

ASPECTS OF
BRITISH POLITICAL
HISTORY, 1815–1914

Stephen J. Lee



London and New York

settlement of the various issues involved. He had outwitted Metternich and made France play second fiddle. He had, for the moment, avoided a Russo-Turkish war and at the same time secured Greek independence.²⁷

The long-term outcome was less happy, although part of the responsibility for this must lie with Canning's successors. Wellington withdrew Britain from her alliance with Russia and apologised to the Turks. Released from all constraints, Russia promptly declared war on Turkey and, by the Treaty of Adrianople (1829), secured control over the mouth of the Danube. Russia was now in a position to put pressure in the future on Moldavia and Wallachia. The whole process ended, as Evans points out, 'with an enhanced Russian presence in South-east Europe'.²⁸ Canning had therefore inherited an 'Eastern question' and, although unintentionally, bequeathed an Eastern problem.

Was Canning a great statesman? His time at the Foreign Office was certainly eventful. More than anyone else, he contributed to the demise of the Congress System which, arguably, Castlereagh had been trying to salvage. He recovered British prestige after the Spanish fiasco by preventing French intervention in Portugal. He ensured that there would be no intervention against the Latin American republics, for which he secured British recognition in 1824 and 1825. Everywhere, it seemed, British interests were being aggressively pursued. On the other hand, Rolo argues that Canning was never fully tested, since times were relatively quiet.²⁹ Canning's task was hardly monumental, although it suited him to project it as such. At no time were Britain's fundamental interests seriously threatened; at no time did Britain face a serious prospect of war. In the case of the South American colonies, recognition would have come eventually anyway and Canning's policy here was largely a matter of personal image. Overall, therefore, Canning deserves to be praised for his foreign policy – but faintly.

THE 1832 REFORM ACT

The period between 1830 and 1832 was one of political and constitutional change. In the first place, the long period of Tory rule ended in the autumn of 1830 when Earl Grey replaced the Duke of Wellington as Prime Minister. His main commitment was now to secure the reform of the electoral system for the House of Commons. A Reform Bill, introduced by Lord John Russell in March 1831, passed the second reading in the Commons, but was defeated in committee. Grey obtained a dissolution from William IV and, in the general election of April 1831, secured an increased majority for the Whigs; this was widely seen as a mandate to press the issue to its conclusion. A second Bill passed all stages in the Commons in September, only to be rejected in the Lords. A third Bill fared little better, being substantially amended by the Lords in committee. Grey's request for the creation of fifty new Whig peers was at first refused by William IV, until the King found it impossible to appoint an alternative government. When he finally agreed to comply, the Lords gave way and in June 1832 passed the Bill in the third reading.

This chapter concentrates on four major issues connected with the Act which finally emerged from this tortuous process. What arguments were advanced for and against parliamentary reform? Why, despite the extensive obstacles placed in its way, had the impetus for reforming legislation succeeded by 1832? How extensively did the Act change the franchise and distribution of seats? And what was the impact on key institutions outside the House of Commons?

ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

During the eighteenth century, it has been said, the system to elect the House of Commons 'worked not unsuccessfully' and could be seen as 'providing a parliament which reflected the leading interests of the nation'.¹

Several factors had already rendered it obsolete, however, by the beginning of the nineteenth century. One was the transformation of society as a result of industrial growth which reduced the comparative economic importance of agriculture and the land. As yet, however, there was no means of increasing the political influence of industrial and commercial interests or of enfranchising the majority of those involved in them. Industrialisation in the North, with its consequent urbanisation, had also created serious distortions in the distribution of parliamentary seats. Lancashire in 1831 had a population of 1,337,000 but had only two MPs, in contrast with Cornwall which, with 300,000 inhabitants, returned forty-two members. Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield, with a combined population of over half a million, were entirely unrepresented, while twelve seats were available for six Cornish coastal boroughs with less than 6,000 people in total. A large proportion of such seats were 'pocket', 'rotten', or, in political parlance, 'nomination' boroughs. These were a means whereby an MP could enter Westminster without having to fight an election. Indeed, where constituencies were contested, crippling expense could be incurred by the candidates. In an election in Yorkshire in 1807, for example, Fitzwilliam spent £97,000, Harewood £94,000 and Wilberforce £30,000.

Pressure to reform the system came both from below and from above. The former was strongly influenced by the French Revolution and its English connection, especially by the ideas of Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, published between 1791 and 1792. The French Revolution has, in fact, been called a 'watershed' which popularised the cause of parliamentary reform,² particularly in the hands of individuals like Hardy and organisations such as the London Corresponding Society. Although they found their cause inhibited during the French Wars by government repression, they took up the cause again from 1815; Cobbett, Hunt, Cartwright and the Hampden Clubs now aimed to transform society and economic conditions by achieving a more representative political balance in parliament.

Meanwhile, reformist arguments were also being put by a group already strongly based in parliament, the Whigs. Their intentions were less sweeping than those of the radicals, but as longstanding. Grey, for example, had shown interest in the 1790s, sponsoring unsuccessfully a parliamentary Reform Bill in 1797 to enfranchise all householders and increase county representation. The interest of the Whigs declined over the next twenty years, to revive in 1822 with Russell's proposal to provide representatives for some of the larger towns by removing one MP from the smallest boroughs.³ Some Whigs were never entirely convinced about the need for such changes, but most were gradually won over by a variety of arguments.

These did not, of course, include a case for democracy. The emphasis was on bringing other groups into the arena of power, not on handing power over to them. Above all, the Whigs did not intend to destroy the base of aristocratic control. Grey stated, at the height of the Reform Bill crisis in November 1831, 'There is no-one more decided against annual parliaments, universal suffrage and the ballot, than I am. My object is not to favour, but to put an end to such hopes and projects'.⁴ Their conception of the need for and role of reform was more limited; basically they aimed to save the constitution by making it work more effectively. They considered this to be directly in line with the argument of Edmund Burke that, although drastic changes were always to be avoided, any political system had occasional need for a sharp corrective in order to ensure its survival. Hence Grey always maintained that 'The principle of my reform is to prevent the necessity for revolution' and that he was 'reforming to preserve and not to overthrow'.⁵

At the same time, any measure introduced to prevent revolution had also to be worthwhile in its own right. That is why Grey warned the king that 'not to do enough to satisfy public expectation would be worse than to do nothing'.⁶ He was referring specifically to the 'satisfaction of the rational public', or the productive middle classes. The Whigs advanced two arguments for giving them the vote. One was to detach them from radicalism and thereby provide a guarantee against the sort of revolutionary activity which was affecting the Continent. Macaulay argued for bringing the middle classes into parliament to strengthen the *status quo*. 'At present', he said, 'we oppose the schemes of revolutionists with only one half, with only one quarter of our proper force'.⁷ Equally important,

however, was the acknowledgement that the new wealthy fully merited inclusion within the electoral system. Grey wrote that they had made 'wonderful advances in both property and intelligence',⁸ while Brougham considered them 'the genuine depositories of sober, rational, intelligent and honest English feeling'.⁹ Why should it not be acknowledged that their proper link was with the aristocracy?

Needless to say, a different set of arguments was advanced by the Tories, this time in opposition to parliamentary reform. They also took their stand on Burke, but interpreted his ideas as being anti-reformist as well as anti-revolutionary; this is a good example of how two conflicting meanings can be read into the writings of one philosopher. The Tories considered that the Whig remedy against revolution was essentially concession and retreat, although the Whigs had wrapped this up in terms of strengthening the defensive basis of power. The Tories recognised only one form of defence: not to give ground and to stand firm against demands for reform. To do otherwise would be to risk opening the floodgates and bring upon Britain the deluge which had already affected the Continent. Britain's power base was firmly set in the constitutional settlement of 1689 and any attempts to meddle with it now would be to inflict serious damage. Croker was particularly disgusted by what he regarded as the 'levelling' effects of the Great Reform Act and, after its successful passage in 1832, withdrew from the Commons because he wanted nothing more to do with a House which was prepared to 'subvert the Church, the Peerage and the Throne'.¹⁰

The Tories had three specific objections to parliamentary reform. First, the end of nomination boroughs would have serious political implications, making ministers and MPs more dependent on popular opinion and without the safeguard of a secure seat. It would also accelerate the declining influence of the Crown and destroy any residual influence of patronage. According to Peel, reform would mean that 'flexibility in the working of the constitution would be lost' and the 'provision of an executive to carry on the King's government would be frustrated'. It would, above all, become next to impossible for the king to 'change a ministry'.¹¹ Second, the Whig argument for seat redistribution meant an attack on the small boroughs; this, in turn, would become a wider onslaught on private property. In a debate on 6 July 1831, Peel argued that the Bill 'subverts a system of government which has combined security to

personal liberty, and protection to property, with vigour in the executive power of the State, in a more perfect degree than ever existed in any age, or in any country in the world'.¹² And third, the Tories defended as inevitable the absence of uniformity in seat distribution. What really counted, they maintained, was not the rapid increase in population in some areas but the pattern of property ownership, which was less likely to change.

It would be naive not to see behind both sets of arguments a strong degree of self-interest. The Whigs, out of office for so long, urgently needed to change the political system more in their favour and to enfranchise a section of the population from which they could expect substantial support in the future. The Tories, by contrast, were bound to remain wedded to a system which had for so long operated in their favour. After all, the existing electorate had consistently returned them to power for three decades and, in any case, the base of their position in the House of Commons rested on about two hundred nomination boroughs, compared with the seventy or so held by the Whigs. Peel expressed himself 'unwilling to open a door which [he] saw no prospect of being able to close'.¹³ The unspoken corollary was that he also had no desire to see the Whigs pass through it.

THE OVERCOMING OF OBSTACLES TO PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

Time, however, favoured the Whig rather than the Tory analysis of the needs of the constitution; it proved easier to expand the base of power than to try to restrict it. Before 1829 there was very little prospect of the Whigs being able to form a government, let alone carry a highly contentious piece of legislation on parliamentary reform. Yet, within a year Grey had replaced Wellington as Prime Minister, within two he had won a general election on a mandate for reform, and within three he had overcome the mountainous obstacle of the House of Lords. All of this was in the teeth of Tory opposition with its dire warnings of revolution and upheaval.

The main reason for this remarkable transformation was the sudden collapse of the Tory monopoly of political power. Chapter 2 dealt with the end of the Liverpool era of stability; the subsequent instability under Canning, Goderich and Wellington; the contrasting styles of leadership; and the release of conflicting tendencies which tore apart the previous consensus which had more or less

passed for party unity. Wellington's fall in 1830 has been seen by C. Flick as 'one of the turning points in modern British history'.¹⁴ Underlying this catastrophe for the Tories was the Catholic Emancipation Act, which has received increased attention from modern historians for its political rather than religious impact. According to R.W. Davies, Catholic Emancipation 'broke up the old Tory party of Pitt and Liverpool that had so long dominated the political life of the country'.¹⁵ The Ultra Tories, who bitterly resented the measure, gave the Whigs the extra support they required – both in bringing down the Tory government and in securing the passage of the Reform Bill through the Commons.

It could also be argued that Catholic Emancipation was a watershed in a more constructive sense, by removing the absolute veto on all alterations to the constitution. In 1829 Wellington had adopted a position on Catholic Emancipation not too dissimilar to the Whig argument on parliamentary reform, namely that reform was necessary as a concession to prevent revolution. When the Tories revived their opposition to parliamentary change on the grounds that revolution might be encouraged, they appeared for the first time inconsistent. Catholic Emancipation had therefore blown a hole in Tory ideology as well as in Tory party unity. The Whigs were able to manoeuvre themselves through both, to achieve power and then to secure the passage of the Reform Act. The Tories did the Whigs another favour. By tackling the problem of Emancipation themselves, they removed from the Whigs the burden of being associated with this particular reformist cause. The Whigs, in other words, could concentrate on parliamentary reform and not have to divert part of their energy to pressing for the removal of an obvious injustice to a religious minority.

The Whigs also benefited from a combination of objective factors, not an experience familiar to them over the past few decades. In the early 1830s things moved more obviously in their favour. One example was the death of George IV, which meant the removal of a major obstacle to a Whig ministry. George IV's dislike of the Whigs in general and of Grey in particular had been reinforced by a royal veto on the whole issue of parliamentary reform. William IV was altogether a different proposition; he had no such prejudices and was willing to work with the Whigs provided, of course, that they could establish a stable government and present a proper case for reform. At the same time, another set of circumstances intervened to add a sense of urgency to what the Whigs were demanding.

Popular pressure and the disturbances analysed in Chapter 1 worked in favour of the Whigs between 1830 and 1832. The agricultural disturbances of 1830, especially the Swing Riots, favoured the Whigs by exposing the insensitivity of Wellington's policies and demonstrating that the Tories were no longer capable of governing effectively. Then the riots which accompanied the crisis of the Reform Bill in 1831 and 1832 added weight to the demands of the Whigs. This proved to be one of the few cases in modern British history where the threat of revolution promoted rather than inhibited the progress of reform.

CHANGES TO THE FRANCHISE AND SEAT DISTRIBUTION

The Reform Act received royal assent in June 1832, to be followed by provision for Scotland and Ireland in July and August. In England the county franchise now included 40 shilling freeholders, £10 copyholders and £50 leaseholders, while eligibility was extended in the boroughs to £10 householders. The total number of seats remained unchanged at 658, but 143 of these were redistributed. Fifty-six boroughs with less than 2,000 voters lost two members, while thirty-one boroughs with between 2,000 and 4,000 lost one member. Sixty-five seats were provided for previously unenfranchised boroughs, and a further sixty-five for the counties. Finally, the other two kingdoms also benefited from the redistribution – Scotland receiving six extra and Ireland five.

These measures went some way towards dealing with the previous problems and anomalies of the electoral system. In the first place, they brought unrepresented areas and individuals within the system for the first time and partially redressed the geographical imbalance between the North and South – at the expense of the rotten boroughs, which all but disappeared. Of the 143 seats reallocated, for example, 65 went to substantial centres of population such as Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds, Oldham, Bradford and Bolton. Second, the £10 householder qualification meant that a large proportion of the middle class living in enfranchised boroughs now had the vote, raising the total electorate from 478,000 to 813,000. Third, Scotland was particularly affected by the Act. Before 1832 she had possessed a total electorate of only 4,500, thinly spread across ninety-six constituencies which were, in effect, little more than a system of pocket boroughs.¹⁶ After the new

franchise, Scottish boroughs had an average of 1,300 voters and counties an average of 1,100, providing a fifteen-fold increase altogether.¹⁷ Ireland also benefited, although for the most part the Act supplemented changes already made by the Act of Union in 1800 or by Catholic Emancipation in 1829.

On the other hand, the Reform Act clearly had its limitations. The vast majority of the total population of 24 million remained unenfranchised, including part of the lower middle class and the entire working class; this appeared to undermine somewhat the assertion of Lord Durham that 'to property and good order we attach numbers'.¹⁸ Second, the redistribution of seats was by no means complete. Only the worst anomalies, the 'rotten' boroughs, were actually disenfranchised. Over 123 constituencies still had populations of less than 1,000.¹⁹ This meant that patronage might continue a little longer into the future in elections, even if it no longer had the same influence on the making of governments. Third, there remained a fundamental imbalance between the North of England, which had the majority of the population but only 120 MPs, and the South, which still had 370 constituencies. There was a similar distortion between the boroughs and the counties, which had to be redressed by subsequent Reform Acts in 1867 and 1884. Finally, in the absence of any measure to introduce the secret ballot, there could be no effective control over electioneering methods. In fact, according to Gash the increased number of contested constituencies after 1832 may actually have increased the incidence of bribery and corruption.²⁰ The problem was not fully addressed until the passing of the Ballot Act (1872) and the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act (1883).

The overall balance between what the Whigs changed and what they left alone has been aptly summarised by Finlayson. 'If, then, the electoral system after 1832 recognised new elements in the country and society, these had to exist within a framework which still gave scope to many of the older elements.'²¹

THE IMPACT ON INSTITUTIONS OUTSIDE THE COMMONS

Any analysis of the Reform Act would be incomplete without a brief consideration of its impact on institutions outside the House of Commons: the Lords, the Crown and the parties.

No reform of the House of Lords had been envisaged in the bills

of 1831 and 1832. But the manner in which these bills eventually became the 1832 Act involved a change in the role of the Lords. For the first time they had been forced, very much against their will, to concede legislation with which they profoundly disagreed under the threat of being swamped with new Whig peers. This was an important precedent for the future and marked a vital stage in the transfer of real legislative power to the Commons. In his nineteenth-century survey *The British Constitution*, Walter Bagehot argued that the role of the Lords had significantly changed. 'The House has ceased to be one of latent directors, and has become one of temporary rejectors and palpable alterers.'²² On the other hand this transition should not be painted too strongly. It was essentially a long-term and delayed by-product of the reform of the Commons. Any reform aimed explicitly at the Lords was unlikely at this stage, largely because of the difficulty of arriving at a consensus on an alternative composition. In any case, the Tories had a strong vested interest in keeping the Lords unchanged to counteract some of the damage done to them by the 1832 Reform Act, and to use the delaying powers to curb what they regarded as Whig excesses in the area of social reform. Indeed, it could be argued that the Lords emerged from the Reform Bill crisis temporarily strengthened, precisely because they were more than ever a repository of Tory influence and power acting to counterbalance the revival of the Whigs in the Commons.

As regards the power of the Crown, the 1832 Reform Act accelerated a decline already under way. It further reduced the scope for the operation of patronage, which had already been significantly undermined by the financial reforms of the 1780s. In disenfranchising the nomination boroughs, the 1832 Reform Act made it virtually impossible for the monarch actually to select a ministry; for example, there was no repetition of George IV's interference in the government of Goderich (see Chapter 3). Royal authority was also affected by the rise of political parties, which virtually replaced the Crown as the main channel for the flow of executive power from the legislature.

It is here that the Reform Act had its most important impact outside the House of Commons. The extension of the franchise meant a larger electorate to be won over, and the reduction of the nomination boroughs increased the number of constituencies where genuine elections would have to be held.²³ These two changes forced the parties to organise themselves more effectively and to

compete more openly against each other to register the new voters. This resulted in the evolution of more effective management. For the Tories an important stage in this development was the establishment of the Carlton Club (1832), the purpose of which was to try to pull the party together after its period of humiliation and disintegration. For the Whigs, the equivalent was the Reform Club, set up in 1836. Influence radiated outwards from the centre and, under the guidance of managers like the Tory F.R. Bonham, built up a network of local party associations. The Act also brought a regional dimension to party support. The enlarged electorate in Scotland and Ireland meant that the Tories lost a significant number of nomination boroughs which, now that they were contested, tended to go to the Whigs. As a result, the Whigs and their successors – the Liberals – gradually built up a powerful basis of support in the Celtic fringe to offset the predominance of the Tories in the English heartland.

A 'WHIG' PROCESS?

There is a tendency to see reform as a self-sustaining momentum, with each individual achievement leading inexorably to the next stage in an unfolding pattern of progress. This was certainly the view of nineteenth-century Whig historians and their twentieth-century successor, G.M. Trevelyan. But such an analysis relies essentially on retrospection and reads too much into the motives of reformers at the time. The 1832 Act did not lead inevitably to those of 1867 and 1884. Nor was it the first step towards parliamentary democracy. Its essence was really to preserve and strengthen aristocracy by removing from it the taint of oligarchy.

This is not to say that the Whigs succeeded in this objective in the long term, or even that they continued to hold to it after 1832. The First Reform Act was followed by changes which were far more rapid than those which had preceded it. But, because the Act was primarily a defensive measure, these changes were brought about not directly through its clauses, but indirectly through its impact on those areas it was never intended to cover. As we have seen, the Act was a catalyst for the development of party organisation, which encouraged the formulation of more explicit party programmes to compete for the support of the electorate. The Whigs made the first adjustment to life after the 1832 Act, not by planning further constitutional changes, but by using what they had already accomp-

lished as the means to secure social and economic improvements. Peel, in turn, had to adjust the priorities of the Tory party to enable it to compete. The result was the reforming ministries of the 1830s and 1840s.

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

1867 and beyond

Lord John Russell, and others in his party, had confidently predicted that the Great Reform Act of 1832 would be a 'final settlement' of the parliamentary question. This, like all such prognostications, proved premature. During the Victorian era, two further Reform Acts followed in 1867 and 1884 to extend the franchise and redistribute seats, although the basis for full universal suffrage was not achieved until those of 1918 and 1928. This chapter will examine the period leading up to 1867; interpretations of the passing and effects of the 1867 Act; and the need for and results of the 1884 Act.

DEVELOPMENTS 1832-67

Despite the stir it had caused at the time, the 1832 Reform Act was limited in its impact; as Wright argues, 'Only the intolerably diseased sections of the old system were completely cut out'.¹ Among the remaining anomalies and inconsistencies was the uneven representation and distribution of seats; ten counties in southern England with a combined population of 3.3 million had 156 seats, while Middlesex, Lancashire, and West Yorkshire had 3.7 million people but only 58 seats. The boroughs (many of which were rural) had 62 per cent of the seats with only 43 per cent of the voters, at the expense of the counties, for which the figures were 38 per cent and 57 per cent respectively; among the boroughs were eight with fewer than 200 electors. Finally, less than 15 per cent of adult males had the vote after 1832: the electorate was 813,000 out of a total population of 24 million.

The 1830s and 1840s saw considerable pressure for further parliamentary reform. The Chartists, in particular, saw the 1832 Act as a

sell-out to the aristocracy and upper middle class and demanded a comprehensive overhaul of the entire system (see Chapter 8). The collapse of the movement in 1848 for the moment weakened the demand for more radical solutions like universal suffrage. Instead, reform was picked up again by isolated politicians with strictly limited intentions. One of these, despite his earlier stand, was 'Finality Jack' Russell. By 1851 he considered it necessary to extend the franchise into at least the upper level of the working class, as a means of preventing the revival of political radicalism. Several measures were therefore considered. In 1851 Russell brought before the cabinet a bill which would have made the basis of the franchise qualification in the boroughs a £10 rateable value and would have given the vote in the counties to £20 tenants. This, however, failed to make it through cabinet discussion. He tried in 1852 to introduce the same bill into the Commons but had to withdraw it under a combined assault from both Whigs and Conservatives. In 1854 Russell tried again with a third bill which reduced the county franchise to £10 occupiers and the borough franchise to a £6 rateable value. Again it failed, as did a bill introduced by Disraeli in 1858. Russell's attempt in 1860 was opposed by the Conservatives and Whigs, who saw no need for it, as well as by the radicals, who regarded it as too cautious.

A number of factors contributed to the failure of any attempt to secure further reform during the 1850s. Perhaps the greatest of these was indifference. The collapse of Chartism was followed by a period of greatly reduced activism for parliamentary reform, while the Anti-Corn Law League never really moved into the realm of political activism once it had achieved its specific objective of repealing the Corn Laws. It could be argued that the growth of economic prosperity in mid-Victorian Britain reduced the immediate necessity for parliamentary reform, while foreign affairs held public attention in a quite unprecedented way. Such distractions from parliamentary reform included the Crimean War and events in Italy and Poland, to say nothing of the incidents, analysed in Chapter 10, which gave Palmerston the opportunity to 'play to the gallery'.

Even the sporadic efforts of Russell were frustrated. The House of Commons was largely hostile to reform because, at this stage, it saw no need for it. In any case, its social composition was a natural barrier to any degree of democratisation. In 1841, it has been calculated, 342 members were related to the peerage and 240 others

were members of the landed gentry; this meant that fewer than 100 were without privileged connections. Most MPs ignored Russell and aligned themselves with Palmerston, whose views on the extension of the franchise were well known. Indeed, he and the Conservative leader, Derby, made a tactical agreement to ensure that the issue was not raised in parliament between 1859 and 1865, while he failed to refer to it at all during the 1865 election campaign. There was no shortage of MPs willing to articulate arguments against reform. The two best-known were Cranborne for the Conservatives, and the Liberal, Lowe. The latter said in 1865:

I regard as one of the greatest dangers with which this country can be threatened a proposal to subvert the existing order of things, and to transfer power from the hands of property and intelligence to the hands of men whose daily life is necessarily employed in daily struggle for existence.²

Despite the resistance of the likes of Palmerston and Lowe, the profile of parliamentary reform was gradually raised during the 1860s. Partly responsible for this was Gladstone, who added a moral emphasis. He considered that a working-class aristocracy had developed which had come to accept middle-class values such as industry, sobriety and thrift. He also maintained that enfranchising the upper section of the working class would reduce its susceptibility to socialism by attaching it to the principles of capitalism. Pressure was also reviving from below. The National Reform Union, formed in 1864, demanded three-year parliaments, secret ballot, equal electoral districts and a ratepayer franchise. The Reform League, originating in the same year, also pressed for universal manhood suffrage. Meanwhile, external factors had also been encouraging the revival of popular enthusiasm for reform. The most important of these was the American Civil War. Whereas the majority of government ministers had been more sympathetic to the Confederacy, public opinion favoured the Union. The sort of enthusiasm this engendered could, when the time was appropriate, be transferred to the issue of domestic reform. Much the same applied to the visit of Garibaldi in 1864; in fact the committee which organised his reception eventually transformed itself into the Reform League.

By 1866, therefore, there was a raised level of consciousness throughout the country and a consensus in the House of Commons that the issue of parliamentary reform would have to be given

another airing. With the death of Palmerston, the main obstacle to this had been removed. The key questions were: what form would any new bill take; who would introduce it; and what would be its fate?

THE SHAPING OF THE 1867 ACT

The process of parliamentary reform between 1866 and 1867 produced some unexpected twists.

Russell's Liberal government introduced a bill in 1866, extending the franchise in the boroughs to £7 householders and, in the counties, to £14 tenants. This measure, which would have expanded the electorate by some 400,000, caused immediate dissension within the Liberal party. It was savaged from the left by the radicals, who wanted household suffrage, and opposed on the right by the Whigs, who considered that the franchise was insufficiently selective. Derby and Disraeli saw in this a unique opportunity for the Conservatives to help the Liberals destroy themselves. This was accomplished by an alliance with the right-wing Liberal dissidents, the 'Adullamites', led by Elcho and Lowe. In June 1866 this combination introduced an amendment which modified the proposed changes. When this was passed, Russell resigned and Derby found himself in power at the head of a minority Conservative government.

Logic would have suggested the introduction of a more restricted bill to enfranchise a group somewhere between the £7 rental proposed by the Liberals and the existing £10. And yet Derby and Disraeli actually intended to drop the franchise level still further – until, that is, Cranborne threatened to split the Conservatives with a revolt from the right. To prevent this, Derby and Disraeli drew up a new bill which actually made very few alterations to the system established in 1832. It soon became obvious, however, that the Liberals would not support it. Hence Disraeli reverted to a measure which was even more radical than his original one. After a number of Liberal amendments the bill was enacted in August 1867; the House of Lords, mindful of its experience in 1832, offered only minimal resistance. The 1867 Reform Act extended the borough franchise to all householders and £10 lodgers, and the county franchise to £12 ratepayers and £5 copyholders and leaseholders. Some seats were also redistributed: forty-five were removed from boroughs with a population of under 10,000. Of these, fifteen went

to boroughs without an MP; twenty-five to the counties; one each to Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds; and one to the University of London.

This strange turn of events, in which the Conservatives produced a reform which was infinitely more progressive than that proposed by the Liberals, has attracted a variety of explanations. One is a Liberal myth that the working man owed the vote less to Disraeli than to the constant pressure exerted by Gladstone throughout 1867 after the Conservatives had defeated Russell's measure in 1866. The new electorate subsequently acknowledged the real source of their extended franchise by voting the Liberals into power in the 1868 general election. This interpretation now has very few adherents since it does not really hold water; although in favour of a measure of reform, Gladstone had never wanted household suffrage and had consistently voted against the 1867 bill.

The second is a Conservative myth which was popularised by Money Penny and Buckle,³ the original biographers of Disraeli. This claims that Disraeli from the outset wanted to create a much larger electorate in the belief that it was likely to be fundamentally Conservative; indeed, he was really preparing his party and the country for his own vision of Conservative democracy. This still has a few influential advocates, including G. Himmelfarb,⁴ who argues that Disraeli was firmly wedded to the concept of Tory democracy and that the Conservative party was far more attuned to the needs and aspirations of the working class than were the Liberals. On the other hand, such an approach has been extensively criticised, not least by the modern biographer of Disraeli, R. Blake: Disraeli 'was never a Tory democrat' and, in any case, he did his best to neutralise the effect of household suffrage 'by redrawing the county and borough boundaries'.⁵ Whatever Disraeli's motives were, he cannot be seen as 'a far-sighted statesman, a Tory democrat or the educator of his party'.⁶

This brings us to a third possibility – that changes were introduced in 1867 for pragmatic reasons. In the words of Walton: 'The nature of the Act was determined by the exigencies of party strife in a complex and fragmented political system'.⁷ This is also the position of Blake, who maintains that Disraeli and Derby 'had the wide franchise of 1867 forced on them as the price of staying in power.' Disraeli realised that he had to adapt to new circumstances – and he was better at doing this than most. 'It was like a moonlight steeplechase. In negotiating their fences few of them saw where they were

going, nor much cared so long as they got there first.'⁸ M. Cowling goes still further, stressing the importance of cynical party politics. Disraeli moved towards household suffrage not through principle or through careful calculation about the party's future, but rather because of the pressure of events. He adds: 'Disraeli's was a policy of consistent opportunism'.⁹ The actual methods involved are aptly summarised by Feuchtwanger: 'In the session of 1867 Disraeli practised the tactics he had used so often since he became leader of his Party, the attempt to link up with any available group to secure a majority'.¹⁰

An overall interpretation might be advanced as follows. Having turned out Russell and Gladstone in 1866, the Conservatives had no option but to introduce their own measure of parliamentary reform. Disraeli was receptive to the lesson of 1832 – that the party taking the initiative could select the recipients of franchise extension, whereas the party opposing reform could expect only a period in political exile. But he could hardly expect the Liberals to support the reintroduction of Russell's bill of 1866. His own had to be substantially different, going either above or below the Liberal baseline. Since the Conservatives were in a minority of 290 to 360, Disraeli had to keep his own party together and, in addition, get some support from the Liberals. The former could be accomplished by a mild measure, pitched somewhere above Russell's. But when Disraeli tried this in order to appease Cranborne, he quickly realised that there would be no chance of any Liberal support. Such backing could come only from the radicals, and then only if the proposals were sufficiently progressive. Disraeli therefore opted for a bold stroke to take the old enemy completely by surprise. This was, above all, a tactical *coup*.

This is not to deny that Disraeli had some sense of the electoral implications of his stroke. Why were most of the Liberals so insistent on stopping the franchise at £6 or £7 householders? It was probably because they were confident of the support of the well-to-do working class, but considered the next layer down an unknown quantity. Disraeli saw no reason why this might not be captured by the Conservatives. There would, after all, be no secret ballot and the influence of industrial masters could therefore be brought to bear. Alternatively, the redistribution of seats would to some extent neutralise the franchise extensions, which would at least mean that the Liberals would not benefit unduly. At best, therefore, the Conservatives would gain, at worst they would not lose. All this

was, of course, taking a calculated risk but, as Blake suggests, 'moonlight steeplechasing' was in Disraeli's political nature.¹¹

There is a further controversy. How important was the pressure of public opinion in the passage of the 1867 Reform Act? The bald facts are that the replacement of Russell by Derby in 1866 was followed by an increase in public interest and pressure in the form of meetings and demonstrations. In July disturbances occurred at Hyde Park, during the course of which a 1,400-yard stretch of railings was pulled down and destroyed.

This was less violent than the events in Bristol and Nottingham in 1831. But, as with the First Reform Act, the *threat of violence* has been seen as a significant factor in forcing the pace; history, in other words, was repeating itself. This is certainly the line taken by the original biographer of Gladstone, John Morley. He argues that the House of Commons which passed the 1867 Act had actually been elected 'to support Palmerston' and that the reason for its reversal 'would seem to be that the tide of public opinion had suddenly swelled to flood'; particularly important were the Hyde Park riots and huge demonstrations and open air meetings held in Glasgow, London, Birmingham and elsewhere.¹² G.M. Trevelyan agrees, referring to the solidarity between the middle and working classes which characterised 'the agitation in the country over which Bright presided in the autumn of 1866.'¹³ More recently, R. Harrison has claimed that historians have underestimated the fears of revolution among contemporaries. The Hyde Park demonstration appeared menacing and politicians were ready to concede limited measures at this stage to avoid having to grant universal suffrage in the future. The Conservatives were, therefore, pushed by the disturbances into picking up reform again.¹⁴

There are, however, anomalies in this approach. There was a time-lapse of six months between the disturbances and the introduction of the Conservative reform bill. Since such bills could be – and were – drawn up at very short notice, this scarcely indicates a knee-jerk reaction by the government. The alternative argument is therefore that public opinion was not as significant a factor as in 1832. As Cowling states, 'The passage of the Reform Act in 1867 was effected in a context of public agitation: it cannot be explained as a simple consequence.' He also maintains that 'There was no "capitulation" to popular pressure'.¹⁵ 'The final verdict', says Feuchtwanger, 'must be that the public reform movement did not do much more than act the part of the chorus in this play'.¹⁶

Contemporaries were somewhat apprehensive about the likely impact of the 1867 Act. Derby, for example, referred to it as 'a leap in the dark', while the historian, Carlyle, likened it to 'shooting Niagara'. Did the effects justify these forebodings?

Some of the changes were extensive. The total electorate expanded from 1.4 million to 2.52 million and there were now working-class majorities among the voters of all the major cities. Yet these were accommodated to the political system with surprising ease. Both parties built up a more effective and centralised bureaucracy. J.E. Gorst transformed the organisation of the Conservative party by establishing in 1871 the central office as the focus for party propaganda. The Liberal equivalent was the National Liberal Federation. Both parties emphasised the importance of constituency organisation. The best example was the Birmingham Liberal Association which developed a highly successful method of ensuring that all three seats allocated to Birmingham were generally captured by the Liberals. Each constituency developed local clubs, with the intention of attracting working-class members and promoting permanent party allegiance. As a result, both parties were broadly based. Neither was based exclusively on a particular class, even though specific occupational and sectional groups might tend one way or the other. Because party loyalties divided vertically rather than horizontally, the wider franchise had a stabilising effect as both Conservatives and Liberals became more genuinely national parties. Furthermore, the two-party system returned as a regular feature for the first time since the repeal of the Corn Laws. Governments now alternated more frequently because it was not too difficult for a significant number of voters to switch their support from one election to another. The absorption of the new electorate was reassuring to all leading Liberals and Conservatives, making the prospect of changes in the future less traumatic.

FURTHER REFORMS, AFTER 1867

These soon became necessary. The 1867 Reform Act had a number of anomalies which needed urgent attention.

The most obvious was an imbalance in the franchise qualifications, which increased the electorate in the boroughs by 135 per cent but in the counties by only 45 per cent.¹⁷ This was accompanied by a disproportionate distribution of parliamentary seats. For example, the South-West had forty-five constituencies for

76,612 electors and the South-East forty-one for 80,177; the North-East, by contrast, had only thirty-two for 232,431. More specifically, Wiltshire and Dorset, with a total population of 450,000, had twenty-five MPs, while London's 3 million were represented by twenty-four members.¹⁸ In the absence of secret ballot, there was also plenty of scope for corruption and intimidation: according to *The Times* on 22 June 1868:

Unceasing clamour prevails; proposers, seconders, and candidates speak in dumb show, or confide their sentiments to the reporters; heads are broken, blood flows from numerous noses, and the judgement of the electors is generally subjected to a severe training as a preliminary to the voting of the following day.¹⁹

The last of these problems was the first to be addressed. The Ballot Act of 1872, produced during Gladstone's first ministry, considerably reduced the scope for intimidation by ending open voting at the hustings. On the other hand, it had very little effect on corruption. This was dealt with separately, during Gladstone's second ministry, by the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act (1883). This was considered especially urgent in the light of the evidence of electoral corruption revealed by the Royal Commission of 1880. The Liberals were willing to press ahead with such a measure partly because they were more heavily stretched than the Conservatives by the heavy expenses involved in unrestrained electioneering. The Conservatives gave way with grace. After all, what possible reason could they have given for opposing the bill?

Meanwhile, there had also been momentum for further extending the franchise, a process which was much more rapid than it had been after 1832. In 1877 the Liberals formally committed themselves to extend the suffrage to rural householders and thereby eliminate the difference between county and borough franchises. In 1884, therefore, Gladstone introduced a franchise bill. Although this passed through the Commons, the Conservative-dominated Lords threatened to reject it unless it were accompanied by a redistribution act. Lord Salisbury claimed that the Liberals would otherwise make a net gain of nearly fifty seats. It now looked as if there might be a constitutional crisis. Certainly, the radical wing of the Liberal party, under Joseph Chamberlain, did what it could to stir up public opinion, presenting the issue as 'the peers v. the people'. The Queen was sufficiently worried about the prospect of a

major constitutional crisis to request a meeting between Gladstone and Salisbury. In the end, a settlement was reached by negotiation between Gladstone and Salisbury, together with their deputies. The subsequent legislation was pushed through the Commons and Lords with surprising ease, each of the two parties following the instructions of its leadership.

The attitudes of both Gladstone and Salisbury require some explanation here. The former was reconciled to a further extension of the franchise partly because he was projecting himself increasingly as a populist politician and, according to Gash, wanted to 'round off his term of office on a creditable reforming note'²⁰ and partly to compensate for the government's unpopularity over Egypt. It is also possible that the increase in the Irish representation which would inevitably follow would strengthen Gladstone's hand over Home Rule, a cause he had now adopted. Salisbury, meanwhile, was not especially in favour, but saw no advantage in resisting the increase in the electorate from a point of *principle*. The Conservatives might even pick up many of the new county votes; in any case, they were benefiting from the growing support of the middle class, probably in reaction to the extension of the franchise in the working class, and this process could be expected to continue. The key to Salisbury's attitude was that the Conservatives must be given a fighting chance by a redistribution of seats which would not automatically load the new franchise proposals in the Liberals' favour. This explains the introduction of two measures rather than one: the Franchise Act (1884) and the Redistribution Act (1885).

Public opinion has again been put forward as a significant influence behind the events of 1884. W.A. Hayes, for example, maintains that 'At bottom the course of events in mid-November reflected the importance of the battle out-of-doors, and more broadly, demonstrated the critical role played by popular opinion in the making of the Third Reform Act.'²¹ It could certainly be argued that public opinion was taken into account more in 1884 than in 1867. On the other hand, it was hardly a threat of 1832 proportions and was exploited in a much more moderate manner. The danger of public upheaval was stressed by the party leaders to strengthen their own political positions: Gladstone needed the Conservatives to withdraw the stranglehold in the Lords, Salisbury wanted Gladstone to rethink his proposal. But the threat was never more than latent and both Gladstone and Salisbury responded rapidly to the Queen's request that they should negotiate an agreement. It might even be

said that the Queen intervened less because of any possibility of revolution than the real prospect that she would succeed in ending a rather artificial dispute.

The new reform measures made a substantial difference. By the Franchise Act of 1884, all householders in the counties received the franchise, achieving uniformity with those in the boroughs. This effectively doubled the electorate from 2.5 million to just under 5 million. The Redistribution Act of 1885 removed both MPs from boroughs with fewer than 15,000 people and one MP from those with fewer than 50,000. The 142 seats now available were redistributed according to population. A major feature was the creation of the single-member constituency as the norm: this now applied to 647 out of a total of 670. The imbalance in seat distribution between the North and South was finally ended. Cornwall's seats, for example, were now reduced from forty-four to seven; Lancashire, by contrast, increased its representation from fourteen to fifty-eight. In the light of such changes, Read argues that 'These two Liberal measures, plus the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act of 1883, and the 1885 Registration Act, amounted to the largest single instalment of parliamentary reform undertaken during the nineteenth century'.²² There were also significant side-effects. Party activism was further stimulated at local level as the single-member constituency took hold. The composition and character of the Liberal party were particularly affected. The traditional pattern of securing the election of both a Whig and a Liberal was ended by the introduction of single-member constituencies, so that the Whigs now rapidly became extinct.

Yet major deficiencies still remained in the period before 1914. Several categories of adult males, for example domestic servants, were deprived of the vote and even those who were entitled had to satisfy a twelve-month residence qualification and go through a complex process of registration. It has been estimated that the electoral registers contained no more than 63 per cent of adult males. Of the 5 million or so who were not enfranchised, about 2.5 million had the necessary qualification but had failed to fulfil the requirements for registration.²³ Above all, the entire population of women were denied the vote for a series of specious reasons which were still used by the establishments of both the major political parties. The final achievement of democracy therefore had to wait until the Franchise Acts of 1918 and 1928, by which time Britain was lagging behind most of the countries of Europe.

DISRAELI AND THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

More than most of his contemporaries, Benjamin Disraeli's rise to power was assisted by circumstances over which he had no immediate control. For much of his early career in parliament, which began in 1837, there was little to mark him out for high office. His individuality, which bordered on eccentricity, alienated all but a small group of personal followers. His first opportunity, however, came in 1846 with the resignation of Peel and the split within the Conservative party over the repeal of the Corn Laws. In Peel's absence Disraeli emerged, by 1849, as a most capable leader of the Conservatives in the House of Commons. But for nearly two decades he was unable to accomplish much in government, his only experience of which was a brief term as Chancellor of the Exchequer under Derby in 1852. His second chance came when, in 1865, the death of Palmerston loosened the Whig grip on British politics, while the problems experienced by Gladstone after 1872 gave him the opportunity in 1874 to lead the Conservatives to their first outright election victory since 1841, thereby completing his own ascent of the 'greasy pole'.

Yet it would be a mistake to see Disraeli's career as a series of fortuitous steps. More than any other British statesman in the nineteenth century he had the ability to bend circumstances to his use. In this he was aided by an unusual clarity of thought and by the capacity to prevent his ideas from hardening into ideology. In this respect he was more thoughtful than Palmerston but less affected than Gladstone by underlying principle.

This chapter will first examine the development of Disraeli as a party and national leader by 1874. It will then analyse the domestic reforms of his second ministry and consider whether or not the

THE RISE OF THE LABOUR PARTY BEFORE 1914

The name 'Labour party' was first used in 1906. It was a shortened form of 'Labour Representation Committee', which had been set up in 1900 to unite the various working-class and socialist groups within Britain. These included the handful of Labour MPs then within the Liberal party, the Scottish Parliamentary Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Social Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society. The breakthrough for the Labour party came with the election of thirty MPs in 1906; these increased to forty and then forty-two during the two general elections of 1910. Although it was not until 1924 that Labour was able to form a government, this increase in electoral support was unparalleled in British political history.

There were, of course, precedents for smaller political parties during the nineteenth century. One type was the splinter group, like the Canningites, Peelites or Liberal Unionists, which all separated as mature sections of an existing party, eventually to join another. A second variety was a distinctive party with a strictly regional base; an example was the Irish Nationalists, who never established themselves outside their own area. But the growth of the Labour party was entirely different from both of these. It was essentially a new development – not a splinter group – which achieved a national – not a regional – base.

Accounts of the rise of Labour have often obscured the overall process under a welter of detail. The focus of this chapter will be on three distinct stages which can be identified before 1914, and an examination of each. The first was the growth of a new organisation in close association with one of the established parties, the Liberals – not changing that party's general outlook, but maintaining a separate identity as a section on its fringe. Second, this section

gradually expanded and overlapped groups which had been developing entirely independently of the Liberals. These applied pressure for the emergence of a separate overall identity. Third, this separation did occur gradually during the 1890s and was formalised with the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. A connection was maintained, however, with the Liberals between 1903 and 1914, this time as an electoral pact between two independent parties.

INITIAL ASSOCIATION WITH THE LIBERALS

It might be thought that the enlargement of the electorate in 1867 and 1884 would have created an automatic demand for a new party. And yet, in the early stages, the more obvious effect was to modify *existing* parties. The Liberals and Conservatives, having achieved a broad consensus about the extension of the franchise, tried to accommodate the extra voters within their own party ranks, and to aim their policies more directly at what they perceived to be the needs of the working class, whether through 'Gladstonian Liberalism' or the 'Tory Democracy' of Disraeli and Lord Randolph Churchill.

These reforms, however, showed the strong influence of *laissez-faire* and self-help, two principles which were felt to be inappropriate to working-class needs. There was, therefore, some disillusionment with the traditional parties. This showed itself partly in the swing from one party to the other, winning the 1868 and 1880 elections for the Liberals and the 1874 election for the Conservatives, and partly in the substantial number of non-voters, or abstainers, in elections after 1884. In other words, there was now a large part of the electorate which did not have a natural home within either of the two existing parties. If this untapped voting power were to polarise around a new party, the result could be devastating since, between 1885 and 1914, working-class constituents were in a majority in over 100 seats in Britain. There were distinct advantages in such a course. For example, a political dimension might be added to the organisations which had already been set up for the economic well-being of the working classes, particularly trade unions. This would make it possible to shift the focus of legislation away from *laissez-faire* and to develop State intervention – perhaps even socialism – as an alternative to the traditional influences of conservatism and liberalism.

Of course, such a step had enormous difficulties. A working-class organisation had virtually no chance of sustaining an independent existence at the outset. It would need, instead, to grow and develop within an existing political party.

Why was this? In the first place, the existing parties had already established contacts with the working classes and had geared their party organisations for this purpose, the Conservatives promoting entertainment via the brewing interest, the Liberals focusing more on the influence of the Nonconformist chapels. No newly formed group could hope to break connections like this immediately. It would be additionally hamstrung by the electoral system which favoured the major parties and made it extremely difficult for any third party to break their monopoly. Similarly, any minority party would be in serious financial difficulties as soon as it tried to take on more powerful opposition. It would have no means of supporting large numbers of candidates in elections, or of meeting the costs involved in campaigning which were, of course, unlimited until the Corrupt Practices Act of 1883. Even the election of an MP would cause difficulties since there was as yet no salary or subsistence independent of individual or party provision. A new party could not sustain itself properly until both of these difficulties had been met.

There were even conservative forces within the trade union movement which were opposed to the pursuit of a new policy within a new party, preferring instead to meet specific targets within an existing one. Hence early political spokesmen for trade unions tended to take for granted a Liberal connection at local constituency association level. This applied especially to the miners, who felt that more could be done on their behalf by an established party than by an inexperienced one struggling for survival. What was needed was a pressure group to remind that party from time to time of its reform agenda and to make sure that the interests of specific portions of the working class received due attention. There was at first even some antipathy to the notion of a separate party. Being in a tiny minority it would automatically be ridiculed and distrusted, and could have an adverse reflection on the working-class components of the Liberal party.

The answer, therefore, was an arrangement whereby a handful of working-class MPs were elected on a Labour ticket but within the broad church of the Liberal party. Known as 'Lib-Labs', these took part in all general elections between 1868 and 1895, although their

handful of seats were subsumed within the overall Liberal totals. One of their main spokesmen was Henry Broadhurst, who defined the purpose of the Lib-Lab arrangement as 'a system by which you cordially co-operate with your friends, while reserving to yourself, should the need arise, your own independence of action'.¹ The implication here was that the Lib-Lab concept stopped short of integration with the Liberals. The Labour representatives retained an identifiable image on the fringe of the Liberal party and did not dismiss the possibility of eventually seceding from it. This would depend, of course, on future circumstances, ideas and influences.

INDEPENDENCE FROM THE LIBERALS

Meanwhile, several other groups claiming to represent working-class interests were developing *outside* the scope of Lib-Lab collaboration.

One was the Social Democratic Federation, established in 1884 by H.M. Hyndman, a theoretical determinist and follower of scientific socialism. The movement was split, however, by the inevitable Marxist division over whether the focus should be revolution or propaganda. The result was a second group, the more moderate Socialist League under William Morris. A third was the Fabian Society, also set up in 1884. Composed mainly of intellectuals, the core of whom were known as the 'Hampstead Marx Circle', these focused on the conversion of politicians to a gradualist socialism. Its strategy, which gave the Society its name, was described vividly by Frank Podmore, one of its leading members: 'For the right moment you must wait, as Fabius did most patiently, when warring against Hannibal, though many censured his delays; but when the time comes you must strike hard, as Fabius did, or your waiting will be in vain, and fruitless'.² The most important of the new groups, however, was the Independent Labour party, formed in 1893 under the leadership of Keir Hardie. Its aim was to entice trade unionists away from the Lib-Lab strategy they had been following and to promote a more explicit socialist programme based on the principle of 'the collective and communal ownership of all the means of production, distribution and exchange'.³

How important were these organisations in encouraging the Labour movement to emerge from its close association with the Liberal party? On the one hand, they did reveal an alternative political strategy and they succeeded in influencing a number of

trade unionists with socialist ideas. As this occurred the politicians representing trade unionists had to accept the need to distance themselves at least partially from the Liberals in order to prevent a split from opening up within trade unionist ranks. This inevitably meant some movement towards the new groups, especially the socialist ideology of the Independent Labour party and the gradualist strategy of the Fabians.

On the other hand, the influence of the external working-class groups was less than total. For one thing, they set a bad example by competing, often viciously, with each other. Keir Hardie's Independent Labour Party was strongly opposed to revolution and hence denounced Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation (SDF); so did William Morris of the Socialist League, who argued that 'As Hyndman considers the SDF his property, let him take it and make what he can of it, and try if he can really make up a bogey of it to frighten the Government . . . we will begin again quite cleanhanded to try the more humdrum method of quiet propaganda'.⁴ Beatrice Webb of the Fabians thought very little of the Independent Labour Party. She wrote in her diary on 12 March 1894 that 'The Independent Labour Party, with its lack of money, brains, and, to some extent, moral characteristics, is as yet more of a thorn in the side of the Liberals than an effective force on our side'.⁵

The external groups therefore lacked the power or credibility to control political changes in the 1890s even though they did influence them. The overall initiative lay with the trade union movement, which had been renovated by a process usually described as a transition from 'old' trade unionism to 'new'. Partly responsible for this was a greater degree of industrial militancy, expressed, for example, in the Great Dock Strike of 1889. Indeed, Ben Tillett, a union leader, believed that 'The regeneration of the Trade Union Movement dates from this great social event'.⁶ It is true that there was a sudden downturn in union membership and activity between 1893 and 1894, due largely to the impact of industrial depression. Nevertheless, 'new' unionism picked up again after 1894, sustaining its growth until by 1900 there were almost 2 million trade union members. The Independent Labour Party, by contrast, had 10,000 members in 1895, falling to just over 5,000 by 1901,⁷ while the membership of the Social Democratic Federation was a fraction of even that.

The decision to increase the distance with the Liberal party, therefore, had to be primarily a trade union one. There were two

good reasons why this decision needed to be taken. One was that there was a class conflict developing at local constituency level as the Liberals were unwilling to adopt working-class candidates; one such victim was Ramsay MacDonald, who had failed to be adopted as a Liberal candidate because of his humble origins. Ramsay MacDonald later said: 'We did not leave the Liberals. They kicked us out and slammed the door in our faces'.⁸ There was therefore no chance of Lib-Lab co-operation leading to a broader Lib-Lab party and the trade unionists decided not to attempt to move in this direction. In any case, a second strong reason presented itself for separation rather than integration. This was the comparative weakness of the Liberals in opposition from 1895 to 1905. This meant that the Liberal party would be able to pass no legislation on behalf of the working class and it was preferable for labour interests to try to build up their own strength and independence. Many even considered that independence would strengthen their electoral bargaining position with the Liberals, forcing the latter to concede more constituencies than before in order to have a clear run in their own strongholds: this was the only way in which they could hope to defeat the Conservatives.

This reasoning underlay the formation of the Labour Representation Committee. This comprised seven trade unionists, one Fabian, and two members from each of the Independent Labour Party and the Social Democratic Federation. Its purpose was to fashion 'a distinct Labour group in Parliament, who shall have their own whips'.⁹ Of course, the Labour Representation Committee faced initial difficulties, such as the secession of the Social Democratic Federation in 1901. But it also grew in confidence. The Taff Vale judgement of 1901 was a further – if unintended – help. Ramsay MacDonald proved correct in his view that 'The recent decision of the House of Lords . . . should convince the unions that a labour party in Parliament is an immediate necessity';¹⁰ it has been estimated that, as a direct result of the Taff Vale case, 127 new unions threw in their lot with the Labour Representation Committee, including the first of the miners' unions.

True to its original purpose, the Labour Representation Committee restrained its members from helping other parties. The 1903 Newcastle Conference adopted a resolution 'to abstain strictly from identifying themselves with or promoting the interests of any section of the Liberal or Conservative parties'.¹¹ This seemed to pay

off as between 1902 and 1903 Labour managed to win three by-elections quite independently of Liberal support. The days of Lib-Labism seemed to be over.

A REDEFINED RELATIONSHIP

Or did they? Although Labour had emerged *out* of the Liberal party, it was not yet time to grow *away* from it. Instead, the relationship between the two was now to be redefined.

As an alternative to negotiating within the Liberal party, Labour now conducted diplomacy as a separate, if still unequal, partner. In 1903 Ramsay MacDonald formed with Herbert Gladstone an electoral agreement which redefined the relationship between the two parties. Gladstone would 'ascertain from qualified and responsible Labour leaders how far Labour candidates [could] be given an open field against a common enemy'; Liberal associations would then be persuaded to 'abstain from nominating a Liberal candidate and to unite in support of any recognized and competent Labour candidate who [supported] the general objects of the Liberal Party'.¹² Both the Liberals and Labour aimed to exploit the quirks of the electoral system which distorted a small majority of the overall vote into a large majority of seats. The Liberals hoped to reverse two successive defeats by the Conservatives (in 1895 and 1900) by letting loose Labour candidates in selected Conservative constituencies while, at the same time, preventing any Labour threat in their own or in those Conservative seats which they had targeted themselves. Labour, in turn, were using these Liberal calculations to achieve their own breakthrough. The pay-off was impressive. Out of the party's fifty candidates contesting the 1906 general election, Labour won thirty seats while, in the twenty-four constituencies where there was a direct contest with the Conservative, Labour won 60 per cent of the vote.

It now remained to be seen what practical use Labour would be able to make of these gains. How far would a still small party be able to influence a new Liberal government in possession of a huge majority? Would it be able to play the role of junior partner and contribute to the development of legislation? Or would it be entirely dependent on a few crumbs big brother condescended to give it? There are two ways of looking at this.

On the one hand, it has been argued that the Labour party exerted an influence which was quite disproportionate to its actual size. According to K. Hutchison:

The very existence of such an independent political force was a considerable factor in the outpouring of social legislation that makes the period 1906 to 1911 in Britain comparable to the New Deal era in the United States . . . While all the credit cannot be given to the Labour Party, its advent surely created a climate favourable for such building operations.¹³

Labour MPs, furthermore, periodically prodded the Liberal government into action. This was especially important since there was still a residue within the Liberal party which wanted to apply the brakes because, argues Hutchison, they 'clung firmly to the economic philosophy of the nineteenth-century Whigs'.¹⁴

An alternative view is that Labour had comparatively little control over the Liberals and were able to exert only occasional influence – and then in specific ways, as tolerated by the Liberals themselves. Although, as Feuchtwanger concedes, this meant that Labour 'scored some success',¹⁵ the scope for intervention was strictly limited. The greatest success was the involvement of Labour MPs and trade union officials in determining the eventual form and details of the 1906 Trades Disputes Act. This gave trade unions the right to strike and to picket without running the risk of legal action being taken against them by employers. But, as Belchem says, 'this was the last concession to sectionalism as the Liberals seized the initiative with a series of progressive measures which Labour could neither oppose nor amend'.¹⁶ The Liberals were very much in control of the more ambitious programme of social reform and were not anxious to allow much Labour intervention. This was intensely frustrating to some Labour members, who would have preferred a different framework to the incipient welfare state. R.H. Tawney expressed the difference as follows:

The middle and upper class view in social reform is that it should regulate the worker's *life* in order that he may *work* better. The working class view of economic reform is that it should regulate his *work*, in order that he may have a chance of living. Hence to working people licensing reform, insurance act, etc. seems beginning at the wrong end.¹⁷

There were also reservations about Liberal reforms concerning employment, especially the introduction of 'labour exchanges' which were seen initially as a device for providing work for strike-breakers or 'blacklegs'. The Labour party got nowhere

in its attempts to persuade the Liberals to introduce a 'right-to-work' bill.

Even so, the Labour party preferred the Liberal reforms to no reforms at all, or to the prospects of a Conservative government. Between 1909 and 1914 the Liberal reforms hit a series of obstacles (see Chapter 17) and, for a while, Labour had no alternative but to suspend its criticism and support the beleaguered Liberals against a common enemy. In the process, it secured two pieces of legislation which were of considerable benefit. The first was the payment of MPs which Lloyd George introduced in 1911; this enabled the Labour party to consider putting up a larger number of candidates for future elections. Second, in 1913, trade unions were permitted to set up a political fund, which solved the problem of financing these future additions and, in the process, effectively reversed the Osborne Judgement of 1909. Labour was not, therefore, without compensation for frustrations it experienced during the Liberal ascendancy.

LABOUR IN 1914

How far had the Labour party progressed by 1914? To what extent was it vulnerable to setbacks and decline? According to Belchem, it is possible to see an adverse trend beginning to develop. 'Boosted by the pact, Labour reached its peak in 1906-7, after which support fell away.'¹⁸

In some respects this trend can be borne out, although the dates are open to question. After achieving its electoral breakthrough of thirty seats in 1906, Labour's impetus slowed in the next four years. It won forty in January 1910, which it increased to forty-two the following December. Labour's share of the total actually dropped between the two elections in 1910 from 7.6 to 7.1 per cent. Furthermore, Labour candidates won none of the thirty-five three-cornered contests and came third with twenty-nine. Worse still, between 1910 and 1914 Labour lost five seats in by-elections, some in Midlands coalfields, to reduce its total parliamentary representation to thirty-seven. Part of the problem was that the electoral system prevented Labour from becoming fully established unless one of the two major parties spiralled into insignificance. It was totally unrealistic to think in terms of displacing the Conservatives, since there was little overlap in their electoral appeal. Labour could only hope, therefore, to replace the Liberals as the party

representing the majority of the working class and at least part of the middle. But what hope was there of this, given the strength of the Liberals since 1906?

The Labour party was still hampered by its somewhat restricted image. It depended for its support on a particular social stratum – the trade unionists or better-off members of the working class. It had still not established its credentials with the groups below these or, at the other end, with sufficient members of the middle class. In addition, the two major parties were both confident of retaining the share of the vote to which each had become accustomed. There were still working-class Conservatives, attracted by better recreational facilities or by the memories of Disraeli and 'Tory Democracy'. The Liberals still projected themselves as the major party for the working class and, since they had a far better chance of being elected, they were the more realistic choice for the working-class electorate. Labour even lacked a comprehensive overall programme. Before 1914 it represented a variety of views and lacked united or effective leadership. According to Beatrice Webb, 'The Labour MPs seem to me to be drifting into futility'. She complained that 'J.R. MacDonald has ceased to be a Socialist, . . . Snowden is embittered and Lansbury is wild. At present there is no co-operation among the Labour Members themselves nor between them and the trade union leaders.'¹⁹

On the other hand, there was some evidence that the Labour party was expanding steadily right up to the outbreak of the First World War. There had been substantial improvements, for example, in the party's structure. The number of constituency organisations had increased from 73 in 1906 to 179 by 1914.²⁰ With an influx of trade unionists, it has been estimated that membership of the Labour party had reached 2.1 million by 1915. Labour also benefited from improvements in its financial basis as the legalisation of affiliation fees paid by trade union members effectively reversed the Osborne Judgement. The Liberals, who introduced this legislation, failed to curb the flow of trade union funds to Labour, since the requirement for secret ballots among union members produced majorities of 71 per cent in 1913 and 1914 in favour of financing Labour candidates. This, in turn, attracted still more union members and enabled the party to contest more constituencies. According to Belchem, 'Labour marched forward in the pre-war years as trade-unionism expanded. No longer the preserve of the labour aristocracy, national trade unions

eradicated regional and traditional loyalties, promoting a wider working-class identity.²¹

Labour also made rapid inroads among existing voters in the Celtic fringe, and was building links which would bring it many women's votes in the future. To some extent the increase in Welsh union support for Labour was due to fundamental changes taking place in the occupational structure. Many of the miners decided to cut their links with the Liberals, especially those in South Wales. A significant proportion of their employers were Nonconformists, who were being deserted increasingly by the younger generation of miners. Thus political and social transformations overlapped as secular socialism began to replace Liberal nonconformity as the basis of Welsh radicalism. Meanwhile, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies assisted with the promotion of Labour at national and local level, through canvassing, in exchange for a Labour commitment to support women's suffrage. This was seen by some Labour supporters as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it placed Labour on the side of what was widely regarded as the 'lunatic fringe' and may therefore have alienated some potential male voters. On the other hand, it established a strong future connection between the Labour party and middle-class women, who were prepared to support Labour for non-social reasons. This was important, because to gain credibility Labour needed to escape from its limited image of a party entirely for the working class.

Finally, the Labour party achieved spectacular successes in local politics. By 1914 it was fighting up to 18 per cent of municipal seats and increased its seats from 91 in 1906 to 171 in 1913 – a much faster rate of growth than in parliamentary politics. Labour had certain advantages locally. Candidates were able to focus clearly on municipal issues and to project the need for social reform, whereas to an extent the local Liberals were tied to the national programme of the Liberal government and were made to look conservative and unexciting by comparison. They also seemed more backward in their funding schemes and attitudes to financial constraints.

By 1914, therefore, the Labour party had made extensive progress. Yet it was still in a difficult position. It could not stand still but had not yet the means of going forward. It had outgrown the Liberal connection but was not yet strong enough to fight the Liberals openly. The question which was going to have to be addressed was whether or not the electoral agreement of 1906 and 1910 should be repeated in the election to be held at the latest in

1915. Labour would have wanted to put up more than 150 candidates, which could not possibly have been covered by a stand-aside policy by the Liberals. There would therefore have been more three-cornered contests, which could have cut deeply into the Liberal vote and given the election to the Conservatives. For this reason, the Liberals might have tried to undercut the baseline that they had already allowed Labour to build up: was Labour yet strong enough to withstand an all-out Liberal assault? It was fortunate for Labour's political future that the whole question was rendered hypothetical by the outbreak of war.