1 Introduction

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Historians and the Reform Act of 1867

The events of 1865–8

> The Truth is that a vote is not a Right but a Trust. All the Nation cannot by possibility be brought together to vote and therefore a Selected few are appointed by law to perform this Function for the Rest. (Memorandum from Lord Palmerston to his secretary, 15 May 1864[1])
>
> The nation is now in power. (*Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 7 November 1868[2])

The third Viscount Palmerston first entered the House of Commons in 1807, long before the first Reform Act of 1832. As Liberal prime minister from 1859 to 1865, he viewed claims for a wider franchise with suspicion. His idea of the vote was that it was a 'trust', both a privilege and a responsibility, to be exercised by those who had a propertied stake in the country, on behalf of all others. He resisted any widening of the electorate beyond the limited one established in 1832, which had enfranchised only 'a Selected few', in England and Wales just under one-sixth of adult men in 1861.

Lord Palmerston died in October 1865. Three years later, by 1868, when the radical *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* claimed that 'the nation is now in power', the electorate had radically changed. In those three years the qualifications for the franchise and, by implication, for the citizenship of the nation had been widely explored, in political debate inside and outside the House of Commons. In such debates, and through the terms of the Reform Acts of 1867/8, the privileges of citizenship were extended far beyond the 'Select few' defended by Palmerston. Yet at the same time both the House of Commons, and those whom the *Newcastle Daily*

[1] Broadlands Papers, HMC, PM/A/16, cited in Jasper Ridley, *Lord Palmerston* (London: Constable, 1970), p. 565.
[2] 'The Progress of Society', *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 7 November 1868, p. 2, cited in Eugenio Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 312.

Chronicle represented, drew their own boundaries for the British nation, boundaries which we explore in the chapters that follow.

Many textbooks have summarised the events of those three years. What follows in this section briefly draws upon such familiar narratives. In the new and much more urbanised social and economic climate of the 1850s and 1860s, the movement for a wider franchise gathered strength. The Reform Acts of 1832 had introduced a uniform franchise in the boroughs of England, Scotland and Wales, favouring the pre-industrial middling sort, including shopkeepers and skilled artisans as well as the professional and manufacturing middle classes. They had also extended the qualifications for voting in the counties of England and Wales beyond the limit of the old 40s freehold to better-off tenants, and introduced a new and uniform county franchise to Scotland. Though the Irish Act of 1832 made relatively little difference to Ireland, voting qualifications there were transformed by the Irish Franchise Act of 1850, which allowed county and borough voters to qualify as occupiers of premises rated for the Poor Law at £12 and £8 respectively. As figure 1 shows, county voters were in the majority in the electorate for the United Kingdom in 1866, though significantly so only in Wales and Ireland.[3]

By 1865, an increasing number of politicians from both the Conservative and the Liberal parties tended to favour an extension of the franchise which recognised the claims of the skilled manual workers of the towns and cities. Yet Lord Palmerston was reluctant to introduce any measure of parliamentary reform which would open the way for broader debates, and an expansion of the political nation. In July 1865 a general election returned his Liberal government with a slightly increased majority. Four months later, his death transformed the political scene and created new possibilities for the reform of Parliament.[4]

The new Liberal prime minister, Lord Russell, had been a key figure in the introduction of earlier Reform Bills, in 1852, 1854 and 1860. The Conservative leaders, the Earl of Derby and Benjamin Disraeli, in their

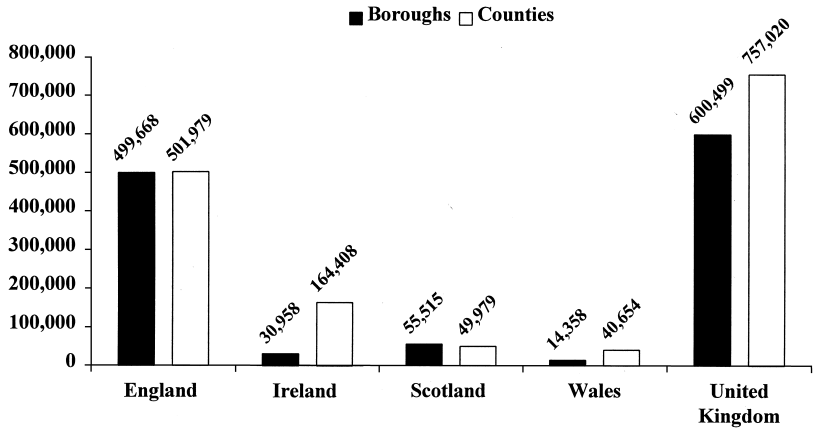
[3] The population in 1861 was:

England	18,834,000
Ireland	5,800,000
Scotland	3,062,000
Wales	1,121,000
United Kingdom	28,817,000

(Figures from Eric Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain, 1783–1870* (2nd edn, London: Longman, 1996), p. 427.)

[4] For full and detailed discussion of the narrative of events, on which this summary account draws, see: F. B. Smith, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge University Press, 1966); Maurice Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1967). For brief, more recent accounts, see, for instance, Evans, *Forging of the Modern State*, ch. 40; K. T. Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation, 1846–1886* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), chs. 7–8.

Figure 1. *The electorate of the United Kingdom, 1866*



Source: R. Dudley Baxter, *The Results of the General Election* (London, 1869), p. 17, cited in F. B. Smith, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 236.

brief ministry of 1858–9, had also proposed a modest measure of enfranchisement.[5] Outside the House of Commons, initiatives had been taken even before the general election of 1865, in the formation in Manchester in 1864 of the Reform Union, which appealed to middle-class opinion, and in the founding in February 1865 of the Reform League, which spoke for the skilled working class. Both the Reform Union and the Reform League had been influenced by W. E. Gladstone's opinion, given in the House of Commons in May 1864, that 'every man who is not presumably incapacitated by some consideration of personal unfitness or of political danger is morally entitled to come within the pale of the constitution'.[6] Gladstone became Chancellor of the Exchequer in Russell's government. On 12 March 1866 he introduced a Reform Bill which proposed to add to existing qualifications the relatively high rental qualifications of £14 in the counties and £7 in the boroughs. These relatively limited proposals were opposed by a powerful group of backbench Liberals, sometimes referred to as the 'Cave of Adullam', led by Robert Lowe.[7] The Adullamite attack,

[5] See the appendices, pp. 239–40, for full details of these and subsequent proposals for reform.

[6] *Hansard*, 3rd ser., vol. 185, cols. 324–5, 11 May 1864.

[7] This group was labelled by John Bright the 'Cave of Adullam' with reference to the verses in the Bible, I Samuel 22: 1–2, which described the 'Cave Adullam' where 'everyone that was in distress and every one that was discontented, gathered': *Hansard*, 3rd ser., vol. 182, col. 219, 13 March 1866.

supported by the Conservatives, brought down the Liberal government on 28 June 1866.

The Reform League responded to this defeat by further meetings and demonstrations. An attempt by the police to prevent the League holding a national demonstration in Hyde Park in July 1866 brought about what were to become, notoriously, the 'Hyde Park riots', in which part of the crowd broke down the railings and a few fought the police. Though these riots were not as violent as many electoral conflicts in Britain, they came to symbolise the threatening power of the working men's movement to Liberal and Conservative politicians alike. Their awareness of its potential led them to the view that the reform question had to be settled. Yet many historians would nevertheless argue that it was the parliamentary battle, rather than such external pressures, which determined the precise timing and shaped the provisions of the Reform Acts.

Derby and Disraeli believed that a limited measure of parliamentary reform would secure their government, and set limits on the electorate for the future. In February 1867 a Conservative Reform Bill was introduced, though its terms were hotly contested. One calculation suggests that there were ten significant changes in the terms of the bill between 9 February and 2 March. Disraeli had initially proposed a measure of household franchise, combined with a system of plural voting similar to that used for parish elections, and a further system of 'fancy franchises'.[8] He was prepared if necessary, however, to fall back on the terms of the Liberal bill, with a £6 rental qualification in the boroughs and £14 in the counties. The majority of Conservative backbenchers were in favour of the household franchise, though they were also committed to safeguards against too wide an enfranchisement, such as a three-year residential qualification, and the personal payment of rates. The latter was a very significant limitation since it excluded all lodgers who 'compounded' for their rates.[9]

The Conservative bill placed before the House of Commons on 18 March 1867 had by then provoked three Conservative Cabinet ministers to resign. It appeared to embody household suffrage in the boroughs, protected by the principle that only those who paid their rates in person

[8] Under the Sturges Bourne Act of 1818, which regulated voting in parish vestries, inhabitants rated at less than £50 had one vote, with those rated at more than £50 having one vote for every additional £25 up to a maximum of six votes. The same principle was embedded in the Poor Law Amendment Acts of 1834 and 1844: Brian Keith-Lucas, *The English Local Government Franchise: A Short History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), pp. 226–9. The Reform Bills of 1852, 1854 and 1859 had incorporated provisions for votes for those with a variety of educational or financial qualifications, known as 'fancy franchises'. These are listed in appendix C, pp. 239–40. Disraeli's original proposals combined these two principles.

[9] 'Compounding' was a widespread and convenient practice by which lodgers included payment for rates within the rent paid to a landlord.

might qualify. In the important division of 12 April, a group of Liberals – some ex-Adullamites, some convinced reformers and radicals – had supported the Conservatives, in what was known as the Tearoom Revolt. As a result the government won a victory of 310 votes to 289. But in future divisions, as Disraeli strove to maintain his majority, with some Liberal support, he allowed the all-important safeguards to slip away. Plans for plural voting were soon discarded. The residence requirement was reduced from three years to one. Lodgers 'of £10 annual value' were allowed to vote. And most significantly of all, on 17 May a motion from Grosvenor Hodgkinson abolished the practice of 'compounding' rates altogether. All male occupiers were in future to pay their rates personally, and therefore theoretically could qualify for a vote. Disraeli had no option but to accept the abolition of these safeguards, although he was still not prepared seriously to consider the enfranchisement of women. He did not accept John Stuart Mill's amendment to the bill of 20 May calling for the word 'person' to be substituted for 'man'.

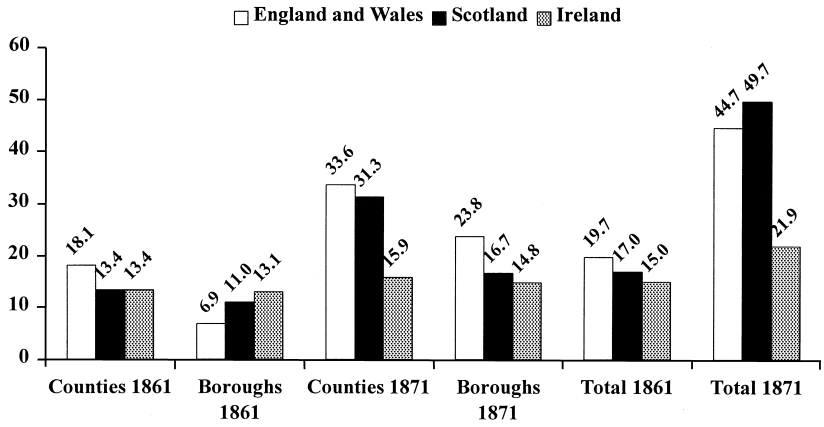
The Reform Act for England and Wales, which passed into law in June 1867, gave the vote in the boroughs to all ratepaying adult male occupiers and lodgers in lodgings worth at least £10 a year, and resident for at least twelve months. In the other clauses of the act Disraeli made fewer concessions, with more modest extensions of the county franchise, and twenty-five of the fifty-two seats redistributed going to English counties.

This legislation for England and Wales was followed by the Reform Act for Scotland, introduced in May 1867 and finally passed in June 1868, with the same qualifications as the English bill, except that there was no lodger franchise because there lodgers were legally tenants. The delay was caused by a battle over the redistribution of seven seats gained for Scotland. The Irish bill, though expected in the late spring of 1867, was postponed indefinitely in June 1867, probably because of the opposition of influential Irish supporters of the Conservative leadership to further extension of the franchise. A year later, in June 1868, the Irish Reform Act reduced the borough qualification from £8 to £4, and maintained the county franchise at £12. There was no redistribution of seats.[10]

The Reform Acts did not ensure for Disraeli that security of tenure which he had hoped for after he succeeded Lord Derby as prime minister in February 1868. Gladstone's commitment to Irish affairs, and especially to the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, won him a series of favourable votes in the House of Commons. He fought the general election at the end of 1868 on the issue of disestablishment, which had a

[10] F. B. Smith, *Making of the Second Reform Bill*, pp. 225–8. See the appendices for a summary of Reform Bills and Acts.

Figure 2. *Percentage of adult males over twenty-one enfranchised, 1861 and 1871*



Source: K. Theodore Hoppen, 'The Franchise and Electoral Politics in England and Ireland, 1832–1885', *History* 70 (1985), 210, 215.

broad appeal to liberal, radical and nonconformist voters. Many aspects of the older system, such as the continuing importance of the smaller boroughs, remained unchanged. And the complexities of voter registration meant that the full impact of the Reform Acts was not experienced in the election of 1868. The Liberal party won a clear victory and Gladstone was able to embark upon the reforming programme of his first ministry.

Nevertheless, K. T. Hoppen has suggested that by 1871 the changes brought about by the Reform Acts, and their significance for the different parts of the United Kingdom, can be measured, as indicated in figure 2. Where the number of borough voters in England and Wales had more than doubled, county voters had increased by slightly less than half. The impact in Scotland was broadly similar, though the Irish Reform Act had relatively little effect.

The sketchy account given above does not, however, necessarily help us to understand what the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* meant by the claim that 'The nation is now in power.' Recent historical work already offers wider interpretations, which pay far greater attention to the nature of extra-parliamentary activity, and to the social and cultural context of political life. In the 1990s the expansion of women's and gender history, attention to national identity and citizenship, and perspectives arising from the legacy of empire have all prompted new questions about nineteenth-century British politics.

The essays brought together in this volume have arisen from such concerns, and in this introduction we attempt to map out such new

approaches. At the same time, we remain convinced that, for a full understanding of the events of 1865–8, recent and not-so-recent work in the field of 'high politics', work to which we are greatly indebted, must be fully recognised. So too must its relationship to a parallel strand of historiography, which since the 1960s has stressed the social and economic foundations of political life. In the following two sections, we examine these two approaches to nineteenth-century political history and, more specifically, to the events of 1865–8.

High politics and the Reform Act

The dominant interpretations of 1867, such as those by F. B. Smith and Maurice Cowling, all tend to stress the political origins of the Reform Acts and to see them as largely a consequence of events and processes 'internal' to high politics and the parliamentary domain. In particular, Smith's study, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill*, is indispensable both for an understanding of the political processes involved and for the details it provides of the complex technicalities involved in the drafting of the legislation. External events, such as the pressures from the organised working class through the Reform League, have a place in such interpretations but of an essentially secondary kind. So the organisation of the narratives comes to be structured largely by how key individuals, especially Gladstone and Disraeli, respond to events and put into effect particular political interests. As Cowling put it, there may have been a context of public agitation, but the 'centre of explanation' lay in Parliament itself, for 'parliament . . . was not *afraid* of public agitation: nor was its action determined by it'.[11]

There are, of course, variations within the historical arguments about the political origins of reform. Interpretations of Gladstone's conduct tend to be shaped by the weight given to two main elements. The first lies in Gladstone's commitment to questions of moral principle and duty, and his 'conversion' by 1864 to the cause of enfranchising at least a section of the respectable working class, and the second in Liberal calculations of political expediency.[12] Some historians, like Jonathan Parry, argue that to see Gladstone and the Liberals as appreciating the 'good moral sense of the respectable artisans' or perceiving an identity of interests between middle- and working-class Liberals is simply 'romantic'. The Reform Act was an accident but it was also a matter of hard-headed political calculation concerning the possible effects of the act on the Liberals' electoral

[11] F. B. Smith, *Making of the Second Reform Bill*; Cowling, *1867*, p. 3.
[12] Evans, *Forging of the Modern State*, p. 360, is representative of much of the conventional wisdom on Gladstone in this respect.

position in the constituencies, the possible impact of artisan votes on public expenditure, and the need to design a bill which would establish a clear identity to the parliamentary party.[13]

Disraeli and the Conservatives have similarly been seen as generally guided by such political calculations. In particular, they were driven firstly by the possibility of overturning the Liberals and Whigs – who had been overwhelmingly dominant in politics for twenty years – and, secondly, by the necessity of defending the counties, the core base of Tory politics, against urban encroachment. There are exceptions to this. Gertrude Himmelfarb has argued that, in pursuing reform, Disraeli was animated by the belief that the Tories were the national party and that there was a natural identity of interests between the aristocracy and the working class. Disraeli's enacting of a Reform Bill more radical than anything the Liberals had proposed is here not seen as an accident or the result of parliamentary tactics, as the majority of historians argue, so much as a more or less self-conscious enactment of a political strategy of building a Conservative nation, a 'Tory democracy'.[14] And some recent work on the history of Conservatism is tending, once again, to stress the importance within Disraelian Conservatism of the themes of the nation, the importance of empire, and the enduring importance within Disraeli's own thought of the romanticism of 'young England'.[15] But the conventional wisdom tends to eschew explanations of Conservative positions on reform except in terms of political tactics and calculation. Disraeli emerges as 'the man who rode the race, who took the time, who kept the time, and who did the trick', as they said at the Conservative Carlton Club on 12 April 1867.[16]

Thus the narrative is pursued through the parliamentary goings-on of 1866–7: the defeat of the Russell–Gladstone bill of 1866, the revolt of the Cave of Adullam led by Lowe, the manoeuvres of Disraeli, and the acceptance of Hodgkinson's amendment and of household suffrage. The result is that the origins of the Reform Act of 1867 are seen as largely contingent

[13] Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 207–17.

[14] Gertrude Himmelfarb, 'Politics and Ideology: The Reform Act of 1867', in Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Intellectuals* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), pp. 333–92 (first published as 'The Politics of Democracy: The English Reform Act of 1867', *Journal of British Studies* 6 (1966), 97–138); see also F. B. Smith, 'The "Dependence of Licence upon Faith": Miss Gertrude Himmelfarb on the Second Reform Act', *Journal of British Studies* 7 (1967), 96–9, and Himmelfarb's reply, 100–4.

[15] See among others, Paul Smith, *Disraeli: A Brief Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 13. See, for instance, Hoppen, *Mid-Victorian Generation*, pp. 237–53.

[16] W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, 6 vols. (London: John Murray, 1910–20), vol. IV, p. 533, cited in Hoppen, *Mid-Victorian Generation*, p. 251.

upon the immediate political situation, its particular form a result of 'accident', its consequences unintended. As Parry has put it: here was 'the most unintentional revolution in the history of British politics'.[17]

Yet if the immediate origins of the act of 1867 have not been significantly reinterpreted, the history of nineteenth-century British politics, and thus the broader political context of 1867, have been. Indeed, there has been a considerable revival of political history in recent years. If the focus of much innovative historical work in the 1960s–80s was in social history, the focus of attention of many younger scholars in more recent years has shifted back to the political. Much of this work has built upon not only the rapid expansion and methodological innovations of social history but also upon the prior impact of political sociology upon the subject. As Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor have suggested in a recent survey, electoral sociology of the kind pioneered in both the United States and Britain from the 1950s had a considerable impact upon the development of historical studies, largely in the field of electoral behaviour.[18] They emphasise the particular importance of four historians, H. J. Hanham, D. C. Moore, John Vincent and T. J. Nossiter.[19] To these one might add the work of Norman Gash.[20]

These historians differed considerably among themselves. Gash's studies of Parliament and the electorate in the 1830s and 1840s were pioneering in their detailed analyses of political structures after the 1832 Reform Act, and emphasised the essentially conservative character of both the Reform Act and its repercussions. Hanham's work was concerned with the impact of the Reform Act of 1867 on party organisation in the 1870s and 1880s. Moore attempted to demonstrate the limited

[17] Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, p. 216.

[18] Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor, 'Introduction: Electoral Sociology and the Historians', in Lawrence and Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain Since 1820* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997), pp. 1–26.

[19] H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (London: Longmans Green, 1959); T. J. Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms in Reformed England: Case Studies from the North East 1832–1874* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1975); D. C. Moore, *The Politics of Deference* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1976); John Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1857–1868* (1966; 2nd edn, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), and his *Pollbooks: How Victorians Voted* (Cambridge University Press, 1968). Local political studies include: R. W. Davis, *Political Change and Continuity 1760–1885: A Buckinghamshire Study* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1972); R. J. Olney, *Lincolnshire Politics, 1832–1885* (Oxford University Press, 1973); Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980); John Garrard, *Leadership and Power in Victorian Industrial Towns, 1830–1880* (Manchester University Press, 1983).

[20] Norman Gash, *Politics in the Age of Peel: A Study in the Technique of Parliamentary Representation 1830–1850* (London: Longmans Green, 1953; 2nd edn, Hassocks: Harvester, 1977); Gash, *Reaction and Reconstruction in English Politics, 1832–1852* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

impact of the 1832 Reform Act upon electoral politics and the persistence of 'deference' and aristocratic political authority within Victorian politics. Vincent's work on the Liberal party and on pollbooks stressed the 'pre-industrial' character of the electorate and the absence of class conflict – at least in the 'modern' sense – in political behaviour. Nossiter was concerned with the social basis of voting behaviour and the testing of alternative determinants of voting: 'influence', 'the market' and 'individualism'.

Whatever the differences between these historians, evident not only in their empirical concerns but also in their theoretical assumptions, the cumulative effect of their work suggests two main points of relevance here.[21] First, these studies placed a considerable stress on the persistent importance until about 1880 of a 'traditional' politics in which local, aristocratic and religious influences remained paramount as against the importance of class in the subsequent era.[22] Secondly, such work and the emphasis on the 'traditional' or 'conservative' character of politics and political change has been complemented by a great deal of work across the range of political history and, indeed, much recent social history. If there is a single theme that predominates, it is the persistence of aristocratic politics, evident, it is argued, not only in the limited consequences of formal electoral changes as in 1832 and 1867/8, but also in the revaluation of the character of political groups and parties.[23] For example, recent studies of the Whigs and Liberalism have stressed the capacity of Whiggery to adapt to changing circumstances, the continuities between the Whigs of the 1830s and 1840s and the subsequent Liberal party, and also, partly consequentially, the continuing dominance of 'aristocratic government'.[24]

This stress ties in with recent developments in social history. There is currently in train an effective reinterpretation of the social history of modern Britain, not only in method (to which we return below, in our discussion of the cultural history of nineteenth-century politics), but also in content. While the results of this are by no means settled, among the dominating themes that have emerged are those which emphasise the relatively slow, evolutionary and in many respects conservative development

[21] See Lawrence and Taylor, 'Introduction', for an interesting analysis of the relationship of this work to the development and assumptions of political sociology.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[23] A good brief introduction to the 1832 act, and to historians' changing views of it, is Eric J. Evans, *The Great Reform Act of 1832* (2nd edn, London: Routledge, 1994).

[24] See among others: Richard Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics: Whiggery, Religion and Reform 1830–1841* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals 1830–1852* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Ian Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform, 1830–1841: The Politics of Government* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990); Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*.