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Parties, from Peel to Palmerston

Melbourne and the 'Liberal Party'

Sir Robert Peel strengthened his minority by a dissolution:(1) but was speedily crushed by the united forces of the opposition; and Lord Melbourne was restored to power. His second administration was again exclusively Whig, with the single exception of Mr. Poulett Thomson, who, holding opinions somewhat more advanced, was supposed to represent the Radical party in the cabinet. The Whigs and Radicals were as far asunder as ever: but their differences were veiled under the comprehensive title of the 'Liberal Party,' which served at once to contrast them with the Conservatives, and to unite under one standard, the forces of Lord Melbourne, the English Radicals, and the Irish followers of Mr. O'Connell.

During the next six years, the two latter sections of the party continued to urge organic changes, which were resisted alike by Whigs and Conservatives. Meanwhile, Chartism in England, and the repeal agitation in Ireland, increased that instinctive [207] dread of democracy which, for the last fifty years, had strengthened the hands of the Tory party. Ministers laboured earnestly to reform political and social abuses. They strengthened the Church, both in England and Ireland, by the commutation of tithes: they conciliated the Dissenters by a liberal settlement of their claims to religious liberty: they established municipal self-government throughout the United Kingdom. But, placed between the Radicals on one side, and the Conservatives on the other, their position was one of continual embarrassment.(2) When they inclined towards the Radicals, they were accused of favouring democracy: when they resisted assaults upon the House of Lords, the Bishops, the Church, and the Constitution, they were denounced by their own extreme followers, as Tories. Nay, so much was their resistance to further constitutional changes resented, that sometimes Radicals were found joining the opposition forces in a division; and the Conservative candidates were preferred to Whigs, by Radical and Chartist electors. The liberal measures of the government were accepted without grace, or fair acknowledgment; and when they fell short of the extreme Radical standard, were reviled as worthless. It was their useful but thankless office to act as mediators between extreme opinions and parties, which would otherwise have [208] been brought into perilous conflict.(3) But however important to the interests of the state, it sacrificed the popularity and influence of the party.

Conservative Reaction

Meanwhile the Conservatives, throughout the country, were busy in reconstructing their party. Their organisation was excellent: their agents were zealous and active; and the registration courts attested their growing numbers and confidence.(4) There were diversities of opinion among different sections of this party,—scarcely less marked than those which characterised the ministerial ranks,—but they were lost sight of, for a time, in the activity of a combined opposition to the government. There were ultra-Tories, ultra-Protestants, and Orangemen, who had not forgiven the leaders by whom they had been betrayed in 1829. There were unyielding politicians who remembered, with distrust, the liberal policy of Sir Robert Peel in 1835, and disapproved the tolerant spirit in which he had since met the Whig measures affecting the Established Church and Dissenters. The leaders were appealing to the judgment and sentiments of the people, while many of their adherents were still true to the ancient

traditions of their party.

But these diversities, so far from weakening the Conservatives while in opposition, served to increase [209] their strength, by favouring the interests, prejudices, and hopes of various classes. Men who would have repealed the Catholic Relief Act, and withheld the grant for Maynooth; who deemed the Church in danger from the aggressions of Dissenters; who regarded protection to native industry as the cardinal maxim of political economy; who saw in progress nothing but democracy,—were united with men who believed that the safety of the Church was compatible with the widest toleration of Catholics and Dissenters,—that liberty would ward off democracy, and that native industry would flourish under free trade. All these men, having a common enemy, were, as yet, united: but their divergences of opinion were soon to be made manifest.(5)

Peel and the Corn Laws

Before the dissolution of 1841, they had become more than a match for the ministry; and having gained a considerable majority at the elections, they were again restored to power, under the masterly leadership of Sir Robert Peel. Such were the disrepute and unpopularity into which the Whigs had fallen, that Sir Robert Peel commenced his labours with prospects more hopeful than those of any minister since Mr. Pitt. He was now joined by Lord Stanley, Sir James Graham, and the Earl of Ripon,—seceders from the reform ministry of Earl Grey. He combined in his cabinet men who retained the confidence of the old Tory school, and men who gave promise of a policy [210] as liberal and progressive as the Whigs had ever professed. He was himself prepared for measures of wisdom, and the highest statesmanship: but such was the constitution of his party, and such the state of the country, that his policy was soon destined to destroy his own power, and annihilate his party.

During the late elections, a fixed duty on corn had been advocated by the Whigs, and free-trade, on a more extended scale, by the Anti-corn-law League, and many liberal supporters of Lord Melbourne's government. The Conservatives, as a body, had denounced the impolicy of these measures, and claimed protection for native industry.(6) Their main strength was derived from the agricultural classes, who regarded any relaxation of the protective system as fatal to their interests. The Conservatives had taken issue with the Liberal party, on the policy of protection, and had triumphed. But the necessities of the country, and more advanced political science, were demanding increased supplies of food, and an enlarged field for commerce and the employment of labour. These were wants which no class or party, however powerful, could long withstand; and Sir Robert Peel, with the foresight of a statesman, perceived that by [211] gradually adopting the principles of commercial freedom, he could retrieve the finances, and develop the wealth and industry of his country. Such a policy being repugnant to the feelings and supposed interests of his party, and not yet fully accepted by public opinion,—he was obliged to initiate it with caution. The dangers of his path were shown by the resignation of the Duke of Buckingham,—the representative of the agricultural interest,—before the new policy had been announced. In 1842, the minister maintained the sliding scale of duties upon corn: but relaxed its prohibitory operation. His bold revision of the customs' tariff, in the same year, and the passing of the Canada Corn Bill in 1843, showed how little his views were in harmony with the sentiments of his party. They already distrusted his fidelity to protectionist principles: while they viewed with alarm the rapid progress of the Anti-corn-law League and the successful agitation for the repeal of the corn laws, to which he offered a dubious resistance. In 1846, the policy of free trade was again advanced by a further revision of the tariff. The suspicions of the protectionists were then expressed more loudly. Mr. Disraeli declared protection to be in 'the same condition that Protestantism was in 1828;' and expressed his belief 'that a Conservative government was an organised hypocrisy.'

[212] The bad harvest of this year, and the failure of the potato crop, precipitated a crisis

which the Anti-corn-law League and public opinion must ere long have brought about; and, in December, Sir Robert Peel proposed to his colleagues the immediate repeal of the corn laws. It was not to be expected that a ministry, representing the landed interest, should at once adopt a policy repugnant to their pledges and party faith. They dissented from the advice of their leader, and he resigned. Lord John Russell, who had recently declared himself a convert to the repeal of the corn laws, was commissioned by Her Majesty to form a government: but failed in the attempt; when Sir Robert Peel, supported by all his colleagues except Lord Stanley,(7) resumed office; and ventured, in the face of a protectionist Parliament, wholly to abandon the policy of protection.

Peel as a Party Leader

As a statesman, Sir Robert Peel was entitled to the gratitude of his country. No other man could then have passed this vital measure, for which he sacrificed the confidence of followers, and the attachment of friends. But as the leader of a party, he was unfaithful and disloyal. The events of 1829 were repeated in 1846. [213] The parallel between 'Protestantism' and 'protection' was complete. A second time he yielded to political necessity, and a sense of paramount duty to the state; and found himself committed to a measure, which he had gained the confidence of his party by opposing. Again was he constrained to rely upon political opponents to support him against his own friends. He passed this last measure of his political life, amid the reproaches and execrations of his party. He had assigned the credit of the Catholic Relief Act to Mr. Canning, whom he had constantly opposed; and he acknowledged that the credit of this measure was due to 'the unadorned eloquence of Richard Cobden,'—the apostle of free trade,—whom he had hitherto resisted. As he had braved the hostility of his friends for the public good, the people applauded his courage and self-sacrifice,—felt for him as he writhed under the scourging of his merciless foes,—and pitied him when he fell, buried under the ruins of the great political fabric which his own genius had reconstructed, and his own hands had twice destroyed. But every one was sensible that so long as party ties and obligations should continue to form an essential part of parliamentary government, the first statesman of his age had forfeited all future claim to govern.(8)

[214] The fallen minister, accompanied by a few faithful friends,—the first and foremost men of his party, were separated for ever from the main body of the Conservatives.

'They stood aloof, the scars remaining,
Like cliffs which had been rent asunder;
A dreary sea now flows between; -
But neither heat, nor frost, nor thunder,
Shall wholly do away, I ween,
The marks of that which once hath been.'

Men of all parties, whether approving or condemning the measures of 1829 and 1846, agreed that Sir Robert Peel's conduct could not be justified upon any of the conventional principles of party ethics. The relations between a leader and his followers are those of mutual confidence. His talents give them union and force: their numbers invest him with political power. They tender, and he accepts the trust, because he shares and represents their sentiments. Viewing affairs from higher ground, he may persuade them to modify or renounce their opinions, in the interests of the state: but, without their concurrence, he has no right to use for one purpose, that power which they have entrusted to him for another. He has [215] received a limited authority, which he may not exceed without further instructions. If, contrary to the judgment of his party, he believes the public welfare to demand an entire change of policy, it is not for him to carry it out. He cannot, indeed, be called upon to conceal or disavow his own opinions: but he is no longer entitled to lead the forces entrusted to his command,—still less

to seek the aid of the enemy. Elected chief of a free republic,—not its dictator,—it becomes his duty, honourably and in good faith, to retire from his position, with as little injury as may be to the cause he abandons, and to leave to others a task which his own party allegiance forbids him to attempt.

The Conservatives After Peel

This disruption of the Conservative party exercised an important influence upon the political history of the succeeding period. The Whigs were restored to power under Lord John Russell, —not by reason of any increase of their own strength, but by the disunion of their opponents. The Conservatives, suddenly deprived of their leaders, and committed to the hopeless cause of protection, were, for the present, powerless. They were now led by Lord Stanley, one of the greatest orators of his time, who had been the first to separate from Earl Grey, and the first to renounce Sir Robert Peel. In the Commons, their cause was maintained by the chivalrous devotion of Lord George Bentinck, and the powerful, versatile, and caustic eloquence of Mr. Disraeli,—the two [216] foremost opponents of the late minister. But they were, as yet, without spirit or organisation, disturbed in their faith,—and repining over the past, rather than hopeful of the future.

Meanwhile the Whigs, under Lord John Russell, were ill at ease with their more advanced supporters, as they had been under Lord Melbourne. They had nearly worked out the political reforms comprised in the scheme of an aristocratic party; and Sir Robert Peel had left them small scope for further experiments in fiscal legislation. They resisted, for a time, all projects of change in the representation: but were at length driven, by the necessities of their position, to promise a further extension of the franchise.(9) With parties so disunited, a strong government was impossible: but Lord J. Russell's administration, living upon the distractions of the Conservatives, lasted for six years. In 1852, it fell at the first touch of Lord Palmerston, who had been recently separated from his colleagues.(10)

Power was again within the reach of the Conservatives, and they grasped it. The Earl of Derby(11) was a leader worthy to inspire them with confidence: but he had the aid of few experienced statesmen. Free trade was flourishing, and the revival of a protective policy utterly out of the question. Yet protection was still the distinctive principle of the great body of his party. He could [217] not abandon it, without unfaithfulness to his friends: he could not maintain it, without the certain destruction of his government. A party cannot live upon memories of the past: it needs a present policy and purpose: it must adapt itself to the existing views and needs of society. But the Conservatives clung to the theories of a past generation, which experience had already overthrown; and had adopted no new principles to satisfy the sentiment of their own time. In the interests of his party, Lord Derby would have done well to decline the hopeless enterprise which had fallen to his lot. The time was not yet ripe for the Conservatives. Divided, disorganised, and unprepared,—without a popular cry and without a policy,—their failure was inevitable. In vain did they advocate protection in counties, and free trade in towns. In vain did many 'Liberal Conservatives' outbid their Whig opponents in popular professions: in vain did others avoid perilous pledges, by declaring themselves followers of Lord Derby, wherever he might lead them. They were defeated at the elections: they were constrained to renounce the policy of protection: they could do little to gratify their own friends; and they had again united all sections of their opponents.

The Whigs and Peelites Combine

And now the results of the schism of 1846 were apparent. The disciples of Sir Robert Peel's school had hitherto kept aloof from both parties. Having lost their eminent leader, they were free to form new connections. [218] Distinguished for their talents and political experience, their influence was considerable,—notwithstanding the smallness of their following. Their

ambition had been unchecked and unsatisfied. Their isolation had continued for six years: an impassable gulf separated them from the Conservatives; and their past career and present sympathies naturally attracted them towards the Liberal party. Accordingly, a coalition ministry was formed, under Lord Aberdeen, comprising the Peelites,—as they were now called,—the Whigs, and Sir William Molesworth,—a representative of the philosophical school of Radicals. It united men who had laboured with Mr. Canning, Sir Robert Peel, Earl Grey, and Mr. Hume. The Liberal party had gained over nearly all the statesmanship of the Conservative ranks, without losing any of its own. Five and twenty years before, the foremost men among the Tories had joined Earl Grey; and now again, the first minds of another generation were won over, from the same party, to the popular side. A fusion of parties had become the law of our political system. The great principles of legislation, which had divided parties, had now been settled. Public opinion had accepted and ratified them; and the disruption of party ties which their adoption had occasioned, brought into close connection the persons as well as the principles of various schools of politicians.

No administration, in modern times, had been stronger in talent, in statesmanship, and in parliamentary support, than that of Lord Aberdeen. But the union of parties, which gave the cabinet outward force, was not calculated to [219] secure harmony and mutual confidence among its members. The Peelites engrossed a preponderance, in the number and weight of their offices, out of proportion to their following, which was not borne without jealousy by the Whigs. Unity of sentiment and purpose was wanting to the material strength of the coalition; and in little more than two years, discord, and the disastrous incidents of the Crimean war, dissolved it.

Further Changes in Party Alliances

Lord Aberdeen, the Duke of Newcastle, and Lord J. Russell retired; and Lord Palmerston was entrusted with the reconstruction of the ministry. It was scarcely formed, when Sir James Graham, Mr. Gladstone, and Mr. Sidney Herbert, followed their Peelite colleagues into retirement. The union of these statesmen with the Liberal party,—so recently effected—was thus completely dissolved. The government was again reduced to the narrower basis of the Whig connection. Lord John Russell, who had rejoined it on the retirement of Mr. Sidney Herbert from the Colonial Office, resigned after the conferences at Vienna, and assumed an attitude of opposition. The Radicals,—and especially the peace party,—pursued the ministry with determined hostility and resentment. The Peelites were estranged, critical, and unfriendly.

The ministerial party were again separated into their discordant elements, while the opposition were watching for an occasion to make common cause with any section of [220] the Liberals, against the government. But a successful military administration, and the conclusion of a peace with Russia, rendered Lord Palmerston's position too strong to be easily assailed. For two years he maintained his ground, from whatever quarter it was threatened. Early in 1857, however, on the breaking out of hostilities in China, he was defeated by a combination of parties.(12) He was opposed by Mr. Cobden and his friends, by Lord John Russell, by all the Peelites who had lately been his colleagues, and by the whole force of the Conservatives.(13) Coalition had recently formed a strong government. and combination now brought suddenly together a powerful opposition. It was not to be expected that Lord Palmerston would submit to a confederation of parties so casual and incongruous. He boldly appealed to the confidence of the country, and routed his opponents of every political section.(14)

In the new Parliament, Lord Palmerston was the minister of a national party. The people had given him their confidence; and men, differing widely from one another, concurred in trusting to his wisdom and moderation. He was the people's minister, as the first William [221] Pitt had been a hundred years before. But the parties whom he had discomfited at the elections,

smarting under defeat, and jealous of his ascendancy,—were ready to thrust at any weak place in his armour. In 1858, our relations with France, after the Orsini conspiracy,—infelicitously involved with a measure of municipal legislation,—suddenly placed him at a disadvantage; when all the parties who had combined against him in the last Parliament, again united their forces and overpowered him.(15)

These parties had agreed in a single vote against the minister; but their union in the government of the country was inconceivable. The Conservatives, therefore, as the strongest party, were restored to power, under the Earl of Derby. The events of the last few years had exemplified the fusion of parties in the government, and their combination, on particular occasions, in opposition. The relations of all parties were disturbed and unsettled. It was now to be seen that their principles were no less undetermined. The broad distinctions between them had been almost effaced; and all alike deferred to public opinion, rather than to any distinctive policy of their own. The Conservatives were in a minority of not less than one hundred, as compared with all sections of the Liberal party; and their only hopes were in the divided councils of the opposition, and in a policy which should satisfy public expectations. Accordingly, [222] though it had hitherto been their characteristic principle to resist constitutional changes, they accepted Parliamentary Reform as a political necessity; and otherwise endeavoured to conform to public opinion. For the first session, they were maintained solely by the disunion of their opponents. Their India Bill threatened them with ruin; but they were rescued by a dexterous manoeuvre of Lord John Russell. Their despatch disapproving Lord Canning's Oude proclamation imperilled their position: but they were saved by the resignation of Lord Ellenborough, and by a powerful diversion in their favour, concerted by Mr. Bright, Sir James Graham, and other members of the opposition. It was clear that, however great their intrinsic weakness, they were safe until their opponents had composed their differences. Early in the following session, this reconciliation was accomplished; and all sections of the Liberal party concurred in a resolution fatal to the ministerial Reform Bill.(16)

Ministers appealed in vain to the country. Their own distinctive principles were so far lost, that they were unable to rely upon reactionary sentiments against constitutional change; and having committed themselves to popular measures, they were yet outbidden by their [223] opponents. They fell; and Lord Palmerston was restored to power, with a cabinet representing, once more, every section of the Liberal party.

Footnotes.

1. Before the dissolution, his followers in the House of Commons numbered less than 150; in the new Parliament, they exceeded 250; and the support he received from others, who desired to give him a fair trial, swelled this minority to very formidable dimensions. On the election of Speaker, he was beaten by ten votes only; on the Address, by seven; and on the decisive division, upon the appropriation of the surplus revenues of the Irish Church, by thirty-three.—Hans. Deb., 3rd Sep., xxvi. 224, 425, etc.; Ibid, xxvii. 770; Courts and Cab. of Will. IV and Vict., ii. 161; Guizot's Life of Peel, 72. Peel's Speech at Merchant Taylors' Hall, 12th May, 1838.—Times, 14th May, 1838.
2. The relative numbers of the different parties, in 1837, have been thus computed:—Whigs, 152; Liberals, 100; Radicals, 80 = 332. Tories, 139; Ultra-Tories, 100; Conservatives, 80 = 319.—Courts and Cabinets of Will. IV and Vict. ii. 253.
3. Bulwer says: "They clumsily attempted what Machiavel has termed the finest masterpiece in political science,—"to content the people and manage the nobles."—England and the English, ii. 271. But, in truth, their principles and their position alike dictated a middle course.
4. Sir Robert Peel's advice to his party was, 'Register, register register.'—Speech at

Tamworth, August 7, 1837.

5. A reviewer treating in April, 1840, of Sir Robert Peel and his party, said: 'His ostracism may be distant, but to us it appears to be certain.'—*Edinb. Rev.*, April, 1840, p. 313.
6. 'Sir Robert Peel solicited and obtained the confidence of the country in the general election of 1841, as against the whole free-trade policy embodied in the Whig budget of that year.' . . . 'This budget, so scorned, so vilified, that it became the death-warrant of its authors, was destined, as it turned out, to be not the trophy, but the equipment of its conquerors,—as the Indian, after a victory, dresses himself in the bloody scalp of his adversary.'—*Quarterly Rev.*, Sept. 1846, p 564.
7. Lord Wharncliffe died the day before Sir R. Peel's return to office. *Ann. Reg.*, 1845, Chron. 320.
8. On quitting office he said: 'In relinquishing power I shall leave a name, severely censured, I fear, by many who, on public grounds, deeply regret the severance of party ties,—deeply regret that severance, not from interested or personal motives, but from the firm conviction that fidelity to party engagements, the existence and maintenance of a great party, constitutes a powerful instrument of government.'—*Hans. Deb.*, 3rd Ser., lxxxvii. 1054. So complete was the alienation of the Tory party from Sir R. Peel that even the Duke of Wellington, who co-operated with him in the repeal of the corn laws, concurred with Lord Derby in opinion, that it was impossible that he should ever place himself at the head of his party again, with any prospect of success.—Speech of Lord Derby at Liverpool, Oct. 20th, 1859.
9. [Supra, Vol. I. 450.](#)
10. [Supra, Vol. I. 160.](#)
11. Lord Stanley had succeeded his father in the earldom, in 1851.
12. Previous concert between the different parties was denied; and combination is, therefore, to be understood as a concurrence of opinion and of votes. Earl of Derby and Lord J Russell; *Hans. Deb.*, 3rd Ser., cxliv. 1910, 2322.
13. The majority against government was 16; *Hans. Deb.*, 3rd Ser., cxliv. 1846. *Ann. Reg.*, 1857, ch. iii.
14. Mr. Cobden, Mr. Bright, Mr. Milner Gibson, Mr. Layard, and Mr. Fox, among his Liberal supporters, and Mr. Cardwell and Mr. Roundell-Palmer among the Peelites, lost their seats.—*Ann. Reg.*, 1857, p. 84.
15. The majority against him was 19—Ayes, 215; Noes, 234.—*Ann. Reg.*, 1858, ch. ii.; *Hans. Deb.*, 3rd Ser., cxlviii. 1844.
16. [Supra, Vol. I., 455.](#) It was moved by Lord J. Russell, and supported by Lord Palmerston, Mr. Bright, Mr. Cobden, Mr. Milner Gibson, Mr. Sidney Herbert, Sir James Graham, and Mr. Cardwell.—*Hans. Deb.*, 3rd Ser., cliii. 405.

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