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0521019583 - Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution: The Passing of the Second Reform Bill, 1867

Maurice Cowling

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The understanding of mid-Victorian politics which the pre-war generation of historians transmitted to its successors has, over the last twenty years, been subjected to extensive emendation. A period of psephological and sociological analysis has established the received fact that nineteenth-century political society was more aristocratic than earlier historians had been willing to admit, and its politics socially more conservative than they had tended to suppose. In a society of great fortunes, many of them new and some politically unrewarded, the ethos of political deference, the strength of executive government and the concern felt by owners of even new wealth for their continued possession of it have been given their place in the still-life picture which historians present. The farther away 1860 recedes in time, the less volatile and radical the structure seems to become.

Yet, though these truths are understood by every student of the period, they have left virtually no mark on the accounts which have been given of the process by which political decisions were made. Most full-scale published accounts of the major political decisions taken in England between 1846 and 1880 were written in the late nineteenth century or early twentieth, or, if written later, take at its face value the structure of interpretation in which, for example, Molesworth, Trevelyan, Justin McCarthy and Herbert Paul put them. They assume that Radicalism was more powerful, the gentry weaker and middle-class politics uniformly more progressive than sociological analysis might suggest, and they fail, where they try, to understand the conservative character of the politics they were attempting to describe. They see mid-Victorian parliamentary politics as Liberal politics. They see Liberalism as a doctrine rather than a political party, and Radicalism as truth rather than ideology. They see industrial change on the one hand and political change on the other, and assume a simple, one-way relationship between them. They by-pass, ignore or explain away both the hostility to change and the power to resist it which analysis of society at large suggests might be found, not just on one side of the House of Commons but in most parts of both.

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They assume, moreover, a straight progression from the reforms of the 1830s to the reforms of the 1870s, neglecting the recession in progressive feeling which Palmerston reflected as much as he wished to create. The death of Chartism, the mid-Victorian boom and the hints given, alongside a militant trade unionism, of a contented, loyal and royalist working class in some of the larger cities, produced a sense of political stability and distrust of Radical motion which impregnated the social attitude of a great part of the House of Commons. If the Reform bill of 1867 symbolized the beginning of a period of rapid political change, it did so in a parliament which not only thought of itself as the ruling assembly of a highly stable society but was also in strong reaction against any suggestion that it should be otherwise.

In an earlier work¹ John Stuart Mill was seen not as the central moralist he has become but as a radical critic of the society in which he lived. This book examines the political system Mill attacked, displays the process of decision-making with which it worked and shows how one central decision was made, not by Bright, Mill, Fawcett, Thomas Hughes and other leaders of the Radical assault, but by a House of Commons in which the parliamentary Radicals were a small, extreme group reflecting neither the general body of opinion inside Parliament nor the only centre of political equilibrium beyond. This has been done by seeing the Reform bill of 1867 as an incident in the history of party; by showing that the movement of the action is unintelligible outside this context; and by emphasizing what Lowe, Bagehot and Bernal Osborne² noted at the time—that its substantive merits as it was eventually passed were given prior discussion, at a moment at which choice was possible, neither in Parliament, as Osborne suggested, nor in Cabinet, as it is now possible to know. The deployments of principle with which nostalgic publicists credit the parliaments of the 1860s will be seen not as examples of ‘the classical parliamentary system’ where ‘the debates were public, the issues were known and the personal struggle for power could take place on the floor of the House or on the hustings’³ but as assertions of individual and party opinion and personal and party power in a battle—as private as it was public—not just to establish the best constitution but to decide who should establish it. They will be seen in this way, not because this is how some of the actors saw them at the time, though some of them did,

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but because there was so solid a measure of agreement among four-fifths of the members who sat in the Parliament of 1865 about the importance of electoral arrangements in maintaining the social and economic structure, and about the overriding need to maintain it, that the action is unintelligible if its significance is supposed to lie in differences of fundamental opinion or disputes about fundamental principle.

The Reform Act of 1867 was not the consequence of relevant decisions relevantly taken about the substantive merits of questions but neither was it the outcome of simple consonance between public agitation on the one hand and agitated assent from government on the other. There was a development of party commitment, established opinion and governmental policy which, however much the leaders of public agitation claimed it had been determined by them, was not so determined in fact. Because the Reform League was politically active at moments of crisis, it is easy to attribute outstanding importance to its role. This is doubly easy when the historian has an interest in the working-class movement or the historical sociologist a belief that political manoeuvre is incidental to the progress of popular social movements. There is, however, a sociology of power as well as a sociology of protest. In the period under discussion new social forces did not make their impact directly, were effective through existing concentrations of power, and, in the process of decision, were transformed in order to be made tolerable to ruling opinion. The passage of the Reform Act of 1867 was effected in a context of public agitation: it cannot be explained as a simple consequence. Parliament in the sixties was not *afraid* of public agitation: nor was its action *determined* by it. Its members did not believe that public agitation necessarily represented public opinion. Public opinion included a variety of acquiescences and protests, which interacted continuously with Parliament. The interaction took the form of dialogue: the dialogue was a real one. The interaction reached its most fruitful peak in Parliament. It is in Parliament, and in the light of Parliament's view of public feeling, that the centre of explanation will be found.

This book, therefore, may be treated as an essay in political sociology—an attempt to uncover the logic of conservative resistance, to show how class consciousness permeated consideration of an electoral system and to display the impact of political respectability on

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political agitation; and to do this by drawing together two factors to which historians pay their respects—parliamentary manipulation and consciousness of popular pressure—at a point at which it might be expected that clear decisions would have issued from the consensus if decisions had not been blurred and blunted by the mechanism of the political system through which they were taken.

In Parliament predominant opinion was affected by, affected and concentrated itself around a fluctuating combination of the personal standing of political leaders, the permanent interests of political parties and a vague sense of the preferences of not one, but a number of public opinions outside. Public opinion did not mean just the Reform League, or even the Reform Union. Nor did it mean merely *The Morning Star*, *The Daily Telegraph* or the authors of *On Liberty*, *Sartor Resartus* and *Culture and Anarchy*. It did not mean just the existing electorate or the new electorate which Parliament might create. It meant Conservative working men as well as Liberal ones. It meant the deferential workman in the small borough as well as the radical urban artisan. It meant the assumed Conservatism of rural England as well as the Radicalism of the metropolis. It meant Conservative merchants, bankers and industrialists as well as Liberal ones, and, more important, Liberal ones who might become Conservative. It meant different things at different times, from day to day and month to month, and it meant them connected and tied together, for practical political purposes, in parliamentary parties led by particular leaders. However loose party ties were in Parliament, in the Liberal party at least, however independent of central control the emergence of MP.s in constituencies, however fissiparous the tensions between leaders within parties, however great the ignorance shown by politicians in Parliament of the real movement of public opinion outside, party was the mould in which parliamentary ambition had to set. The context in which politicians were operating made it impossible to think of achieving any permanent political objective without attempting to control, or modify, the course adopted by one party or another. Any particular measure in these circumstances may be explained as an incident in the career of a politician or the life of a party: the Reform Act of 1867 no less than any other. The context of public agitation explains some aspects of the Conservative government's policy, chiefly by reaction against it. By itself it explains

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nothing of the change which occurred in Conservative thinking about Reform, and Liberal thinking about party, between October 1865 and August 1867.

The second object of this book is, therefore, to suggest that sense of continuing tension *between* and *within* and *across* party, which is important, not merely because it had special significance in the twenty years following the fall of Peel, but because it was a central part of the process of decision-making in the political system we are discussing. Particular leaders were never so certain of their political following that they could govern without fear either of competition from within or of opposition from without. Conservative governments were not the governments of the Conservative party, but the governments of Peel or Derby or Salisbury: Liberal governments, the governments of Russell or Palmerston or Gladstone. For each of those who succeeded, others failed, or hoped to succeed in future: knives were never so far below the surface that a victor could ignore them.

Nor, under British parliamentary arrangements after 1832, were politicians so confident of the climate of opinion that they could ignore it. What made the political classes tolerable and, by acquiescence, acceptable to public opinion were the slogans and images presented by ministers and parties, and their ability to deal with real or new problems, when these pressed, in terms which could be made to appear consistent with previous declarations or honourable to those who shared their assumptions. This combination of pressures and contexts in changing situations gave *any* political statement an ambiguity which is characteristic, no doubt, of all political rhetoric, particularly where large electorates vote, but which was peculiarly intense when an important factor in any political decision or any political career was a capacity for polarizing differences, while working within a framework of common assumptions; and when as much attention was given, as was given in mid-nineteenth-century England, to the sort of politico-metaphysical refinement of principle of which Gladstone, however untypical, was the master. Government by synthetic conflict is not obviously the most rational form of polity: when surrounded with deliberate reticence and calculated ambiguity, it will not yield its reasons without a struggle.

In the political system we are considering, tension—whether institutionally inherited or deliberately enhanced—was an integral

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part of the process of decision-making: statements made, or actions taken, by any participant must be scrutinized, not as expressions of *belief*, but in their logical place in the chronological sequence. A major defect of much recent narrative writing about nineteenth-century British politics is that, concerned as it is with one man or party, it neither sees each group in relation to all the rest nor searches for the movement of events which is the outcome of tension between the wills of all. A defect of the contributions made by Seymour, Park, Trevelyan, Professor Briggs and Dr F. B. Smith to an understanding of the function and passage of the Act of 1867 is that, aware as these authors are of the existence of tension in the Parliament of 1865, they neither follow the tension in detail as it impinged on the actors at the time, nor show that it was tension itself—within parties as well as between them—which prevented the House of Commons passing the sort of bill a majority of MP.s would have been happy to accept from any government, if any government had been able to free its action, and their votes, from all consideration of party interest, duty, situation and advantage. An attempt, inadequate and incomplete as this one is, to shed light in a specific instance on the politics of continuous tension is the core of such special message as this book contains.

Finally, since the amount of material is large, the subject provides an opportunity to discuss a question central to all historical thinking—how far does the material available to an historian provide conclusive indication of the motives we assume to have been imbedded in the minds and wills of the actors whose activities we are attempting to explain? The politics of mid-nineteenth-century Britain provide an opportunity to discuss this question, not because they were more typical or important than any other, but because the combination of a loose party system, a vigilant public opinion, a high level of literacy among politicians, the permanence of families and survival of letters, an absence of typewriters and telephones and the length of the parliamentary recess have produced a body of material as rich as, perhaps richer than, is available for any comparable historical problem.

This book sets Disraeli, Derby, Russell, Gladstone, Elcho, Cranborne, Lowe, Beales and Bright in the historical situations in which they were operating. From what one finds them writing and from what others wrote about them, and from the context in which they

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wrote, one intuitively discerns their intentions. Even with material so extensive, and apparently as categorical, however, intentions can seldom be established certainly. Yet the historian has to judge, and to work with the judgement he has made. He must do this assuming that much of the material was *meant* to be opaque and that political convention left little room for private conviction as opposed to public. He is dealing with men whose function was histrionic, whose words and actions were meant to be ambiguous and who are most likely to be understood, not by asking whether they believed what they wrote but by showing what role each cast himself for in the political world. With politicians of high intellect, wide experience and continual involvement over many years in party conflict, these roles developed an autonomy of their own, arousing loyalties which fact had somehow to be prevented dissolving, raising expectations which decision did not always sustain. Yet what seems at first to be dishonesty, trickery or disingenuousness appears, once the context is understood, as sensitivity to the limits of political possibility or attempts by politicians to edge themselves, and everyone else, into reconciling the roles they felt obliged to play with what they took to be the necessities of situations. This process occurred, no doubt, half-consciously, manifests itself fragmentarily and is difficult to discern. Nevertheless we assume that it occurred, and is central to the problems with which we are dealing.

'I always hold', wrote Gladstone in 1873, 'that politicians are the men whom, as a rule, it is most difficult to . . . understand completely and for my own part I never have thus understood, or thought I understood, above one or two.'¹ Historians have smaller contact, though sometimes more evidence, than Gladstone: their claims need be no more categorical. Their evidence is slender: justification of use is essential to historical activity. For all these reasons, beyond the intrinsic interest of the subject, this book takes the form in the first place of categorical narrative, and then finally of justification of the decisions on which the narrative has been made to rest.

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I

PRELUDE

‘There is no country in the world where every class can speak its own mind and exercise its influence so openly and earnestly as in England: no country where there is so little practical separation between the several classes . . . ; none where the freedom of the individual is so absolutely secured; and none where social rank and personal influence enjoy a stronger sway over every class. There is no country therefore more free or less democratic.’

Thornton Hunt (of the *Daily Telegraph*) to Layard, May 1 1866.
Add. MSS 38993

‘If the nation is to be split into two parts and there is to be a wide gulf between them, there is nothing for the future but subjection for you are powerless to obtain your end: but working with a large portion of the middle class and with the most intelligent and just of the highest social class, we may find these great measures accomplished without any violation of public peace and without any disruption of that general harmony which ought to prevail throughout all classes of the people.’

Bright to Leeds Manhood Suffrage meeting, October 8 1866
(*Morning Star*, October 9 1866)

‘Come, then, Fellow-workmen, and let your orderly conduct, your respectable demeanour and law-abiding qualities, be so many thousand mouths, whose united voice shall make your enemies stammer forth the sacred truth that the vast Aerarian classes of this country are worthy of the Franchise.’

Hugh McGregor, Hon. Sec. Working-Men’s Rights Association,
on proclaiming break-away from Reform League and determination to meet in Hyde Park on Good Friday 1867. H.O. OS 7854

(i) THE EVENTS

The government which Earl Russell formed on Palmerston’s death on October 18 1865 met Parliament first on February 6 1866. On March 12 it introduced a franchise bill, the chief objects of which were to lower the 1832 borough franchise qualification in England and Wales from £10 to £7 and the county franchise from £50 to £14, and to give votes to £50 savings bank depositors, £10 lodgers and certain others, enfranchising altogether about 400,000 new voters. On May 7 it introduced a seats bill which provided for grouping of thirty-eight boroughs with populations smaller than 8,000

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and removal of second seats from eight small boroughs with two members; and which proposed to distribute the seats thus freed so that Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Salford would have one extra seat each, London four, Scotland seven (to be detailed in a separate bill), London University and seven new boroughs one each and the English counties twenty-six in all. These measures were recommended by Gladstone, as leader of the House of Commons, in the hope, which the Queen shared, that they would put an end to the Reform question for a generation. Their authors, Russell and Gladstone, intended them to wind up the line of abortive measures which had been presented to Parliament in the previous seventeen years. They expected, innocently as it turned out, that a degree of enfranchisement which the Cabinet had accepted, however reluctantly, which had been tailored in order to pass through Parliament and 'which we had so much cut down... from the standard of the Palmerston measure of 1860',¹ would be accepted by the Liberal majority in the House of Commons.

In this they were disappointed. The nucleus of the Adullamite 'Cave' had been created in March 1865 in opposition to precipitate lowering of the franchise, and had operated in the debate and division on Baines's Reform motion in May of that year. It operated now more intensively around Lowe, around Clanricarde's Irish connection (of whom W. H. Gregory was the most prominent), around alienated Whigs (Earl Grosvenor, Anson and Horsman in the one House, Earl Grey, Lord Lichfield and the Marquess of Lansdowne in the other) and under guidance from an ex-peelite MP. (Lord Elcho) in whose home the Cave at first normally met, who was a close relative of Lichfield and Anson (themselves brothers) and who persuaded Grosvenor (a colleague from the Volunteers and desirable as 'a whig swell')² to provide titular leadership in the House of Commons. Before the session began, Horsman thought there would be seventy or eighty rebels.³ In each of five of the six major reform divisions between March and June more than twenty-five Liberal MP.s voted against the government (in the final division—Dunkellin's—on June 18, on which the government was beaten, more than forty), and there were others who disliked either the government or the bills but did not vote against them because they disliked the Cave and the opposition leaders equally. MP.s who voted with the Cave on April 28 or June 18 were not all Whigs or

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apprehensive Irish landowners. There was a London industrialist—Doulton of Lambeth—and a Yorkshire industrialist—Crosland of Huddersfield. There was an advanced Liberal mapmaker—Wyld of Bodmin—who thought the bill did not go far enough. There was a Dublin Quaker (Pim), a Scottish railway administrator (Laing), a number of Scottish MP.s who wanted a better deal for Scotland and a handful of Liberal country gentlemen who either disliked the abandonment of the rating qualification or were repelled by Gladstone's handling of the House of Commons. There were, in addition to those who voted with the Cave, a great many more who nearly did so, and at least twenty Whigs in the House of Lords who seemed likely to do so if the bill ever reached them.¹ Nevertheless, the Cave never numbered, properly speaking, more than about a dozen MP.s not all of whom (Gregory and Grosvenor, for example) were unwavering in support, and none of whom, except Lowe, carried the biggest political guns.

In organizing resistance in the Commons, in helping Lansdowne to prepare for resistance in the Lords and in keeping Grosvenor up to the mark, the drive was provided by Elcho, with Lowe as chief speaker. Neither thought of himself as head of the movement (a role reserved for Lansdowne as representative of a great political family) but in combination they did most of the work. Lowe—*Times* leader-writer, ex-don, ex-barrister, ex-official and MP. in Australia and Lansdowne's MP. for Calne—was a cynical, strident, fifty-five year old half-blind albino outsider in whig politics with a wife whom Whigs thought 'unfortunate' (though she reminded Bright 'with thankfulness, of the quiet ladylike reserve of my own wife when she is in company');² a systematic utilitarian and ideologist of respectability who even Gladstone thought lacked both the smoother arts and the common touch, but who was one of the most powerful debaters the House of Commons was to see in his generation. The role cast by Lowe for himself involved a pungent, highly intellectualized advocacy and defence, tailored as much to the political aristocracy as to the commercial and propertied classes, of enlightened government, a free economy and the absolute rights of property against the inroads which democratic protectionism, democratic socialism and a concern for Irish improvement might make on the enjoyment by existing owners of the wealth they now possessed.³