this country owes all its greatness," declared Wood, without being shouted down. Yet, for all the talk by contemporaries and historians about the means available to the manufacturing interest to get its voice heard under the unreformed system, Wood showed a clear awareness of the shortcomings of that system from the manufacturing point of view. Only nine out of 658 MPs, he told the

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[49] Manchester Guardian, 19 May 1827.

meeting, were engaged in staple manufactures, and only ten staple manufacturing towns were represented, three of which were close boroughs under the influence of large landowners. Except for the close borough of Clitheroe, there was not one borough in the hundreds of Salford and Blackburn, "the great seat of the cotton manufacture." In addition, there were no MPs for the Yorkshire clothing trade, the Sheffield and Birmingham iron trades, or the Staffordshire, Shropshire and South Wales iron ore mining industries.[50]

Wood had given a general view of the grievances of the manufacturing areas, but he, like others, naturally put his own town's interests first. "We must," he wrote to the Manchester Boroughreeve in early June 1827, when East Retford seemed likely to be disfranchised and Birmingham's claim considered, "endeavour to secure for ourselves the first chance at each place. It will not do to let Birmingham be beforehand with us."[51] As at the equivalent Manchester gathering, a wider view of the problem was taken at the Birmingham meeting held to express

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[50]*Ibid.*, 26 May 1827.

[51]Minutes of the Manchester Representation Committee, Wood to the Boroughreeve, 9 June 1827. Quoted in J.M. Main, 'The Parliamentary Reform Movement in Manchester, 1825-32' (Unpublished B.Litt. thesis, University of Oxford 1951), pp.100-2. This work also contains a good account of the differences of emphasis within the Manchester representation campaign, particularly on the level of the voting qualification in any future parliamentary borough.

satisfaction at Tennyson's introduction of the East Retford bill. Timothy Smith, the foreman of the Court Leet Jury, praised parliament for giving more attention than formerly to the manufacturing interest, whose importance he then proceeded to describe. Joshua Scholefield agreed with Smith in this regard, but his attack on the "unnatural and preponderating power" of the agricultural interest in parliament showed that he thought the nation's governors were still not sufficiently alive to the manufacturers' needs. Thomas Attwood also looked beyond the aspiration of his home town when he expressed the hope that if the experiment with Birmingham worked well it would open the way to the representation of other great towns.[52]

Yet in Birmingham also there was an uneasiness about 'rival' claims. The Birmingham Journal reported in May 1828 that there still existed a hope that the town would be enfranchised, since Peel was thought to be pledged to Birmingham in the event of no case being made out against Penryn to justify transfer to Manchester. However, the paper had reason to believe "that the extraordinary exertions made by this town to obtain the expected boon have produced an unfavourable impression in the minds of some of the

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[52]Birmingham Journal, 23 June 1827. Attwood had been converted to the idea of separate representation for Birmingham following the failure of Richard Spooner, his partner and a prominent Birmingham banker, to get elected for Warwickshire in 1820 and 1822. W.B. Stephens (ed.), The Victoria County History of Warwickshire, vii, R.B. Rose, The City of Birmingham (Oxford 1962), pp.290-1.

members of His Majesty's Government, who have been prejudiced against our claim in consequence of the interference of a committee of gentlemen appointed to forward the interests of this town in parliament, which conduct is contrasted with the patient forebearance of Manchester to the disadvantage of Birmingham."[53]

This sense of competition, which existed in both towns, showed that there was a strong parochial streak in the campaign to receive the forfeited franchises. The general principle of enfranchising big industrial towns was felt to be a good one in both Birmingham and Manchester, but not to the extent that the possible success of the rival claim could be viewed with equanimity by everyone, especially since opportunities such as those provided by the Penryn and East Retford cases were comparatively rare.

As it was, Birmingham and Manchester were left with a shared sense of grievance, since neither of them was enfranchised on this occasion, a fact which could be taken to have an important bearing on general reform. The failure to disfranchise Penryn, declared the West Briton, showed that "the borough system is not to be rectified by piecemeal."[54] Archibald Prentice agreed: "Fortunately our [the Manchester campaigners'] expectations were disappointed - fortunately because if ministers had

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[53] Birmingham Journal, 17 May 1828.

[54] West Briton, 27 June 1828.

possessed even the left-handed wisdom of cunning, they would have granted the Penryn seats to Manchester one year, and the East Retford seats to Birmingham in another, and thus have spread over fifty years the demolition effected at once by the 1832 bill."[55]

The Penryn and East Retford bills certainly had an important effect on the 'high political' situation. In the Cabinet, only Dudley favoured the 'unbalanced' solution of giving both franchises to towns, whilst Huskisson wanted Penryn to go to the hundreds and East Retford to a town and Peel wanted the reverse, since "Cornwall was so thickly studded with boroughs that the House of Commons would be unwilling to throw any corrupt place there into the hundreds; while on the other hand Retford, though more extensively corrupt on this occasion, had never been proved so before, and was in the hundred of Bassetlaw, which contains 2,000 freeholders."[56]

The seed of trouble was sown when on 21 March 1828 Huskisson declared that if East Retford were the only borough to be dealt with he would support giving its franchise to a town, a sentiment he thought perfectly in keeping with Peel's approach. Then, on the 25th, Calvert carried his motion favouring Bassetlaw, and Tennyson moved

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[55]Archibald Prentice, Historical Sketches and Personal Recollections of Manchester (1851), p.310.

[56]Hon. Evelyn Ashley (ed.), The Life and Correspondence of Henry John Temple, Viscount Palmerston (1879 edn.), i, p.149, Journal.

for the postponement of the committee from time to time until it was clear whether or not the Lords would agree to the transfer of Penryn to Manchester. This seemed to be resolved when on 14 May the Earl of Carnavaon, the Penryn bill's sponsor in the Upper House, stated that he thought there was insufficient evidence to justify the transfer and he would therefore propose that the neighbouring hundreds should be enfranchised. A week later, Tennyson accordingly moved for the recommital of the East Retford bill. At the cabinet of the 19th, it was decided that the Government would adhere to Peel's plan until the House of Lords' decision on Penryn was confirmed. Despite Carnavon's declaration, Peel said he still felt free to vote as he liked when Calvert renewed his motion urging that the claims of Bassetlaw be considered.[57] He also assumed that the government would present a united front in that night's debate, but Huskisson had already committed himself by his March declaration and when, during the debate, Lord Sandon 'claimed' his vote for Birmingham, he felt bound to comply, in opposition to Peel, and then bound to offer his resignation which, to his chagrin, Wellington accepted.

In an explanatory letter to Wellington, Huskisson stated that to his mind the question of East Retford in itself "was one of very minor importance."[58]

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[57] Ibid., p.150.

[58] 2 PD, xix, 928, 2 June 1828.

Although he acknowledged that existing institutions "are capable of improvement, and may require from time to time, additions and alterations", he was not resigning because a central part of his political creed had not been endorsed by some of his colleagues. Cobbett thought he had chosen for the occasion of his resignation an event connected with an issue "about which no man in the country cared a single straw; about which, no more attention was excited than would be excited by any turnpike-road bill that ever passed the House."[59]

Even if a scot and lot franchise had been established in Birmingham and Manchester, Cobbett, like any popular Radical, would not have been satisfied, because the indefensible hotch-potch of the unreformed system as a whole would have remained, but these two bills were more significant than Cobbett suggested. Reformers could point to their role in further educating public opinion, for instance. The Bolton Chronicle believed that the Penryn investigation "has been the means of furnishing collateral proof of the existence of similar shameful abuses, and prostitution of the elective franchise which prevail, more or less, in every Borough in the Kingdom."[60] In addition, reformers had been given occasion to convert their general preferences into practical schemes which would apply to a particular locality. Here again the

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[59] Political Register, 31 May 1828.

[60] Bolton Chronicle, 26 May 1827.

shortcomings of the existing system were highlighted. For example, a request from the Birmingham committee induced Place to focus on the defects of the polling system in supposedly the most democratic of constituencies, Westminster, and to warn Joseph Parkes to be on his guard against their introduction in Birmingham.[61]

Another obvious consequence was the heightening of the general desire for representation in the major towns which was to become significant in 1830-2.[62] As John Prest put it, "three years in which the transference of seats to Manchester and Birmingham had been proposed, discussed, apparently agreed to, cavilled over, and then refused, had not passed without making an impression."[63] Lord Dalling traced from the apparently insignificant business of East Retford a specific and momentous chain of events: "The quarrel between the Duke of Wellington and Huskisson led to Grant being succeeded by FitzGerald at the Board of Trade - which led to the election for Clare - which led to Catholic Emancipation - which led, by a new defection in the Tory party, to the Reform Bill - which led to a complete social and political revolution."[64]

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[61] Add. 35148, ff.21-3, January 1828.

[62] In Sheffield, for instance, both the Independent and the Iris intensified their call for separate representation for the town. See, for instance, Independent, 9 May 1829, and Iris, 2 June 1829.

[63] John Prest, Lord John Russell (1972), p.36.

[64] Stuart Reid, The Life and Letters of the First Earl Durham, 1792-1840 (1906), i, p.199.

CHAPTER FIVE

ECONOMICAL REFORM AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE CROWN

These two issues were closely linked to each other and to parliamentary reform, but a distinction should be drawn between them. The campaign for cheap and efficient government could spring from nothing more than a desire to get one's money's worth. It could in this sense be wholeheartedly supported by opponents of parliamentary reform. On the other hand, others saw it not only as necessary to save the country's pocket but also as an attack on that executive influence which was seen as contributing in several different ways to the distorted picture of national opinion given by formal political structures. This put inflated civil and military establishments in the same category as the restricted electorate or the absence of the ballot. But, although motions such as H.G. Bennet's on the independence of parliament (31 May 1821), Brougham's on the influence of the Crown (24 June 1822), and even Hume's laborious exposures of corruption could be seen as pursuing parliamentary reform on a different front, critics could describe them as irrelevant and even harmful to the cause. Some Westminster petitioners for reform in 1822, for instance, entertained no hope for relief through economical retrenchment because in their view the system, whoever administered it, depended on profligacy.[1]

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[1] _CJ_, lxxvii, pp.29-30, 15 February 1822.

Ministerialists, besides defending executive influence in principle, were keen to stress that their opponents were completely unjustified in their claim that it had enormously increased. Many believed that it had, in fact, become completely inadequate. "The House of Commons is totally unmanageable," Lord Grenville told the Marquis of Buckingham in November 1821. "... The whole weight of the ministers there, combining their aid as they do, is, you see, hardly sufficient to carry on the ordinary public business from day to day."[2] John Rickman took a similar view. "The Opps," he told Southey,

> "have at this moment an unquestionable and practical veto, somewhat acquired by insolence and perseverence, more by the liberality (God help the word) of the Administration, who act too without concert and in disgust (natural enough) of the degraded state in which they collectively feel themselves. Do you not observe that we have been doing nothing for more than two months, that is nothing but listening to Opposition speeches and resisting their motions?"

The friends of the government had gone off to their country seats whilst "a compact squadron of Radicals" had ensured that half of the supplies for the year had not yet been granted.[3]

Lord Liverpool himself complained of the difficulties of "recovering that weight and influence which ought to

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[2]Buckingham and Chandos, Memoirs, i, pp.32-3, 11 June 1820.

[3]Orlo Williams, Lamb's Friend, pp.220-1, Rickman to Southey, 2 July 1821.

belong to every government."[4] Yet, despite this awareness of the problem, he did not, according to Southey, have "the required vigour of mind and decision of character" needed to combat it. He had encouraged "the reformers in parliament to assail the government with fresh demands, by conceding to them whatever they demanded." His ministry had submitted to highly dangerous reductions in Crown influence in order to show its readiness to conciliate the opposition and the political economists.[5]

Mrs Arbuthnot also believed that the government was not being assertive enough, though in her view it still had great potential power, since the opposition was totally unfit to govern. There never had been a government, she believed, which could have been more arbitrary than the present one, and there was therefore no need for Liverpool to put up with the attacks of the country gentlemen on taxes and offices.[6]

However, modern historians have tended to stress the government's weakness and have therefore generally played down the influence in this sphere of 'old corruption' in the early nineteenth century. W.R. Brock, who saw Liverpool as helping to change the eighteenth-century

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[4]Quoted in Asa Briggs, The Age of Improvement (1959), p.187.

[5]Quarterly Review, xliv, No.lxxxvii (January 1831), pp.274-6.

[6]Journal, i, pp.146-7, 4 February 1822.

view of politicians as being by definition dishonest, asserted that "a most cursory reading of political correspondence will show that the patronage system was on the decline and ceasing to be an effective means of party organisation, [and] that the Government was frequently at the mercy of public opinion expressed through a large independent section of parliament."[7]

In the early twenties, such vulnerability was demonstrated by votes on economical reform, the government defeats on the abolition of the two lords of the Admiralty (1 March 1822) and one postmaster-general (2 May 1822) being examples of what 'defections' by country gentlemen could bring about. On the other hand, there was something in Arbuthnot's view of what the government was still able to do. In March 1821, for instance, Charles Western carried a motion against the extra Malt Duty of 1819 only to see the decision reversed a fortnight later after the government had threatened to resign. This was admittedly in part a reflection of the genuine desire of independent MPs that ministers should stay in, but the votes of 'shackled' placemen could also be blamed.

Nevertheless, A.S. Foord believed that during most of Liverpool's rule "the ministry retained a precarious control over the House of Commons by the sufferance of independent members."[8] J.R. Dinwiddy, whilst not considering

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[7]Brock, Lord Liverpool and Liberal Toryism, p.77.

[8]Foord, 'The Waning of the Influence of the Crown', English Historical Review, lxii (1947), p.486.

that Whig complaints were wholly anachronistic, has also played down the political importance of patronage after the Napoleonic Wars, showing that the government opted for the popularity to be achieved by reduction.[9]

But the Whigs of the time were not easily thrown from their traditional hobby horse. As Dinwiddy has stressed, the opposition case was now concerned less with the direct government influence on parliament shown by the numbers of placemen and more with the vast reservoir of patronage made available by the great growth in the civil, military and naval establishments in the previous forty years. According to Russell, ministers had lately "more completely organised and adapted this kind of patronage to the purpose of parliamentary influence."[10] An MP might not hold an office himself, but his attachment to government would be fostered by allowing him to recommend his constituents and connections to jobs in the customs, or in the stamp and post offices, or, in the case of county MPs, to receiverships of the land tax. In turn, this fountain of favour and the expectation of more would induce electors to return the member regardless of principle. In all, Russell reckoned that the government had £25,000,000 to spend among twenty million people. His consideration of the abuse of executive influence as perpetrated by

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[9]Dinwiddy, 'The "Influence of the Crown" in the Early Nineteenth Century: A Note on the Opposition Case', Parliamentary History, iv (1985), pp.189-200.

[10]Essay on the History of the English Government and Constitution (1823 edn.), p.403.

his political foes led him into a somewhat un-Whiggish defence of the king's own prerogative. In the present circumstances, he claimed, ministers were able to say to the king: "you must maintain us in power, for we alone can command a majority in the House of Commons, though our conduct and our acts are disgusting to the country and offensive to your Majesty."[11] On the other hand, it was very Whiggish to connect constitutional grievances with the party's inability to get into power.

Burdett took the defence of the monarch's prerogatives further. According to Sir Denis Le Marchant, he "discountenanced all attacks on the influence of the Crown, maintaining that the monarch was the natural protector of the lower classes against the higher. Thus he seemed to oscillate between Democracy and Toryism, and in his old age subsided into the latter."[12] However, as a reformer, he could not condone strong executive influence, even though he might not use the usual Whiggish label for it. For instance, he clearly meant that a grievance had come out into the open when at the 1822 Westminster dinner he noted that such influence was openly avowed by ministers whereas, in his earlier days in the Commons, to hint that an MP was unduly influenced "was looked upon as most offensive, and was treated as a gross breach of order."[13]

[11] Ibid., pp.427-8.

[12] Le Marchant, Memoir of John Charles, Viscount Althorp, third Earl Spencer (1876), p.121.

[13] Times, 24 May 1822.

Although direct control of office-holding MPs within the walls of parliament may have been seen as a smaller problem than out-of-doors government influence, H.G. Bennet still thought it necessary to tackle the former in his motion on the independence of parliament. As with the question of reform proper, there was an awareness that the very existence of grievances made their removal more difficult. Bennet, whilst admitting that the "majority of its own creatures" which had kept the government in office since 1812 did not overrule the sense of the House on great questions of national importance, claimed that they nevertheless stimied attempts at economical reform (which might have entailed their removal). In such cases, "the preventive vote was given by some useless lord of the Admiralty or bedchamber."[14] The extent of Bennet's proposals showed that he thought there was still a fair amount of room for improvement. Three of the five lords of the Treasury, the vice-chancellor of Ireland, and all but the president of the India Board could, he thought, be excluded, as could five of the seven Admiralty members. These proposals, together with others, would have excluded twenty-nine of the fifty-one members holding places at pleasure. Their sweeping nature ensured their defeat, although, considering the built-in antipathy to such plans in the Commons (the very thing Bennet wanted to remove), the division of 52:76 was not a bad result for the friends of 'independence'.

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[14] 2 PD, v, 1056, 31 May 1821.

On either side of Bennet's motion there were two well-publicised cases of MPs whose offices made them vulnerable to executive influence suffering as a result of their anti-ministerial conduct. Firstly, Lord Fife was dismissed from his post as a lord of the Bedchamber for his vote against ministers on the repeal of a part of the Malt Tax. The incident, Lord Archibald Hamilton trusted, would teach MPs "that there were situations the maintenance of which was inconsistent with parliamentary independence."[15] Fife himself pointed out that his great 'crime' was that he contributed to a ministerial defeat. The previous year he had voted in an anti-government minority without punishment but when he formed part of a majority he was sacked.[16] The incident was also mentioned by Russell in his Essay and by Bennet, who concluded that the Household officers formed "the dead weight hung underneath the scale of truth and justice in that House." Fife was the exception who highlighted the grievance.[17]

The second cause celebre was the dismissal of Sir Robert Wilson from the army as a result of his conduct at the Queen's funeral. A specific vote in the House of Commons may not have been involved, but, in view of Wilson's vocal reformism, the hand of the executive moving against its political foes could just as clearly be seen.

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[15] Ibid., 32, 3 April 1821.

[16] Ibid., 33.

[17] Ibid., 1059, 31 May 1821.

Samuel Favell certainly did not miss the chance to make reforming capital out of the affair. At the City of London Tavern meeting for Wilson in October, he claimed that through their treatment of the Southwark reformer the government was effectively saying to all MPs who were army officers: "'You must vote with Ministers, or they will disgrace and destroy you if they can.'"[18] Similarly, Douglas Kinnaird believed that Wilson's dismissal was

> "a transaction fit to be thrown in the teeth of all the lauders of our glorious constitution &c &c, at least once every day. No half-pay officer can hereafter call himself other than a pensioner at the beck and nod of the Sovereign. I think it good ground of motion to exclude such from the House of Commons - and they should certainly henceforth be counted amongst the members holding pensions and places in that House."[19]

This is what the Scotsman did when it considered the report of the 1822 select committee on MPs' places and pensions, an important document in both the contemporary and the historical debates on this subject. The report, the Scotsman told its readers, showed that seventy MPs held offices at the Crown's or Ministers' pleasure and that a further nineteen had 'freehold' offices, pensions and reversions obtained directly or indirectly from the Crown. To these were added the twenty naval and military officers, who were obviously beholden to government. It was therefore concluded that "the gross number of

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[18] Wooler's British Gazette, 28 October 1821.

[19] Add. 36459, f.136, Kinnaird to Hobhouse, postmarked 9 October 1821.

Gentlemen, constituting that power which has been termed the 'just and salutary influence of the Crown' in the House of Commons amounts to exactly 109, without reckoning their immediate connections. Subtract but half the number from the usual majorities of the session, and what would have been the result?"[20]

This last comment suggested what opposition MPs usually liked to maintain: that the votes of 'shackled' members were decisive in securing government majorities. Historians may largely have exploded this myth, but its falsehood was not obvious enough at the time to convince oppositionists that it could no longer be convincingly propounded. Brougham, in his speech on his motion on the influence of the Crown, doubted what is now generally accepted: that there had been a significant reduction in the number of placemen since 1780. In that year, he claimed, there had been eighty to ninety and now there were eighty-seven, though admittedly not all of these were under the influence of the Crown. However, even if reduction in their numbers was accepted as a fact, MPs could still be bribed by having offices held in trust for them.[21]

The main thrust of Brougham's speech was against the increased means of out-of-doors influence available to government. Use of these means, as well as exciting

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[20]Scotsman, 10 August 1822.

[21]2 PD, vii, 1282, 24 June 1822.

expectation of reward, could also play upon the desire to escape punishment. The innumerable traps for traders in the revenue laws, for instance, had given the Treasury great control over the trading community and had forced "many a member of parliament to become a suitor to the minister on behalf of his constituents, and had thus, by compelling him to appear at the gates of the Treasury, greatly increased the influence of the Crown."[22] A local instance of such influence in action was described to Grey by Sir John Swinburne in 1820:

> "The power vested in the Treasury of remitting revenue fines, or lessening them, gives them great influence. A principal attorney in Newcastle, I know, refused Beaumont his vote, and assigned as a reason: 'I am agent for a number of shipowners and others at Shields, who must have a member, who can ask a favour of the treasury, as they are very often in difficulties with the revenue officers, and I shan't vote against their interest and mine.'"[23]

Brougham believed that the habit of looking up to the government for the means of subsistence was now ingrained in all classes of society. Simple reduction of establishments of the sort embodied in Burke's Bill of 1780 might have remedied this situation, in which electoral politics seemed to be reduced to a matter of greed rather than principle. It could even be argued that reform, in the sense of limited adjustments of the franchise and redistribution of seats, would not in the first instance have gone to the root of the problem as

[22] Ibid., 1278.

[23] Grey, Swinburne to Grey, 29 February 1820.

perceived by Brougham and his colleagues. More voters may have stretched the government's supposedly vast resources further, but with the moderate plans favoured by most Whigs at the time it was difficult to see how such influence could be rendered completely inoperative.

However, there was a great deal of faith in the ability of reform to produce a better sort of MP who would be able to overwhelm vested interests and get Crown influence both in and out of doors markedly reduced. By the opposition's logic, this would in turn increase still further the efficiency with which the system reflected people's opinions rather than their pecuniary hopes. The relationship between economical reform and parliamentary reform was thus very close but a little complicated. It was not always totally clear which would come first. Parliamentary reform could be the universal panacea, yet it could, in the view of its supporters, be blocked by Crown influence, and in any case if it were carried the task of reducing that influence would still need to be performed. On the other hand, it seemed very difficult to attempt a reduction of influence in an unreformed House.

Brougham made clear his belief that the Crown influence of which he complained in his 1822 motion would be curbed by parliamentary reform. Castlereagh, however, saw the issues as completely separate and objected to Brougham's bringing in reform under the disguise of reducing Crown influence, which was a principle Castlereagh

accepted if its application were ever shown to be necessary. But Brougham's avowal meant that the minister opposed the resolution not only because he thought its factual foundation insubstantial but also because he saw it leading to other things. If it should pass, Castlereagh argued, Brougham would return to the House and say:

> "Nothing has been done, so long as this guilty parliament, this nuisance which poisons the source of our prosperity, is suffered to exist. Be true to yourselves, and to the interests of the public, and effect that reform of parliament for which you have laid the basis, by agreeing to my resolution."[24]

Castlereagh had earlier mustered quite an impressive mass of statistics to rebutt Brougham's allegations. Only forty-seven or forty-eight MPs, he claimed, held office under the Crown to which influence was attached, and since the end of the war a total of 2,012 offices had been abolished, giving a saving of £580,000. These figures were enough to convince 216 members, as against 101, that the other orders of the day should be read.[25]

Although the Times reckoned that the defeat would focus public attention on the issues raised,[26] Castlereagh's good performance meant that Brougham could not really claim even a moral victory. As well as citing statistics, Castlereagh had given the usual Tory ideological response

[24] 2 PD, vii, 1308, 24 June 1822.

[25] Ibid., 1318.

[26] Times, 26 June 1822.

by contending that the power of the press, the spread of French-Revolution principles and the increase in public wealth and knowledge meant that Crown influence had not grown in relative terms. This view of public opinion and Crown influence as being in opposite sides of the scale and therefore in need of being evenly matched to maintain the constitutional balance was an aspect of the Tory defence particularly derided by reformers, who argued that the Tories were in effect saying that as the people became more worthy of a better system it should get worse.

Reformers could also claim that the implementation of their schemes would meet the Tory pre-occupation with the smooth running of the mechanics of government, but the Tories' long spell in office inclined them to stick with the machinery they knew, which, though it seemed inadequate, was better than a system based on a new and untried principle. Thus Robinson claimed that if Bennet's proposals "were pushed to the extent to which he seemed desirous of carrying them, it would go far to destroy that union and community of feeling among the members of a government, without which no government could be effectively conducted - it would destroy, in short, the power of carrying on the government as a party."[27] A removal of placemen might be portrayed as a threat to intelligent legislative decisions, which were after all what the reformers hoped to promote. "It would," wrote

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[27] 2 PD, v, 1063, 31 May 1821.

'A Tory', "shut up almost the only access which the House of Commons has to important state information." A lesson should be drawn from the fact that the American congress had had to request the presence of the treasury secretary to help with financial measures.[28]

Another strand in the Tory case was the belief that the Commons, rather than the constitution as a whole, had become the arena in which the interaction of King, Lords and Commons was played out.

> "The idea of three distinct estates, so nicely counterbalanced as to form an efficient and perpetual check upon the ambitious views of each other, is an imposing theory in appearance, but it is incapable of being reduced to practice; or at least the existence of such a constitution cannot be proved by our history."

The influence of the Crown in the Commons, together with that of the peers, was salutary in preventing violent clashes between the three estates and if it were removed it would be seen that "a radically reformed parliament is not required to replunge the country into the troubled sea from which she was, by the favour of Divine Providence, extricated."[29]

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[28] John Bull Magazine, December 1824.

[29] Carlisle Patriot, 18 May 1822. The reference is to the constitutional struggles of the seventeenth century. Jeffrey, in the Edinburgh Review, x, No. xx (July 1807), p.413, had expounded the theory that all three constitutional elements were contained in the House of Commons and that their interaction was thus made less confrontational, but reforming Whigs had abandoned this idea by the early twenties. See J.A.W. Gunn, 'Influence, Parties and the Constitution: Changing Attitudes 1783-1832', Historical Journal, xvii (1974), pp.301-28.

Such arguments were naturally extremely controversial and they helped to sustain the debate on the influence of the Crown but, although such a venerable item in the reforming creed was not jettisoned overnight, other reforming arguments, which were themselves well-established ones, gradually overshadowed it. The Westminster Review believed that the Edinburgh's apparent obsession with Crown influence was actually pernicious. Regarding it as all-important was "a mischievous fallacy, calculated, whenever it is not seen through, to mislead inquiry from the right path, and make it waste itself in the wrong." Patronage was the effect, not the cause, of bad government, and the Commons had failed to limit Crown influence through its own misconduct. The real problem was that the majority of MPs was chosen by fewer than two hundred great families.[30] This was a perfectly respectable Whig argument for reform (it had been the main thrust of the famous Friends of the People petition of 1792), but here it was being used to attack another of the party's beliefs. Cobbett's position was similar. "It is not, Mr Brougham," he wrote in anticipation of Brougham's motion,

> "the influence of the crown, but the influence of Winchelsea, Peterborough, Higham Ferrers, Knaresborough, Appleby, Calne, and the like, that has increased with the amount of the taxes and the number of offices, pensions, and so forth... Do not even idiots see, that the Crown has no means but what comes to it through votes of the House of Commons?"[31]

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[30] Westminster Review, iv, No. vii (July 1825), p.206.

[31] Cobbett's Collective Commentaries, 3 June 1822.

The same message was enforced in statistical form in an article by Place in the British Luminary and Weekly Intelligencer entitled "Placemen in the House of Commons - Influence of the Aristocracy." This list of pensioners and their constituencies and connections showed that the influence of peers was a far bigger evil than that of the Crown.[32] It is not surprising that Place and other Whig-haters should favour this conclusion, since resistance to Crown influence was an important part of Whig historical identity, whereas in resisting aristocratic influence one could expose the hypocrisy of Whig boroughmongers. Walter Fawkes, though he did not share Cobbett's or Place's attitude to the Whigs, nevertheless believed that the "master mischief" was not so much the influence of the Crown as the domination of borough patrons who either directly nominated or were closely connected with the pensioners listed in the select committee's report.[33]

Even the supposedly all-powerful wielders of Crown influence could, it appears, feel the strength of this greater power. Just before his planned departure for India, Canning was reported to have said that he had once entertained a hope of becoming leader of the Commons, "but that when he saw that the Ministry were obliged to yield to the dictation of the Duke of _____ and the Duke of _____, he no longer had a wish to be leader."[34] As

[32] British Luminary, 11 August 1822. In Place Collection, Prt. 39, iv, f.222.

[33] Leeds Mercury, 24 August 1822.

[34] Lord John Russell, Recollections and Suggestions, p.38.

the twenties wore on, the identification of the great landowners as the real controllers of the rotten system, rather than the ministers, whom, as Canning complained, the grandees often thwarted, became more prevalent. Although complaints about the inflated establishments which Brougham had described continued to be made, there were no further attempts in parliament to link them to specific discussions of the influence of the Crown.

However, the campaign for economical reform, which was always seen by its promoters as an attack on corruption as well as mere inefficiency, continued, sometimes appearing to be the only front on which the opposition was operating. "No exertions are making to rally the Whigs," Henry Swann told Sir George Sinclair in October 1822, "so that I imagine all the conduct of the war must rest with General Hume's call for inquiry and reduction."[35] The position did not seem to have changed three and a half years later when the Representative came to consider recent parliamentary business. Pecuniary topics, it believed, had eclipsed everything else, including parliamentary reform, "all-important as that vital measure was so often declared to be." The opposition was "narrowed into Mr Hume, and its glories are confined to picking a hole in an estimate, or making a wrong calculation some half dozen times in an evening."[36] As was suggested in the introduction to this

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[35]Sinclair, RH4/49/1, iii, ff.76-8, Henry Swann (MP for Penryn) to Sir George Sinclair, 21 October 1822.

[36]Representative, 28 March 1826.

chapter, economical reform could be broadly popular because it appealed to basic interests and was not ideologically challenging. Thus John Cam Hobhouse's brother, Henry, could write of Hume that "his opposition politics hits the fancy of the English people much more than parliamentary reform, because, of course, its benefits are obvious and immediate... radical reform politics frightened John Bull, but he is naturally a saving person, and likes the advocate of economy and retrenchment." Hence the need of Castlereagh and even Wellington to listen to Hume.[37]

The Times also presented Hume as one of the real achievers on the opposition side of the House. He had "carried questions which the King's ministers declared repeatedly that the nation would be ruined if the legislature should entertain; and moreover forced these very Ministers to be the instruments of these destructive reforms."[38] Hume himself believed that his principles had made progress in parliament: "There is scarcely one point on which I took the sense of the House in 1821, when I was beat by such triumphant majorities, that the Government has not in part or wholly conceded; and are now carrying into effect the very plans I then ventured to suggest."[39] This achievement of practical results led to comparisons

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[37] Add. 36459, f.249, Henry Hobhouse to John Cam Hobhouse, 8 May 1821.

[38] Times, 12 September 1822.

[39] Sinclair, RH4/49/3, viii, Hume to Sir George Sinclair, 5 April 1823.

with the less 'productive' patriots. Like Hume, Creevey made a speciality of promoting economy, and Hunt asserted in early 1821 that he had, "during this one short session of parliament, done more for the cause of a Reform than the 'Hero of the Tower' [Burdett] ever did in his life."[40] In similar vein, the Morning Herald called upon electors to support hard-working MPs like Hume rather than those made arrogant by property or talents. Taxation, tithes and poor-rates would never have been so high if this course had been followed before. The makers of "flowery speeches" were of no service. Burdett, for example,

> "considers the real business of the House beneath his attention, and having also the reputation of being a splendid orator, he reserves himself with great stateliness of dignity, for a few of those gala nights, in the House, which he thinks not unworthy the intervention of his genius. He disdains matters of public account - he looks into no estimates - finds out none of the jobs of office - puts no Minister to the trouble of proving his statements, and makes no trader in Parliamentary speculations ashamed of his venality."

He thought it enough to make one or two harangues per session on Reform, "or some other abstract question."[41]

Burdett even came off second best when the comparison was made by a more sympathetic observer. A Mr Ellis, at a Southwark dinner in 1823, cited Burdett and Hume as illustrations of the difference between "acting on general principles and applying oneself to specific cases."

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[40] Memoirs, i, To the Radical Reformers, 22 February 1821, p.1.

[41] Morning Herald, 20 May 1826. In Place Papers, Add. 27843, f.394.

Burdett, though a great patriot, frightened the timid with his occasional warmth, whereas Hume's quiet determination was in the long run more effective.[42]

But this chorus of praise for Hume was by no means joined in by all reformers. Not surprisingly, Hobhouse, who was to some extent seen to be implicated in Burdett's shortcomings, took a more qualified view. In June 1821, he admitted that Hume "has certainly done wonders this session", but added, "I think he has produced among the people rather an over-anxiety about economy and a consequent apathy to all invasions of public liberty."[43] Six years later, his exasperation with what he saw as the unjustified popularity of 'economaniacs' led him to pen an unspecific but swingeing attack on the way in which

> "any coarse unfeeling pretender with no other merit than having a good digestion and a bad heart, laborious about trifles, and trifling about matters of real importance, dishonest and unfair, impudent and intriguing and, except for his own purposes, altogether impracticable, any such person, I say, can at any time, by bidding higher and stooping lower, make himself a favourite with a good many of those who ought to know mankind a little better than they do."

Hobhouse named no names, but Place was in no doubt as to whom he was referring to. "These allusions are to Mr Hume," he wrote over Hobhouse's letter, "and do no credit to Mr Hobhouse."[44]

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[42] Globe and Traveller, 12 February 1823.

[43] Add. 56542, f.41, Diary, 27 June 1821.

[44] Add. 35148, ff.6-8, Hobhouse to Place, 21 December 1821.

The lack of sympathy between Hobhouse and Hume might be taken as illustrating the difference in temperament between a classically-educated liberal and a hard-nosed Scotch utilitarian, yet even James Mill could express doubts about 'economania'. He complained that opposition MPs were in full attendance on petty questions of finance which they hoped would discredit the ministers, "but let it be a proposal to give the people the choice of their representatives, and thereby to stop, in the gross, the extravagance so loudly complained of in detail, and where are the speakers, where is the eloquence, what are the divisions?..."[45] This was an attack on the opposition in general rather than on Hume (who was later praised), but the passage nevertheless shows that criticisms of the Hume-like activities of concentrating on such 'petty' subjects as sinecures, taxation and waste of public money could, somewhat ironically, form part of a utilitarian assault on party politicians, who were believed to be anxious to distract attention from larger abuses which all MPs had an interest in upholding. Brougham, when reviewing the Parliamentary History and Review, complained that such charges gave confidence "to our common adversaries, the enemies of all improvement and all reform..."[46]

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[45]Parliamentary History and Review, 1826-7, p.769.

[46]Edinburgh Review, xliv, No. lxxxviii (September 1826), p. 474.

Doubts about Hume's approach could even be expressed at one of the dinners in his honour. The remarks of C.F. Palmer showed that the very trait which earned Hume much praise, the narrowness of his focus, could be grounds for criticism:

> "... until a measure of reform on a plan much less limited than that pursued by Mr Hume, was adopted in this country, he would not be satisfied. Mr Hume had, perhaps, in the present state of the country, while the existing system was carried on, adopted the best plan that could be devised; but he could not say that it was sufficiently extensive to satisfy him."[47]

Palmer's comments were part of a chorus of advice and admonition directed at the economaniacs by reformers. In the previous year, the Liverpool Mercury had insisted that Creevey and Hume should always urge the necessity of parliamentary reform in their exposures of corrupt and wasteful spending. "This and this only, would prove them to be in earnest."[48] An article by "Homo" in the Black Dwarf attacked MPs who exposed corruption "but who, at the same time, touch not on the radical cure of the nation's disease" and who propose "motion after motion for that mere pruning of the tree of corruption which strengthens the root."[49] Cartwright was particularly anxious that the right conclusions should be drawn from the campaign for economy, and to ensure that they were he

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[47]Morning Chronicle, 17 January 1822.

[48]Liverpool Mercury, 23 February 1821.

[49]Black Dwarf, 10 March 1824.

proposed a sort of division of labour. A patriotic opposition needed two leaders: "The first (in which class a mighty one has arisen) might penetrate the darkest recesses of corruption", whilst the second, "by bringing each abuse to the test of the constitution, might show that in every part, and to what an extreme, it has been violated, thus demonstrating the urgent, the paramount necessity of a truly Radical Reform." It was implied that Hunt would fit this bill.[50]

As with the Whigs' alleged obsession with the influence of the Crown, the mainspring of criticisms of Hume's work was the fear that, though the man himself did not intend it, it would distract attention from parliamentary reform. By 1824, for example, Wooler had come to believe that the ministers had successfully substituted retrenchment for reform.[51] Hume's work in theory did great service to the case for reform in that, as the Morning Chronicle put it, he "laid bare the nerves and sinews of corruption, and shewed how they were nurtured by the public purse."[52] But the very success for which he was hailed and of which he himself was proud represented the removal of abuse without the application of "the one thing needful". Hume may have been the beau ideal of an industrious man-of-business, but Place told him before

[50] Wooler's British Gazette, 6 April 1822, letter to Lord John Russell.

[51] Black Dwarf, 1 June 1824.

[52] Morning Chronicle, 17 January 1822.

the commencement of the 1822 session "that if there were any chance of the den [the Commons] adopting his proposals, I should look upon him as the most pernicious man in the country."[53] The philosophy behind this view was expounded in a manuscript draft of an 1820 address from the Middlesex electors to George Byng, which urged that it was necessary to return only men pledged to Radical reform "or in default of such distinct pledge being given, then to return such men only as will in the most effectual manner support the present corrupt system of Government and thereby increase the existing discontent until the people shall feel the absolute necessity of taking their own affairs into their own hands."[54]

As we have seen, Place strongly disapproved of Hobhouse's attack on Hume (or at least on Hume-like politicians), but in a sense the Westminster MP and his committee-man coincided in seeing the damaging aspect, from the point of view of reform, of Hume's campaigns. During his speech on Russell's 1826 reform motion, Hobhouse questioned Hume's assertion that if the opposition did their duty they would achieve much, referring to the marathon sessions in support of Hume himself, which were unavailing and perhaps counter-productive in that "foolish unreflecting debate-readers, seeing a great deal said,

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[53]Add. 27843, ff.348-9, Place to Hobhouse, 12 May 1822.

[54]*Ibid.*, f.432.

thought a great deal done, by the Opposition; and this House began to acquire a character which it did not, and never can, as now constituted, fairly deserve." Even if some reduction had been achieved, "it is for the advantage of ministers occasionally to make some trifling sacrifice of their personal interests, in order to give respectability and a character of independence to the parliamentary system."[55]

An example of what Hobhouse had in mind was the carrying of Normanby's motion for the abolition of one of the Postmasters-General. Like the dropping of the Bill of Pains and Penalties, this showed how a victory for the popular side was also a setback in that it could be construed as justifying the existing system. Thus the result delighted a politically aware ministerialist like Henry Bankes. "We can give no other sort of answer so convincing to the Radical reformers," he told Charles Abbot, Lord Colchester, "as by showing them that, when a strong case is made out, the representative body as at present constituted is able and ready to counteract the wishes and influence of the Government."[56] The Liverpool Mercury rejected this boast as it appeared in the ministerial papers by asserting that it was disgraceful

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[55] 2 PD, xv, 693, 27 April 1826.

[56] Colchester, Diary and Correspondence, iii, pp.253-4, 6 May 1822. Cookson has contended, however, that ministers could not be as sanguine as this; any defeat was a blow to their already low morale. Lord Liverpool's Administration, p.363.

that the vote should have been as close as 216:201. "Why, in a reformed Parliament, such an office would never have had half a dozen votes in its favour; and instead of an occasional majority for the paltry reduction of a few thousands per annum, we should have unanimous decisions for the saving of millions."[57]

Hume's approach could sometimes take in partial measures of reform proper. An example of this was his motion to disqualify civil officers in the Ordnance Department from voting at elections, as other civil servants had been by previous legislation. In supporting this proposal, Hume detailed the large numbers of Queenborough voters and their relatives who held Ordnance jobs and he described how non-Queenborough freemen were dismissed to make room for members of this more favoured breed.[58] Like other reform measures, general and particular, this one produced opposition from some one posing as the friend of voters' rights. Robert Ward thought that Hume was running "counter to the wishes of his friends the reformers. He the advocate of universal suffrage, proposed by a single measure to destroy the elective franchise of 2,000 meritorious individuals."[59] Despite Tierney's support (conditional on the measure being restricted to Queenborough), the motion was defeated 60:118.

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[57] Liverpool Mercury, 17 May 1822.

[58] 2 PD, v, 180-8, 12 April 1821.

[59] Ibid., 191.

A fortnight later, Creevey moved an amendment to the motion for going into a committee of supply on the Army Estimates urging that salaries of offices in the civil departments of the army be reduced. Bennet believed that this motion would demonstrate the necessity of parliamentary reform and show that whether the House was economical or extravagant was solely determined by the disposition of ministers. "He wished such a motion to be made every day in the week, that the people might see what the House was, and how regardless it was of its duty in the expenditure of the public revenue."[60] This was the classic argument of those who saw economical reform as the blood relation of the parliamentary variety.

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[60] *Ibid.*, 467, 30 April 1821.

CHAPTER SIX

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH CATHOLIC EMANCIPATION

In terms of sheer weight of material - in newspaper column inches, parliamentary debates and discussions in correspondence - Catholic Emancipation was undoubtedly the issue of the 1820s. J.C.D. Clark's view that it overshadowed reform seems not only justified by this quantitative view but also by contemporary testimony. For instance, "Mr Reform" himself, Lord John Russell, was advised by Lord William Russell in November 1826 that mastery of the Irish Question was the main route to great popularity for a statesman.[1] Clark asserted that a concentration on Emancipation made political sense for the Whigs. The fact that Plunkett's Roman Catholic Relief Bill (1821) and Canning's Roman Catholic Peers Bill (1822) both passed the Commons, whereas no reform motion did, showed, he argued, that religion, not representation, was the weak spot in ministerial defences.[2] It could of course be retorted that the failure of the reform motions merely underlined in the minds of many Whigs the existence of the abuses they sought to remedy and hence boosted the cause of reform. It could further be argued, as John Cannon has done to Clark's disgust,[3] that the Catholic Question,

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[1] Spencer Walpole, The Life of Lord John Russell (1889), i, pp.131-2, 5 November 1826.

[2] English Society, p.388.

[3] Parliamentary Reform, p.245.

in touching the franchise and representation, was really just a branch of the reform question.

During the twenties, Emancipation measures stimulated a fair amount of discussion on reform proper, notably in 1825 on the proposed disfranchisement of the Irish forty shilling freeholders and in 1829 after the measure was finally carried and Ultras like Blandford and Winchilsea suddenly became friends of the people.

Nevertheless, Radicals often regarded the issue, or at least its overwhelming prominence, as something of an irritation. One response was simply to play down its importance in order to ensure that public attention stayed firmly focused on reform. Thus the carrying of the Catholic Relief Bill in the Commons in 1821 could be portrayed as a mere trick, since it was certain that it would never pass the Lords. "The Catholics had begun to show a disposition to turn parliamentary reformers," wrote Wooler. "This was to be prevented, and the strongest assurances were given to them, that if they would be quiet good boys, they might have emancipation, which they were instructed to believe was a much prettier plaything than reform."[4] Similarly, the Westminster Review complained that by making Emancipation "occupy a large space in the public eye, honourable members have, in some measure,

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[4]Wooler's British Gazette, 15 April 1821.

diverted that eye from prying into abuses which it is not the interest either of Whig or Tory to rectify."[5]

Carlile, as ever when it came to religion, was dismissive. In his view, the Catholic Question was "about the division of spoils, and admits a prior question - Should those spoils be made to be quarrelled about?"[6] Carlile saw organised religion itself as the main obstacle to reform and he thus advised that zealous friend of the Catholics, Sir Francis Burdett: "You will support parliamentary reform by endeavouring to pull down the Protestant Church, but not by endeavouring to raise the Roman Catholic Church."[7] He had already lost patience with what he, along with other leading Radicals who by no means shared his Infidelity, saw as the misdirected energies of the Irish campaigners. "I never heard of any party in Ireland," he complained in 1821, "that advocated the necessity of the Representative system of Government; or that, beyond Mr. George Ensor and some other half dozen individuals, there were any persons in Ireland who called themselves Reformers."[8]

This Radical exasperation persisted to the end of the decade. A Manchester Times editorial in 1829

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[5]Westminster Review, v, No. ix (January 1826), p.267.

[6]Republican, 13 January 1826.

[7]Ibid., 10 June 1825.

[8]To the Reformers of Great Britain, 13 October 1821, p.5.

condemned the Irish obsession with Emancipation and indifference to reform, pointing out that had Irishmen not been roused by a small portion of the English press they might have acquiesced in the disfranchisement of 200,000 forty shilling freeholders. "As to the general question of Reform, in all the coil (sic) that has been kept up in Ireland against the oppressions of this country, there never has been anything like a general demand for a broad system of suffrage." Those few who pointed out the root cause of crippling taxation and maladministration of the law were branded, even by the people themselves, as demagogues, whilst a few Catholic leaders were lauded as the personification of patriotism by millions who could have no interest in their elevation to positions of influence within the establishment. All this could be attributed to aristocratic hegemony, and the English were to some extent guilty of the same thing.[9]

Nevertheless, Radicals still attempted to link the Catholic Question with reform in a more positive way. Cobbett's pro-Catholic History of the Protestant Reformation in England presented that event as giving birth to the amalgam of corruption and oppression he called "The Thing" in that it founded the fortunes of many powerful families now resisting reform and living off the taxes.[10] In the

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[9]Manchester Times, 24 January 1829.

[10]G.D.H. Cole, The Life of William Cobbett (1924), p.288.

early twenties, as John Belchem has described, the Radicals hoped to enlist the Irish grievances in their push for universal political rights. Hunt had added Catholic Emancipation to the Radical programme in his Address from the People of Great Britain to the People of Ireland in 1819 and whilst in prison he recommended to northern Catholics W.E. Andrews' Catholic Advocate, which embodied "the true radical spirit of civil and religious liberty."[11]

Prospects for an Anglo-Irish Radical alliance looked good in view of Daniel O'Connell's political stance. His principles, he told Lord Cloncurry, "are, and ever shall be, favourable decidedly to a complete - say, a radical reform."[12] In early 1825, he was still making the right noises from the Radical point of view, calling Cobbett "a bold clear-headed fellow" whose "views are distinct and well-intentioned", and expressing the belief that his trip to London would do the cause some good "if it were in nothing else but in showing us what a base and vile set the House of Commons is composed of."[13] However, his acceptance, as one of the "wings" of the 1825 Emancipation bill, of the disfranchisement of the forty shilling freeholders created in Cobbett and Hunt a

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[11]John Belchem, Orator Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism (Oxford 1985), p.185.

[12]W.J. Fitzpatrick (ed.), Correspondence of Daniel O'Connell the Liberator (1888), i, p.66, O'Connell to Cloncurry, 16 November 1820.

[13]Ibid., p.98, O'Connell to his wife, 21 February 1825.

suspicion of him that was never really allayed. Cobbett responded bitterly to O'Connell's conduct, pointing out that the method proposed to get rid of perjury and crime in England (for instance in a rotten borough) was to augment the number of voters, not to diminish it. If the Irish freeholders were, as was claimed, powerless, why were the enemies of Catholic Emancipation so keen to get rid of them?[14] From the Radicals' point of view, men like O'Connell and Burdett were merely concerned with allowing, in the name of civil liberty, a handful of middle-class Catholics to share in the fruits of corruption whilst the mass of the Irish peasantry laboured under the ill-effects of tithes and the absence of a poor law. In this light, Emancipation seemed the very reverse of a libertarian measure.

O'Connell certainly regretted that he should ever have thought the forty shilling freeholders politically servile when, against the odds, they returned Emancipationist candidates for Waterford and Louth in the 1826 General Election. In his June 1828 address to the Clare electors, he pledged himself to vote for every measure favourable to a Radical reform.[15] This meant nothing to Cobbett, who demanded to know how such a declaration could be accepted as sincere, given that O'Connell had supported Canning

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[14] Political Register, 19 March 1825.

[15] Fitzpatrick, i, Correspondence, p.158.

and Burdett who coalesced with him and not Wellington, who, though undoubtedly opposed to reform, had not made an insolent declaration to that effect as Canning had.[16] O'Connell further aroused the Radicals' disgust when at the Sligo meeting in August he accepted the substitution of the word "constitutional" for "radical" in the address.[17]

However, in an anonymous letter to Hunt, Bentham described O'Connell as "the only man perhaps in the world, by whom, for many many years to come, Radical Reform, or any approach to it can be brought upon the carpet, with any the smallest chance of success." Hunt's speeches would do nothing without O'Connell's massive mobilisation of Irish opinion, and the two men ought to act together. Bentham explained that when the forty shilling freeholder disfranchisement was being considered, several sincere Radical reformers were in disagreement about the issue. He himself had been in favour of disfranchisement because, considering the condition of the freeholders, he could not see "the smallest probability of their doing as they have done." In sum, Bentham was calling on Hunt not to question the sincerity of O'Connell's attachment to Radical reform.[18]

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[16] Political Register, 19 July 1828.

[17] See ibid., 30 August 1828, for Hunt's attack on such 'apostasy'.

[18] J. Bowring (ed.), The Works of Jeremy Bentham (Edinburgh 1843), xi, p.5.

O'Connell was certainly now determined not to let the freeholders down again. The proposal for a £10 county voting qualification, he told James Sugrue, "must be opposed in every shape and form."[19] He even sent Lawless to get Hunt to mount opposition to the proposal, but the mission failed because, O'Connell believed, Hunt had no following. "I was until now convinced that the Radicals were in some power - they are not; they are numerous, but they have no leaders, no system, no confidence in either Henry Hunt or William Cobbett - not the least - not the least." This, he thought, applied to reformers in general, who were rendered powerless by their leaders' squabbles.[20]

It is unfair to represent O'Connell as being prepared to sacrifice other principles in order to get Emancipation carried. In spite of what English Radicals might have thought, he did not propose to rest on his laurels after the success of the Emancipation campaign. "How mistaken men are who suppose that the history of the world will be over as soon as we are emancipated!" he exclaimed to Sugrue in 1829. "Oh! that will be the time to commence the struggle for popular rights."[21] He and his associates could be quite ready to link their particular

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[19] Correspondence p.174, 6 March 1829.

[20] Ibid., p.177.

[21] Ibid., p.176, 11 March 1829.

cause with that of reform. In 1828, for instance, O'Connell was attacked by the Duke of Newcastle in a published letter to Lord Kenyon. His reply to this, he told Edward Dyer, would

> "demonstrate to the people of England the turpitude and moral debasement of that titled crew of boroughmongering swindlers, who defraud the People of their right of representation - who plunder the public purse - and then, with these proofs of knavery complete upon them, add blasphemy to the entire, by endeavouring to make the cause of their peculating avarice the cause of religion and of God. What a beautiful Protestant Constitution it is in which the Duke of Newcastle has no less than 12 or 14 nominees in the Honourable House, although it is the declared maxim of that Constitution that no peer shall, in any manner, interfere with the election of members of the House of Commons!
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> I think I will be able in that reply to demonstrate to the people of England the almost inevitable connection that exists between political depravity and religious hypocrisy."[22]

Similarly, Richard Shiel claimed at the 1828 Kent meeting that in the Catholic days of Edward I there had been no boroughmongering oligarchy and he called on the Duke of Newcastle to give up his ten MPs if he wanted to speak of the liberty afforded by the constitution without being hypocritical.[23]

O'Connell was not lacking in Radicalism, but reform was not for him the complete monomania it was for Cobbett and Hunt. Their vision, especially that of Hunt,

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[22] Ibid., p.171, 29 September 1828.

[23] West Briton, 31 October 1828.

was totally focused on one measure whilst O'Connell championed another almost equally far-reaching one whose promotion occasionally led him into compromise, or at least the appearance of it, of the principles of reform. Hunt's Radicalism, he believed, was born of a hatred of tyranny rather than a love of liberty, but such men had a role to play: "They are the pioneers of reform; but they get so unsavoury from their trade, that it is absolutely requisite to send them to the rear when the practical combat comes on."[24] This suggests that O'Connell saw Hunt, with his vehement insistence on a very simple programme, as creating a public awareness which more sophisticated advocates could then exploit.

However, Radicals persisted in thinking that the Radical analysis was not an indispensable part of the intellectual armoury of all Catholic advocates. For one thing, Emancipation, being only a partial measure of relief, was more likely to be wrung from the system than reform because, as the Manchester Times put it, "the interest of the Legislators, is not placed in one scale, while that of the people is in the other, as in the questions on the Importation of Corn, and on Reform of Parliament, questions of infinitely more importance than one which affects only the privileges of a part of the Aristocracy."[25]

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[24] Works, x, p.603, O'Connell to Bentham, 6 October 1828.

[25] Manchester Times, 10 January 1829.

Burdett may well have agreed that Emancipation was more likely to be carried than reform, but his view of the respective importance of the issues differed somewhat from that of the Manchester Times. In his speech on Spring Rice's motion for an inquiry into the state of Ireland, he said that Emancipation had to be granted as soon as possible, the clamour for it being so great that government could not be carried on without it. Yet the reform measure was not one of immediate, instant urgency - the present omission of it brought no danger to the State. Though constitutional and just, it was not indispensably necessary within any particular time.[26] He had told Lambton that the main object ought to be to form an administration on the express basis of conceding the Catholic claims. "I said," wrote Lambton to Grey, "what, without any stipulation as to reform? He answered certainly that is a secondary consideration. I suggested the reproaches of Place and the ultra reformers but he made light of them and insisted that it was the only course, for which purpose he said a junction ought to be formed with the Catholic part of the present Cabinet."[27] This approach paradoxically helped to save reform from total neglect.

It featured quite prominently, for instance, in the May 1825 debates on the Elective Franchise in Ireland Bill. Some MPs agreed with Burdett; Ebrington said that

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[26]2 PD, xiii, 897, May 1825.

[27]Grey, Lambton to Grey, 12 February 1825.

though "warmly attached to the cause of parliamentary reform" he would vote for the bill to help the progress of Emancipation.[28] But Hume, like Brougham, contrasted the haste to disfranchise a whole class of voters without investigation with the long deliberation before Grampound was punished. He believed that "if there was one principle which more than another ought to be kept in view by those who were friendly to a reform of parliament, it was the further extension of the elective franchise; and upon that same principle he now called on all the advocates of parliamentary reform to oppose this obnoxious bill."[29]

Burdett, obviously keen to deflect charges that he had betrayed the cause he had for so long championed, claimed, in the subsequent debate of 12 May, that he could defend the bill "upon a principle of reform. He should be able to show that the same principle applied to particular parts of the elective franchise in this country would be beneficial, and tend much to the independence of parliament and the liberty of the subject."[30]

If the measure was seen in this light, the opposition to it of illiberals was easily explained. Henry Bankes, for instance, was mocked by the Durham Chronicle for his defence of the Irish voters:

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[28] 2 PD, xiii, 461, 9 May 1825.

[29] Ibid., 463-4.

[30] Ibid., 570, 12 May 1825.

> "Whether Mr Bankes' sympathy proceeds from tracing any resemblance between them and the independent electors of Corfe Castle, or that he considers them to form part of the glorious system which secures to him a seat in parliament for life, we know not; but we cannot help being amused at a man standing forward to defend the privileges of the people, and to prevent their elective franchise being taken from them, who would, without compunction or scruple, suspend the Habeas Corpus Act, and that on the most frivolous pretence."[31]

It would not be the last time that Catholic Emancipation would produce an apparent reversal of roles.

During the 1826 General Election, Emancipation, with its strong bearing on some still quite virulent popular prejudices, overshadowed general reform as an issue. J.A. Roebuck believed that this was a position favoured by anti-reformers for they knew they were on sure ground with public opinion in opposing Emancipation and could therefore fend off other innovations: "The question of catholic emancipation had always, by those who well understood the character of the English people, been deemed the surest, nay, the almost impregnable rampart by which the existing constitution of the House of Commons was defended."[32] However, Machin has pointed out that pro-Catholic candidates could still get elected, despite public opinion, by stressing their views on supposedly more important questions. In Reading, a supporter of J.B. Monck, the reforming candidate, demanded to know what was to happen

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[31] Durham Chronicle, 30 April 1825.

[32] J.A. Roebuck, History of the Whig Ministry of 1830 to the Passing of the Reform Bill (1852), i, p.124.

to parliamentary and Corn Law reform "if the men who were ready to do the good work were not to be supported, because of their mode of thinking on Catholic Emancipation?"[33] The Globe and Traveller, in another protest against Emancipation being the only issue on which a parliamentary candidate was judged, thought that, subject to certain conditions, anti-Catholicism should not condemn a man either. Provided he was ready to support retrenchment and reforms of abuses and to be a useful and independent MP rather than a mere tool of power, he should be allowed "to rave about protecting the bulwarks of the constitution from the Pope, however strong a 'prima facie' suspicion professions of that sort might have created."[34]

This intimation that an Ultra might be a reformer was borne out in startling fashion when Emancipation was finally carried in 1829. There had been previous indications that such a thing could happen. On a superficial level, the general rhetoric of anti-Catholics was often somewhat similar to that of the reformers in dwelling on the threat to the constitution from "despotism", though for the Ultras, of course, the bugbear was popery rather than the Pitt system. More particularly, two High Tories, Sir Charles Burrell and William Heygate had voted for Russell's 1821 reform motion, and the Duke of Newcastle

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[33] Times, 13 June 1826. Quoted in G.I.T. Machin, The Catholic Question in English Politics, 1820-30 (Oxford 1964), p.72.

[34] Globe and Traveller, 29 May 1826.

had expressed the hope that, should Emancipation pass both Houses, the king would veto it and laugh at the decision of parliament. Hobhouse jocularly concluded from this that it appeared "that they were to number his Grace the Duke of Newcastle among the radical reformers, seeing that he was not disposed to consider the decision of parliament as representing the sense of the nation."[35] In the following year, Sir James Langham expressed his regret about any lessening of respect for the Protestant ascendancy arising from the conduct of the House of Commons or from ministers' measures to manage that body, "of the evils arising from which, many of the most strenuous friends of Church and State seem quite insensible."[36]

In 1829, these "evils" destroyed the Protestant ascendancy itself, and several of the "strenuous friends" became acutely aware of them. Even the Lords, when they passed the measure by 105 votes, showed, in the view of John Rickman, that "they are as bad as the Commons in yielding to undue influence..."[37] The return of the "apostate" Peel for Westbury under the auspices of Sir Mannaseh Lopes of Grampound notoriety further discredited the existing parliamentary system in the eyes of Ultras.

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[35] Times, 5 April 1821.

[36] Fitz., 182, f.51, Langham to Milton, 5 December 1822.

[37] Orlo Williams, Lamb's Friend, p.244, Rickman to Southey, 4 April 1829.

"We fear less from the Radicals," declared the Morning Journal, "than we fear from the dishonest Whigs and unprincipled Liberals. On this point our opinions are firm and decisive - we would rather see a Radical Reform, than the destruction of the constitution by mercenary placemen and apostates."[38] The outraged "No Popery" zealots even joined the Radicals in the Home Office catalogue of "seditious" activities and publications. For instance, a placard by the Reverend F.H. Maberly of Kingston near Caxton in Cambridgeshire called for a petition to impeach Wellington, Peel, the Lord Chancellor and the Solicitor-General and pointed out that the majorities in both Houses for Emancipation had vastly increased since the ministers had taken up the issue.[39]

The Marquis of Blandford, in introducing his reform resolutions in June, admitted that he was adverting "to a subject, further discussion on which I am sensible is unpalatable to a greater part of this House", but he felt constrained, given the quiescence of reform's usual advocates, to revive a shelved issue.[40] In order to avoid charges of party pique or shallowness, he was anxious not to base his case solely on his fears that a strong Roman Catholic party would "enter the borough-market with better

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[38] Morning Journal, 14 March 1829.

[39] HO 40/22/3.

[40] 2 PD xxi, 1672-3, 2 June 1829.

chances and larger means of purchase than any of their competitors." Instead, he declared that "an imperious necessity has been superadded to the already existing propriety of putting down the Borough-monger and his trade", and he presented general arguments taken from the reforming text-book.[41]

But his particular motivation inevitably put liberals in a quandary as to how to react to the resolutions. As Peel observed, perhaps with some glee, the usual friends of reform could hardly wish to abolish close boroughs on the grounds that they "had contributed to the triumph of a great principle over local prejudices and passions" or that they had aided the progress of Free Trade.[42] Hobhouse could not avoid voting for the resolutions, but he defended small boroughs as the means by which men of talent but with no stomach for a popular contest, like David Ricardo, could gain their rightful place in Parliament.[43]

The detractors of the Westminster MPs naturally had a field day. The Standard remarked that "now that Reform is taken up by a man of high rank, high talents, and spotless character, and upon unexceptional grounds too, the Westminster members see that kindred spirits to his

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[41]Ibid., 1673-5.

[42]Ibid., 1685.

[43]Ibid., 1686-7.

will be arrayed in the same cause, and that their occupation is gone."[44] Cobbett, claiming that a majority of the people opposed both Emancipation and Free Trade, vilified Hobhouse for preferring to withold reform until they agreed to both: "... he supposes a case not to exist [i.e. that the people were not opposed to these two measures], which he knows does exist; and then he says if that case existed, I would oppose parliamentary reform." Hobhouse had said that though he opposed rotten boroughs per se, he wished them to continue until the entire system was changed, yet he had previously stated that he would not refuse a narrow and limited reform.[45]

Thus political events which had pushed the Ultras towards reform had induced corresponding misgivings among liberals and moderate reformers. The Manchester Guardian confirmed that its doubts about universal suffrage had been strengthened by the conclusion drawn from anxious observation that, had it existed then, neither Emancipation nor Free Trade would have made progress.[46]

There were a variety of opinions as to whether the carrying of Emancipation had aided or hindered reform. Wellington had undertaken the measure in order to avoid

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[44]Standard, 4 June 1829.

[45]Political Register, 13 June 1829.

[46]Manchester Guardian, 6 June 1829.

"the consequences of a practical democratic reform in Parliament."[47] Yet both contemporaries and later historians considered it to have had the opposite effect, especially by teaching some important lessons in popular organisation. General Gascoyne, during the Commons debate on the 1829 Address, caustically assured the House that "the hon. gentlemen around him need no longer despair of obtaining universal suffrage and parliamentary reform: they had nothing to do but get up an association, and straight the alarmed minister would come down to the House with a proposal to grant all they wanted."[48] In the view of John Foster, a very important principle had been established. Catholic Emancipation, he wrote, "is such a dashing and prodigious kick at 'the wisdom of our ancestors' as seems to threaten unmeasured hazard to everything else that has been under the sacred protection of that venerable and inviolable superstition."[49] Clark's stress on the importance of this first major breach in the old constitution led him to conclude that "Reform was not the culmination of a well-informed campaign of inquiry and planning, but the hurried and confused consequence of Emancipation."[50]

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[47] Charles Stuart Parker (ed.), Sir Robert Peel. From his Private Papers (1891-99), ii, p.64, Wellington to Peel, 12 September 1828.

[48] 2 PD, xx, 96, 5 February 1829.

[49] J.E. Ryland (ed.), The Life and Correspondence of John Foster (1846), ii, p.113.

[50] English Society, p.403.

But not all reformers at the time were ready to welcome Emancipation, especially as it was accompanied by the obnoxious disfranchisement measure. The Liverpool Chronicle warned: "In this peremptory extinction of [a] national right we see a precedent dangerous to the freedom of the people; for if the forty shilling freeholders of Ireland are to be destroyed, what safety have the freeholders of England?"[51] The Manchester Times reckoned that Mackintosh, in supporting the Franchise Regulation Bill, had "talked in strains which must have been peculiarly pleasing to the enemies of a broad and popular basis of representation." The paper did not see Emancipation as paving the way to reform because "the very men who are emancipating the Catholic nobility and gentry made a most strenuous and effective stand, to prevent the seats from being transferred from rotten Penryn to [Manchester] and disfranchised at one word one half of the freeholders of Ireland."[52] Later, it saw the loss of Tennyson's measure to transfer East Retford's franchise to Birmingham as confirming its view that Emancipation would not necessarily lead to reform.[53] Yet, in the following month, perhaps encouraged by Blandford's resolutions, it admitted that "the Pope-fearing politician who sees that his holiness of Rome is not so formidable a person as he supposed him to be, may now perhaps look on a reformer without dread."[54]

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[51] Quoted in Manchester Times, 21 March 1829.

[52] Manchester Times, 28 March 1829.

[53] Ibid., 9 May 1829.

[54] Ibid., 6 June 1829.

On the same day, the Tory Manchester Courier wrote in the same vein, though somewhat more bitterly, on Russell's plan to enfranchise Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham: "The House which has opened its doors to the emissaries of the Pope, will surely not be so illiberal as to refuse the benefit of representation to three towns which are wealthier than all the Irish Catholics."[55]

The dominance of Emancipation as an issue in the twenties did not necessarily mean that reform was altogether forgotten. In the absence of pressing distress or blatant oppression in England, debates on Emancipation, especially on the disfranchisement measures thought necessary to its achievement, provided a base for reform discussion even during the "quiet" years.

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[55]Manchester Courier, 6 June 1829.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LIBERAL TORYISM

The "modernisation" of Lord Liverpool's government, effected in response to far-reaching social and economic change, was one of the salient political features of the 1820s. The clearest outward signs of this development were the changes in cabinet personnel made in the early part of the decade. The replacement of Sidmouth by Peel and Vansittart by Robinson at the Home Office and Exchequer respectively, the succession of Canning to Castlereagh at the Foreign Office and the entry of Huskisson to the cabinet as President of the Board of Trade can be taken as ushering in the period of liberal Toryism, though progress in several fields had already been made. In the field of criminal law, for instance, Mackintosh had in 1819 carried a motion for a Committee of Inquiry whose report formed the basis of Peel's reforms.

The government's economic liberalism included the removal of cumbrous customs duties, the permitting of the free export of gold, and the modification of the Navigation Acts give greater economic freedom to the colonies.

W.R. Brock, in his eulogy of Liverpool, saw this period as one of quiet stability and positive progress. After describing, with appropriate horror, the bitter strife of the immediate post-war years, he noted how "with the return of prosperity there was also a change in the

whole tone of Government; within a few years the very suspicion of revolution had vanished and the broad outlines of Victorian England had been sketched by a Government which has some claim to be called the first of the great improving ministries of the nineteenth century."[1] This development is always given as one of the main reasons why, until the economic slump and political flux at the end of the decade, the issue of reform lay dormant. For instance, a cutting in Place's collection, dating from the time of the Reform Bill, gave a chronology of events since 1792 which was illustrative of reforming zeal and government oppression. There were noticeably fewer entries for the twenties, and most of these were short. The most important were:

> "1823 - Mr Canning introduces a more liberal system of policy, foreign and domestic - the change is gratefully received - a truce between Parliament and the people in Britain...
> 1829 - Further proofs of unexpected liberality - Catholic Emancipation granted - the Test Act repealed - Taxes remitted - Law reforms vigorously prosecuted - Truce between Parliament and people continues!"

Under 1830 was the entry: "The call for Reform re-appears", which confirmed the implication in the preceding remarks that it had temporarily disappeared.[2]

J.R. McCulloch was making the sort of remarks which cropped up time and again in assessments of the state

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[1]Brock, Lord Liverpool and Liberal Toryism, p.1.

[2]Add. 27809, f.268, 'Veritas et Utilitas. End of the Forty Years War! A Candid Appeal to the Electors of Great Britain on the Necessity of Reforming the Representation' by the Editor of the Scotsman.

of the nation at this time when he told Macvey Napier in 1824 that "politics seem to be quite on the wane. The Ministers are exceedingly popular, and the populace are seeking excitement in the formation of Mechanics Institutions, and in the purchase of cheap periodical publications."[3] Such developments could be taken as demonstrating the "March of Mind" which, reformers argued, reinforced the need for a more broadly based representative system, but several liberal/Radical journalists responded to the changed national atmosphere by modifying their editorial positions, which sometimes entailed their becoming less zealous about parliamentary reform.[4] One paper to soften its tone was the once-notorious Exeter-based Alfred. In March 1824, when the paper changed its premises and printing and publishing arrangements, it carried an address in which it was admitted that in the past it had used strong language. At the time, this had been justified, but

> "the turbulence of party spirit having now greatly abated, and the seeds of future amity lately sown having given birth to a spirit of liberal sentiment throughout the nation, the present Proprietors would consider themselves unworthy the generous patronage with which the Alfred has been eminently honoured, if they did not most cordially join in the general feeling, in hailing the auspicious dawn of a gradual and temperate improvement."[5]

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[3] Macvey Napier jnr. (ed.), Selections from the Correspondence of the Late Macvey Napier (1879), p.39, McCulloch to Napier, 2 May 1824.

[4] See, for instance, Donald Read, Press and People 1790-1850. Opinion in Three English Cities (1961), p.85, for the 'softening' of J.E. Taylor of the Manchester Guardian.

[5] Alfred, 30 March 1824.

A month later, the paper was expressing the belief that the Radical reformer was beginning to view slow but uninterrupted progress towards such an improvement as a step gained.[6] It had to be admitted that "on great constitutional points, Mr Canning, and his colleagues in office, have as yet given the People no satisfactory proofs of the sincerity of their intentions to remedy the existing evils", yet whilst a free press and a generally liberal adminsitration continued, "we need not despair of seeing even Mr Canning, in the fervour of his amor patriae, adopting sentiments in union with the true interests of his country."[7]

This optimistic view of the prospects of reform under liberal Toryism was echoed by a number of other observers. From their point of view, the absence of reform agitation did not mean that the people were well satisfied with a constitution which permitted such improvements to take place, as anti-reformers claimed, but rather that events seemed to be going in the reformers' direction anyway, and all they had to do was wait. As Place put it: "The people know that the present ministers cannot live for ever, that they cannot as they die off be replaced with even such men as themselves, that the more the present ministers do, the more must be done by any set of men who may succeed them, and that it is therefore

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[6] Ibid., 27 April 1824.

[7] Ibid., 22 June 1824.

better to encourage them to go on with the amendments they are disposed to make..."[8]

Although several historians have concluded that the people simply became apathetic, some have preferred a Place-like interpretation. J.R.M. Butler, for instance, believed that the government's improvements afforded "a foothold for innovation generally."[9] Similarly, Spencer Walpole, whilst admitting that by 1826 little tangible had been achieved towards reform, thought that hindsight made it easy to see "that the legislation which the parliament of 1820 had adopted was silently pointing to reforms, both in Church and State. The parliament of 1820 had destroyed monopolies in trade. It left to its successors the task of destroying monopolies in politics and religion."[10] Chester New also believed that the cumulative effect of tariff and Navigation Law changes, criminal law reform, the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and Catholic Emancipation (though it should be added that this last measure owed far more to Tory realism that liberal Toryism) prepared men's minds for the biggest change of all in 1832.[11]

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[8] Add. 35144, ff.108-9, Memoirs, Ch. 14.

[9] Butler, The Passing of the Great Reform Bill (1914), p.42.

[10] A History of England, ii, p.342.

[11] New, Lord Durham. A Biography of John George Lambton, First Earl of Durham (Oxford 1929), p.98.

Among contemporaries, Place thought Huskisson and Palmerston were by their policies unwittingly promoting changes far beyond any they wished to effect.[12] Similarly, Thomas Hodgskin believed that liberal Toryism would, despite the wishes of ministers themselves, lead on to greater things. The government's innovations, which "encourage inquiry, and convince us the system is neither sacred nor incapable of improvement", would produce results which the innovators did not intend.[13] Cobbett too was keen to see the spirit of improvement applied everywhere. "How odd it is," he wrote in an open letter to Peel, "that while every other code has been found unfit for the present times, the representative should be found the most perfect in the world."[14]

This implied challenge had in a sense been taken up by one Tory. In a letter printed in the Representative newspaper, a liberal Tory organ, "Torissimus" avowed himself a "Tory reformer" and pointed out that criminal, civil, commercial and international law were being reformed by Tories, even though the old system worked well enough. Reform for the sake of principle had thus been accepted, "and when the Hobhouses &c press us to apply the same method to the state of our representation in Parliament, I really do not see that we can answer them in the negative with

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[12]Add. 35148, f.28, Place to Hobhouse, 4 June 1828.

[13]Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital (1922 edn.), pp.106-7.

[14]Political Register, 15 March 1828.

all the same bold, manly and self-confident sort of visage which we certainly used to mount on all similar occasions in times past... I am decidedly of the opinion that the cause of Reform (as it is called) is gaining ground, and that sooner or later it will be carried; and it is in this state of my belief that I am naturally led to ask why, after all, we Tories should continue to hold out on the question, after the Whigs, as a party, have (apparently) pledged themselves to the popular side of it?... In a word, sir, I think we are all frightening ourselves about nothing." As long as the world was divided into masters and men, "I have the most devout belief that property will be represented in the House of Commons. Make partial changes, and I would not answer for the result; but take the bold step, and give a vote to any human being that can articulate, and I, for one, shall watch the consequences with a fearless eye, and a bottle of good old Port before me, just as at this present writing."[15]

This letter was at least partly written with tongue in cheek, though the idea that the ministers' measures stimulated a calm consideration of other aspects of change may have some validity. Whether Tory squires drew the same conclusions as "Torissimus" is more doubtful. He was probably not typical of stolid port-drinkers at this time; he may even have been unique.

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[15]Representative, 4 May 1826.

Yet, at a higher political level, there was no mistaking the flow of ideas across increasingly less rigid party boundaries. Austin Mitchell noted how the number of government/opposition divisions fell from 88 in 1822 to 59 in 1823, 56 in 1824, 29 in 1825, and 20 in 1826.[16] The increasing inter-party consensus that these figures imply took away from the opposition one of their incentives for pressing for reform. That measure was still seen to be indispensable to their accession to office, but their accession was no longer the only means by which many good measures could be carried; their influence was being strongly felt in any case. Thus, during the debate on the salary of the President of the Board of Trade,[17] Hobhouse made a half-serious reference to "His Majesty's Opposition" and Tierney agreed that the opposition was in fact part of the government since the proceedings of the latter "for some time past have proved that, although the gentlemen opposite are in office, we are in power. The measures are ours, but all the emoluments are theirs."[18]

Wooler, however, did not derive even this partial satisfaction from the phenomenon. His mistrust of the liberal but non-reforming ministers was fundamental. They were still anxious to retain a standing army whilst

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[16] Mitchell, The Whigs in Opposition (Oxford 1967), p.183.

[17] 10 April 1826.

[18] Hobhouse, Recollections of a Long Life, iii, pp.129-30.

"buying popularity with baubles", and the people, "cajoled by a little fair-weather eloquence", believed that they would never be forcibly suppressed again.[19] When considering the meeting, at the Lord Mayor's Easter dinner and ball in 1824, between Canning, "the leading jester of the school of Pitt", and Lord Mayor Waithman, the butt of the Pitt School for twenty-five years, which was hailed by some as a "triumph of liberality", Wooler was equally unimpressed. He took the opportunity to tell a little parable about the "robbers" (i.e. the ruling classes) and the "shepherds" (the people who did the work). The latter, because the robbers for a time did not take as many sheep as usual, invited them to a great feast. But because the shepherds had earlier challenged the robbers' rights to the sheep (a reference to the post-war reform agitation) only one robber (Canning) attended, and his show of liberality was a sham.[20]

Reformers were obviously determined that alleged governmental altruism would not detract from their analysis of the system. The main point that they made was that the existence of good government would always be precarious if it depended on the disposition of individuals rather than on the electoral and representative system itself. An 1824 declaration by the Cheshire Whig Club spoke of the deviation of the constitution from its original

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[19] Black Dwarf, 25 February 1824.

[20] Ibid., 1 May 1824.

scheme caused by the means of influence available to ministers, yet it acknowledged the moderation with which ministers at present used that influence, thanks to the "late change in the persons, temper and policy of the Government." However, the Times, commenting on this, contended that liberties which depended on the mood of unaccountable persons were no liberties at all.[21] Jeremy Bentham took a similar view: "If there be any one maxim in politics more certain than another, it is, that no possible degree of virtue in the governor can render it expedient for the governed to dispense with good laws and good institutions."[22]

There was a worry that this message would be smothered. The Scotsman, for instance, believed that the cause of reform had been set back by Canning's increasing popularity and wondered whether under a liberal government the people would "have reflection enough to see that *this* is the time for making laws to prevent a recurrence of bad times."[23]

Among others, the Middlesex reformers were anxious that they should. At their 1824 Hackney dinner held to celebrate the anniversary of Whitbread's election, Shaw

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[21] Times, 1 October 1824.

[22] The Book of Fallacies. Given in Bhikhu Parekh (ed.), Bentham's Political Thought (1973), p.237.

[23] Scotsman, 24 April 1824. In Place Collection, Prt. 39, iv, f.431.

Lefevre acknowledged the ministers' achievements but did not think they had gone far enough to be satisfactory. The government might not at that period be using all of its giant's strength, but only reform would ensure that it never would again. H.G. Bennet believed that the ministers had only changed their policies because they had been forced to do so by public opinion and because their old ones had failed. Furthermore, "had they not continued many of the odious acts which so long deprived the people of their constitutional rights?" The changes they were now bringing in to a chorus of praise from their adherents had been opposed by them when the Whigs had proposed them two years earlier. Joseph Hume summed up the main message which all the speakers at this meeting had striven to put across: "To set a large value... upon any apparently liberal measures of the government until the people were put in possession of their just rights, would be a mere mockery of their unprotected situation."[24]

Lord Howick was another who was keen to maintain the importance of reform. His response to the increasingly blurred party lines was to take the issue as a political litmus test. Thus, at a dinner to him in 1826 at the Newcastle Assembly Rooms, he stated:

> "If I say that the cause of the Whigs is the cause of improvement, I do not mean to insinuate that the other great party in the state is opposed to every beneficial change. Such would be a

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[24]<u>Times</u>, 1 April 1824.

> proof of ignorance, as well as illiberality, particularly after the recent measures of the present ministry. I only mean that they (the Tories) would enter with greater timidity than their opponents into reform of abuses, and would not be disposed to place so firm a reliance on principles; while they correct particular evils, and remedy abuses which have crept into some subordinate parts of the system, they would not so boldly attack everything corrupt, wherever it appears; particularly they would never attempt to render the House of Commons a full and fair representation of the people. At present the two great parties seem so nearly agreed, that this appears to me to afford a certain distinction; a friend to reform I call a Whig; an enemy to reform, though he vote with the opposition, is in my mind a Tory."25

Soon after Howick's speech, during the debate on Russell's first reform motion since 1823, good illustrations were furnished of the way in which the ministers' liberality, like several other developments of the twenties, could be used on both sides of the reform argument. Russell himself admitted that in late years the ministers had done much that was praiseworthy, but they had been prevented from going further by the fear of the displeasure of parliamentary patrons. A reformed parliament would support them fully in their liberalism. Their anti-reforming arguments were "in behalf of those who disliked every measure which they had recently carried, and who, though not open enemies, still were enemies to what had been done, and more particularly enemies to what was to follow."[26] On the other hand, J.E. Denison claimed

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[25]Newcastle Courant, 15 April 1826.

[26]2 PD, xv, 662, 27 April 1826.

that as the ministers "have shown themselves sensitive to abuses; as they have rejected the senseless clamour against all innovation... if now they oppose alterations, they have a right to be believed that they oppose them on principle."[27]

Some of the heat of reforming attack was taken off ministers in this period. Whereas in the Castlereagh era they were seen as villains empowered by a corrupt parliament to erode the nation's freedom and plunder its wealth, now parliament could be seen as hampering the improving measures of more enlightened ministers. This is not to say that all Radicals and reformers became devoted admirers of Canning, far from it; but there does seem to be a comparatively greater stress on what had always been a principal target of Radical attack: the influence of great and intransigent vested interests. James Mill, for instance, saw ministers as contending against a malign House of Commons. In the Westminster Review in 1826, he contended that ministers were now far more dependent on public opinion than the bulk of MPs and they therefore acted as a check on the Commons rather than vice versa: "Whoever has contemplated the proceedings in the House during recent years must have observed many occasions on which it would have gone much greater lengths in evil courses, had it not been witheld by the ministry."[28] This was an interesting

[27] Ibid., 665.

[28] Westminster Review, vi, No. xii (October 1826), pp.266-7.

modification of the more usual reforming view that the House of Commons merely followed the wishes of any minister, be he good or bad, but it did not at all detract from the case for reform. Mill's statement can be interpreted as expressing the belief that the advent of liberal ministers, instead of neutralising the evil of dominant executive influence through that influence being used benignly, had simply demonstrated in a different way the innate tendency of the House to do evil.

The debate on the relationship between reform and general liberal policy gained a new intensity when the most prominent liberal and anti-reformer of all became Prime Minister and an opportunity was afforded to some members of "His Majesty's Opposition" to take a formal share in policy-making. Apart from the Grenvillite accession of 1821, the formation of Canning's coalition in 1827 saw Whigs in government for the first time since the somewhat embarrasing "Talents Ministry" of 1806-7. But, although the death of the great bridge-builder between Tory factions, Lord Liverpool, ended what was becoming to seem like a timeless Tory monopoly of office, the opportunity afforded by the refusal of seven Ultra members of Liverpool's cabinet to work with Canning did not in the end do the Whig party as a whole much good. It was merely another chance for them to display the looseness of their party structure and for their detractors to pillory a section of them for

the abandonment of reform. Lord Burlington reckoned that the party was "completely annihilated and every one at liberty to act as he thinks best."[29]

Although Emancipation was the central element in discussion of the coalition, reform was certainly not forgotten, especially since Canning owed a large part of his political reputation to his unswerving opposition to it. During the negotiations, Robinson, believing that the Whigs as a body were committed to a package of measures which included reform, deemed it vital to know how far they were "prepared to adopt our notions upon these subjects, and whether they would require freedom of opinion and action. To the latter I could not consent."[30] Canning was of the same mind, telling Lansdowne that "the inconvenience (now unavoidable) of having one open question in the Cabinet [Catholic Emancipation] makes it more necessary to agree that there should be no other." The Cabinet had therefore to be united in not bringing forward reform.[31] Lansdowne replied that though this did not concern him, he would urge Canning not to ask Tierney to oppose reform "as it will answer every practical purpose that it should not be brought forward or supported by any member of the Cabinet, and I should be surprised if he could

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[29] Grey, Lord Burlington (Lord George Cavendish) to Grey, 29 September 1827.

[30] A. Aspinall (ed.), The Formation of Canning's Ministry (1937), Letter 125, Robinson to Canning, 15 April 1827.

[31] Ibid., 219, 23 April 1827.

enter into any stipulation so strong as the particular word I have referred to would imply. No person will feel more than yourself how much is due to the regard every man must have for his own consistency where the practical object can for the time be attained."[32]

However, no professed reformer who joined the ministry was given credit for any consistency by hostile observers. John Foster, for example, could not understand "this zealous coalition of the avowed enemies of all corruption with a minister who has been, through all times and seasons, its friend and defender." Canning might carry Emancipation, but "will he alleviate the oppressive burdens of the country? Will he cut down the profligate and enormous expenditure of the government? Will he bring any of the detestable public delinquents to justice? Will he blow up a single rotten borough?"[33]

Supporters of the government based their case on the overwhelming need to exclude the Ultras and on the broad areas of agreement between the Whig members of the cabinet and the Canningites. "We are convinced," declared Macaulay in the Edinburgh Review, "that the cause of the present Ministers is the cause of liberty, the cause of toleration, the cause of political science..."[34] Here was

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[32] Ibid., 259, 27 April 1827.

[33] Simon Maccoby (ed.), The English Radical Tradition 1763-1914 (second edn., 1966), pp.98-9, Foster to John Easthope, 23 May 1827.

[34] Edinburgh Review, xlvi, No. xci (June 1827), p.247.

a liberal consensus which did not take in reform as the necessary prelude to all things desirable. Macaulay went on to claim that reformers were "delighted with the New Ministry", despite the efforts of its critics to convince them that they should oppose it. The Whigs had not insisted that reform should be made a government measure because "be Reform good or bad, it is at present evidently unattainable." To have made its adoption a condition of taking office would have been madly utopian and would have left only corrupt men in power, with the resultant hardening of extremism which Macaulay dreaded above all else.[35]

It was clear to Macaulay that haggling over any particular issue should not be allowed to prevent that strengthening of the middle ground which alone could prevent a revolutionary cataclysm. Reform might be a security against future oppression, but for immediate safety the continuation of liberal measures in all fields was requisite. As Sir Robert Wilson told Scarlett, "whilst a wish is entertained for vigorous administrative reforms, still the preservation of liberal ministry is so paramount an object, as to limit the demands to acts which may not hazard its existence." Even though reform itself might not be specifically espoused, "measures of sympathy with just constitutional jealousy are amongst those acts by which favor will be won and with that favor, strength in, as

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[35] Ibid., p.256.

well as out, of the House."[36] Lambton's justification of coalition was similar to Wilson's: since the king would never accept a purely Whig ministry, "the only rational hope... is in a government so formed as not to irritate his or the country's prejudices, or excite their alarms at innovations, and with a tendency to encourage, not resist, the general call for liberal principles."[37]

The West Briton believed that such an approach would at length have the desired reforming effect, for the installation of an administration dependent, as Canning's was claimed to be, on public opinion would mean that the force of that opinion would continue to increase and "at length it will no longer be in the power of any Minister to retain such a political nuisance as the Borough system."[38]

Others, though not entirely unsympathetic with the government's general aims, still thought reform important enough to view it as an insurmountable sticking-point to their own involvement. Thus Tavistock told Holland that he could not join such an anti-reformer as Canning, but he would support any government of which Holland was a member. He was quite prepared to see Canning "strengthened by those who have not such strong opinions on reform as I have. Moderate Whigs might without any violation of

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[36] Add. 31111, f. 341, 24 December 1827.

[37] Ellice, MS15032, f.5, Lambton to Ellice, 15 December 1827.

[38] West Briton, 1 June 1827.

principle join him, and let us radicals stand by..."[39]

Hobhouse too had Canning's stance on reform uppermost in his mind and he therefore took his place among the "watchmen" who were prepared to give the government selective support but no formal backing. He recorded in his diary that he told Burdett that "I could not bring myself to sit behind the arch-enemy of the reformers, and that having no confidence at all in Mr Canning, I could not take a step which would make it appear that I had confidence in him."[40] Albany Fonblanque also did not share his liberal contemporaries' euphoria about Canning's accession: "For many years we have been accustomed to see in Mr Canning the virulent enemy of Reform, the apologist of the cruellest oppression, the advocate of every abuse, the approver of every job."[41] There was certainly no moderation of Canning's hostility to general reform, although the Birmingham Independent, writing after his death, claimed that this hostility did not include the piecemeal transfer of the franchises of convicted boroughs. In the formation of the coalition, there was little doubt that the enfranchisement of large towns "formed a secret article of the political union between the parties."[42]

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[39] Add. 51675, ff.11-12, 13 April 1827.

[40] Recollections of a Long Life, iii, p.187, Diary, 30 April 1827.

[41] England Under Seven Administrations (1837), i, p.15.

[42] Birmingham Independent, 1 September 1827.

Whether the ministry would or would not ultimately promote the cause of reform was also an open question among the enemies of the measure. Two interesting pamphlets printed in 1827,[43] both written by anti-reformers, gave diametrically opposite views of the matter. The first expressed support for the coalition and insisted that it would not increase the "danger" of reform being passed. Failure would be "the fate of any motion of the kind at present, though enforced by the joint powers of Brougham and Canning." Canning's eloquence had acted "not only to confirm the sentiments of those who concurred with him, but, in many instances, to make converts from the opposite ranks."[44] The second pamphlet expressed the fear that the weather-cock-like Canning would "in all probability advocate Reform, &c, notwithstanding his solemn declaration to the contrary."[45] Canning could not "league with Whigs and Radicals, and Reformers, without being, in some measure, infected with their principles!"[46]

Another observer believed that Canning, unwittingly or otherwise, had actually encouraged those principles and

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[43] Anon., _A Short View of the Recent Changes; in which The Question - Does Mr. Canning's Government merit the Confidence of the Country is impartially discussed_ (1827); Anon., _A Refutation of the Principal Arguments contained in a pamphlet entitled_ (as above) (1827).

[44] _A Short View_, pp.33-4.

[45] _A Refutation_, p.16.

[46] _Ibid._, p.27.

their adherents. Reform and the Whigs had been rejected by the nation,

> "But Canning, aping supernatural pow'r
> And caring nought of measures or of men,
> Sounds the loud trump; and now proclaims the hour
> For Whigs and Radicals to rise again."[47]

However, Burdett at least was not inclined to force the issue. He had already shown a lack of impatience amounting to indifference about agitating reform, and a description of his position which he wrote when Goderich, as much an anti-reformer as his predecessor Canning, had succeeded to the premiership showed what governed his conduct when supporting the coalition in the first place. He had been thinking about making a reform speech, but

> "I am principally deterr'd by the fear of playing the game of the old faction more effectually, for I cannot conceal from myself that it is playing it, in some degree, to knock up the present administration, if such it can be call'd. A display of strong reform views would, I fear, aid them greatly, perhaps reconsolidate them, and re-unite them with the king. I rather think reform must come, if at all, like the Lord of Hosts, like a thief in the night, and that the country must be led blindfold to the point when the step must be taken, and from which there will be no power of retreating. A great splash just now would run the risk of drowning it."[48]

Whether this was the height of political sagacity or merely a lame excuse for apostasy, it got Burdett into very hot water in Westminster. The uproarious anniversary dinner of 1827 showed how fierce was the antagonism between

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[47] Huntingdon, Bedford and Cambridge Weekly Journal, 19 May 1827.

[48] Add. 47222, ff.227-8, Burdett to Hobhouse, 31 December 1827.

those who saw reform as paramount and those who took what they claimed to be a wider and more flexible view. It was, of course, Cobbett who led the attack on "the Don". Amidst cacophony, he proposed a toast to the dismissal of Canning because of his opposition to reform, and he quoted Burdett's strong reform speech at the previous year's dinner to emphasise the latter's betrayal in backing the arch anti-reformer. Burdett replied that in encouraging liberal principles, foreign and domestic, he was encouraging reform, which in any case was not the only desirable measure. "It was owing to a long chain of causes connected together, one leading on and linking itself to another, that they could hope to attain that end." This was reminiscent of Ellenborough's view that reform would follow other improvements rather than be the source from which all other benefits would flow. This view contrasted with Hunt's declaration that "all the anticipations of Sir Francis Burdett, without reform, are a mere farce and nonsense." Hunt pointed out that Canning had supported every repressive measure in the past and added that, although Canning could not have formed a government without Burdett's support, Burdett had not forced him to pledge for reform.

After a riot arising from the stewards' attempts to eject Cobbett, during which Hobhouse threatened to hit him with a wand, Nugent and Ebrington declared that they had never shrunk from affirming to Canning their commitment to reform. Russell re-iterated the view that the absence

of reform did not preclude the existence of a good minister, but he saved some of his reputation as a reformer by saying that the present House of Commons would support a bad minister as readily as a good one. He was joined in support of the ministry by Wooler, who, using a different simile but forwarding the same analysis as the anti-reforming and anti-Canning author cited above, described Canning as like an eel which had escaped from a reservoir and which "when it once got into the current, it was obliged to go, not where its will directed, but wheresoever the current took it."[49]

The Times echoed the Burdettite view that Canning's pledging for reform, Catholic Emancipation and the abolition of the Test and Corporation Acts would have ruled him out of office altogether. "Mr Canning, in taking up one of those measures, - Catholic Emancipation - has landed himself with quite as much as he can carry; one ounce more and he breaks down." The paper appealed to the "March of Mind", rather than individual politicians, to decide the fate of reform:

> "Let Mr Canning continue, and develop yet further his present liberal system of policy. Let him foster genius and promote talent; and if it be the effect of increased intelligence, diffused knowledge, and expanded mind, to create indifference to the great question of parliamentary reform, none will have a right to complain - none will or can complain - the question will have been lost in a legitimate manner in the court of Reason. If, on the contrary, it be the effect

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[49] Times, 24 May 1827.

> of a higher degree of public knowledge, and a more uncontrolled communication and expression of public opinion, to evince more clearly the necessity of reform, as the protection against the recurrence of abuses, neither the present, nor any future Mr Canning when the present shall be laid low, can prevent the question from being carried; from being carried silently and tranquilly, step by step, as the conviction of its utility is imparted to greater multitudes."

There seems to have been something of a regression here, since papers like the Times were already in the early twenties declaring that the public's education on reform was well-nigh complete and had made most people decidedly favourable to the measure. But now it was more fashionable to inculcate a correct sense of priorities: "... to begin with the most perilous and contested question of an enlightened system of policy, and to pursue the minor objects of the system afterwards, - nay, to make the immediate adoption of the great question the condition of joining in the promotion of the subordinate measures, however useful, would be preposterous and absurd."[50]

To sum up: the arguments about Canning's ministry showed that the experience of governmental liberalism before 1827 had led some politicians to believe that the great dividing line in the country was not between reformers and anti-reformers but between two groups - liberals and illiberals - who were not identifed purely by their stance on one issue. This was one way in which liberal Toryism appeared to reduce the importance of parliamentary reform, besides the most obvious factor of

[50] Ibid., 25 May 1827.

better government emanating from the old system. But the new policies were more a response to wider social and economic trends already well in motion than a package conferred from above on an unsuspecting nation by progressive theoreticians. For our purposes, the most important of these trends was the increasing public political awareness which men like Canning, whose reputation was based on his skills as a communicator, both responded to and fostered. In the view of T.S. Duncombe, "Mr Canning's brief career as Prime Minister, though productive of no great political advantage to the people, permitted a more extensive development of popular principles."[51] Such a view would fit into a general picture of the twenties as being, with respect to reform, an important "seeding time" of ideas and attitudes which would germinate in agitation and formal measures when the conditions were right.

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[51] T.H. Duncombe (ed.), The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Slingsby Duncombe (1868), i, pp.85-6.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE UTILITARIANS

> "Even now, it is impossible to disguise, that there is arising... a Republican sect, as audacious, as paradoxical, as little inclined to respect antiquity, as enthusiastically attached to its ends, as unscrupulous in the choice of means, as the French Jacobins themselves, - but far superior to the French Jacobins in acuteness and information, in caution, in patience and in resolution."[1]

This well-known passage by Macaulay is a good illustration of the trepidation that the enthusiastic adopters and adapters of the ideas of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill could arouse in the apologists for a more venerable political tradition. It was not just that the utilitarians went further on given issues than Macaulay and others would have liked; their whole philosophy of action was different, and it carried them into the most minute critique of existing systems yet seen.

However, as with other aspects of the formation of public opinion, it could not really be claimed that men like Mill simply created an attitude from thin air. A passage by J.S. Mill portrays the utilitarians as benefitting from an intellectual climate which did not owe its existence solely to them. In the twenties, "when Liberalism seemed to be becoming the tone of the times, when improvement of institutions was preached from

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[1] Edinburgh Review, xlvi, No. xci (June 1827), pp.260-1.

the highest places, and a complete change in the constitution of parliament was loudly demanded from the lowest, it was not wonderful that attention was roused by the regular appearance in controversy of what seemed a new school of writers, claiming to be the philosophers and legislators of this new tendency."[2]

William Thomas has also presented the utilitarians as providing a collection of ideas more in keeping with the spirit of the times:

> "The old agrarian radicalism, represented in its aristocratic form by Burdett and its popular form by Cobbett, was at once too archaic and too unsettling to retain its appeal in a society nervously coming to grips with the problems of industrial growth and the stabilization of commerce."

Whilst these "agrarian Radicals" put forward no new ideas and gained no new converts in the twenties, the educated young turned to the new and self-confident creed of utilitarianism.[3]

However, Cobbett did not in the twenties show any lack of self-belief in his assaults on particular strands of utilitarian thought, particularly Malthusian ideas on population, and, whereas his still influential journalism was directed by one will, the utilitarians' "press presence" was a little more diffuse. This particularly applied to what might be seen as the publishing "flagship" of the utilitarians and the foremost tangible indication of their existence, the Westminster Review.

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[2]Jack Stillinger (ed.), The Early Draft of J.S. Mill's Autobiography (Urbana 1961), p.96.

[3]William Thomas, The Philosophic Radicals: Nine Studies in Theory and Practice, 1817-1841 (Oxford 1979), pp.95-6.

J.S. Mill believed that this quarterly "gave a recognised status in the arena of opinion and discussion to the Benthamic type of radicalism quite out of proportion to the number of its adherents." But he admitted that his father was never entirely satisfied with it.[4] By 1828, it was in financial difficulties and the Mills broke with it entirely when Perronet Thompson came to dominate it. J.W. Flood concluded that under the editorship of John Bowring the Westminster could not be said to have been ideologically monolithic, representing instead the specific views of the writers of each article.[5] On the other hand, the London Magazine could still write in 1827 that "the grand distinction between the Westminster reviewers and the Edinburgh is that the former have a system."[6]

It will not do, though, to regard the utilitarians as the cohesive and rigidly doctrinaire phalanx which Macaulay seemed to be pointing at, although the idea of utilitarian rigidity was admittedly a popular one at the time. Thomas Barnes of the Times, it has been claimed, disliked the views of the "political intellectuals, political economists, and political scientists" of the

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[4] Early Draft, p.95.

[5] J.W. Flood, 'The Benthamites and Their Use of the Press, 1810-1840' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London 1974), pp.18-19.

[6] London Magazine, new srs., vii (February 1827), p.283. Quoted in George L. Nesbitt, Benthamite Reviewing. The First Twelve Years of the Westminster Review 1824-36 (New York 1934), p.65.

Morning Chronicle because "for such men doctrinal consistency was the only virtue."[7] Such a view helped the self-definition of those who favoured moderate reform consistent with ancient usages as against the "un-English" obsession with theoretical perfection. However, it could be argued that the search for the scientific principles of government entailed a greater open-mindedness than the mere adherence to old party watchwords.

According to D.P. Crook, the twenties were the decade "during which Bentham's general theories were being simplified and popularized by his followers to serve the cause of parliamentary reform."[8] James Mill's essay on Government, first published in 1820, could be taken as the starting-point for this process, although it did not gain the unqualified approval of Bentham, who disliked the setting of a high age limit for voters and the exclusion from the franchise of women.[9] Mill's and Bentham's ideas on government differed in other respects. Bentham, in his Constitutional Code, showed that he went beyond Mill's essay in doubting that a government elected by

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[7] History of the Times, 1785-1841, The Thunderer in the Making (1935), p.212.

[8] D.P. Crook, American Democracy in English Politics, 1815-50 (Oxford 1965), p.26.

[9] See Bhikhu Parekh (ed.), Bentham's Political Thought, pp.311-12. For the view that this difference of opinion illustrated the fact that Bentham's approach was often more empirical than Mill's a priori reasoning, which, in the case of the voting age proceeded from notions of maturity and respectability, see Frederick Rosen, Jeremy Bentham and Representative Democracy: A Study of the 'Constitutional Code' (Oxford 1983), p.169.

universal suffrage for a limited term could be guaranteed to have the same interests as the people at large. He therefore added other securities (which he thought would be more effective) to frequency of election. No sitting member of a legislative assembly, he believed, should be eligible for re-election until there was a pool of former members two or three times larger than the number of existing members. This would give a choice of experienced men at each election. Mere frequency of election was not enough because of the tendency of sitting members, rather than men who had no track record at all, to be re-elected. Bentham also made suggestions for the punishment of delinquent legislators, which Mill had not thought feasible. He also envisaged occasional disagreements between deputies and constituents as to the general interest, which Mill believed would be eliminated given democratic elections.[10]

Mill's essay, then, was not a universally agreed "party manifesto", and it was ambiguous enough to lead modern historians to form conflicting interpretations of it. According to Jack Lively and John Rees, the main point at issue has been whether the essay was a work of political science or of political propaganda.[11] Hamburger

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[10] Ibid., pp.170-5.

[11] Lively and Rees (eds.), Utilitarian Logic and Politics: James Mill's Essay on Government, Macaulay's Critique and the Ensuing Debate (Oxford 1978), p.6.

reckoned it was primarily a parliamentary reform polemic,[12] whilst William Thomas contended that it was, intentionally, not doctrinally clear enough to form the basis of an actual reform measure.[13] In other words, it shied away from specifically advocating the Radical programme. Wendell Carr, on the other hand, believed that it was quite clear from the essay that this was the mode of reform Mill favoured.[14]

There can be no doubt that Mill's basic premise was the inevitability of the abuse of irresponsible power, a doctrine particularly offensive to the Whigs unless limited to the Tories. Thus for Mill the main purpose of government was to minimise the evils arising from abuse and, ideally, to remove any possibility of its taking place at all. Thomas's clash with Carr centred on the interpretation of Mill's discussion of certain restrictions on universal suffrage. Thomas saw Mill's identification of certain groups who shared their interests with others as demonstrating that he was mainly pre-occupied, in the name of utility, with contracting the "choosing body" as far as possible, consistent with its still having the

[12] Joseph Hamburger, 'James Mill on Universal Suffrage and the Middle Class', Journal of Politics, xxiv, (1962), pp.167-90.

[13] William Thomas, 'James Mill's Politics: The "Essay on Government" and the Movement for Reform', Historical Journal, xii (1969), p.249.

[14] Wendell Robert Carr, 'James Mill's Politics Reconsidered: Parliamentary Reform and the Triumph of Truth', ibid., xiv (1971), pp.554-5.

same interests as the community as a whole.[15] Carr, on the other hand, saw Mill's attitude to such restrictions as far less positive; in other words, he believed that Mill thought they could be made but did not see them as overwhelmingly desirable. Mill's discussion of them was part of a typically utilitarian process of assessing various means to a given end, in this case good government as a result of proper representation, and he made it clear that universal suffrage was certain to achieve this. The essay, argued Carr, should not be taken as the definitive utilitarian statement on reform because reforms other than the utilitarian (i.e. Radical) one might have been built upon its premises.[16]

This preparedness to entertain other plans and at least not to reject them outright could be taken as an example of utilitarian open-mindedness in contrast to the intransigence of Cartwright or Hunt. The younger Mill believed that his father was "not discussing whether the suffrage ought to be restricted to less than all, but, (assuming that it is to be restricted) what is the utmost limit of restriction which does not involve a sacrifice of the securities for good government."[17] This

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[15] 'James Mill's Politics', pp.253-4.

[16] 'James Mill's Politics Reconsidered', pp.376-80. For the two further instalments of this debate, see Thomas, 'James Mill's Politics: A Rejoinder', Historical Journal, xiv (1971), pp.735-50; Carr, 'James Mill's Politics: A Final Word', ibid., xv (1972), pp.315-20.

[17] Early Draft, p.98.

statement might conceivably be interpreted as meaning that Mill did not discuss the merits of restriction because they were taken for granted, but it is more likely that he was not a zealous advocate of restriction but was prepared to accept some as long as it did not hinder the proper functioning of representative government.

It naturally has to be borne in mind what Mill was setting out to do in the essay. Modern students can gain insights from it into the utilitarian attitude to practical politics, but the fact that it appeared in a repository of general knowledge and was meant to seem like a calm, reasoned and largely abstract exposition of the "science" of government meant that it could not too obviously appear as a parliamentary reform polemic. Ricardo, like Mill a devoted advocate of the ballot, nevertheless thought Mill had done right in "not entering into the consideration of the securities for a good election, even after the right of suffrage is given to the people generally: it would have given the article too much the appearance of an essay on Reform of Parliament, which it was perhaps desirable to avoid."[18]

Yet this "scientific" approach could irritate opponents more than overtly controversial writing, since it took for granted points which were still in dispute. This was what led to Macaulay's telling attacks on Mill's

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[18] Sraffa and Dobb, Works and Correspondence, viii, p.211, Ricardo to Mill, 27 July 1820.

excessive faith in the deductive or "philosophical" method as against a less mechanistic treatment of human nature derived from a study of history and actual contemporary systems in action. Of course, the controversy was not simply about different intellectual approaches; it had a bearing on practical politics in being part of the perennial struggle between Radical and moderate reformers, which, at the time when Macaulay was writing, seemed set to take on still greater significance.

Macaulay's attack led J.S. Mill to precisely the opposite conclusion to Ricardo's; he regretted that his father did not justify himself by saying "'I was not writing a scientific treatise on politics. I was writing an argument for parliamentary reform'."[19] But James Mill himself saw that the essay was not perfectly designed for such a role; he merely thought Macaulay was attacking reason.

Nevertheless, even hostile criticism denoted that the utilitarians had a place on the reforming stage and could not be ignored. Burdett, for instance, got round to reading Mill's articles on Government, Law of Nations and the Liberty of the Press in 1823. They were, he wrote, "nothing but feeble imitations of or spun out extracts from Jeremy Bentham. However they are things one must read because they are talked about."[20]

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[19]Quoted by William Thomas, The Philosophic Radicals, p.137.

[20]Add. 47222, ff.108-9, Burdett to Hobhouse, 3 April 1823.

Although Burdett had collaborated with Bentham in 1818, his democracy (if by the twenties his creed could still be described as such) was of a different pedigree from that of the utilitarians. Burdett's reputation was built upon his emotional involvement with the people's struggles against injustice and for liberty, whereas, according to Bentham, Mill's democracy resulted less from his love of the many than from his hatred of the few.[21] J.S. Mill later angrily denied this,[22] but he did describe his father's politics in terms which showed that the latter was not a traditional "man of the people". James Mill supported democracy "not on the ground of 'rights of man', 'liberty' or any other of the phrases more or less significant by which up to that time democracy had usually been defended, but as the most essential of 'securities for good government'."[23]

It was certainly true that the utilitarians were interested in the efficient functioning of systems rather than in inherent rights which other Radicals thought essential to individual dignity. However, whilst non-utilitarian Radicals might regard democratic rights as of themselves conferring happines (in the sense of enhancing a man's self-respect) they naturally also saw such rights as the only means by which general happiness

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[21] Works, x, p.450.

[22] Alexander Bain, James Mill, a Biography (1882), p.461.

[23] Early Draft, p.100.

could be safeguarded. In other words, the vote was to be of practical use rather than just a badge of honour. Therefore, Mill, in talking of "securities", was not propounding a concept either invented by, or exclusive to, the utilitarians.

A year after Mill's essay came a more specific utilitarian reform tract: George Grote's Statement of the Question of Parliamentary Reform with a Reply to the Objections of the Edinburgh Review No. lxi. Like Mill, Grote saw the importance of arriving at a sound theory on which to base practical action. The Edinburgh had said that all attempts thus far to apply political philosophy practically had been defective and that therefore the science itself had to be improved. Grote set about contributing to this task, presenting his approach, in contrast to the hostile view of the utilitarians as ivory-tower scheme-mongers, as one of rational observation. All men acted according to their interest; "if, therefore, we wish to re-model political science, upon the principles of Bacon, and to restore it to its long lost connection with experience, we must build all its doctrines on this infallible basis."[24] This approach led Grote to justify the ballot on the grounds that a large electorate would do no good if it could be dominated by a small group. Influence need not be entirely annihilated by its introduction. It would free the votes (if not the speech)

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[24] Statement, pp.7-8.

of those who were opposed to the views of others with power to harm them, yet it would not stop those in agreement with the powerful from gaining favour by declaring their views. The claims of the Edinburgh that the ballot would deaden people's interest in public affairs was nonsense because it would be in the interests of candidates to promote political deliberation in voters.[25]

However, there was an echo of Mill's "non-doctrinaire" (or deliberately hedging) language when Grote considered the most desirable extent of the suffrage:

> "It need not be co-extensive with the community, because an aliquot part of the whole, possessing this requisite, may unquestionably be found. However the advocates of reform may repel,as visionary and chimerical, all those disastrous consequences which are imputed to universal suffrage, yet they do not urge the absolute necessity of such a system, because a majority of the population will unquestionably be sufficient for all the purposes of good government."[26]

However, later on in the work, he did justify universal suffrage on the eminently practical grounds that if the people were competent to choose the best physicians, lawyers and tradesmen to patronise, their discernment could be trusted at properly conducted elections.

A main target of Grote's attack was the Whig adherence to the idea of the representation of "classes" or separate interests, which also formed the basis of

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[25] Ibid., p.86.

[26] Ibid., p.18.

anti-reforming defences of the system. The ideal, thought Grote, of the perfectly regulated representation of interests was unattainable because either one class would be in the majority and disregard all the others, or two or more would unite with the same result. Whereas the Edinburgh saw the general interest as a composite of local and professional interests, Grote believed that it formed a minute component part of each of these interests. In other words, it was distinct from, rather than being a compound of, selfish sectional views. Knowledge of a particular subject was not essential to legislating deputies and could even be harmful: "There cannot be a worse legislator in commercial affairs than a merchant."[27]

Mill took up the attack on the interests theory of representation in his Westminster Review article of 1825, which was also directed against the Edinburgh. Unless all MPs shared their interests with the community at large, he claimed, good government would at best be hindered and at worst destroyed. The Edinburgh was not clear on whether the separate classes had an identity of interest with the community; if they had, why make a distinction between them? Mill was also keen to repel the charge, often made by those who wanted to represent Radical reformers as abstract visionaries, that the latter had no political experience: "What is political experience, but the experience of human nature in

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[27] Ibid., p.124.

political action?"[28] Like Grote's wish to conduct political inquiry on the principles of Bacon, this denoted a utilitarian desire to stress practicality and common sense. However, despite the fact that, unlike the essay on Government, this article was avowedly about reform, there were times when Mill, as in the earlier work, was so keen to flaunt his disinterestedness and attachment to a goal that he risked diluting the Radical message: "What we desire to obtain is, an elective body whose interests are identified with those of the community. This is our end. And provided that is equally well obtained, that is, with equal certainty, and equal advantage in all other respects, we are indifferent as to the means."[29]

Mill dismissed the objections to the three main Radical objectives as mere trifles since it could not be shown that the inconvenience caused by Radical reform would amount to more than all the evils of bad government, yet the admission of indifference was something which could never have come from the more "traditional" advocates of the Radical programme such as Cobbett and Hunt. Mill was probably trying to underline his lack of dogmatism at a time when universal suffrage, annual parliaments and the ballot could still have been represented as the slogans of the mindless. He had faith in the people's ability to make the correct electoral

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[28]Westminster Review, iv, No. vii (July 1825), p.218.

[29]Ibid., p.220.

choice, but, in attacking the over-reliance of the Edinburgh on the checking force of public opinion, he expressed his doubt as to whether the people would infallibly draw the correct conclusions with respect to their government's actions. Like Grote, he was suggesting that the people were competent to choose their representatives but not to judge the reasoning behind the more detailed acts of those representatives.

Such reservations about the political discernment of the masses, together with, it could be argued, the flexibility inherent in utilitarian thought, could lead to an avowed retreat from full-blown Radicalism. The Manchester Guardian, for instance, did not believe that universal suffrage would serve the principle of utility. In an obvious reference to Mill's claim (which was not in concert with his general principles) that the voting of the working classes would be influenced by the enlightened middle class, the paper contended that if a House chosen by universal suffrage did not differ from one chosen primarily by the middle class, then there could be no advantage in the former mode of election; if, on the other hand, there was a difference, "then obviously the views of the worst informed portion of society would be acted on, to the exclusion of those of the best informed." It was impossible that the middle class could have an interest opposed to the general interest, and therefore universal suffrage, which could never be

peaceably agreed to, gave no further guarantee of good government, rather the reverse.[30]

There were further less extreme instances of utilitarian caution, which lend weight to the belief that, far from being inflexible theorists, the group was more aware than some other Radicals that politics was the art of the possible. Ricardo, for instance, reckoned that reformers only wanted good government, and, granted that or a sincere pledge of it,

> "they will be satisfied, although you should not advance with the rapid steps that they think would be most advantageously taken. My own opinion is in favour of caution, and therefore I lament that so much is said on the subject of universal suffrage. I am convinced that an extension of the suffrage far short of making it universal, will substantially secure to the people the good government they wish for, and therefore I deprecate the demand for universality of the elective franchise - at the same time, I feel confident that the effects of the measure which would satisfy me would have so beneficial an effect on the public mind, would be the means of so rapidly increasing the knowledge and intelligence of the public that, in a limited space of time after the first measure of reform were granted, we might, with the utmost safety, extend the right of voting for members of Parliament to every class of the people."31

Ricardo, like most other utilitarians, believed that the ballot, as the infallible means of ensuring secrecy of election, was indispensable, unlike annual parliaments and universal suffrage. In 1828, Bentham

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30 Manchester Guardian, 8 August 1829.

31 Scotsman, 24 April 1824, 'Observations on Parliamentary Reform by the Late Mr. Ricardo'. In Place Collection, Prt. 39, iv, f.431.

suggested to O'Connell that demands about the length of parliaments and the extent of suffrage could be dropped altogether. If Radicals simply campaigned for the ballot, it would arouse less opposition than all the elements of Radical reform proposed at once, and many men who might object to having the value of their votes lowered by an extension of the franchise would welcome the freeing of their own votes.[32] Again we have here the utilitarian stress on practicality, both with regard to political strategy and to the mechanics of an electoral system.

It was a practical argument which Albany Fonblanque, editor of the Examiner after Leigh Hunt and one of the leading utilitarian journalists, cited in defence of a cautious attitude to the francise:

> "... we would not urge things to a change too instant and radical for public timidity. The suffrage need not be laid open to the desired extent in a day, or half a dozen years. Machinery would be wanting for it; and the machinery contrived for taking a moderately enlarged franchise, might be gradually stretched, so as to accommodate itself to yearly increasing numbers of electors. What we suggest, subject to correction, is the plan of throwing open the franchise to a certain rate of property, at which it may be judged prudent to commence, and year after year to lower the qualifying sum. Such an arrangement would avoid any violent shock; the common intelligence would be in progress and preparing for the discreet use of approaching rights; and the machinery would be adapting itself to the increasing demands on it by degrees, and consequently without embarrassment or confusion."[33]

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[32] Works, x, p.601, 23 September 1828.

[33] Examiner, 22 November 1829.

Such gradualist sentiment did not, of course, mean that the utilitarians had become more congenial to the Whigs, who disliked them because they (the utilitarians) were seeking to become the only credible critics of Toryism and thus the only true prophets of reform. It was significant that both Mill and Grote should have given their views on reform in the form of criticism of Edinburgh Review articles. The objections to Toryism were almost too obvious to state in any detail. On the other side, the Whigs often showed in their private and published writings an anxiety about the declining status of party politicians. This was not only the "fault" of utilitarian Radicalism, but it was particularly promoted by that creed's view of society as a mechanism in which certain groups were bound to behave in a certain way regardless of the views of individuals. It was this aspect of utilitarian thought that Brougham was attacking when he complained about the tendency of the Parliamentary History and Review to give unwarranted praise to men in office because they did not make worse use of the bad system, and unfair criticism to opposition figures, who were portrayed as mere place-hunters.[34] The Review's argument against attacking the misconduct of individuals was that the more faults an official displayed "the more effectually will he thereby expose the system", and attacks on him induced his connections to support that system. The adoption of this philosophy, thought Brougham,

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[34]Edinburgh Review, xliv, No. lxxxviii (September 1826), p.485.

would allow general misrule to go unpunished whilst only occasional improvements in certain aspects of policy would be effected.[35]

In November, Brougham gave Grey a sardonic summary of his case against the utilitarian attitude to politicians, systems and reform: "You know the pernicious heresy of that school, viz: that the ministers can do no wrong - the system being so bad, and that the least good they attempt they are to be deified for - a short recipe for making absolute monarchy."[36]

The utilitarians tended to see themselves as in a different category from party politicians. Whilst the latter were scrambling for the "loaves and fishes", and erecting ideologies merely to justify themselves, Mill and his colleagues, attached to no place-hunting machinery, could take a general view and conclude that "the very same inducements under which ministers lie to make a bad use of the powers of government, would operate on any other men if put in their places."[37] It was such statements which annoyed Brougham, who, though Flood classed him alongside Parkes and O'Connell as marginal members of the Benthamite group, had thrown in his lot with the Whigs. The utilitarian analysis seemed to deny that he and his

[35]Ibid., pp.487-8.

[36]Brougham, no number, Brougham to Grey, 26 November 1826.

[37]Mill in Westminster Review, iv, No.vii (July 1825), p.195.

colleagues could have any intellectual autonomy, and it cast them, if they were returned to office, in the role of mere guinea-pigs in a constitutional experiment about whose result Mill at least had no doubt.

How much the de-personalised reasoning which supported Mill's views became a habit of mind in England is not easy to determine. J.A. Roebuck believed that the Benthamite influence was to be traced in the changes in the way people thought rather than in dramatic political events. The utilitarian Radicals, he reckoned,

> "produced a much more serious effect on public opinion than superficial inquirers perceived, or interested ones would acknowledge. The important practical effect was not made evident by converting and bringing over large numbers of political partisans from one banner or class to another, or by making them renounce one apellation and adopt another; but it was shown by effecting the conclusions of all classes, and inducing them, while they retained their old distinctive names, to reason after a new fashion, and according to principles wholly different from those to which they had been previously accustomed."[38]

Similarly, Francis Place reckoned that the public was no longer to be beguiled by mere personality in politics. They based their judgements of politicians on the principle of utility.[39] It should, of course, be remembered that both Roebuck and Place were utilitarians themselves and therefore could not be expected to give a wholly objective view of the influence of the group. Yet utilitarian assessments of the progress of their ideas in

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[38] Quoted in Bain, Biography, p.446.

[39] Add. 35148, f.5, Place to Hobhouse, 19 December 1827.

this period were not all so self-congratulatory. In another letter, Place expressed the view that the continuation of misrule showed that utilitarianism had not yet penetrated the popular mind sufficiently. "If any very considerable portion of the people understood the principle of utility, governments would be compelled to conform thereto."[40] John Mill wrote of his father that he had embraced democracy at a time when he could not have had the smallest hope of gaining personally from the move, "even had his opinions become predominant, which he never expected would be the case during his life."[41]

Nevertheless, as far as parliamentary reform specifically was concerned, Alexander Bain saw the elder Mill as a vital figure in producing that cast of political thinking that enabled the compromise of the Reform Bill to be effected, and he suggested that even Macaulay might have resisted reform had he not come into contact with Millites at Cambridge.[42] In the train of events leading up to 1832, Bain asserted, Mill's essay on Government "was both an impelling and a guiding force; and, taken along with the other disquisitions of the author, and his influence with those that came into personal contact with him, it, in all probability, made our political history very different from what it might otherwise have been."[43]

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[40] Add. 35145, f.112, Place to Joseph Hume, 25 November 1829.

[41] Bain, Biography, p.461.

[42] Ibid., p.447.

[43] Ibid., p.215.

This last suggestion cannot, of course, ever be proved, and there is little evidence that the views of Mill and other utilitarians weighed heavily in the minds of the men who were to draw up and pilot the Reform Bill. However, it could be that at this time the groundwork was being laid whereby utilitarian ideas would influence national politics later in the century.

Francis Place showed how the Benthamite frame of mind could attract intelligent artisans, especially in London, yet, unlike Cobbett, utilitarian writers did not tailor their style to meet the tastes of a mass audience. The deadpan abstraction of Mill's essay can have had little attraction to those used to the raciness of the Political Register. The Westminster articles on reform and related topics also lacked verve and often contained tiresomely intricate syntax. Bowring, in his defence of utilitarianism in the Western Times in 1829, admitted that Bentham's language was often involved, and that this had been used as an excuse not to read him. But, argued Bowring, the products of a mind as profound as Bentham's could never be light reading. "He who will be instructed, cannot always be amused."[44] It is arguable that the work of a master satirist like Cobbett disproved this.

Nevertheless, readers could gain at least a superficial knowledge of Bentham's works through the pages

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[44] Add. 35145, f.98. Reprint of the Western Times article of 25 July 1829.

of the reviews. In the view of Sidney Smith, this was the way most people went about it. Smith himself gave a condensed version of the Book of Fallacies, and entertainingly summarised the humbugs it exposed in his imaginary "Noodles's Oration".[45]

Of course, the reviews themselves did not command a particularly wide audience, but this was not necessarily a disadvantage from the point of view of the utilitarians. Their priority was the winning over of educated opinion as the prelude to general enlightenment. J.S. Mill's view of the mechanics of political change was essentially an élitist one. He regarded the passing of Catholic Emancipation as

> "one of those great events, which periodically occur, by which the institutions of a country are brought into harmony with the better part of the mind of that country - by which that which previously existed in the minds only, of the more intelligent portion of the community, becomes the law of the land, and by consequence raises the whole of the community to its own level. The greatest advance in the national mind, until thus adopted by the government and incorporated in the institutions of the country, is the advance only of the leading minds, or those who already were furthest in advance. It does not bring forward the whole nation, but widens the distance between the advanced posts and the rear. Much as we have improved in the last twenty years, it is only a part of us that has improved. There remained millions of men in a state of the same brutal ignorance and obstinate prejudice in which they were half a century ago... The intelligent classes lead the government, and the government leads the stupid classes..."[46]

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[45]Edinburgh Review, xlii, No. lxxxiv (August 1825), pp.367, 386-8.

[46]Francis E. Mineka (ed.), The Collected Works of J.S. Mill, xii, The Earlier Letters of J.S. Mill 1812-1848, (Toronto and London, 1963), p.27, Letter 24, Mill to Gustave D'Eichthal, 11 March 1829.

Such an attitude did not denote an overwhelming anxiety to address a mass audience directly. In any case, the apparent equivocation of some passages in utilitarian statements on reform were probably less attractive to much of that audience than the straightforward, "no-questions-asked", advocacy of the three Radical panaceas epitomised by Hunt. The utilitarians' very championing of the "scientific" method, which led some to label them "doctrinaire", in fact produced a refusal to take even Radical orthodoxies for granted. It also seemed to imply that the followers of Bentham were the first ones to make a meaningful inquiry into the remedies for misgovernment, despite the fact that Major Cartwright had been constantly urging those same remedies since the 1770s. It could be argued that the utilitarians contributed little to the basic case for reform; the maxim that there should be an identity of interest between representatives and the represented might be seen as the mere statement of the obvious. In the view of C.B. Roylance Kent, the belief that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the end of government was hardly new, since Locke and Fox has said much the same thing.[47] However, from the basis of such principles, Bentham constructed detailed plans for ideal systems which carried the critique of existing ones to new heights of sophistication. As far as securities for good government were concerned, he was

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[47]C.B. Roylance Kent, The English Radicals: An Historical Sketch (1899), p. 224.

not simply a parliamentary reformer. He recognised that the secret ballot and other electoral improvements would create conditions for the promotion of the public interest at the expense of sinister interests, but he did not rule out the possibility of the latter making use of such a system. He therefore did not rely on the electoral machine alone to promote the greatest happiness principle. 'The Public Opinion Tribunal' was as important, if not more so.[48]

The utilitarians' elevation of reformism into a product of an infallible political science no doubt gave many reformers extra intellectual self-confidence. The Manchester Times, for example, recommended to its readers the Westminster article on "The Greatest Happiness Principle", which had just been published as a twopenny pamphlet "and in which those persons who are afraid, like the editor of the Guardian, of being thought reformers "after the pattern of Messrs Cobbett and Hunt" will find that universality of suffrage and annuality of election, and the vote by ballot, are advocated by the greatest jurisconsult of the age."[49]

Bentham's Book of Fallacies may well also have increased the confidence with which reformers dismissed the objections of their opponents. It reads today as one

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[48]Rosen, Jeremy Bentham and Representative Democracy, p.32.

[49]Manchester Times, 15 August 1829. Bentham had not actually written the article in question.

of the more telling applications of the analytical method to contemporary political discussion. It was relatively lucid, and it arranged the exposure of the fallacies under some quite catchy headings. "The Wisdom of our Ancestors; or Chinese Argument"; "the No Precedent Argument"; "the Hobgoblin Argument, or, No Innovation"; and "the Snail's pace Argument"[50] were all common features of the anti-Radical case, and it was no doubt helpful to Radicals to have them neatly categorised and demolished in a single work.

However, the utilitarians did perhaps show an excessive faith in the correctness of their own reasoning. "To us," James Mill wrote of his arguments for reform, "it appears that nothing but a due consideration of the evidence is wanting to render assent to the conclusions unavoidable."[51] It was this sort of statement that could antagonise others who were working broadly for the same cause.

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[50] Parekh, Bentham's Political Thought, pp.233-46.

[51] Westminster Review, iv, No.vii (July 1825), p.233.

CHAPTER NINE

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE DIFFUSION OF KNOWLEDGE

Perhaps more than in any previous period, men in the 1820s were aware that they lived at a time of intellectual progress and of important developments in the field of mass communication. The appearance of the Westminster Review, the foundation of University College London to provide non-exclusive education for the commercial and industrial middle-classes, and the formation of Mechanics' Institutes and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge were some of the milestones in a process which contemporaries clearly identified and labelled, sometimes derogatively, the "March of Mind" or the "March of Intellect". The process was very important to the debate on reform in that it gave rise to claims by reformers that the increasing political literacy of the masses made their general admission to the constitution both safe and salutary, whilst on the other side it was argued that the success which an increasingly well-informed and organised public opinion enjoyed in getting itself listened to by government obviated any need for change and that a system which allowed such intellectual advance to take place did not deserve the obloquy heaped upon it by reformers.

A notable instance of this response was Canning's reply in 1822 to Russell's great statistical set-piece on the spread of knowledge, which was one of the major

features of his speech in support of his reform motion of that year. Mrs Arbuthnot took a similar view to Canning. "One would think," she commented on Russell's speech, "the natural feeling to arise in one's mind in answer to all this would be 'in God's name let alone the Constitution under which so fair a fabric has been raised. Let us be thankful and quiet.'"[1] Yet, whilst increasing intelligence could be claimed as the offspring of the old system, there was a strong Tory impulse to deplore any such advance by the masses or, alternatively, an anti-reforming position could be bolstered by denying that it had taken place at all among the lower ranks of the politically excluded. Place believed that all ministerialists laughed at the "March", but Hobhouse corrected him by saying that some welcomed it whilst others, like Eldon, believed it would lead to revolution.[2]

Tory uneasiness was no doubt fuelled by the fact that many comments on the "March" stressed that it was not only a process whereby more people had access to existing knowledge but also the creator and encourager of a questioning frame of mind. Thus James Shergold Boone, in his versified portrait of the spirit of the age, described how accepted wisdom was being challenged in all areas, religion and philosophy as well as politics:

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[1] Journal, i, p.159, 26 April 1822.

[2] Add. 35148, ff.5-6, 19 and 21 December 1827.

"Thus man's inquiring spirit now displays
Its active ardour in a thousand ways.
We, modern sages, scrupulously just,
Nothing can take for granted, or on trust."[3]

Similarly, Carlile attributed the increased clamour about a deficiency of liberty to the fact that "we have a better discernment of what is right than our forefathers had."[4]

Thomas Hodgskin, in Labour Defended, stressed how this phenomenon described by Boone and Carlile applied particularly to the working classes. In a passage which clearly shows the author's sense of a new era, he claimed that labourers "are now only for the first time beginning to acquire as extensive a knowledge of the principles of government as those who rule." They would thus closely scrutinise all institutions and attack them if they were found wanting.[5] An example of the practical confirmation of these words was provided in 1826, when it was remarked that "lean, unwashed artisans" in Birmingham discussed "the maxims of government and the conduct of their rulers quite as rationally as some of the theorists in higher places."[6] William Lovett described how he gained a political education in this period through membership

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[3]Men and Things in 1823 (1823), Epistle II.

[4]An Effort to Set at Rest Some little Disputes and Misunderstandings between the Reformers of Leeds, upon the subject of some late Deputy Meetings and a Declaration of Sentiments arising therefrom (1821), pp.8-9.

[5]Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital (1922 edition), p.101.

[6]Mechanics' Magazine, 3 June 1826. Quoted by Asa Briggs, The Age of Improvement (1959), p.223.

of a small literary association of working men called "the liberals" and through attendance at London coffee house debates involving such "celebrities" as John Gale Jones, Robert Taylor and Richard Carlile.[7]

In a period of minimal agitation, it was natural to assume that, where it survived, working-class reformism took the form of quiet study and reasoned debate. Archibald Prentice noted that after 1820, instead of large meetings, "there were the little congregations of the workshop and at the fireside, at which the principles of representation were calmly discussed, and comparatively sound opinions formed, as to what ought to be the real objects of a government."[8]

Like James Mill, Albany Fonblanque noted in a rather puzzled tone in 1828 that corruption was better understood than ever before "and yet, on the part of the popular champions, the demand for the remedy has been abating as the sense of the evil has been growing, and within the last two years the question, as it is called, has altogether slumbered."[9] It could be argued that this was not as paradoxical as it seemed because periods of political calm, whilst they might furnish

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[7] The Life and Struggles of William Lovett in his pursuit of Bread, Knowledge and Freedom (1876), pp.34-6.

[8] Historical Sketches, p.200.

[9] England Under Seven Administrations, i, p.175.

fewer practical examples of the evil effects of the bad system, were the best times for the diligent acquisition of detailed political knowledge which could be put to use when controversy did flare up. This argument of course implies that some outside stimulus was needed to make the nation's growing reformism really noticeable. Fonblanque in effect supplied an answer to his own riddle when, also like Mill, he put forward what might be called the "germination" theory of public opinion. "The minds of men," he wrote in a retrospective introduction to Seven Administrations, "had received impressions and formed conclusions, which lay, like the writing in sympathetic ink, wanting only warmth to produce them in vivid character."[10] Croker, looking back thirty years, used a different metaphor to describe a similar idea: Reform "was in a very slumbering state, but of so combustible a nature that when the match was once applied, it blazed up and exploded with a fury that surprised and astonished and alarmed those who had introduced it..."[11]

The silent progress of ideas was also a concept resorted to by the Nottingham Review when it attempted to rescue reform from alleged oblivion:

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[10] Ibid., Introduction, p.ix.

[11] Croker Papers, iii, p.374, Croker to Guizot, 14 July 1857.

> "The Reasons for Reform and millions of copies of little publications of a similar nature, which issued from the press a few years ago, are not all destroyed; thousands of them are yet to be found in the cottages of the poor, and on the book shelves of the tradesmen and mechanic[s], and in the very nature of things, they cannot fail to be perused by those younger branches of the family who are advancing into life, on whose minds they are calculated to make an indelible impression."[12]

The argument was, in effect, that working men were now reformers not because their stomachs were empty but because their minds were full. Tranquillity enabled them to acquire a firm intellectual base for their political views, to which could be added the motivating passion when conditions allowed. Colonel Fletcher had feared in 1821 that Radical publications had done irreperable "damage" to the people's habits of thought. It might be possible, he told Henry Hobhouse, to set up a loyalist club at Bolton, "but it cannot be concealed that the elasticity of the public mind to such good purposes, has been much weakened within these few years past by the operation of the deleterious poison sprung from a licentious press."[13]

Two modern historians of lower-class literacy in the nineteenth century have given similar views of the extent of popular interest in politics at this time. In the view of R.K. Webb,

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[12] Nottingham Review, 25 November 1825.

[13] HO 40/16, 21 January 1821.

> "It was not easy to escape from politics in nineteenth-century Britain. It filled the newspapers; it was a principle means of mass entertainment. Economic and social protests almost invariably turned to political expression: it was the programme preached by reformers to an unenfranchised populace; it was the bias from which none of the industrial movements has been able to remain immune."14

For R.D. Altick, the circulations of the Black Dwarf, Republican and Political Register may have been reduced by the Six Acts,

> "but the excitement of the 1820s - the swelling demand for parliamentary reform, the trial of Queen Caroline, the controversy over Catholic Emancipation - forbade that the popular interest in current events which they had aroused should die away. The day had passed for ever, indeed, when the rank and file of the English population could remain indifferent to the course of political events."15

This passage is particularly reminiscent of some contemporary comment. In the view of Francis Place, popular political involvement was now linked to greater popular discernment. The people, he told Hobhouse, would no longer be satisfied with mere slogans like "Wilkes and Liberty" or Charles James Fox's "the Cause, the Cause". If a man now wanted influence with the masses he had clearly to state his views so that their utility could be fairly assessed.[16]

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[14] R.K. Webb, The British Working-Class Reader, 1790-1848: Literacy and Social Tension (1955), p.83.

[15] R.D. Altick, The English Common Reader. A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900 (Chicago 1957), p.328.

[16] Add. 35148, f.5, Place to Hobhouse, 19 December 1827.

Such a probing and dispassionate approach was probably encouraged by the many analyses of parliamentary constituencies, Commons divisions and MPs' backgrounds which appeared at this time in pamphlet form or in newspapers and which no doubt facilitated the exercise of the "statistic" function of Bentham's "Public Opinion Tribunal".[17] They were all written from a reforming viewpoint, but their format varied. 'An Alphabetical List', for example, was a detailed tabulation of the status and voting behaviour of MPs which claimed to show that the eighty-nine who, according to a recent return, were receiving salaries, profits and emoluments formed "the bulk of that phalanx who regularly assemble to out-vote those members who are returned to Parliament by the voice of the people."[18] 'To the Independent Electors', by the same author, concentrated on the constituencies, dividing them into eight classes and making lengthy remarks which, though the author claimed that he was simply stating facts and did not intend "to enter on any detailed elucidation

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[17] Examples are The Electors' Remembrancer (1822), 'An Alphabetical List of the Members of the House of Commons', Pamphleteer, xxi (1822-3), No. xlii, pp.293-324, The Necessity of Parliamentary Reform Demonstrated by an Arithmetical Statement of the Inadequate Representation of the People of Great Britain... (1820), A Peep at the Commons... (1820), 'Analysis of the British House of Commons as at present constituted...', including an address 'To the Independent Electors of Representatives in Parliament', Pamphleteer, xxii (1823), No. xliv, pp.451-74.

[18] Pamphleteer, xxi (1822-3), No. xlii, p.301.

of the merits or demerits of the British House of Commons as at present constituted", clearly highlighted the system's defects.[19] A Peep at the Commons, which was not specifically addressed to electors and only cost sixpence, covered more or less the same ground but in a somewhat more trenchant and lively style. For example, its full title promised, besides copious amounts of information, "some curious and Amusing Anecdotes, and other Interesting and Instructive Particulars." Readers would not have been disappointed.

The heightened awareness of the need for reform which these publications encouraged was not, of course, seen as being limited to working men. Prentice believed that, as well as fostering workshop discussions, the period after the 1820 trials, when Radicals were forced to be silent, gave men of the middle-classes "an interval of calm, in which they could quietly consider the defects of our representative system, undisturbed by the agitation which had raged around them."[20] The alleged accession of mass middle-class support was seen as one of their major trump cards by the moderate reformers, who knew they were on far firmer ground in eulogising the intelligence of that rank, which had a reassuringly large amount of property to its name, than they would have been in stressing the advances made by a class which

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[19] Ibid., xxii (1823), No. xliv, p.472.
[20] Historical Sketches, p.199.

not long before seemed to some to be threatening to overthrow the state. Even Ricardo, who was as Radical as any in his advocacy of the ballot, told Mill that as a result of Hume's exertions "I really believe it is a better class of the people that are now active than that which had been previously operated upon by Cobbett and Hunt."[21]

Mill may have been thinking of such a "better class" when he described what he hoped would be the readership of the Westminster Review: "We may be sanguine enough, or silly enough, or clear-sighted enough, to believe, that intellectual and moral qualities have made a great progress among the people of this country, and that the class who will really approve our endeavours, in favour of good government, and of the happiness and intelligence of men, are a class sufficiently numerous to reward our endeavours."[22] Neither he nor Ricardo had put a specific socio-economic label on this class, and it could well have contained some calm and enlightened ex-members of the "mobocracy". But, in Mill's case, the fact that he was discussing the readers of a comparatively expensive and demanding quarterly, along with other indications in the same article, suggest that he was thinking primarily of the middle classes when

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[21] Works and Correspondence, ix, pp. 119-20, 10 December 1821.

[22] Westminster Review, i, No.i (January 1824), p.222.

he considered the "March of Mind". His main criticism of existing periodical literature, for instance, was that, to gain the immediate popularity essential to its commercial success, it had to pander to prejudices and hence hinder the progress of right opinions. That Mill was particularly concerned about the effects of this phenomenon on the lower classes was shown by his belief that publications addressed to the latter, which had increased in number with the spread of literacy, had been bad in their effects because their producers were bad and silly men who thrived in the poor state of instruction in the country.[23]

Mill's was not the only slightly discordant note sounded by reformers in the general chorus of praise for the power of the press which came from that side of the political spectrum. Brougham believed that the press played a positive role in sustaining erroneous beliefs. He denied Canning's assertion that Crown influence and public opinion were separate counter-weights. The former was exerted on public opinion as well as on MPs' votes. "Even the press, of which so much is said, works for the established system with all its abuses. The dispensers of wealth and honours can use it, and do employ it, to promote their corrupt views, and we doubt if, at any period of our history, a greater abundance of venal writers was

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[23]*Ibid.*, pp.207-10.

ever known to receive protection and encouragement from the rulers of the country and their immediate dependants."[24]

Hazlitt also touched upon the potential the press had for doing evil (i.e. retarding reform) as well as good in an article in the Edinburgh. He began with a celebration of the growth of the medium: "... let Reviews flourish - let Magazines increase and multiply - let the Daily and Weekly Newspapers live for ever! We are optimists in literature, and hold, with certain limitations, that, in this respect, what ever is, is right!"[25] But the writers who used personal invective to discredit advanced political ideas obviously did not come under this benediction. They had built, claimed Hazlitt, a new Temple of Fame "as an outwork to the rotten boroughs, and the warders were busy on the top of it, pouring down scalding lead and horrible filth on all those who approached, and demanded entrance, without well-attested political credentials."[26] The public ought not to tolerate this, "but the truth we fear is, that the public, besides their participation in the same prejudices, are timid, indolent, and easily influenced by a little swaggering and an air of authority."[27]

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[24] Edinburgh Review, xxxvii, No. lxxiv (November 1822), p.394.

[25] Ibid., xxxviii, No. lxxvi (May 1823), p.358.

[26] Ibid., p.373.

[27] Ibid., p.377.

But, despite the possibility that its power could be abused, the growth in the periodical press was generally a matter for satisfaction for reforming or liberal authors, since it both promoted and indicated favourable developments. Thus, in the same volume of the Westminster in which Mill had expressed his reservations about some popular papers, W.J. Fox noted in generally approving tones that "shoals of twopenny magazines issue from the press, some of them respectably got up, and circulating to the amount of several thousands weekly. In short, the prodigiously increased importance of the people is recognized in the speeches of the statesman, the sermons of the divine, the lucubrations of the author, and the criticisms of the reviewer." The talent engaged on newspapers was

> "of a superior order to what was formerly employed, and [papers] are the not infrequent vehicle of communication between the very noblest minds, and the common sense and heart of the many. True, they are party engines; they vituperate and misrepresent for party purposes: they may often mislead, often inflame, but to be effective engines they must be conducted with ability, they must meet the demand for fact and argument, a demand which 'grows by what it feeds upon.'"[28]

A similar assessment could also appear in the Tory Quarterly Review. C.E. Dodd, in an article in which he rejected charges that the libel law was bad because it was ill-defined, acknowledged that the press had grown in quality as well as size.[29]

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[28] Westminster Review, i, No. i (January 1824), pp.2-3, 6-7.

[29] Quarterly Review, xxxv, No. lxx (March 1827), pp.567-8.

'Liberal' observers usually claimed that this could do their cause nothing but good. Tory uneasiness about the growth of the press was, they argued, to be expected, since that growth was, in the main, both a symptom and the cause of the decay of illiberal ideas.[30] Tories would stress the causal role; in other words, they believed that designing journalists had first conjured up a demand for new ideas which they went on to exploit and nurture. George IV, for instance, reckoned that the public opinion lauded by the Radicals during the Queen Caroline Affair was manufactured in a gullible people by the press and other "collateral engines."[31]

There was no clear-cut and universally accepted analysis of the causal relationship between press and opinion. James Montgomery of the Sheffield Iris saw the process thus: "Newspapers are first what public opinion makes them, then by a peculiar reaction, they make public opinion what they please, so long as they act with discretion and seem to follow while in reality they lead."[32] An assessment of the way in which the Times became "the

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[30] In a letter to George Pryme in October 1827, Daniel Sykes reported that a friend of his had toured through the populous areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire and had "met few well-instructed persons who were not Anti-Tories." George Pryme, Memoir of the Life of Daniel Sykes Esq., MA and MP (Wakefield 1834), p.32.

[31] A. Aspinall (ed.), The Letters of George IV, 1812-30 (1938), ii, pp.377-8.

[32] Sheffield Iris, 4 January 1820.

leading journal of Europe" also stressed the dual nature of this interaction. The official history of the paper described how Thomas Barnes kept in touch with the heart-beat of the nation in the post-war years through building up a network of socially diverse contacts. Thus "the secret of those changes in policy which drew upon the Times the nickname of "The Turnabout" lay precisely in the fact that Barnes consulted, first, public interest, and secondly, public opinion... The Times, not being tied to a party, could afford to vary its expressions in accordance with the ebb and flow of public sentiment. It could direct and it could indicate public opinion."[33] According to the same work, the Queen Caroline affair was an important factor in the achievement of such status by the Times. When the excitement had died away, the paper "found that the new and keen interest shown by the country in its royal governors and their ministers remained. The Times set itself to sustain and vitalize the growing forces of public opinion in England." Since its pro-Queen stance had raised circulation from 7,000 to more than 15,000, strength was acquired to proceed further in the same vein.[34] Henry Hunt even claimed that the affair had made the paper into the Radicals' biggest ally. It was "daily inundating the whole country with the most powerful, most efficient, and most radical truths...

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[33] History of the Times, 1785-1841, The Thunderer in the Making (1935), p.207.

[34] Ibid., pp.242-3.

> "The editor of the Times says he is no friend to the Radicals, but while he continues to disseminate the purest radical principles, under the cloak of abusing the Radicals; while he daily sends forth his irresistible and forcible radical doctrines into every town in England, into every coffee room, and reading room in town and country, as well as into the houses of thousands of the most respectable families in the kingdom; while he does this and with the greatest talent too, he may profess, if he pleases, to dislike the Radicals. I, for one, will forgive him with all my heart."[35]

According to F.K. Hunt, a paper could even gain influence by going somewhat against the grain of public opinion. He wrote of Black of the Morning Chronicle that in encountering "some of the strongest prejudices of Englishmen, it may be doubted whether he took the best means of promoting the sale of the Paper, but he had much influence in the country, through the partisans he obtained in the Provincial Press."[36]

Whatever the true nature of the interaction between the press and opinion, the friends of progressive measures, seeing that statistics were so much on their side, liked to stress how papers throve by meeting an existing demand. Thus Gibbons Merle claimed that the prospectus of the John Bull, the scurrilous ministerial paper, led many in London to believe that it would be "a good sound radical reform newspaper", and thus demand for the first number was great. Merle went on to claim that four-fifths of the

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[35] Memoirs, i, To the Radical Reformers, 17 November 1820, pp.9-10.

[36] F.K. Hunt, The Fourth Estate: Contributions towards a History of Newspapers, and of the Liberty of the Press (1850), ii, p.112.

national weeklies in 1829 were liberal, and that the purchasers of liberal newspapers outnumbered the purchasers of anti-liberal ones by nine-and-a-half to one. There was a similar position in the provincial press, where, of 250 titles, there were four times as many liberals as ultras. The coffee houses had aided this spread of liberalism, since it was fair to estimate that in them each copy was read by thirty people. Therefore, adding together the increases in circulation of evenings, dailies and weeklies and multiplying by thirty, a figure of 480,000 new readers, not counting the provincial press, was obtained. From that it could be estimated that about one eighteenth of the population read newspapers, a great demonstration of the "March of Mind".[37]

Liberalism was not a synonym of reformism, but it was a creed of which reform was a component, if not an all-eclipsing one. Its ascendancy in this period was taken for granted by Henry Fox Bourne. In a chapter entitled "The Radical Revolt, 1826-36", he asserted that whereas the foundation of papers like the Manchester Guardian, the Scotsman, the Leeds Mercury and the Liverpool Mercury had clearly demonstrated the surge of liberalism or Radicalism in the provinces, the only strong provincial Tory papers were those kept up by outside help in Radical strongholds.[38]

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[37] Westminster Review, x, No. xx (April 1829), pp.477-9.

[38] English Newspapers, ii, p.45.

He was not alone among historians in seeing a link between the rise of the press and advanced political opinions. W.H. Wickwar, in his definitive study of the fight to make the press the true reflection of public opinion rather than an auxiliary of the powerful, believed that that fight and the reform movement "were two aspects of a single movement to secure the development of the constitution in accordance with the desires of the people."[39]

That the popular or "liberal" side were seen as winning the contest is an impression not solely derived from exultant floods of statistics in the Westminster Review. Anti-reformers were aware of it too. In 1822, Croker believed that almost the whole press was "loud for reform, and I believe I may say with truth that such is the apathy, or the timidity, on our side of the question that, except an annual speech of Mr Canning at a Liverpool Dinner, and the occasional article of some obscure man of letters in the Quarterly Review, nothing is spoken or written to oppose the torrent of the reformers."[40]

An anonymous pamphleteer had been aware of this situation two years earlier and had issued an ideological call to arms to the loyal. He advocated the formation of anti-Radical societies to propagate right ideas among the

[39] W.H. Wickwar, The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press (1928), p.305.

[40] Croker Papers, ii, p.52, Croker to Peel, 1 February 1822.

poor, and he defended free discussion between the Radicals and their opponents in order to "let belief wrestle with belief". A big effort was needed from the loyal to bring the upper and lower ranks closer together. "We cannot surely begin too soon to vindicate under circumstances like the present, the system, to use the word, of boroughmongering."[41] This differed from the merely persecuting and censoring approach of the "Bridge Street Gang" in that it was an acknowledgement that the Radicals were better fought with their own weapons than with those of oppression.

In 1821, two homely little parables[42] were published which, as the nom de plume in the second title suggests, were not necessarily anti-reforming but they were strongly anti-Radical. In the advertisement for Will Waver, it was denied that, since the effervescence of public opinion had already largely subsided, the story came too late to do any good. This suggests that the publication was designed to take its place in the calm deliberation upon the nature of political authority in which returning tranquillity and the "March of Mind" were enabling the lower orders to indulge. However, its readers were not thought capable

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[41] Anon., The Oppositionist; or Reflections on the present state of Parties; Accompanied by a proposal for a new system of reform, interspersed with a few occasional remarks on the trial of the Queen (1820).

[42] Anon., Will Waver or Radical Principles, A Tale: Jem Gudgeon, or Radical Conduct. By a Reformer... (Both Oxford 1821).

of handling abstract intellectual concepts, so the message was put across through the vernacular conversations of Jem Gudgeon, a hot reformer; Will Waver, his good-natured but easily-influenced friend; and Master Goodman, the defender of the old order. Thus, in chapter three, "Some say, Let us have a thorough Radical Reform", Goodman reports that Sam Stitch the tailor is complaining that the hedge made by Gudgeon at the bottom of his (Stitch's) garden does not keep the pigs out and he therefore has half a mind to pull it down and build a better one himself.

> "Why there now, said Goodman, you are angry enough with Master Stitch, when he finds fault with your work, and can laugh at him for talking about what he does not understand. But now would it not be as well if you yourself would stick to your spade and hatchet, and not go about to patch up constitutions?... it is as much for the interest of the rich as the poor to alter things for the better. And so, neighbour, let us leave it to them to bring it about quietly, and as every honest man would wish it to be done. And let us rather wait patiently, than hurry the law-makers on too fast... And be sure, neighbour, the longer we stand quiet, the more people will be of one mind, as to some change being necessary, if things do not become better. For it all comes of violent reformers and jacobins, that honest quiet men are frightened into supporting what is bad, for fear of something worse."[43]

This was not a completely inflexible attitude to constitutional adaptation, but it was a denial to the lower classes of an autonomous political voice. In the view of this writer, their political education consisted of an admonition not to concern themselves with such things and to stick to knowing their place and being good Protestants.

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[43] Will Waver, pp.15,17.

This refusal to accept the views of the humblest classes as valid public opinion was given more formal expression in the period's most extensive treatment of the subject, W.A. Mackinnon's On the Rise, Progress and Present State of Public Opinion, in Great Britain and Other Parts of the World (1828). Here a clear distinction was drawn between public opinion proper, the strength of which corresponded to that of the middle class, and "popular clamour", which "is powerful in proportion as the lower class is ignorant and numerous, when compared to the other classes." Thus, popular clamour had probably less influence in England than in any other state in Europe because public opinion there was so strong.[44] The two could not both be powerful, because one was based on ignorance and the other on information.

As far as politics were concerned, Mackinnon used his view of the great growth of public opinion since 1815 to defend a largely anti-reforming position, asserting that the constitution's mere survival showed that it had the sanction of public opinion. "Suppose that (which is most unlikely) any change was required by public opinion - this sentiment being so powerful, there could be no opposition, and therefore no struggle and no convulsion would ensue."[45] England was enjoying as much freedom as could be desired, and no power or privilege

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[44]On the Rise, pp.17-18.

[45]Ibid., p.175.

was allowed to exist unless it afforded some advantage to the whole community. The House of Commons represented public opinion more effectually than it would if elected by universal suffrage and the ballot, in which case the lower class and popular clamour would dominate and, since the House of Lords would continue to represent the upper class, there would be no room in the middle for the most important rank.[46] "It seems," Mackinnon concluded, "that a reform in the representation would, in fact, be unsupported by public opinion, although popular clamour would be in its favour. If public opinion influences parliament as much as is requisite, it seems that public opinion, having such influence, cannot wish for a change in the mode of representation."[47]

This was logical, but it was not always the case in reality. Place could write, with reference to the repression of 1817 and 1819, that "notwithstanding all the energy and impudence of ministers, all the efforts of the aristocracy to sustain them, the power of public opinion was silently yet continually bringing them under its influence."[48] Yet this did not mean that Place came to see reform as less important. That he was not an isolated case is suggested by Peel's well-known remark

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[46]Ibid., p.180.

[47]Ibid., pp.188-200.

[48]Add. 27809, f.47.

to Croker in 1820: "It seems to me a curious crisis when public opinion never had such an influence on public measures, and yet never was so dissatisfied with the influence which it possessed."[49] To some extent this was a result of the reformers wishing to have their cake and eat it. On the one hand, without the continued stressing of the disparity of sentiment between parliament and people they could not defend their views on improvement, but on the other, victories for the people, such as the dropping of the Bill of Pains and Penalties, could not go uncelebrated and were put forward as illustrations of a power in the land which ought formally to be allowed into the constitution.

Nevertheless, the success of public opinion (not merely its strength) led Peter Fraser to question the traditional historiography of the period leading up to 1832.[50] Joining in the fashion of dismissing the power of "Old Corruption" as a Radical myth, he attacked the following elements in the established analysis: the view of parliament as being out of touch with public opinion through being dominated by patronage-wielding nobles who ruled in their own interests; and the idea that there were frequent clashes between a repressive parliament and an assertive public opinion, especially at times of

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[49] Croker Papers, i, p.170, 23 March 1820.

[50] Peter Fraser, 'Public Petitioning and Parliament before 1832', History, xlvi (1961), pp.195-211.

economic slump, until the danger was removed by the 1832 Act.[51]

Developments like the extension of select committees to cover every field of inquiry, Fraser argued, indicated a far less confrontational relationship between public opinion and the unreformed system than had generally been described. The heroes of Fraser's story, as of Mackinnon's, were the middle class. They, for instance, got the renewal of the income tax dropped in 1816, and their political supremacy was confirmed by the failure of the working-class reform meetings of 1817 and 1819 and the great impact of the middle-class-supported meetings of 1820-3. Far from being completely immune to outside influence, "the Commons responded effectively to articulate opinion out of doors."[52]

Why, then, was reformism apparently on the increase? For Fraser, the character of politics in the twenties was not yet actually democratic but it had acquired many of the assumptions of democracy. It could be that to some extent the system itself encouraged this by getting people used to having an influence on politics; this takes us back to Peel's conundrum: a people influential but still dissatisfied. For all the alleged responsiveness of the system, reformism was predominantly a symptom of such dissatisfaction, and the "democratic assumptions",

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[51]_Ibid._, pp.198-9.

[52]_Ibid._, p.207.

rather than being accepted by everyone who mattered, could be a source of conflict between parliament and public opinion.

Fraser set about exploding the "myths" on which the reforming case was built, but he also quoted Croker's remark on the spread of reformism as an illustration of how the twenties equalled the decades after the Reform Act in the liberality and popularity of their politics.[53] But if Croker is to be believed, and if the system was really so responsive, why was not a reform act carried then? Or, conversely, if the system was so responsive, why should the formation of Radical "lumps" have particularly struck Croker? Developments like the full-scale reporting of parliamentary debates, the tendency of parish meetings to regard themselves as "the channels for the voice of the people"[54] in both local and national affairs, and the badgering of MPs at county meetings do not of themselves prove the whole of Fraser's case; they merely illustrate what few contemporaries disputed: that an assertive public could not be kept down, not that it usually got its way. The numerous reform petitions of 1820-3 did carry the opinion of a fair proportion of the community into the Commons, but, like many others that had gone before them, they produced no practical result. Hence the many complaints on the part of reformers about the futility of petitioning.

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[53]*Ibid.*, p.205.

[54]*Ibid.*, p.204.

It could, however, be argued that reform was a special case in that it involved a possibly damaging alteration of a system which responded readily but not slavishly to public opinion; reform could therefore be justly resisted even though, paradoxically, people's support for it had been made clear. The people expressing such support could be represented as vociferous but untypical minorities.

It could well be that some of the reformers' complaints were unjustified. Their opponents were in a particularly strong position to argue this when "liberal Toryism" was in full swing. In particular, Fraser's rejection of the view that the influence of the Crown was a formidably harmful counterbalance to public opinion seems now to be generally accepted. However, this study is more concerned with why, how and when such complaints were aired, and not with a minute investigation into their justification. Suffice it to say that there was enough wrong with parliament for reform to be a prominent issue in the early twenties and for agitation in its favour to return in 1830 with unprecedented velocity, despite all the liberalism and victories for public opinion that had gone before.

Thus, public opinion was seen by the reformers as one of their main weapons, but, just as some did not see the growth of the press as a wholly unmixed blessing, so there were doubts about public opinion, and these were

not only voiced in the immediate circumstances of political tranquillity. Russell's Essay on the History of the English Government and Constitution was a more general assessment of the state at which the country had arrived, and the view of public opinion contained in it was a very much more cautious one than might have been expected from an opposition politician: "I doubt whether public opinion has increased so much in quality, value, and weight as it has in bulk and velocity."[55] Instead of praising the "March of Mind", Russell stressed that public opinion had been somewhat corrupted by the decline of constitutional learning and esteem for ancient usages, and by the rise of manufacturing towns with inhabitants whose "notions of government vary with every breath of prosperity or adverse fortune: at one time they are indifferent when the whole constitution is menaced; at another, they listen to revolutionary plans and incomprehensible reforms." Extremism had increased and the people were demanding an unrealistic ultra-consistency from statesmen. Those who went over to the Treasury had its rewards to compensate them for attacks, while their adversaries were obliged "to suspend their attendance to public affairs, in order to reconcile some discrepancy which appears between their opinions on reform, at an interval of twenty years." Russell clearly believed that the people were inquiring a little too closely into politicians' conduct and he

[55] Essay, p.433.

wanted them to restore the trust in public men (at least the opposition ones) which he, like several of his Whig colleagues, saw as being eroded. He completed this upbraiding of the people by stating that public opinion could influence parliamentary proceedings and that therefore "the abuses which prevail in the House of Commons, great and glaring as they are, subsist only by permission of the people."[56]

In contrast to this, John Williams, the Lincoln MP, claimed at an 1822 meeting of the Cheshire Whig Club that if public opinion really had any power the ministers would not have remained in office for half-an-hour. "What had public opinion been able to do? Did it punish ministers for acts of gross corruption? Was it able to prevail on the King to turn out ministers for their most miraculous and unheard-of persecution of the Queen?"[57]

Benthamite considerations of reform also played down the capabilities of public opinion. George Grote believed that a reliance on it to check bad government at best rendered government inert, whilst proper reform set the enormous influence of the governing class in the right direction. Public opinion could be perverted and deceived by a devious government and was in any case not a subtle enough instrument: "How can it keep steadily in view the nice and ever-varying boundary between

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[56] Ibid., pp.436, 444-5, 467.

[57] Morning Chronicle, 12 October 1822.

necessary and unnecessary taxation? - How unravel the subtle pretexts, with which the government will continually preface their factitious demands? - How seize on the precise instant, when a once useful placeman is no longer required?"[58]

Mill also dwelt on this theme in his attack on the views of reform put forward by the Edinburgh Review. It was nonsense, he argued, to contend that the only real defence of the people's liberty lay in a readiness to rebel against a government separated from their interests. "This is exactly the idea of the despotism of Turkey." The Edinburgh suggested no concrete plan for the securing of better government and relied wholly on public opinion, yet the "public" could not, on the Edinburgh's own terms, mean the best instructed people because sheer force of numbers was needed to keep government in terror of public reaction. Mill did not believe that the people were capable of the high task which the Whigs seemed to assign to them. To do so "would be to suppose them wiser than the government itself."[59]

It was typical of Benthamite clear thinking that they should not compromise the case for reform by extravagant praise of the people's influence, which might on the surface have seemed to have been the height of liberality. The Examiner, for instance, believed in 1821 that it had become

[58] Statement of the Question of Parliamentary Reform with a Reply to the Objections of the Edinburgh Review No. lxi (1821), p.37.

[59] Westminster Review, iv, No. vii (July 1825), pp.218-20, 226-7.

clear that executive influence "can be so systematised as to baffle public opinion altogether." Its view had not changed at the end of the decade: "It is the fashion of our day to over-estimate the influence of public opinion, which is capable of much, but not of all that is supposed of it. Public opinion is one of those giants that die on the cast of the stone; and we see that whenever it is boldly defied, it is conquered. Witness Parliamentary jobs, passim, Palace-building &c."[60]

Bentham himself saw public opinion as an indispensable component of a good constitution, a "tribunal" which included more or less everyone who took an interest in public affairs, "a system of law emanating from the body of the people." In his view, its operations were largely benign:

> "Even at the present stage in the career of civilisation, its dictates coincide, on most points, with those of the greatest happiness principle; on some, however, it still deviates from them: but, as its deviations have all along been less and less numerous, and less wide, sooner or later they will cease to be discernible; aberration will vanish, coincidence will be complete."61

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[60] Examiner, 11 February 1821, 22 November 1829.

[61] Constitutional Code, i. Quoted in Parekh, Bentham's Political Thought, pp.212-13. Bentham was aware that the proper functioning of the Public Opinion Tribunal was hindered by such problems of political communication as the inefficiency of methods of collecting and transmitting relevant facts and the tendency of even a democratic government to withold embarrassing information. Frederick Rosen, Jeremy Bentham and Representative Democracy: A Study of the Constitutional Code , p.111.

Nevertheless, Mill and other followers of Bentham might often appear less sanguine about such deviations than the master. Their misgivings were an illustration of the fact that, as J.A.W. Gunn has described, some Radicals saw that public opinion needed to be enlightened before a proper reform could be sought, but it was also clear to them that it would be very difficult to effect such an enlightenment without a change in the political order.[62]

John Foster, the baptist minister and essayist, in his An Essay on the Evils of Popular Ignorance (1820), saw himself as exposing the hypocrisy into which political reformers had been led by this dilemma. How could they, he demanded, hope to obtain political changes in the people's favour when the "superior orders" could justifiably allege that the people were unfit to possess further privileges, "even supposing them, abstractedly speaking, their right?"

> "You know, yes, you absolutely know", Foster told the reformers, "that a vast majority of the multitude are, at this hour, as wretchedly ignorant, as dreadfully corrupt, as any of those esteemed their enemies have represented them... Nor can anything on earth be more contemptible than that strain of talking which affects a confidence in their sound judgement, their steady principles, their well-ordered dispositions, and so forth."[63]

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[62] J.A.W. Gunn, Beyond Liberty and Property: the process of self-recognition in eighteenth-century political thought (Kingston 1983), p.313.

[63] Popular Ignorance, pp.251-2.

The reformers, thought Foster, were very likely aware that their talk of the improvement which political change would effect in popular conduct and outlook was cant. The promoters of "higher education and inculcated religion", having a sound sense of priorities, were the real friends of the people. They found "an intrinsic value in such means as there are, in the absence of whatever means there are not, and actively exert themselves that the people may be the better _so far_;" whilst the reformers "rate all means as but cyphers, unless a certain favourite one be at their head; and seem almost content that, till it _shall_ be there, the people should remain just as they are for mere evidence that no scheme but yours can do them good."[64]

Foster was in his early days a republican, and, although, as these passages show, he became less convinced that any political system could improve the lot of the people,[65] he was still in favour of a politically literate population. He offered a Whig-like vision of national consensus replacing ignorant antagonism. Rulers would, he believed,

> "come to feel, that it is better for them to have a people who can understand and rationally approve their purposes and measures, than one bent in stupid submission, - or rather fermenting in

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[64] _Ibid._, p.255.

[65] See Curtis W. Wood in Joseph O. Baylen and Norbert J. Gossman, (eds.), _A Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals_ (Hassocks and New Jersey 1979, 84), i, p.176.

> ignorant disaffection, continually believing them to be wrong, and without sense enough to appreciate the arguments to prove them right. And a time will come, when it will not be left to the philanthropic speculatists alone, to make the comparative estimate between what has been effected by the enormously expensive apparatus of coercive and penal administration, - the prisons, prosecutions, transportations, and a vast military police, - and what *might* have been effected by one half of that expenditure devoted to popular reformation..."[66]

From this it does not seem that Foster would have been hostile to such a practice as the publication of parliamentary debates. It was quite often argued that this practice at least diminished the need for reform. Ridley Colborne, for instance, thought that publication "by subjecting public men to the influence of public opinion, had done much toward a practical reform."[67] Mackinnon was more decided in the anti-reforming conclusions he drew from the subject. Publication ensured, he believed, that parliament both influenced and was influenced by public opinion, and therefore no improvements in the mode of election were needed.[68] It was true that reformers could claim that the practice, by spreading political information, would inevitably strengthen reformism, especially when, as was the case in the utilitarian *Parliamentary History and Review*, the reports of the debates were accompanied by a commentary exposing the

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[66] *Popular Ignorance*, pp.266-7.

[67] 2 *PD*, viii, 1148-9, 21 April 1823.

[68] *On the Rise*, p.200.

"fallacies" uttered by MPs. However, Henry Brougham was a reformer who believed that publication had damaging effects in that, rather than uncovering their shortcomings, it gave MPs a disproportionate influence.[69] The press and public meetings could arouse political excitement on a certain issue, but the people looked with far greater interest, thought Brougham, to parliamentary debates on the same subject, which overshadowed the other commentaries which got attention during the recess. This was not due to the parliamentary debates' superior quality but to their wider dissemination. This situation had in a sense distracted attention from the deficiencies of the electoral system. Publicity to exhaustive discussions of a measure like a tax, especially when those discussions resulted in some concession being made to criticism, reconciled the people to the measure.[70]

Moreover, in moments of crisis and popular dissatisfaction, the meeting of a publicised parliament defused the situation, and hence gave a breathing space to bad ministers, as hopes of redress were kindled. Even when these were dashed, it was done with such pomposity and at such length, that people were gradually reconciled, perhaps even convinced. In short, the publication of debates had increased the power of the legislature, and

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[69] Edinburgh Review, xliv, No. lxxxviii (September 1826), pp.458-90.

[70] Ibid., pp.460-3.

therefore that of the executive, and it was fallacious to think that the people had gained from it.[71]

The skill of the reporters might even in itself have improved the public image of parliament. F.K. Hunt quoted a description by Angus B. Reach, an experienced reporter, of the Commons press gallery, in which the journalists spent much of their time not writing. "Papers have no room for flourishes," Reach had a guide explain to some visitors. "Imagine the consequence, were every word spoken in the House of Commons set down in cold-blooded type exactly as it is uttered. What a huge conglomeration of truisms, absurdities, bad taste, wretched jokes, and worse grammar! Depend upon it, sir, literally-reported debates would infallibly disgust the nation with representative government!" The reporters sorted out the wheat from the tons of chaff. "How many slovenly speeches do not appear shortened one hundred, and improved two hundred per cent, by passing through the alembic of this little gallery!" Parliamentary reporting, "carried, as it has been in our time, to nearly as great [a] copiousness and accuracy as is possibly attainable," could be seen as having an extremely wholesome effect:

> "It tends manifestly and powerfully to keep within bounds the supineness and negligence, the partiality and corruption, to which every Parliament, either from the nature of its composition or the frailty of mankind, must more or less be liable... A stream of fresh

[71] Ibid., pp.464-5.

> air... flows in to renovate the stagnant atmosphere, and to prevent that malaria which self-interest and oligarchical exclusiveness are always tending to generate..."72

This passage, whilst accepting that malpractice was inevitable in government, also suggested that there were means for the mitigation of the evil other than reform itself. Reformers often liked to talk of the close interest taken by the people in the acts of their governors, but some occasionally thought their case strengthened by precisely the opposite view. In 1825, for instance, Scrope Davies expressed the view to Sir Robert Wilson that "the speech of a modern English patriot is read with no more interest than of an ancient Athenian one 600 years B.C. and all this proceeds from the corrupt and inefficient representation of the people." The people regarded the political struggle with apathy, looking upon the combatants "as the Romans did on the show of gladiators, not as on a battle where their soldiers fought, and on the event of which their fate rested."[73]

We have seen how Brougham believed that the people had an enormous, indeed excessive, interest in parliamentary affairs and that this, far from guaranteeing that they would be watchful critics of men and institutions, might damage the cause of reform. However, as mentioned above, the generally increased political acuteness of

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[72] The Fourth Estate, ii, pp.282-3, 287.

[73] Add. 31110, f.187, 4 March 1825.

the people was a factor often stressed by supporters of that very cause and by 1829 the view that the "March of Mind" demanded at least some institutional adaptation had even infected the pages of the Quarterly Review. The article, possibly by Southey,[74] on the "State and Prospects of the Country" which appeared in volume thirty-nine of that publication would not, with slight modifications, have been out of place in its Whiggish rival. Albany Fonblanque thought it "remarkable (considering its place) for the sobriety of its style, the temperance of its tone, and the fairness of a statement of very considerable compass."[75] The article was an un-Tory-like exercise in critical self-analysis and a warning against complacency about "things as they are". Its author argued that as a result of increasing indolence on the part of the higher orders and assiduous self-improvement by the lower, "in nine out of ten occasions, where extraordinary proficiency or information really is demanded, the higher classes are surpassed by those who were originally their inferiors, not only in birth, but in education, and perhaps also in capacity." Thanks to the circulation of papers and documents, official men no longer had a monopoly of information on issues and policies, and "votes and resolutions of legislative bodies are

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[74] Attributed to him in Gentleman's Magazine, xxi (1844), p.580, but without evidence. Walter E. Houghton (ed.), The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824-1900 (Toronto 1966-79), i, p.708.

[75] Seven Administrations, i, p.219.

therefore regarded with diminished reverence; and whenever public opinion has once been strongly expressed, it is much more likely to press legislative assemblies in it than to be driven back by them." This was partly due to concession by rulers but mainly to the people's insistence that attention be paid to them.[76]

As we have seen, an anti-reforming conclusion could have been drawn from this, but this author, attacking the arrogance engendered by prosperity, launched into a startling call for "examination and amendment" of systems and institutions in order that Britain's lead would be maintained. Thus the rise and spread of articulate public opinion and the economic changes which had promoted it had led a Tory writer, like Russell in 1822, to conclude that it was "utterly impossible that everything established by our ancestors should remain untouched for ever either in form or substance."[77]

Whilst this author's view of the improvement in lower-class knowledge had led him to see the necessity of adaptation by the state, reformers themselves were not agreed on whether the mere cultivation of intellect would be beneficial for the cause. Such cultivation could, of course, take in subjects other than politics. The Sun newspaper, commenting on a development of which it

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[76] Quarterly Review, xxxix, No. lxxviii (April 1829), p.503.
[77] Ibid., p.517.

approved, asked whether it was not "one very natural and general effect of creating a desire for knowledge, and a love of intellectual pursuits, to withdraw men from the vortex of political agitation?"[78] However, the supporters of political education for mechanics and artisans could claim that it was their philosophy which would lessen agitation, where that word implied turbulent activity born of ignorance. The best time and place for workers to acquire political knowledge, claimed Brougham in 1825, "is not surely the Hustings at an election, but their own fireside or lecture-room, before being called upon to exercise their power."[79]

Brougham certainly did not intend his educative efforts to take men's minds off politics. "Why should not political, as well as all other works, be published in cheap form, and in Numbers?" he asked in his Practical Observations Upon the Education of the People (1825). "That history, the nature of the constitution, the doctrines of political economy, may safely be disseminated in this shape, no man now-a-days will be hardy enough to deny." Public order and the stability of government were enhanced by the diffusion of constitutional principles: "The abuses which through time have crept into the practice of the constitution, the errors committed

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[78]Sun, 28 July 1826.

[79]Edinburgh Review, xlii, No. lxxxiii (April 1825), p. 216.

in its administration, and the improvements which a change of circumstances require even in its principles" could fitly be expounded through the medium of cheap publications.[80]

J.C. Hobhouse could only have approved of popular education in this form, but he did have misgivings about Brougham's general approach. In his diary, he noted how Brougham "differed from me in thinking that the people would never have spirit or power to procure a fair Government, and thought the Mechanics' Institutions and other establishments for instructing the lower class would work out the cure for all political evil, and make the people too strong for the Government." Whereas Brougham reckoned that Peel's statement at a meeting in honour of Watt that he owed everything to the steam engine would arouse ambition in mechanics, Hobhouse "thought that the effect would be that mechanics would say, 'See how a man may rise according even to the present system of Government. Who knows that a Watt or a Peel may not spring from among us.' This consideration, it appeared to me, would retard a real reform."[81] There were certainly arguments both ways. On the one hand, time devoted to acquiring practical knowledge was time lost to the study of government; on the other, being educated increased the

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[80] Practical Observations, pp.4-5.

[81] Recollections of a Long Life, iii, pp.51-2, Diary, 19 June 1824.

self-esteem which was such an important premise of the artisan critique of the political system.

It was not, of course, advisable for Brougham and his friends to appear too politically partisan. When anonymously countering an attack on his Practical Observations in the Edinburgh, Brougham claimed that he could not see what political advantage he could possibly hope to derive from his efforts to promote general education "since a carpenter or a ploughman is not much more likely to follow Whig principles, because he understands the doctrines of mechanics and vegetation."[82] In the Practical Observations themselves, Brougham claimed that political conservatives could gain equal access to the arena of debate. Anti-reformers could propagate their ideas through the same channels as reformers, and, "cheap works being furnished, the choice of them may be left to the readers."[83] However, he did also hope that the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge would promote his views in particular:

> "I avow," he told Allen, "that my object is at least partly political. I hold certain principles and I am above all things anxious that they should prevail. We hold these principles in common - I mean those of liberal policy and free government and of abhorrence of abuses in Church and State. Is there any way half so likely to propagate these as this society which... has correspondence all over the country so that it can at a moment's warning circulate any sound doctrine and information on any matter all over the country and make it to be read?"[84]

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[82] Edinburgh Review, xlii, No. lxxxiii (April 1825), p.207.

[83] Practical Observations, p.5.

[84] Add. 52182, ff.50-1, Brougham to Allen, 2 September 1827.

But the SDUK did not really live up to these expectations, its shyness with regard to politics being the main reason for its failure to attract a great deal of working-class support. Like the Mechanics' Institutes, the Society was also handicapped by its air of upper-class condescension. Charles Knight realised that

> "no scheme for the diffusion of popular knowledge can be successful which is not immediately addressed to the people themselves, without in any degree depending upon the patronage of gratuituous, and therefore suspicious distribution, by the superiors of those for whose perusal works of a popular character are devised."[85]

No middle-class educator could emulate Cobbett in consistently using a style that was exactly right for a working-class audience. The way in which the ideas of such an audience developed during this decade is the subject of the next chapter.

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[85] London Magazine, 3rd ser., i, p.3 (April 1828). Quoted by Webb, British Working-Class Reader, p.159.

CHAPTER TEN

THE RADICALS AND THE WORKING CLASSES

With respect to working people, their lot and their ideologies, the twenties, far from being without interest, were a crucial decade of innovation, transition and assimilation.[1] As far as the last of these factors is concerned, it should not be forgotten that the Radical analysis was a very flexible thing, or at least its proponents often showed great ingenuity in manipulating developments so that they fitted in with its arguments. It was in a sense challenged in these years by new strains of thought which relegated politics to a secondary position and, in the case of the Owenism of Owen, eschewed the sense of struggle and confrontation on which working-class Radicalism, especially after Peterloo, seemed firmly to be based. As John Belchem has put it, "agitation was at its nadir, but theorizing flourished..."[2] Such theorizing produced a diversification of thought in which parliamentary reform was just one element, but still an important one.

Though it might now seem an inadequate means of addressing the problems of an emerging industrial proletariat, the essential "them and us" mentality of

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[1]For Max Beer, the intellectual and organisational innovations amounted to "the birth of the Modern Labour Movement, political and socialistic." A History of British Socialism (1919, 20), i, p.182.

[2]Orator Hunt, p.166.

the Radical analysis meant that it could quite easily absorb, where such a feeling existed, antipathy to large-scale capitalism. In Oldham, for example, John Foster has shown how Radicals expressed "each successive mass issue in terms of the overall political struggle... It was this which placed them in the forefront of the factory movement in the 1820s."[3] Belchem, with particular reference to the most "focused" political Radical of them all, Henry Hunt, also stressed that popular Radicalism assimilated, rather than was replaced by, the so-called "new ideology" centring on the tyranny of capitalists and the rights of labour.[4]

It should not, of course, be assumed that the intellectual eclecticism of such leaders was to be found in all members of the "rank and file" all of the time. It is doubtful whether in the heat of an attack on a power-loom mill the unreformed Commons was very prominent in a weaver's mind, and there was also a non-political element in some of the more structured manifestations of "economic" action. For instance, William Jackson, the Leicester framework-knitters' leader, claimed that political reform alone would be useless. As long as "the principle of gain" ruled commerce, workers would suffer from demand

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[3] John Foster, Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: early industrial capitalism in three English towns (1974), p.139.

[4] Orator Hunt, pp.166-7.

fluctuations "whatever the colour of the government and the character of political institutions."[5]

These remarks formed a sharp contrast with the reform lecture delivered by Cobbett to the Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire stockingers in 1821 when he assailed what he saw as the humbug in The Question at Issue between the Framework Knitters and their Employers by "Humanus". The war of the land against the funds was approaching, he declared for the umpteenth time, and "our only hope is in the effect of this war; and let HUMANUS, and other fools and impostors, say what they will about funds and combinations and subscriptions, a removal of the cause of all our suffering, by a reform of the Parliament, is the only remedy."[6]

It was Cobbett's influence perhaps more than any other factor which ensured that indifference to politics did not become the general rule among the working classes. The use in his journalism of personalisation, homely analogy and bluntness to express what was in its essentials a well-established outlook seems at this distance to have presented a formidable obstacle to the attainment of influence by writers who had nothing like his command of the press and who were still, perhaps, finding their

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[5] Leicester Journal, 1 February 1822. Quoted by A.T. Patterson, Radical Leicester. A History of Leicester, 1780-1850 (Leicester 1954), p.134.

[6] Political Register, 14 April 1821.

feet intellectually. Belchem has suggested that, in the early twenties, Cobbett's obsession with the establishment of sound monetary policy reduced reform "almost to an incidental" in his programme,[7] but this was largely a matter of presentation. Reform was still the hub of Cobbett's thought, and his relentless attacks on "Peel's Act" did not really direct attention away from this. No Radical leader could call for universal suffrage, annual parliaments and the ballot without illustrating why he thought they were needed, but whether Cobbett's illustrations were particularly tailored to the needs of an urban working class is more debatable. He upheld the right to strike, but even after 1820 he was not an advocate of industrial militancy, since he saw such action as a distraction from reform agitation.

It could perhaps be argued that industrial friction furnished him with the practical contemporary instances of the problems of working people which were an essential part of his journalism, even if it only led him to tell trade unionists that they were barking up the wrong tree. Cole saw him as "groping blindly for a principle of action in the tangled skein of the new economic conditions, clutching at parliamentary reform because it appears the one strand that can be unravelled with a manful tug at the mass."[8]

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[7]Orator Hunt, pp.172-3.

[8]Life of William Cobbett, p.256.

The political analysis of society's ills was not limited to Cobbett's or Hunt's straightforward parliamentary reformism. The Paineite republican tradition, sustained into this decade primarily by Richard Carlile, was similar to the other strains of political Radicalism in being essentially "pre-industrial" - in not addressing itself directly to class feeling in the Marxist sense and in seeing kings, lords, tax-gatherers, fund-holders and clergy as the real enemies - but it went much further than merely demanding a purification of the Commons. The desire for a written republican constitution might be seen as a complete departure from Cobbett's central doctrine that "we want great alteration, but we want nothing new", yet there is a sense in which Carlile and others saw themselves as taking the Radical frame of mind to its logical conclusion; it was a linear progression rather than a tangential departure. Thus Carlile could describe Cartwright, Cobbett, Hunt and Wooler as "men who have each done something, and that something of no small importance, although I do think that they are not now leading on the minds of the people of this Island as they ought, but that they have halted much too soon."[9]

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[9] _An Effort to Set at Rest some little Disputes and misunderstandings between the Reformers of Leeds, upon the subject of some late Deputy Meetings and a Declaration of Sentiments arising therefrom_ (1821), p.8. The _Declaration_ concerned was a republican document drawn up by Brayshaw's faction at Leeds of which Wooler and Hunt strongly disapproved.

At this stage, Carlile was still prepared to praise Cartwright's consistency, call him the Father of Reform and acknowledge that most people now agreed with him, but he also believed that Cartwright was "one step behind what he ought to be, to carry his principles of universal suffrage into action."[10]

This is not to say that there were not fundamental differences between the two strands of Radicalism. Carlile's sometimes conciliatory language did not change the fact that he thought his own political system the only acceptable one and that only Paineites had the right to call themselves true reformers. The note of conciliation with which he started the decade had completely disappeared by 1826:

> "The futile political clamour of the 'Radical Reform' era, that which was to preserve and only to purify the constitution, as by law established in Church and State, to purify the God! the King! the Lords! the Priests! That which was to preserve all the dolls for the national nursery and merely take away their costly dresses, that nonsensical clamour, of which the great H. Hunt was the leader, is now extinct... All was trick, political and party intrigue, personal quarrel and imbecility. Where is now your Great Northern Union Subscription? Where your Radical Reforming MPs? Where your brave Knights of St Henry of Ilchester? Where your white hats?... where are your radical reforming principles? Reproached as insincere, reviled as futile and beaten down as impracticable."[11]

It was true that, by the time Carlile wrote this, the Great Northern Political Union, Hunt's attempt to

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[10] Ibid., p.10.

[11] Republican, 14 July 1826.

sustain the post-war mass reform movement, had petered out, but things had looked more hopeful four years earlier. The aim of the GNU was to raise money for the purchase of boroughs in order, as the Union's treasurer, Sir Charles Wolseley, put it, "to strengthen the ranks of the active and zealous reformers in the House of Commons by the return of such individuals as members whose talents and integrity may contribute to obtain for the question of reform, that fair consideration, which it has never yet been able to command within the walls of St. Stephen's."[12] It seems that this approach was attractive to many. In the same letter, Wolseley reported that he had received remittances from Manchester, York, Birmingham, Leeds, Preston, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Greenock, Rochdale, Bolton, Halifax and several other places. He was confident that every sizeable town would soon be involved.

The members of the Union were naturally open to charges of naivety. "So," wrote the Times derisively, "these penny subscribers would purchase the lease of the premises [a rotten borough] in order that they might oust the landlord; and yet they suppose the latter will be such a fool as to admit them for tenants."[13] On the other hand, apologists for the scheme could claim that it was a very realistic one. For instance, Wooler's defence of the organisation's aims suggests the adoption of a

[12] Add. 36459, f.295, Wolseley to J.C. Hobhouse, 6 August 1822.

[13] Times, 17 September 1821.

gradualist approach after the failure of direct confrontation in 1819:

> "... the walls of corruption will not fall like those of Jericho, at the mere sounding of the ram's horns. They are too formidable to be taken by storm. They must be sapped and mined in detail, until practicable breaches are made in the weakest parts; - and surely those who think the House of Commons the most accessible, may without blame direct their efforts to that point. What is to be done with our oppressors by argument, must be effected there."[14]

The temporary success of the Union testified to the survival of working-class reformism and in particular showed up some of the shortcomings of Carlile's approach. The appeal to the true spirit of the constitution was still a more comforting doctrine than the denial that such a thing had ever existed.[15]

Despite their great differences, both Hunt and Carlile saw the holding of political power as the key

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[14]Hunt, Memoirs, iii, To the Radical Reformers, 14 October 1822, pp.5-6. From Drakard's Stamford News.

[15]Joel Wiener has given Hunt's more certain view of his political objectives as the reason for his followers' ascendancy in the local Union rooms. Joel H. Wiener Radicalism and Free Thought in Nineteenth-Century Britain: the Life of Richard Carlile (Westport 1983), pp.115-6. This is correct in the sense that Hunt's thought was always focused and limited in its scope. He was the Radical programme pure and simple, but with Carlile the three main Radical objectives were mixed up in a package of Infidelity, élitist "temperance by example", and, in due course, Malthusian doctrines on redundant population which were bound to be distasteful to many whose breeding they characterised as excessive.

to all other social relationships,[16] but other thinkers at this time were stressing the fundamental importance of the economic order. In the case of Robert Owen, this stress led almost to a complete indifference to the political structure. However, the ready acceptance of the Co-operative ideal by many working men in the second half of the decade did not denote a wholesale abandonment of reform, William Lovett being a case in point. The thought of William Thompson demonstrated that Co-operation could be linked with major political change. Like the other "new" theorists, Thompson saw the economic structure as the cause rather than the effect of other injustices. Maldistribution of wealth was the real problem. "Whenever this radical evil is permitted to exist, no free institutions, no just laws can be made, or if made, can long be supported."[17] Unlike Owen, Thompson ascribed some value to equal representative institutions and votes for the industrious classes, but these alone would not, in his view, improve the condition of the workers as long as individual competition, and not co-operation, remained the principle of human exertion. However, his complaints against the

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[16] For Carlile, the political power of religious institutions was the great problem. "The cementing power of the interested, in opposing parliamentary reform," he wrote, "is religion, and seeing this, I see, that the cementing power must be removed before the strongly cemented fabric of collateral interest can be removed." Republican, 10 June 1825.

[17] An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth (1824), p.21.

Game Laws, and his talk of "political and clerical drones"[18] were in a venerable tradition which, it can be argued, was well-established in the minds of the industrious classes whom he championed.

Another of the thinkers whose ideas first came to general public notice in the twenties, Thomas Hodgskin, went even further than Thompson by rejecting the very idea of government, in the sense of the delegation of the people's legislative power to a few representatives, altogether. This did not mean, however, that he thought parliamentary reform an irrelevance,[19] and it is arguable that some of his published writing, though in the context of a "new" anti-capitalist ideology, harmonised with some general assumptions which were fundamental to the working-class desire for reform. He anticipated, for instance, "a war of honest industry against the idle profligacy which has so long ruled the affairs of the political world with undisputed authority..."[20]

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[18] Labour Rewarded: The Claims of Labour and Capital Conciliated (1827), p.48. Thompson's view of the required political remodelling was decidedly avant garde. The tiered structure of communes and Provincial, State and National legislatures which he advocated as a middle way between the evils of centralisation and the defects of American federalism did not simply represent reform; it was an entire reshaping of the body politic, an establishment of local democracy to such an extent that the usual idea of the state would no longer be relevant.

[19] His remarks to Place about the Queen Caroline affair show that he was keen that the measure should be agitated for.

[20] Labour Defended Against the Claims of Capital (1922 edn.), pp.103-4.

The case for Radical reform was undoubtedly based on the view of the industrious classes as the most worthy in society,[21] a view which Hodgskin, though not strictly speaking a reformer, wholeheartedly endorsed. However, working-class Radicals could still look beyond their own social order with feelings other than implacable hostility. In July 1822, a meeting was held in the Manchester Union Rooms to invite certain leading patriots in parliament to co-operate with the GNU; "to become auxiliaries," wrote Wooler, "in a great National Cause, which can do without them, but would be better with their support and participation."[22] That sentence itself is interesting. The leading parliamentary lights were to be "auxiliaries" rather than commanders, but at the same time they did have something to add. The working classes were not the alpha and omega of political rectitude. Similarly, the address produced by the meeting itself asserted that although the GNU's permanency and utility were already assured, the enrolment of the big names[23] would make its members feel "that they had secured a host of strength and a tower of impregnability."[24]

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[21]See, for instance, Cartwright's letter to Lambton in Black Dwarf, 21 March 1821.

[22]Wooler's British Gazette, 6 July 1822.

[23]The full list was: Bedford, Tavistock, Burdett, Wilson, Hobhouse, Hume, James, Norfolk, Albemarle, Grosvenor, King, Wood, Bennet, Fyshe Palmer, Lambton, Creevey, Hutchinson and Coke.

[24]Wooler's British Gazette, 13 July 1822.

The Radical movement did, of course, retain such a leader as the _declassé_ baronet, Sir Charles Wolseley. There is no mistaking the patrician strain in Wolseley's outlook. "I tremble," he told the Berkshire magistrates on leaving Abingdon gaol, "to see that the ancient aristocracy, and the landed gentry, have lost, by their unaccountable apathy, that respect among the people, and that influence over the public mind, which rendered them so terrible to bad ministers, and so formidable to misjudging princes, in former periods."[25] In his letter soliciting support for the GNU from Hobhouse and others, he claimed that "the people are anxious that their 'natural leaders' should come amongst them, and direct them." The present leaders "would readily I am sure consign the distinction to abler and more important persons."[26]

However, in the eyes of many of those in local or central authority, working-class Radical activity was simply designed to produce an upheaval in which Wolseley's very traditional concept of "natural leaders" would have little meaning. Carlile was not far wrong when he told Hunt that Castlereagh and company thought all reformers were republicans.[27] No doubt the ministers were not surprised to learn that the Cato Street Plot was meant

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[25] _Ibid._, 2 December 1821.

[26] Add. 36459, f.295, Wolseley to Hobhouse, 6 August 1822.

[27] _An Effort_, p.25.

to be the prelude to the formation of "a Convention of Representatives delegating the right of voting in all males having attained the age of twenty-one years."[28] On the other hand, a more limited "constitutionalist" demand was made in an anonymous threatening letter to Sidmouth in February. This warned that the plot against the ministers' lives had not been ended. "The union will not easily be broken and the death of you all is nearly certain... unless you consent to a reform in parliament... We wish for no other alteration than a properly constituted House of Commons... we care not about Radical reform only let us have a fair and equal representation."[29] This is an interesting juxtaposition of violent intent with comparatively temperate political demands, but as such it seems something of a rarity. When reform does specifically feature in descriptions in the Home Office papers of alleged physical-force Radicals, it is represented as at most a pretext and sometimes as a thing rejected altogether. In 1821, for example, Thomas Ferrymond, whilst in prison, wrote of the northern Radicals:

> "... for a man to offer any arguments of Reform when in the company of a set of these men, he is in danger of his life and he dar (sic) but change his language while amongst them. When I went through Royton near Holdham (sic) in a public house they damn'd Reform and reformers and said it was them that kept things back so long, and cry'd out very boldly, nothing would ever do but blood and a cutting off root and branch..."[30]

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[28] HO 44/4, f.12, Address by Palin, 27 January 1820.

[29] Ibid., ff.229-30, postmarked 26 February 1820.

[30] HO 44/7, ff.192-3, Ferrymond to Sidmouth, 18 March 1821.

The terms "radical", "reform", "reformation" and "revolution", singly or in various combinations, were bandied about a fair amount in the alleged utterances of the disaffected, and obviously one cannot fix precise meanings to these words which are applicable in whatever context they may arise. For instance, against the reported blusterings of Radicals at Royton against "reform" there is the description by Roger Williamson of Thistlewood, hardly a moral-force man, as "a right Hero for reform."[31] It is naturally futile to expect anything more clear-cut from such "informal" sources, but it is safe to say that a political outlook derived from leading Radical writers and sometimes garbled or excessively simplified was present in what disturbances there were in this "quiet" decade. An acquaintance of the Haslingden Methodist minister Joshua Biggs Holroyd gave a fair summary of this outlook when he reported that "the general opinion is, that certain corruptions in the state are the cause of the present distress."[32]

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[31] HO 40/11, deposition of Daniel White of Manchester, 3 March 1820.

[32] Ibid., f.60, Holroyd to Judge Holroyd, 25 February 1820. In the so-called "General Rising" of 1820, which consisted of disturbances in west Scotland, Carlisle, Wigan, Sheffield, Huddersfield and Barnsley, the main indication of ideological motivation was the call for "Equality of Rights" in a printed Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain and Ireland, which was circulated widely at the beginning of the "Scottish Insurrection" on 1 April. This address also contained some not unusual rhetoric about Magna Carta and the blood of ancestors. F.K. Donnelly, 'The General Rising of 1820: A Study of Social Conflict in the Industrial Revolution' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Sheffield 1975), p.135.

Disturbances of the peace were obviously not solely due to a mass intellectual conviction. However, a few observers were worried that a widespread Radical attitude had been established which was impervious to trade fluctuations. James Allison, for instance, complained in April 1820 of the turbulence of the lower orders in Huddersfield and observed that "although there is much real distress for want of employment, yet I am well convinced that that is not the cause of discontent - they want to live without labouring, and I believe that the greatest part of them would be discontent with the government even if they were fed and cloathed by it."[33] William Chippendale was still worried even when things appeared to be calming down in the northern districts. In July, he told Sidmouth from Oldham "that upon those questions which have so long occupied the minds of a large portion of the population, there is no material alteration." Bad principles still kept their hold and were "silently insinuating themselves into the minds of the rising generation." These remarks were made "lest your Lordship should be deceived by the present aspect of the country, which is that of tranquillity as to external appearances."[34]

However, by November, Chippendale could write that "the political or rather radical mania appears to

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[33]HO 40/12, f.38, Allison to Henry Hobhouse, 5 April 1820.
[34]HO 40/14, 22 July 1820.

me to be subsiding every day",[35] and by early 1822, he believed that reformism had contracted to a hard core of die-hards. He described, from the report of an informant, a meeting "attended entirely by thorough-paced Radicals- not an individual of a different description - no new converts nor any of the former deluded multitude." The Radical leaders were still active, but "the multitude manifest the most obstinate insensibility to explosion."[36]

This was largely to be attributed to the coming of comparative prosperity. In June 1823, Peel transmitted to parliament the reports he had received on the state of the manufacturing areas. In Huddersfield, it was reported, times had never been better for the working classes and there was perfect tranquillity; spinners were getting twenty-five shillings a week, weavers between eighteen and twenty-one shillings. In addition, there had been a considerable reduction in the poor rates. There was a similar situation in Halifax and Birmingham, whilst in Manchester fine spinners were earning as much as thirty shillings a week and in Bolton there was more employment available than had ever been known before.[37] Such a pleasant state of affairs did not, however, last indefinitely.

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[35] HO 40/15, Chippendale to Major-General Sir John Byng, 13 November 1820.

[36] HO 40/17, Chippendale to H. Hobhouse, 14 February 1822.

[37] 2 PD, ix, 926-9, 12 June 1823.

The financial panic of late 1825[38] and the adverse effect it had on manufacturing industry in the following year comprised the first major jolt in the gradual improvement in working-class living conditions since 1820. It was an occasion to debunk government self-congratulation: "Is this the prosperity and happiness which Statesmen in Parliament have vauntingly proclaimed, in triumphant exultation, as resulting from their collective wisdom?"[39] The situation was not unwelcome to professional critics of the system. "Cobbett is cock-a-hoop," Hobhouse told Ellice, "and brandishes his gridiron in all its glory."[40] Lord John Russell, on the other hand, saw no reason to celebrate. "I fear the summer may resemble that of 1819," he lamented to Moore, "and then for the Six Acts again - it is woeful."[41] Russell's fears may not have been fully realised, but in the coming year, industrial fortunes would take a turn adverse enough to produce serious working-class violence and an inevitable, but not overwhelming, revival of reformism, or revolutionary sentiment, among the workers.

One of the former hot-beds of Radicalism, the textile region of Lancashire, was particularly badly hit.

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[38]The crisis peaked in December 1825 with the failure of three London banks and sixty-three provincial ones.

[39]Republican, 2 June 1826. An Address to the Artisans, Mechanics and Manufacturers of the United Kingdoms, by "Legion".

[40]Ellice, MS 15028, ff.47-8, 12 December 1825.

[41]Early Correspondence, i, p.246, 23 February 1826.

In April, there were outbreaks of loom-breaking at Accrington, Bury, Wigan, Bolton, Darwen, Rossendale and several other places, including Manchester itself.[42] In July, it was reported that over 33,000 in Manchester were being given charity relief, and at Blackburn, Bury and Burnley, two thirds of the population was said to be jobless.[43]

Whilst there was no doubt in anyone's mind about the seriousness of the distress, the picture we get from contemporary sources of the role of politics in the unrest is less clear. Sir James Graham was certain that the sufferers knew to what source their troubles could be traced:

> "... however complicated the causes of the distress now felt by the working classes, it is quite wonderful to observe, how clearly they are understood by them. If the country gentlemen are half as honestly resolved to enforce a Reduction of Expenditure and Establishments, some hope of averting a serious convulsion might still remain, but the knowledge of flagrant abuse on the one hand, mingled with bitter suffering, and on the other, the boldest adherence to the corrupt system without the least regard to consequences, would seem to lead inevitably to some fatal crisis."[44]

Colonel Fletcher, whilst obviously taking a different view of the correctness of the reforming analysis, also saw the possibility of political turbulence. In replying

[42] John Stevenson, Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1870 (1979), pp.232-4.

[43] J.M. Main, 'The Parliamentary Reform Movement in Manchester', p.73.

[44] Add. 51542, f.2, Graham to Holland, 29 October 1826.

to Peel's enquiry as to the likelihood of disturbances arising from commercial distress, he observed that "though the working classes in general are as little, politically disposed to join in any seditious practices, as at any time since the year 1819, yet in case the present difficulties should increase, or even continue long in their present state, a want of employment must ensue, and consequently distress, furnishing a plausible pretext to the ill-disposed to declaim against Government."[45]

Many of the reports which came to the Home Office in the first half of the following year seemed to demonstrate the fulfilment of Fletcher's prediction, though others played down, or even discounted altogether, the tendency towards sedition. Eckersley, for instance, reported that "whatever change may take place in the feelings of the working classes, in Manchester and the immediate neighbourhood, it is certainly very different now (for the better) from 1819 and 1820, when politics were mixed up with the distresses of the people."[46]

However, working-class hunger was linked very closely to one highly emotive political issue, the Corn Laws. It was not a difficult progression, especially if one often came into contact with agitators who were drumming home the message, to move from a simple inability to afford enough food to a detestation of home agricultural

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[45]HO 40/18, Fletcher to Hobhouse, 26 December 1825.

[46]HO 40/19, Eckersley to Hobhouse, 5 March 1826.

protection and thence to a Radicalism born from "discovering" the political reasons why such protection existed. The prominence of the debate on Corn at this time undoubtedly gave Radical agitators and journalists an excellent opportunity to convince their audience that the political system perpetuated an unnatural ascendancy of the landed interest. Thus, like the other two of the "three Cs" of the twenties, Cash and Catholics, the issue was by no means a distraction from reform and could, without any sense of contrivance, be made a powerful auxiliary to the reform case.[47]

There is also evidence linking the outbreaks of loom-breaking in 1826 with earlier bouts of "Luddism" by suggesting that immediate industrial grievances were combined, sometimes in somewhat garbled fashion, with ultimate political aims. In July, for instance, "Alpha" reported that at a Radical deputy meeting at the Princess Tavern, Manchester, the Stockport representative reported that unemployment and oppressive masters could cause an eruption to break out in his town independent of goings-on in Manchester. "He therefore wished an early opportunity to be taken of coupling Radical Reform and destruction of Power Looms together and demanding the same."[48] At about the same time, Thomas Hanson, a Blackburn

[47]Fletcher, for instance, reckoned that "the corn laws form a constant theme of complaint, in which the old leaders in seditious practices are most prominent." Ibid., Fletcher to Hobhouse, 21 March 1826.

[48]HO 40/20/2, "Alpha" to J. Langshaw, 12 July 1826.

weaver, was describing how Lancashire delegates had told him that "their first object was to destroy power looms, and the next to overthrow the Church and State."[49]

Some Radicals also saw the possibility that the immediate post-war agitation, in which politicisation of economic hardship was thorough enough to produce the biggest democratic challenge yet seen, could be repeated. In April, a Failsworth delegate was reported to have stressed the importance of Radical meetings because these "were likely to be followed by the same consequences as followed the meetings of the weavers on some former occasions - viz. the Blanketeers system of 1817 followed the movements of 1816 - the disturbances of 1819-20 were the effect of the organisation of 1818 - and he doubted not that still greater events would follow the present organisation - in as much as mechanics and artisans were now embarked with the weavers on the same cause."[50] Notorious figures from the recent past such as Samuel Drummond of Bury, Samuel Bamford of Middleton and George Edmonds of Birmingham were thought to be very active again, and it was believed that only the Six Acts had prevented the convening all over the country of meetings of the type seen in 1817 and 1819.[51]

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[49] Ibid., 15 July 1826.

[50] HO 40/19, Fletcher to Hobhouse, 20 April 1826.

[51] HO 40/20/1, George Bradley to Peel, 27 May 1826.

Perhaps the clearest illustration that the distress was seen by some as the occasion for a combined push by all the malcontents which the industrial revolution and the Pitt system had thrown up came in July, when the textile depression intensified. At a meeting of around two hundred at Warrington, one Jonathan Buckley Miller declared:

> "The time was now at hand when Luddites, Spenceans, Blanketeers, Levellers, Cobbettites, Carlislites (sic) and Real Radical Reformers of every species are united. The present unparalleled system of organisation in Lancashire is not a dispute about weavers' wages, mechanics' rights, combination laws or Whig or Tory. No, this is a blow at the whole superstructure of King, Lords and Commons and all the damned evils and oppressions of Monarchical Government."[52]

It has, of course, to be borne in mind that the people who transmitted such alleged statements to the Home Office showed little awareness of the variety of Radical thought. Any man prominent in giving a political interpretation to the distress was set down as a republican revolutionary, including Hunt, whose very rejection of overt republicanism had caused an irretrievable rift between himself and Carlile. It was perhaps natural that those close to the scenes of local mob action should conclude that, in as much as the disturbances had any wider aim at all, it was to establish violent confiscation as a national system à la Jacobin France. The view of Edward Norwood was typical. The minds of the poor, he wrote, "are poisened (sic) by bad designing men who disseminate

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[52] HO 40/20/2, "Alpha" to Langshaw, 20 July 1826. Claimed to be a <u>verbatim</u> report.

principles of infidelity and dissatisfaction against Church and State and are redy (sic) at any time under the general cry of a reform in parliament as a cloak to their views to destroy that constitution which was purchased by the blood of our forefathers."[53]

Radical reformers often stressed that parliament would never reform itself, but if they were to entertain any possibility other than an actual revolution they had to envisage that the overwhelming danger of one would force the Houses to act. For some, no doubt, revolution and Radical reform would both lead to the desired results of a wholesale re-shaping of institutions to promote social justice, even though the desired changes in the electoral system and the duration of parliaments were seen as very unlikely to take place within the existing political framework. In December, one of Sir John Byng's informants reported that in Lancashire many did not want parliament to do anything about the distress in order that a rising planned for the following spring should be facilitated. When the informant suggested petitioning the House of Commons, he was met with scorn. "They say that both Houses represents their own interests and not the people. There is one method of petitioning that is going to be tried if possible and that is to know whether the house is to [be] reformed or not and an answer will be demanded of them. It is intended to come from all manufacturing towns

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[53] _Ibid_., Norwood to John Street Portwood of Stockport, 24 July 1826.

throughout England on the same day, the meetings not to be dissolved but adjourned from time [to time] until if the answer be not to their satisfaction it will be the signal."[54]

The rejection of such a remonstrance was probably taken for granted by these planners, and maybe they even set little store by what was actually demanded. But it is more likely that these comments denote a feeling that real reform, specifically of the House of Commons, could it ever be achieved, would bring the benefits which it seemed to some only armed action would secure.

Whether or not their proponents were simply using them to incite violent disaffection, the standard reforming complaints were inevitably paraded before an audience which seemed receptive to them again. In late June, a meeting, which the Mayor of Leeds had refused to convene, was held on Hunslet Moor to inquire into the distress, and it produced Cobbettite resolutions which, in the view of the Tory Leeds Intelligencer, were "in the worst spirit of the worst period of radicalism."[55] In October, the operative silk-weavers of Macclesfield resolved against taxation and the Corn Laws and in favour of reform, in particular such a reform as would give the manufacturing interest greater weight.[56] Later in the same month,

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[54]HO 40/20/3, 1 December 1826.

[55]Quoted in Representative, 1 July 1826.

[56]Trades' Newspaper, 15 October 1826.

a "numerous meeting of the working classes and others" at the Manor Court House in Manchester came out for the full Radical programme and decided to draw up a petition to be presented by Lord King and Joseph Hume.[57] In the following month, the weavers and others of Carlisle drew up a standard Cobbettite petition calling for the appropriation of Church property to liquidate the National Debt, reduction in military establishments, sale of Crown Lands and "equitable adjustment." All of this was to be carried out by a reformed parliament.[58] Similar conclusions were drawn at the Christmas day meeting of the Blackburn trades chaired by Anthony M'Gregor. A placard publicising these proceedings left no doubt as to what were the main subjects up for consideration, being boldly headed: "TAXATION, CORN LAWS, PARLIAMENTARY REFORM &c". The reform called for, needless to say, was of the Radical variety.[59]

As with the Home Office correspondence, the picture derived from the press of the political content of the reactions to the distress is not uniform. Non-reforming papers might play down such content in order to proclaim the death of Radicalism and the triumph of the old system of values in which the ideal working-class conduct during

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[57] Ibid., 29 October 1826.

[58] Ibid., 12 November 1826.

[59] HO 40/22/1, and Trades' Newspaper, 7 January 1827.

difficult times was submissive fortitude. The Sun rather over-optimistically declared that "there never was a period of public distress attended with so little offence against the public peace; never under such circumstances, was subordination less violated, or the spirit of sedition less manifested."[60] The Huntingdon, Bedford and Cambridge Weekly Journal believed that men had learnt from the experiences of 1819 that political "quacks" were not to be trusted: "The day for mischief is past, and the occupation of radicals and demagogues gone by."[61]

On the other hand, the political danger could be played up, thus implicitly attacking reformism generally. A correspondent to the Representative wrote of Oldham: "I cannot report favourably of the temper of the weavers in this town. There is evidently an evil feeling abroad which, I fear, extends no less to politics than to trade. It is well if the bitter seeds of 'Reform' are not about to produce deadly fruits."[62] Soon afterwards, a Manchester correspondent to the same paper took the disturbances as an opportunity to belabour certain Tory bugbears in the fields of industrial relations and politics:

> "Everybody remembers the Union Clubs and the repeal of the Combination Laws; and nobody should forget the obligations the nation is under to Mr J. Hume, the foster-father of

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[60]Quoted in West Briton, 1 August 1826.

[61]Huntingdon, Bedford and Cambridge Weekly Journal, 29 July 1826.

[62]Representative, 4 May 1826.

> Combination, as Major Cartwright (worthy old body!) was the dry nurse of Reform in Parliament... We owe the breach of the public tranquillity, the destruction of property, the danger of the peaceable, and the death of the riotous... to the corn law abolitionists, the combination [law] abolitionists; the House of Commons abolitionists; the Union Clubs, and Mr Joseph Hume."[63]

At about the same time, however, the Times correspondent was taking a very different view. "The present state of distress," he wrote, "is happily divested of that acrimony of political feeling which made it so dangerous on a former occasion." Three days later, he reported that "attempts are made to give a political character to some of the combinations of the unemployed poor in this district, and to mingle the question of parliamentary reform with their catalogue of direct grievances, but they are utterly groundless, for nothing political has entered into the unquiet spirit which is afloat, and there is therefore the speedier chance of returning peace, when the hunger of the poor shall be appeased."[64] It is arguable that those papers, like the Times, who favoured moderate reform were keen that the issue should not be tainted by connection with something as disruptive and unrespectable as a workers' combination.

The weight given to the political content in working-class action during the crisis, together with the actual

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[63] Ibid., 8 May 1826.

[64] Times, 6 and 9 May 1826.

extent and nature of that content itself, naturally varied from place to place and from time to time, but several observers coincided in attributing the fact that there was no full-blown re-run of 1819 to the precautionary measures of the government, chiefly the Six Acts, and the charitable relief subscriptions raised among the higher echelons of society.[65]

However, the fundamental problem of economic fluctuation had not been solved. In 1829, the country lapsed suddenly and inexplicably into deep distress which affected, reckoned Charles Grant in April, both the agricultural and the manufacturing interests. Every class showed a lack of confidence and the power of consumption seemed to be paralysed.[66] It was reported that in Huddersfield many had only 2½ pence a day on which to live[67] and that in Colne weavers' wages were lower than in 1825-6 and provisions were nearly one third dearer.[68] In May, there were serious riots in Manchester, Stockport and Rochdale,[69] and there was a general strike in Barnsley in August. Towards the end of the year, meetings were

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[65]The contribution of the king especially was made the most of by loyalsits. "... every endeavour," wrote W. Hulton from Bolton, "will be used to make it a new bond of union between the lower orders and the Government..." HO 40/19, Hulton to Peel, 4 May 1826.

[66]William Smart, Economic Annals, p.466.

[67]Ibid., p.471.

[68]Manchester Guardian, 2 May 1829.

[69]Ibid., 9 May 1829.

held, for example on Woodhouse Moor near Leeds, to fix maximum prices for necessities, a "phenomenon which must have given gloomy thoughts to those who remembered the early stages of the French Revolution."[70]

However, evidence of overtly political feeling among the sufferers is somewhat sparse. In May, R. Wilcock told Francis Freeling that he believed that there was nothing of a political nature in the recent disturbances in Manchester; "it is a rebellion of the stomach..." Many were starving as a result of strikes and there were therefore attacks upon provision shops.[71] In April, during the weavers' strike in Stockport, a manufacturer of that town received an anonymous letter which, in a somewhat crude way, linked industrial and political "oppression" together: "'Prepare to meet thy God - Bellingham'. Take this as Notice, for Tyrants shall be rooted from the earth; thee and others are doomed to die as Percival did."[72] In May, a handbill was posted in New Cross in Manchester advertising a meeting that evening "on a most important subject, respecting rent, taxes, &c." Thanks to the presence of a detachment of dragoons, no meeting took place, but, two days later, two further placards, evidently by the same person, were put up to advertise a meeting "to consider on some plan to alleviate the distress so severely

[70]Economic Annals, p.472.

[71]HO 40/23/2, 6 May 1829.

[72]Manchester Guardian, 25 April 1829.

felt by the nation at large." One was headed "Oppression!!!" and the other "Slavery!!!" Again there was no meeting, and the placard-writer was suspected of being a mere hoaxer.[73]

Nevertheless, Radical leaders were still seizing the opportunity to propagate their ideas. In July, Cobbett and Hunt launched their last great effort of political co-operation, the Friends of Radical Reform (later the Radical Reform Association). Their address To the Reformers of the Whole Kingdom proclaimed the battle of the Land against the Funds to be at hand since distress was being felt in both country and town.[74] However, like the GNU before it, the FRR, rather than representing a re-invigorated and unified Radical challenge, served only to illustrate the differences of emphasis in the Radical camp. Cobbett's enthusiasm was diminished by his innate dislike of any formal organisation and by his concern about the infiltration of the body by republicans and infidels. In September, he resigned and embarked on an activity far more to his taste: an apocalyptic lecture tour. The only true remedy for the distress was still, in his eyes, the return of W. Cobbett to parliament.[75] Indeed, suggestions were renewed at this time for a national

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[73] Ibid., 16 May 1829.

[74] Morning Chronicle, 9 July 1829.

[75] Belchem, Orator Hunt, pp.194-99.

reforming rent like that of the GNU for buying rotten boroughs and putting in reformers.[76] Although Hunt made sure that the organisation stuck to the "unadulterated" Radical programme, conditions were not yet quite ripe for the revival of the mass platform.[77]

This chapter's story ends just before the greatest demonstration of the capacity of reform to arouse enthusiasm in the mass of the population. The Reform Bill crisis perhaps demonstrated better than anything else that the "politicism" of the working classes was always very much alive and only needed, as observers like James Mill and Albany Fonblanque maintained, the right conditions for it to burst forth in vigorous activity.[78] J.M. Main concluded from his study of Manchester that where factory and domestic industry co-existed the interests and attitudes of the different types of workers may have been too diverse for any one political movement effectively to comprehend.[79] Nevertheless, in 1830-2, the spectrum of workers engaged in the same political movement was wide enough to arouse real fears of revolution. The working

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[76] Examiner, 16 August 1829.

[77] Orator Hunt, p.199.

[78] Put simply, the right conditions were a mixture of severe distress and an atmosphere of general political excitement among all classes in society. Both of these factors were present in 1830, but in 1826-7 only the first of them was.

[79] J.M. Main, 'Working-Class Politics in Manchester from Peterloo to the Reform Bill, 1819-1832', Historical Studies (Australia and New Zealand), vi (November 1953-May 1955), p.458.

classes may eventually have become fully adjusted to the new economic order and, as Thomis and Holt have suggested, fully accustomed to looking for the redress of grievances within the existing political system,[80] but that process was by no means complete by the end of the twenties.

80 Malcolm I. Thomis and Peter Holt, Threats of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848 (1977), p.130.

CONCLUSION

We can perhaps best tie together the varied elements of this study by looking ahead; in other words by asking: how far was 1820-9 a preparation for 1830-2? As we have seen in the introduction, writers like Harriet Martineau and, in more modern times, John Cannon, could pinpoint the decade as a time of decisive growth of the English people's conviction in favour of reform. "Conviction" is perhaps a safer word to use than "support", since the latter implies some sort of active demonstration which, in some years in the twenties, was largely absent, though at other times, as has been established, agitation was very noticeable. The idea that the twenties contributed several ingredients to the Reform Bill "brew" can be upheld in several ways. On a very particular level, for instance, the "Revolt of the Ultras" after Catholic Emancipation, exemplified by Blandford's reform motion, was one catalyst of the reform agitation of 1830-2, and the Catholic Question contributed to the effectiveness of that agitation in the sense that O'Connell's Catholic Association inspired Attwood in the creation of the formidable Birmingham Political Union.

More generally, the men who were actually to pilot reform through parliament, the Whigs, had had no lack of opportunity during their years in the wilderness to thrash out their attitudes to the question. It was often a painful and damaging process which sometimes led to

despair, but, for all that, Whig opinion did not stand still. Several leading members of the party, especially those of the younger generation, partook of the general conviction that a measure could not be put off indefinitely. 1830-1 intensified that conviction.

The twenties were also an important time in the development of the attitude to reform of that constant object of contemporary politicians' praise, the urban middle class. Most people seemed to agree that this group had made intellectual and material progress, and the campaigns for the enfranchisement of Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham in the twenties were to a great extent based on the desire that that progress should be rewarded. Again, this was an important factor when reform was being considered "for real".

A similar point can be made about the countryside. Agriculturists cannot have forgotten the county-meeting campaign of 1821-3 when they were again plunged into difficulties by two bad harvests in 1830-1. The third element, working-class reformism born of hardship, was also present in the twenties, but, as Wooler several times remarked, economic fluctuations never allowed reform agitation in the different sectors of the community to reach a climax simultaneously, as they were to do later.

Perhaps the most profound legacy of the twenties to the early thirties was that factor which is easy to illustrate but the most difficult to quantify: the general

"temper of the times". We can never furnish conclusive statistical proof that the nation was more politically educated in 1830 than it was in 1820, but the mass of contemporary comment about the "March of Mind", the more objective evidence of newspaper circulation figures and the indisputable facts of the formation of the SDUK and Mechanics' Institutes make it difficult to escape the conclusion that a "thinking public" really was becoming more noticeable. Criticism of the unreformed system was as unrelenting as ever in some quarters, and it was given an almost exhaustive statistical basis, together with, in the case of the utilitarians, intellectual sophistication, or at least the appearance of it. This all helped to make reform an issue of great vitality and variety during a national crisis in which the people's interest in the deeds of their rulers, and vice versa, was perhaps greater than it had ever been.

APPENDIX
THE GENERAL ELECTIONS

Surveys of the two General Elections of this period shed light on the issue of reform in two ways. Firstly, an election is always a time for the general consideration of political questions, and the words spoken and written during the campaigns of 1820 and 1826 give some indication of the place reform occupied in the public mind, or at least in the minds of candidates looking for the support of a section of the public. Secondly, the mere staging of an election was bound to attract attention to certain topics which were of particular relevance to the reform debate: bribery, intimidation and "influence", for example. Few prolonged contests in this period passed off without complaints being made in relation to these questions by one or other of the parties. These complaints were not always assimilated into a general reforming outlook, but in a sense they show a sort of cross-party consensus on how elections should be conducted.

As far as the general question of reform is concerned, a sample of contemporary accounts in newspapers and pamphlets shows that, though it never came near to achieving the dominance it enjoyed in 1830, it was still deemed worthy of notice by candidates and constituents, and not only in places where the election was contested.

Neither of these surveys is anywhere near exhaustive; the aim has been to give a general impression

of the way reform was treated both on the hustings themselves and in the remarks of interested observers.

1820

This contest took place in an atmosphere of national emergency. The Radical menace of the previous year had not been forgotten and in February the discovery of the Cato Street Plot made the threat of politically inspired violence an even more prominent issue. Thus, during the election, the word "constitution" was often in men's mouths. When candidates mentioned it, it was always with due reverence and concern for its safety. For instance, the reforming candidates for Nottingham, Joseph Birch and Thomas Denman, claimed to stand for "OUR KING, OUR ANCIENT CONSTITUTION AND LAWS".[1] The main difference between the parties was, of course, that one regarded the constitution as being imperilled by revolutionaries whilst the other saw the ministers with their Six Acts as the real innovating villains whose excesses lent strength and legitimacy to the Radical cause.

Reform in the House of Commons might recede a little as an issue when the fate of the whole constitution itself was being considered (the two subjects were not always linked directly together), but the Six Acts and the alleged threat of revolution could also provide fertile ground for reform debate. In Sussex, for example, "An

[1] Nottingham Review, 4 February 1820.

Enemy to Radicalism", in an address to the freeholders of Chichester and its vicinity, declared that the coming election would be "a struggle between the friends of Radicalism [i.e. the supporters of Sir Godfrey Webster, who had opposed the Six Acts], and the friends and supporters of our glorious constitution." However, a counter address from "An Enemy to Despotism" saw it as "a struggle between the friends of moderate and rational reform and the friends of the PITT school."[2]

Nevertheless, the Tory candidates, Walter Burrell and E.J. Curteis, did not take an uncompromisingly anti-reform stance. Burrell even turned the issue against his opponents. At the nomination, he described how in the recent short parliament he had voted for the Electors' Oath Bill,[3] which had required burgesses to have been in possession of their burgages for one year before an election if they were to vote. "Gentlemen will perhaps be astonished to learn," announced Burrell, "that those who had voted for a Reform in parliament upon the grand scale, reprobated the measure when in detail, and were

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[2]Anon., An account of the Sussex Election held at Chichester, March 13th, 1820, and Eight following days, with the Addresses, Compositions, Speeches &c. Including the Poll Book. Together with an appendix (Chichester 1820), pp.23, 26.

[3]On 29 March 1819, William Williams obtained leave to bring in a bill "to impose an oath on persons voting in right of small freeholds and to prevent fraudulent conveyances of such freeholds; and also to amend the 25th Geo. 3rd, c.84, relative to the oath of qualification." 1 PD, xxxix, 1173. The second reading of the bill was put off for six months (i.e. the bill was lost altogether) on 7 May 1819. 1 PD, xl, 233.

strenuous and successful opponents to this bill, which they pretended was a violation of private property."[4] Curteis also expressed support for reform, provided that it left property as the basis of power. Adequately qualified copyholders and leaseholders in town and country could, he thought, be safely enfranchised.[5]

On 12 March, Webster had withdrawn from the contest to save his pocket, and Charles Compton Cavendish took over as the opposition candidate. Cavendish's family had a tradition of boroughmongering, and, as usual, Tories were quick to make political capital out of this. Curteis thought that "the friends of annual parliaments would be... much surprised to find that a distinguished member of the House of Cavendish, actually brought in the bill for the rendering of parliaments septennial instead of triennial."[6] Similarly, Huskisson pointed out the hypocrisy of a member of the Cavendish family claiming to stand against aristocratic domination of elections, and he exploited the doubts which Websterites must have had as to whether Cavendish (who withdrew on 22 March) matched the reforming zeal of the original candidate.[7] Edward Sugden, a warm friend of Cavendish, had only expressed support for moderate piecemeal reform and had

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[4] An Account of the Sussex Election, p.115.

[5] Ibid., p.119.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., p.138.

given greater emphasis to his belief that electors themselves could effect "a greater reform in the Commons House of Parliament than could all the quacks who have offered to amend our Constitution for the last twenty years."[8]

As was usual during elections of this period, there was no shortage of such calls to the electors to effect a practical reform by returning good men. Sir Francis Lindley Wood, for instance, when nominating Milton for Yorkshire, talked of a third party which was separate from the Tories and the Whigs and which, like the latter, was jealous of a standing army and the influence of the Crown and anxious to possess the constitution in its purity. But these men, whom Wood termed "reformers", dwelt, he thought, too much on the means, though they had the same objectives as the Whigs. If the House were filled with such men as Milton, good government would be achieved just as well.[9] Reform could also benefit. The Tyne Mercury, for instance, called on the electors to choose men who "may hear the voice of the people, at least so far as to know, and to decide from that hearing, that it is not heard sufficiently."[10]

The "bugbear" of revolution coloured much of the reform discussion during the election. Curteis, for

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[8] Ibid., p.126.

[9] Leeds Mercury, 25 March 1820.

[10] Tyne Mercury, 15 February 1820.

instance, though not, as we have seen, unfriendly to reform, expressed the common sentiment that a time of national danger was unsuitable for its implementation. He admitted that the call for reform had gained great strength, but, he believed, "the period of storm and hurricane... was not exactly the moment for careening and repairing the ship in distress... this operation could only be performed when the vessel was in port and in safety; when the present national calamities shall have been overcome, (and he would to God that this should soon be) then would be the time for reform."[11]

Candidates were by no means frightened of advocating reform, but they were naturally anxious to distance themselves from its more violent, or at least more thoroughgoing, supporters. Some of these were on hand to barrack John Curwen at the Carlisle nominations. When Curwen expressed his determination to defend the constitution at all hazards, he was met with clamour, including Paineite cries of "there's no Constitution!" Undaunted, Curwen declared his support for a reform in accordance with constitutional principles, and he rejected annual parliaments and universal suffrage as likely to secure the return of such ignorant and intemperate men as his current hecklers. The "violent reformers", he asserted, were to blame for the Six Acts.[12]

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[11] An Account, p.118.

[12] Ipswich Journal, 18 March 1820.

Lord Rancliffe, who for a while was a candidate for Nottingham, was similar to Curwen in that he did not shrink from both a specific declaration on reform and a chastisement of the Radicals. He was, he told the electors, "AN ADVOCATE FOR REFORM TO ANY EXTENT THAT MAY BE USEFUL TO THE PEOPLE AT LARGE; but at the same time, I cannot support the doctrines of those who have done injury to the Cause, and by their Conduct have impeded the Progress that would have been made towards A FULL AND FREE REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE."[13]

Similarly, at Shrewsbury, Henry Grey Bennet, one of the more radical Whigs, was keen to discountenance wild and visionary schemes. He and Panton Corbett were returned without opposition, and one of the toasts drunk at their joint celebration dinner was "Success to the Defenders of the Constitution, and Confusion to the Radicals."[14] However, not all Whig candidates played the Tory game of equating Radicalism with bloody revolution. At Norwich, for instance, William Smith, who was to be one of the more consistent voters for reform in the coming parliament, though he protested at being lumped together with the friends of Radical reform, nevertheless asserted that the latter were men of honest intentions.[15] At York, Marmaduke Wyvill pledged that

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[13]Nottingham Review, 4 February 1820.

[14]Salopian Journal, 15 March 1820.

[15]Norfolk Chronicle, 11 March 1820.

if returned he would advocate reform, "not what was called a Radical Reform, though that term, Radical, was certainly misapplied, for he did in reality want a Radical Reform, not to overthrow the constitution but to repair it, to defend it, and to keep it in good order."[16]

However, the Radical bugbear still furnished considerable ammunition to the adversaries of oppositionists. At the Ipswich nominations, for instance, Thomas Barrett Lennard was met with cries of "no Radicals, no Thistlewoods &c", and, when he tried to show how absurd it was to link such respectable men as Grey, Albemarle and Coke with Thistlewoodites, someone in the crowd was reported to have shouted: "they are all links of the same chain."[17]

However, the remarks of observers on both sides of the political fence do not suggest that there had been a widespread reactionary backlash, rather the reverse. Huskisson complained that the dissolution "has deprived us of nearly all our best [and] steadiest props... and has substituted in their stead men of a very different character, who will come into the House yielding to the impression which they have received at the elections, and that impression, if any opportunity is afforded them of displaying it in the House will, by being reflected back from thence, be increased tenfold out of doors."[18]

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[16] Leeds Mercury, 11 March 1820.

[17] Ipswich Journal, 11 March 1820.

[18] Add. 38742, f.7, Huskisson to Arbuthnot, 24 March 1820.

George Tierney reckoned that the Government had lost at least six votes as a result of the election. "Government people" were therefore "much discomposed", and it was the fashion to call the outcome "the triumph of the Radicals."[19] Grey himself had been struck by the power of popular feeling. In April, he expressed to Fitzwilliam his belief that the recent elections in the north had clearly shown that nine-tenths of the lower and middle classes supported parliamentary reform. "The Church, the government, and all the great interests, were really as nothing in comparison with the popular feeling."[20]

Several men who were to vote for three or more reform motions in the twenties were newly returned in 1820 (i.e. they had not been in the previous parliament). These included Samuel Moulton Barrett (Richmond), G.J. Heathcote (Boston), George Purefoy Jervoise (Hampshire), J.B. Monck (Reading), Samuel Whitbread (Middlesex), J.C. Hobhouse (Westminster), Sir George Robinson (Northampton), Francis Pym (Bedfordshire), and William Haldimand and T.B. Lennard (both Ipswich).

The election also had a bearing on reform in that it inevitably highlighted the issue of electoral independence. In Chester, for instance, the "dictation" of Lord Grosvenor was resisted by the supporters of the independent candidates Sir John Grey Egerton and Colonel

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[19] Grey, Tierney to Grey, 5 April 1820.

[20] Fitz., 101, f.5, 9 April 1820.

Edward Townshend, who, in a speech to his and Egerton's supporters in August, pointed out the hypocrisy of Grosvenor (whose candidates in this contest were Lord Belgrave and General T. Grosvenor) declaiming against corruption yet being a rotten-borough owner. At a dinner held by the independent candidates and their followers later that day, the Reverend Rowland Hill dwelt at length on the iniquity of peers controlling elections, and he read approvingly from an independent handbill: "'We are not fighting for Whig principles nor for Tory principles - We are fighting for the first principle of the British Constitution, the freedom of election.'" John Walker, flowery orator and supporter of Egerton, also saw the issue in general terms. He looked forward to a rooting out of the boroughmongering system as exemplified by the activities of Grosvenor.[21]

Methods of controlling voting behaviour were inevitably brought into the spotlight by Cobbett's stormy campaign in Coventry. According to Cobbett, Peter Moore's influence with the freemen came from his providing them or their sons with places in the East India Company and from his "getting others out of scrapes with the Excise Office." But the more immediate evil during the campaign, in Cobbett's view, was intimidation, practised by silk masters who sacked workers who voted for him, and more especially by armed gangs allegedly hired by Ellice, Moore

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[21] Chester Courant, 22 August 1820.

and local notables to terrorise Cobbett and his supporters. Cobbett reckoned that principle had given way to self-interest; several of the "rich ruffians" who paid and directed the mob, he claimed, were reformers and even Radicals who had subscribed towards the expenses of a Coventry Radical meeting the previous autumn. They simply wanted to keep Cobbett out because they saw him as a threat to their local power. Cobbett detested these particular enemies of his so heartily that he was, for a moment, less hostile than usual to the general oppressors of the nation. The "rich ruffians" attacked the borough-mongers, but "the Borough power is full as lawful, and less odious and tyrannical, than the power held and enforced by these low and base usurpers of the freemen's rights."[22]

The "tyranny" was effective, for the final result was: Ellice 1474, Moore 1422, Cobbett 517. Cobbett did not, then, partake of the alleged "triumph of the Radicals", but the return of Ellice and Moore was no comfort to anti-reformers. Ellice voted for every one of the Whig-sponsored reform motions in the twenties, and Moore supported all of Russell's.

In general, it is fair to say that reform had a more prominent place on the political agenda in this election than it was to have in 1826. A mass campaign which was, at least ostensibly, in the measure's favour

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[22]Political Register, 25 March 1820.

was still fresh in the memory, and the general focusing of attention on the constitution naturally entailed consideration of its component parts, including the House of Commons. The fear of general civil commotion, which by the mid-twenties had faded, meant that reform as a subject got noticed, either because it was considered a political combustible or because it was thought that it alone could avert revolution and satisfy a growing rational middle-class desire.

1826

"Corn and Catholics" were the major emotive issues in this election, with reform an incidental part of the baggage of most liberal candidates. The Representative claimed that it had hardly been mentioned during the campaigns, including that of Cobbett at Preston. Hunt had made some allusions to it in Somerset but had been called a rogue for his pains. The people had realised that distress had nothing to do with the representation and that those who said it did were charlatans. "In a word, *this* bubble has burst, and he who looks for mob popularity must look for it on different grounds from that of parliamentary reform."[23]

This statement was somewhat exaggerated, and it could even have been argued by reformers that the very unobtrusiveness of reform denoted a complete

[23] Representative, 22 June 1826.

assimilation of the issue into the electors' consciousness. John Marshall, in his address to the Yorkshire electors of 29 May, claimed that "though Reform in Parliament does not at present occupy any prominent place in the public attention, it will not be forgotten by the 17,000 freeholders who petitioned for it."[24] Occasionally, an elector would show that the issue had not altogether sunk into oblivion among the constitutent body. In the Hertfordshire election, for instance, Sir John Sebright and Nicolson Calvert were returned unopposed, but this did not preclude debate. The discussion between the candidates and their supporters was chiefly about Catholic Emancipation, but a Mr Rook took the opportunity (presented by Sebright's alleged earlier reference to the Duke of Norfolk's ability to return MPs) to raise the general grievance of the influence of peers in parliament.[25] At the Cambridgeshire nominations, Lord Charles Manners was asked whether he would support parliamentary reform, but he refused to bind himself with a pledge.[26]

Feeling for reform in itself does not seem to have been overwhelming, but there were naturally candidates who supported the measure, and they could use the prevalent anti-Corn-Law sentiment as a basis

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[24] Editor of the Leeds Intelligencer, An Historical Account of the Late Election for the County of York (Leeds 1826), p.80.

[25] Herts Mercury, 17 June 1826.

[26] Ibid., 24 June 1826.

from which to construct a case for reform which cast the landed interest (including certain Whig grandees), rather than the government, in the role of arch-villains. Thus T.W. Beaumont, in his campaign in Northumberland in which he posed as the honest victim of Whig aristocratic enmity, told the freeholders that he had pledged himself "to support such a reform as shall leave the ministers of the country unfettered by an aristocratical faction."[27]

A number of reformers were also newly returned. T.S. Duncombe, for instance, having rescued the borough, as he put it, "from the fangs of the aristocracy",[28] was elected for Hertford, and at his victory dinner he made an unequivocal call for reform.[29] Other successful reforming candidates who had not been in the previous parliament included Edward Clive (Hereford), Daniel Harvey (Colchester), John Marshall (Yorkshire), William Marshall (Petersfield), Henry Warburton (Bridport), and John Wood (Preston). All of these voted for Joseph Hume's amendment to the Address in November and thus to some extent demonstrated their independence from the mainstream Whig opposition.

As in 1820, attention was focused on what reformers saw as the blots on the system. According to Place,

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[27]Beaumont to the Freeholders of Northumberland, 20 March 1826. Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society, a scrapbook of documents. Transcripts lent to me by Dr. J. Dinwiddy.

[28]Herts Mercury, 17 June 1826.

[29]Ibid., 22 June 1826.

bad conduct at the elections had actually been less extensive than usual, but the press was now exposing the villainies of candidates and voters more effectively, leading ignorant observers to believe that the offences were either new or much increased.[30] In particular, the 1826 poll highlighted the electoral misdeeds of borough corporations,[31] and increased the concern in Whig circles about election expenses. Hence the little flurry of partial reform measures which followed in 1827 and 1828.

The election also saw the practical result of the zeal of some of the younger Whigs for electoral purity, with the implementation of "Tavistock's Principle"[32] by Tavistock himself in Bedfordshire and his brother Lord John Russell in Huntingdonshire.

"Pep talks" to the electors were a common feature of press comment both before and during the contests. In a sense these tended to play down institutional reform by stressing the need for electors themselves to act, and also the still ample opportunity afforded them by

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[30]Add. 35146, f.30, Diary, 4 July 1826.

[31]It was charged that Leicester Corporation had abused its supposed power of creating honorary freemen in order to swamp the other freemen of the borough. Nearly one third of the eight hundred new honorary freemen had come from outside Leicestershire, mainly from Nottingham, whose Whig corporation had been engaged in similar nefarious activities. In March 1827, Daniel Sykes moved for a committee of inquiry into these allegations, but he was unsuccessful. 2 PD, xvi, 1198-1217, 15 March 1827.

[32]The principle of declining to enhance one's chances of being returned by paying for the conveyance and refreshment of voters.

the unreformed system. Even Albany Fonblanque once wrote that "those who unremittingly make use of the apparently inadequate means within their reach, work what are called miracles."[33] The Times had also seen the potential for improvement by voters' exertions when it had considered the Aylesbury reform meeting in 1821. "If the spirit of independence which animates the borough of Aylesbury existed more generally in those portions of the community to whom has been granted the privilege of sending members to parliament," it declared, "the House of Commons would be a better house than it is."[34]

Even Wooler wrote in 1823 that "this is a favourable period for exertion among all the various classes of voters. There is now no fear of being turned out of farms and houses, for venturing a vote against a patron's will and pleasure."[35] It is interesting that in encouraging increasing independence of mind among electors he should also consider that undue influence, a central grievance of the reformers, was on the wane.

This perception of achievable good sometimes led to chastisement of the constituent body, as opposed to the usual butt of reformers' abuse, the system itself. Thus, the Times, in an apocalyptic harangue, told voters

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[33]Seven Administrations, i, p.7.

[34]Times, 8 February 1821.

[35]Black Dwarf, 15 January 1823.

that the determination of the outcome of political questions was in their hands and it called upon them to review the period since the last election and ask themselves whether financial burdens had been diminished, the poor relieved, bread prices reduced to match wages, the monopoly of corn altered, corruption threatened or general representative reform attempted. That the answer to all these points was "no" was the electors' own fault: "... in all respects we are, as compared with our state in 1820, a people far gone in adversity... the last Parliament was at least an inefficient assembly, - and who was to blame? Why, none but the people who chose it."[36]

On this at least the Times was in harmony with Richard Carlile, who also believed that the misconduct of parliament was ultimately traceable to electors who sold or gave their votes to men whom they did not sincerely believe would do good. "There is no fault in the House of Commons; when constituted, whether corrupt or not, it is what the electors make it; and all its acts are the acts of the electors."[37] Carlile's stress on the responsibility of individuals to reform their own conduct led him to conclude that the General Election had shown that the mass of the people "are but little improved."

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[36] Times, 9 June 1826.

[37] Republican, 2 June 1826.

In Coventry, Chester and Preston especially, "the election has evinced the state of mind to be very low."[38]

However, Tavistock and Russell clearly thought electors capable of good conduct when they embarked on their campaigns with the intention of spending not a shilling to lessen the inconvenience their supporters might experience in coming to vote for them. The young Russells' zeal aroused the misgivings of some more cautious and perhaps more realistic members of their party. Holland told Lord John that he was "a sceptick on the doctrines of purity - that I am not sure on principle that the refusal of all conveyances and all expense is right, at least in our system of representation, and that I am sure in point of policy that it is wrong for one party to adopt it if the other can neither be driven nor persuaded to follow their example."[39] In those days of single polling places for whole counties, the prospect of receiving refreshment at the end of an arduous journey probably weighed heavily in the minds of many electors.

The Whigs' enemies naturally took a dismissive view of the Russells' conduct. "These cheap elections, we may safely prophecy," wrote the Huntingdon, Bedford and Cambridge Weekly Journal, "will never become general in this country. The whole system is foreign to the habits of the English nation, and evinces a narrow-minded,

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[38] Ibid., 23 June 1826.

[39] Russell Papers, PRO 30/22/1A, f.182, 27 June 1826.

huckster-like policy which on such a subject is truly ridiculous and contemptible."[40] In their speeches, Colonel Macqueen, the Bedfordshire Tory candidate, and his friends sounded remarkably like reformers, talking, for instance, of the Russells' coalition against their liberties and of the task of "recovering the county from such a state of jobbing and thraldom."[41] Bedfordshire was "the most rotten borough in his majesty's dominions."[42] It is interesting that this condition was described as "dismal, melancholy and disgraceful"[43] by an opponent of a man whose brother had made attacks on rotten boroughs his own political province. The Russells may simply have been thought of as hypocrites in this regard, but it is likely that such critics felt that rotten boroughs were a serviceable part of the constitution as long as they, as respectable freeholders, did not have to live in one; a county certainly ought not to be reduced to such a state. The Whigs' opponents were in a sense upholding popular election in its proper constitutional place. They did not believe that either property or population should reign supreme. The comments of a Mr Astell during the election suggest this: "I have no objection to the

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40 Huntingdon, Bedford and Cambridge Weekly Journal, 5 March 1825.

41 History of the Late Contest for the County of Bedford from the notes of a freeholder (1826), p.49. Macqueen's speech after the first day's poll.

42 Ibid., p.55.

43 Huntingdon, Bedford and Cambridge Weekly Journal, 8 July 1826.

large property of the Russells and Whitbreads having a proper influence in the county; but I do maintain, also, the people have a right to their share in the representation."[44]

Tavistock, beaten into a humiliating second place by Macqueen, and Russell, ousted altogether, were left to lick their wounds. Holland thought Russell had suffered an unnecessary martyrdom. "Bedfordshire is provoking," he wrote, "and I think a little management might have prevented it."[45] Bedford, however, had no such misgivings and saw his eldest son's conduct as an example of heroic patriotism. "Even you, I think," he told Holland in a letter discussing Tavistock's speeches, "do not do justice to the motives which have guided his conduct... I am so convinced that he is right, that his principle must ultimately prevail, and the country will have to thank him as the first who has attempted to stem the current of corruption which has debased our representative system."[46] His other son was also a model of wronged virtue: "... you have afforded them [the Huntingdonshire voters] the fairest opportunity of maintaining their independence. If they do not profit by it, it is their own fault, or rather I should say their misfortune."[47]

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[44]History of the Late Contest, pp.49-50.

[45]Russell Papers, PRO 30/22/1A, ff.182, Holland to Russell, 27 June 1826.

[46]Add. 51663, f.126, Bedford to Holland, 10 August 1826.

[47]Russell Papers, PRO 30/22/1A, f.187B, Bedford to Russell, 1826.

Blaming the voters was also part of Tavistock's own self-justification. He noted with regret the declining public principles of the county's freeholders, who were prepared to vote for any man who would try and secure to them customs and excise posts, promotions in the army and navy, or preferment in the church.[48] Here again we see the view that the electors' misdeeds were their own individual responsibility and could be reformed if a man had the will to do his duty. No Whig went to the utilitarian extreme of seeing voters as mere cogs whose actions were predetermined by the nature of the political machine.

A similar struggle against aristocratic dictation took place in Westmorland, though in this case it was Brougham contending against the Tory Lowther interest. However, in this sort of contest, the rhetoric did not really change according to the political colour of the independent candidate. Thus a Mr Doveton, at the City of London Tavern meeting of Brougham's friends, declared that it "was high time that the County of Westmorland should be rescued from the degraded and unnatural state of its representation." Like Mr Astell in Bedfordshire, he was prepared to give property its due. The Lowther interest could have one seat, but not both.[49] Upholders

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[48] Add. 51675, ff.8-10, Tavistock to Holland, 7(?) August 1826.

[49] Representative, 16 May 1826.

of county independence were undoubtedly at least partly motivated by the fact that the local aristocratic domination was being exerted on behalf of a party to which they were opposed. One wonders, for instance, whether all the Macqueenites in Bedfordshire would have been as zealous in their opposition to "undue influence" had the Russells been Tory. It could also be that such campaigners were purely concerned with their local position and did not care to draw general conclusions about the electoral system. However, this was not the case with one of the Broughamites at the City of London Tavern, who saw the battle of Westmorland as the battle of England as a whole, "for if every county like Westmorland were to be degraded to the condition of a rotten borough, representation was at an end." He opposed most reform schemes, "yet if the case of Westmoreland came to be the case of other counties, the evils of reform must be encountered."[50]

The liberal Tory _Representative_ newspaper showed a similar zeal for the idea of the freedom of election, though it did not attempt to conceal that this was born out of party feeling. It printed a eulogy on Middlesex's great tradition of electoral vitality (Wilkes and all, presumably) and then attacked "the baneful influence" under which the county "has recently sunk into morbid inaction, like the City of Westminster and the Borough

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[50] _Ibid_.

of Southwark."[51] The paper's belief that Radicalism was fading led it to conclude that there existed an opportunity to end the Burdett/Hobhouse domination of Westminster. The days of "the great mob charlatans" like Preston, Watson and Gale Jones were gone by and "now that the veriest idiot in the nation has laughed at the idea that change in the mode of election or the duration of parliaments (admitting, as we do, that both are the fairest subjects for discussion, and alteration, if there were necessity) could do the miracles that were then pretended," it was difficult to see why Burdett and Hobhouse should be allowed to walk over the course.[52]

Thus it was not only reformers who found themselves in opposition to the "status quo". The Representative, doubtless no enemy to the "legitimate influence of property", nevertheless regretted the expense of a contested county election if it hindered the promotion of its own principles. The prospect of expense left Byng and Whitbread unchallenged in Middlesex and frightened Bethell in Yorkshire, Nowell in Lancashire and Tremayne in Cornwall. In lamenting that "the days of the Roman patriot are gone by, who leaped into the gulf and devoted himself to destruction for the good of his country",[53] the paper showed that an interest in noble self-sacrifice in the

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[51] Ibid., 17 June 1826.

[52] Ibid., 26 May 1826.

[53] Ibid., 20 June 1826.

face of an entrenched establishment was not a monopoly of the zealots for purity.

The election naturally highlighted the problem of expense for the Whigs as well and this provided the immediate incentive to attempt some modification of the law. Some may not have thought it advisable to go as far as Tavistock or Russell, but the vast sums expended certainly gave Whig leaders cause for reflection. Grey estimated that the total expenses of all candidates in the Northumberland and Durham contests amounted to over £180,000. "Was there ever such madness?" he asked Ellice.[54] No doubt he was partly moved by the inconvenience he had personally suffered. His wife thought he had been ruined "by the horrid election, the expense of which, I own, I grudge much."[55] Yet Grey's comment does suggest a more detached view that the whole system needed looking at, rather than mere pique about the conduct, or even the existence, of electoral opponents. The expense of the Yorkshire election led Thomas Tottie to consider the future of such contests and to conclude that there were three possibilities:

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[54]Ellice, MS 15020, f.66, Grey to Ellice, 7 February 1827. Richard Welford published a portion of Beaumont's election bills for 1826 which alone totalled £40,634. Men of Mark 'twixt Tyne and Tweed, i, pp.222-3.

[55]Fitz., 127, f.26, Lady Grey to Fitzwilliam, 13 December 1826.

> "Either first some material change in the law and practice of county elections must be made, by which the enormous expense may be greatly diminished; or second some extended associations must be formed, amongst the opulent and middle classes of electors, by which they shall undertake to contribute a percentage upon their known incomes, for the support at each election, of the most fit men as their Representatives in Parliament; or third this county and most others, will at no very distant period be chiefly represented by men, whose only qualification will be, the power and the will to spend an enormous sum, in such wasteful profligacy as regularly attends the election for such a borough as Pontefract."

Tottie thought that almost insoluble problems prevented an attempt to reform the law and practice of elections, that there was a "chilling apathy" towards the establishment of electoral associations, and that the recent contests in Yorkshire, Northumberland, Westmorland, Huntingdonshire and Somerset showed that the power of the purse threatened to become supreme.[56]

In one of these expensive contests, that for Northumberland, reform was touched upon, either expressly or implicitly, quite frequently. As we have seen, one of the main features of this election was the stand of the erratic T.W. Beaumont against "aristocratic faction" and in particular the leading Whigs of the county, whom he accused of opposing him from mere spiteful personal motives. The Whig candidate, Lord Howick, was not shy of reform, but Beaumont laid the greater stress on it during the contest, and he was also less moderate as

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[56] _Ibid._, 126, f.4, Tottie to Fitzwilliam, 13 July 1826.

to the form it should take. Both he and Howick mentioned it at the Alnwick nomination meeting, but Beaumont was more decided in championing it.[57] On the eighth day of the poll, he observed: "I have been termed a Radical; but I hail the title with joy, for if it be to tear up corruption by the roots, then let me be Radical."[58]

Nor was the issue likely to be forgotten, despite the claims of the Representative to the contrary, at Preston, where Cobbett was standing. Addresses to the Preston electors from Cobbettites in Blackburn, Great and Little Bolton (the manuscript of whose address was claimed to have been signed by 2,500 persons) and Manchester were issued in early June and they put the need for reform in a very prominent position.[59] Yet it was not only Cobbett and his supporters who expressed support for reform. At the nomination meeting, John Wood declared himself a reformer of long standing and attacked the influence of peers in the House of Commons, whilst Stanley included the issue (alongside Catholic Emancipation and the Corn Laws) as one of the three great subjects likely to be agitated in the first session of the new parliament.[60]

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[57] Newcastle Courant, 24 June 1826.

[58] Ibid., 1 July 1826.

[59] A Collection of Addresses, Squibs, &c, Together with the Political Mountebank, (shewing the changeable opinions of Mr. Cobbett), published during the contested election for the Borough of Preston... (Preston 1826), pp.31, 35-6.

[60] Ibid., p.38.

Captain Robert Barrie, avowing himself an independent Englishman rather than a Tory, admitted that he was in some degree also a reformer, though not to the same extent as Cobbett. Thus none of the four candidates had taken up a totally intransigent and hostile position on the issue.

However, the threats of spinning masters, manufacturers and coal merchants to sack anyone voting for Cobbett and the alleged gross bribery by Barrie and his friends aroused Radical indignation. A number of The Tyrant's Looking Glass, or the History and Mystery of Bribery, Perjury and Corruption practised during the Preston Election appeared on each day of the poll and listed specific instances of these sins. Barrie had deprived Cobbett of the benefit of the large Catholic vote by calling for the administration to the voters of the oath abjuring Catholicism, thus disfranchising all Catholics who were not prepared to commit perjury. In addition, the mayor excluded many of Cobbett's voters by refusing to acknowledge their qualifications. Such events could be used to nurture righteous anger when Cobbett trailed in last in the poll; this was another instance of the case for reform being strengthened by the failure of its advocates.

The same might be said of the comprehensive defeat of Hunt in Somerset, secured, the Huntites would have argued, by a massive mobilisation of undue influence

by the successful candidates Dickinson and Lethbridge and contributed to by Hunt's "purity" in not spending any money. With Hunt around, general reform could never, of course, be forgotten, but the contest was much taken up with discussion of the management of county affairs and with simple abuse and character assassination. As Belchem has pointed out, the driving force behind Lethbridge's and Dickinson's desire to crush Hunt was their anger at being put to the cost and inconvenience of a contested election by someone as supposedly disreputable as a Radical blacking merchant.[61] Neither of them had been unshakeably hostile to reform. Even Lethbridge, suffering from the temporary fever of agricultural distress, had voted for Russell's 1823 motion, and during the 1826 nominations at Bridgewater, Dickinson told electors that "although he had not voted against all rotten boroughs without distinction, still he had invariably supported the general measures which would tend to improve the representation." He would advocate such a system as Bridgewater enjoyed, under which voters returned independent members free of expense.[62]

As in 1820, specific references to reform by candidates or their supporters were not in the 1826 General Election as common as the expression of sentiments, by

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[61] Orator Hunt, pp.174-5.

[62] Taunton Courier, 21 June 1826. Dickinson voted for Russell's reform motions of 1822, 1823 and 1826.

persons of different political views, which could form the basis of a reforming analysis. In referring again and again to the "independence" of constituencies, voters and candidates of all colours seem to have had in mind a similar idea of how the system should work. As noted earlier, such rhetoric might often have been simply an adjunct to party feeling, but that in itself meant that Tories could be made aware that the present system might be manipulated by their enemies. If such a danger threatened to become general, actual reformism could be the result, as the reaction of the Ultras to Catholic Emancipation was to show.

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