The End of the Urban Ancient Regime in England

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By

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Translated from French by Melanie Moore

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INTRODUCTION

It is not easy for a French historian to understand the political history of Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century. In a historiography that takes the French Revolution as the origin of political change across Europe, the singular history of the British Isles appears as something of an exception. Can the Age of Revolution, a term, paradoxically, made popular by a British historian,[1] account for institutional and political changes in the United Kingdom, which seem rather to be embodied by the notion of reform? In addition to the rhetorical aspect of this approach, there is a striking constancy to the classic images that sum up European history as the combination of a British industrial revolution and a French political revolution, each spreading out to embrace the entire continent.

Traditional Whig historiography, adopting a mainly teleological approach, held British singularity up as a model. In contrast to revolutionary Europe, the United Kingdom was said to have witnessed the triumph of gradual political change in the nineteenth century as successive reforms conferred ever more rights on the subjects of Britain's monarchs, eventually arriving at a model of parliamentary democracy that was offered up as an example to all. The 1830s played a key part from this point of view as the moment when, after the shock of the Napoleonic Wars and the ensuing social and economic crisis, a time of reform could set in. The chronology of L. Woodward's classic, 1938 contribution to the Oxford History of England, acknowledged this approach.[2] It dealt with the period 1815–70 and had the 1830s at its heart. It analysed the demand for reform and the Reform Act itself, and looked at what it saw as the latter's consequences, up to and including the 1867 reform's opening up of "democracy". This perspective, which made the 1830s the origin of liberal and democratic changes to the British system, has been widely discussed and challenged, primarily by a conservative historiography emphasising the limits of reform and the endurance of a traditional political model.[3]

More recently, the emphasis has been on the importance of reform as an issue[4] prior to this period and of the politicisation of a large proportion of the British population.[5] As a result, the 1830s have been largely repositioned as the end of a process in which the concept of reform flourished in many areas (politics, culture, religion).[6] From this perspective and with this meaning 'the age of reform' seemed the most appropriate to

describe the period covered by this study. It looks in the short term at the reforms of the 1830s and in the longer term at how the issue of reform was debated and developed.

This age of reform is seen therefore as a watershed, a period of moving–and not so gradually as all that–away from Ancient Regime to a new way for institutions, the economy and society to function. Although clearly bearing the stamp of French historiography, the concept of an *Ancien Régime* is used fairly frequently in Britain and seems generally suited to describing the municipal authorities, which are the subject of this study, on the eve of the 1835 reform. There is, of course, no equivalent in France of the volume of British historiographical research into the 1830s, given how few historians have taken an interest in Britain at all. On the basis of a specific moment–that of the 1835 municipal reform and the build-up to it–this study offers an outsider's view, a "French" view, of the British debates. Its subject is distinct from the concerns of many historians whose particular interest is in electoral issues and the changes to both the electoral body and to political behaviour resulting from parliamentary reform in 1832 and its municipal sequel in 1835.[7]

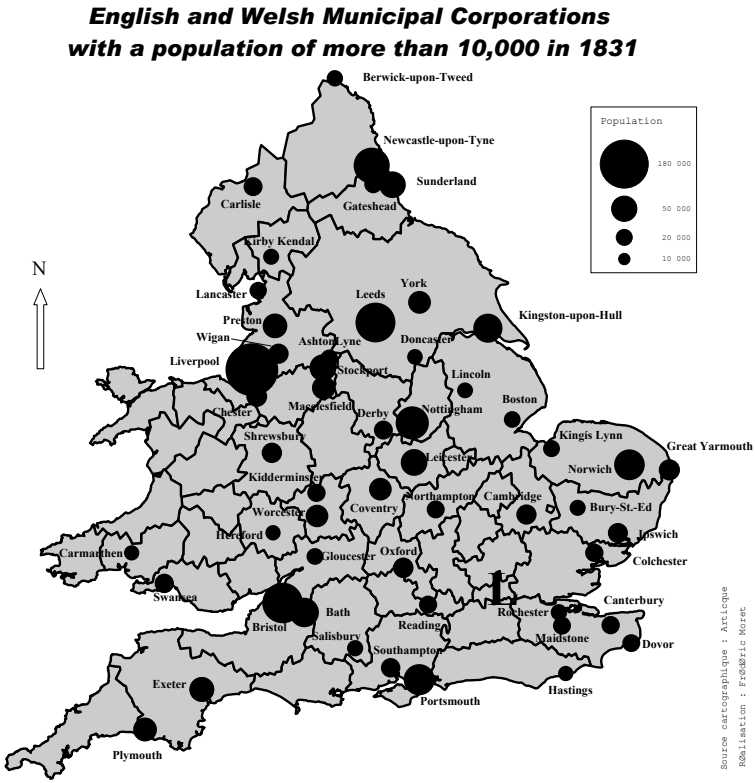
The Municipal Reform Act of 1835 sits easily in the contemporary context of liberal legislation, particularly the passing of the new and more familiar Poor Laws.[8] Within a relatively short space of time, between the end of the 1820s–with the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, which abolished the civil disabilities affecting Protestant dissenters, and the Catholic Emancipation Act, all passed before the Liberals came to power–and the mid-1830s, the very nature of the British system changed although it would be wrong to overestimate the overall coherence of that change.

While the Poor Laws established a uniform administrative system across the country, the criteria for governing towns were entirely different. Urban growth in what was already a highly urbanised country is one of the most frequently cited examples of the economic and social upheavals experienced in Britain from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards in particular. The bibliography on this subject is vast since urban history became part of historiography in Britain far earlier and more extensively than it did in France. The excellent round-up edited by Peter Clark, *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, *Volume II: 1540-1840* enables a global approach to most urban issues. Its chronological approach clearly indicates the turning point constituted by the first third of the nineteenth century.[9] The broad debate about reforming the House of Commons that led to the passing of the 1832 Reform Act took account of this rapid growth which especially affected London and the industrial north of England. One well-known effect of the reform was to remove

parliamentary seats from small boroughs, primarily in the south of England, reallocate them to the counties and create new constituencies in London and the industrial towns. This led to a unique institutional situation. The rules of the parliamentary game were altered, as were constituency boundaries. On the other hand, the status of the boroughs in terms of their administration was unchanged. This led the ruling Liberals to consider municipal reform both for short-term tactical reasons (the old municipal corporations were very largely Tory-controlled) and in order to respond to vigorous calls to improve the way in which local institutions worked.

Even so, the 1835 reform that is the focus of this study tackled only some of the problems caused by the appearance of new urban entities and parliamentary change. It was neither a genuine urban reform inasmuch as it failed to touch upon most of the new problems of the growing towns,[10] nor municipal reform since it applied only to certain boroughs which already had municipal institutions. The title of the act is explicit, confining its remit to the "municipal corporations".[11]

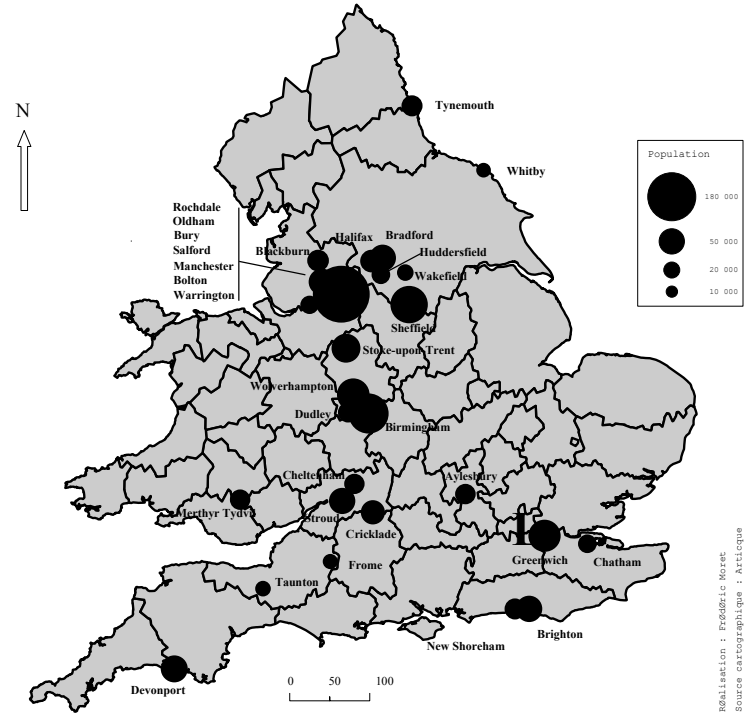
Municipal reform, often quite rightly presented as a consequence of the Reform Act, shared the latter's intellectual and ideological context and was marked by the same mixture of innovation and conservation. This largely explains its restricted application. As we shall see, while the idea of reform implied questioning how political institutions functioned, it also implied permanence in how power was exercised and the maintenance of a balance of institutional power. There was a very clear contrast with the vigour and speed of the growth of the industrial towns so that the 1830s stand at the intersection of two concepts of time. The political pace of reform was distinguished by opting for gradual change in a setting that scarcely altered, whereas economic and social change proceeded far more rapidly. Only 52 of the 90 largest towns in England and Wales with more than 10,000 inhabitants in 1831 had royal borough status (which took various forms) on the eve of reform. The rest, which acquired the power to elect one or two Members of Parliament to the House of Commons in 1832, had no municipal institutions since they had neither royal charter nor long-standing recognition as a borough. The act did not concern them directly and the commission of inquiry that drafted the bill did not study their situation. Nor did the reform apply to London: a specific law was envisaged but the reform never got off the ground. Its corporation was the subject of a separate inquiry, published in 1837.[12] On the other hand, the commission of inquiry visited nearly 300 boroughs of all sizes, of which 178 were ultimately affected by the act. The maps of towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants, drawn up on the basis of the 1831 census, distinguish between towns affected by the reform bill[13] and those the reform ignored.



Map 0-1: English and Welsh Municipal Corporations with a population of more than 10,000 in 1831

The fact that London and most of the new industrial towns, situated mainly along a line running from East Lancashire and West Yorkshire in the north to Gloucestershire in the south, via the Potteries and the Birmingham area, were excluded from the reform is itself indicative of the basic concerns governing that reform. Just as the 1832 parliamentary reform did not seek primarily to respond to economic and social change or to the emergence of an industrial proletariat and is hard to see as a bid for democratisation, so it would be anachronistic to interpret the municipal reform that went with it as an attempt to adapt the law to the growth of the industrial town.[14]

English and Welsh towns with a population of more than 10,000 in 1831 and whithout a Municipal Corporation



Map 0-2: English and Welsh towns with a population of more than 10,000 in 1831 and without a Municipal Corporation

This study aims to question the way in which, going into the 1830s, the municipal institutions inherited from medieval charters and from rights and privileges conferred by Britain's monarchs played a role in the administration and daily life of their respective provincial towns. These municipal corporations were held up as a symbol of the "old corruption",[15] on which the reformers of the first half of the nineteenth century waged both intellectual and political war. Going beyond the archaism and dysfunction that have frequently been stressed and the specific features of individual towns, this study aims to reveal how municipal institutions worked and how they interacted with other bodies of local authority, as well as their relations with central government.[16] At the same time, by analyzing the discourse of advocates and opponents of reform within the short-term framework of the commission of inquiry and the parliamentary

debates, it seeks to question how the urban was defined in the England of the "Age of Reform".

The way in which the topic was defined owes a great deal to an encounter with a particular source that might, *a priori*, seem rather daunting: the report of the commission of inquiry into the municipal corporations.[17] The three thick volumes of Parliamentary Papers consist of more than 3,000 pages, bringing together the reports drawn up by the twenty or so commissioners who, between them, visited most municipal corporations in England and Wales. These reports, together with a series of statistical tables, are appended to the commission's General Report. It is a well-known source and often used, particularly in local studies, and is quoted or mentioned in most overviews of urban history.[18] Historians, who are often critical of its overall findings, nevertheless stress that the quality of its reports on the various boroughs is excellent.

Even so, perhaps because of its sheer size, the report has never been the subject of a full and detailed study. Over and above the challenge offered by going through these 285 monographs[19] and the impressive amount of data of all kinds on the organisation of local institutions that can be extracted, analyzing these documents is exciting thanks to the great consistency of its half-legal, half-political discourse on the towns and on local government in general. While these reports are part of an already established political and administrative tradition[20] and lay claim to a high degree of neutrality, they also deliver a message that clearly favours reform; they allow detailed analysis of the political and urban concepts behind the doctrine of reform. The serial nature of the sources (almost all the reports have a general framework, based on a series of questions sent out ahead of the commissioners' visits) proved particularly suitable to use via a database.

This was initially set up by systematically collecting all the data from the tables appended to the report.[21] These feature a welter of information about population (of towns as a whole, of municipal jurisdictions and of parliamentary constituencies), the make-up of the corporations (the number of freemen, ways of accessing the franchise) and their executives (the names and numbers of the various officers), corporation titles (their title, founding or governing charter), their powers in the areas of justice and the police, their financial situation etc. New sections were added for each activity of the municipal corporations as the research progressed. The information was taken from the primary source as represented by the reports but also from other sources: other parliamentary documents, the press, pamphlets and books about the subject. Lastly, a certain amount of data was gleaned from the existing literature so that the database

incorporates parliamentary election results, the functional typology established by Franck O'Gorman[22] and changes in the status of the various boroughs. The vast bulk of information is of a qualitative nature with quantitative data providing information about demography, the composition of the corporations, their governance and certain features of their budgets. As a result, the database has been used above all as a tool for establishing typologies and cross-tabulating features to do with population or institutions.

The geographical distribution of boroughs throughout England and Wales was highly dependent on the vagaries of politics and the allocation of parliamentary seats, especially when it came to the very smallest of them. Using digital mapping software that harvested information from the database, the preparation and subsequent writing of this book relied on the generation of a great many maps, some of which are included in the text. The first task was to locate and list the boroughs, some of which (the smallest) no longer correspond to existing towns. In order to do so, information from the reports was cross-tabulated with other sources available on the Internet. It was possible to locate all the boroughs thanks in particular to the Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names and, above all, the extraordinary website designed by the University of Portsmouth, A Vision of Britain through Time. The software used, which is French (Cartes et Données), provided stocks of maps of the United Kingdom, which were mainly derived from European concepts (the file is called "communes") and had to be adapted to the realities of British territory. One of the problems, given the extremely high density of municipal corporations in some areas–Cornwall, for example–was to assign just one borough to each square. Where no map was available, it was also necessary to take existing county boundaries as a starting point and to redraw the boundaries of their historic counterparts, often square by square, in order to be able to place each borough in the county to which it belonged in the nineteenth century. Once this had been done, however, combining data from the database with geographical information meant numerous maps could be produced very quickly, allowing visual tests of hypotheses and the depiction of interesting phenomena. The initial project sought, in particular, to ask fairly systematic questions about the relationship between borough size and the administrative, political and functional organisation of the corporations. Another, more hypothetical, concern was to attempt to discern regional patterns in the organisation of local government. Once its structures are in place, the flexibility and speed of this tool alters the relationship to cartography.[23] Of course, the classic use of maps, drawn up *a posteriori* as illustrations that support evidence,

remains an end in itself. The novelty lies in the possibility of testing a hypothesis, using an almost experimental model, by cross-tabulating a huge amount of information, sometimes of different types, and presenting the result as images.

It was also possible to use these tools, which are particularly well suited to handling a serial source such as the commission of inquiry reports, with the other sources used in this study. Other documents of parliamentary or official origin, most frequently published in the Parliamentary Papers, made it possible to add to the information and sometimes to modify conclusions drawn solely from reading the main source. The British culture of publishing documents and inquiries almost systematically provides the historian with rich and easily accessible primary material[24] that is scientific and precise to a degree not found in the French parliamentary system. The half-administrative, half-political nature of these sources is interesting to look at in itself and it would be wrong to restrict them merely to a source of neutral statistical information by neglecting to study their discourse or ideological motives.

Another major source, parliamentary debates, which are just as easy for the researcher to access,[25] made it possible to study the place of the municipal question in parliamentary politics in the 1830s. Publication of the various phases of the bill from presentation[26] to vote and promulgation[27] enabled further study of the parliamentary process. The extent to which the reform resonated with public opinion was seen through studying the press in London and the provinces. It was very valuable to have two major databases allowing relevant articles to be consulted and downloaded by key word. The Times Online[28] makes it possible to consult articles in the newspaper of record, while the British Library's nineteenth-century newspapers collection offers a glimpse of the local press, either directly or through articles reproduced in the national press.[29] As well as having the undeniable advantage of making a study of British history compatible with a career in France, these digital resources also alter the relationship with the source material and with note-taking since the documents' permanent availability allows frequent consultation and a repeated use of sources which can be visited on numerous occasions as the subject and research develop. Finally, in a more classical vein, this research has drawn on the study of a considerable number of pamphlets written about the municipal inquiry, its process and its repercussions in various towns, as well as on an analysis of contemporary writings dealing with the reform, largely found in the British Library.

The structure of the work is in keeping with the project's two-pronged approach and combines chapters that focus on the short term i.e. on the

inquiry and the reform, with others that look to the longer term and the organisation and performance of municipal institutions. The context in which the inquiry and the reform took place is the focus of the first chapter, which talks both about the immediate circumstances and about long-standing debates on the issue. The commission of inquiry, its motives, its composition and how it operated are analysed next, along with the reactions it provoked.

The central chapters aim to develop a precise and nuanced definition of what a municipal corporation actually was on the eve of reform as conceived in legal, cultural and political terms. How these bodies operated and functioned and what people did are, of course, at the heart of this submission. The approach adopted, facilitated no doubt by the outsider's gaze of a historian trained in a different historiography, looked at the legal norms that were constantly taken as references by those involved in the inquiry process and the political debates, at how they were implemented in practice and at how corporations actually operated on the eve of the reform. Detailed analysis of local situations through the commissioners' reports and other sources specifically avoids a discourse–common when discussing a reform or an Ancient Regime–which emphasises that the system has run out of steam and that, ultimately, reform merely acknowledges the natural demise of an institution. From this point of view, it is important to study the municipal business of the corporations as it affected the daily life of the inhabitants.

The aim is to try and gauge the influence of the corporations as municipal institutions operating in and for an urban environment and acquiring–or not acquiring–powers related to town planning, improving sanitation and support of the disadvantaged. The corporations did sometimes perform these functions unaided but most frequently they did so in partnership or in competition with other local bodies operating in the same space. In particular, the judicial functions that were essential even in defining a corporation prior to the reform were one of the most important areas in which the municipal authorities operated in urban life.

The final chapter is devoted to the drafting, discussion and passing of the 1835 municipal act. The new concept of municipal institutions that came into being was the result both of the report into the situation of the old corporations and of political power struggles inside and outside the British Parliament. Beyond its nod to the alleged influence of Bentham's utilitarianism on the advocates of reform, the title of this book makes the utility of municipal institutions the focal issue, along with their need to evolve as social, economic and political conditions changed. At a point when, for the first time in human history, a society was in the process of

becoming predominantly urban[30] and a new distribution of powers, both economic and political, was emerging, the utility of towns certainly deserves to be questioned.

Notes

[1] Eric Hobsbawn, *The Age of Revolutions: 1799–1848* (London, Abacus, 1962).
[2] Llewellyn Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815–1870* (First edition 1938) (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), xviii–681 p.
[3] Lewis Bernstein Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, Macmillan & Co., 1929) xiv–vi–616 p.; Norman Gash, *Politics in the Age of Peel; a Study in the Technique of Parliamentary Representation, 1830–1850* (London, Longmans, Green, 1953), 496 p.
[4] *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780–1850* in Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes (ed.) (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiii–346 p.
[5] See, in particular, research based on electoral studies by F. O'Gorman and J. A. Phillips. Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties: The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian England 1734–1832* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1989), xiv–445 p.; John A Phillips, *The Great Reform Bill in the Boroughs: English Electoral Behaviour, 1818–1841* (Oxford University Press, 1992), xii–337 p.
[6] Joanna Innes, '"Reform" in English public life: the fortunes of a word', in Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes (ed.), *Rethinking the Age of Reform*. pp. 71–97.
[7] In addition to the works of J. A. Phillips and F. O' Gorman already cited, there is an important book by Philip J. Salmon, *Electoral Reform at Work: Local Politics and National Parties, 1832–1841* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, Royal Historical Society/Boydell, 2003), x–302 p.
[8] Lynn Hollen Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People, 1700–1948* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), xii–373 p.
[9] Peter Clark, *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, *Volume II: 1540–1840* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 906 p. For a comparative approach to urban phenomena see, of course, *Histoire de l'Europe urbaine* ed. Jean-Luc Pinol (Paris, Le Seuil, 2003), particularly the second volume, *De l'Ancien Régime à nos jours*.
[10] A bill reforming the government of all large towns was presented but never debated. It was probably a trial balloon launched by the Liberals with the aim of testing Conservative resistance. See Chapter 3.
[11] *An Act to provide for the Regulation of Municipal Corporations in England and Wales,* 5 & 6 William IV, c. 76, 9 September 1835.
[12] *Second General Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Municipal Corporations in England and Wales (London and Southwark)* (London, H.M.S.O., Parliamentary Papers, 1837), vol. XLIV.
[13] Despite their size, they were not all included in the final act, see Chapter 7.
[14] From this perspective, the 1840s and the inquiry into the large towns conducted under the leadership of Edwin Chadwick, open up another point of view. *First [and second] report[s] of the commissioners for inquiring into the state of large*

towns and populous districts (London, H.M.S.O., Parliamentary Papers, 1844), vol. XVII and (1845), vol. XVIII.

[15] W. D. Rubinstein, 'The End of "Old Corruption" in Britain 1780–1860', *Past and Present*, 101 (1983): pp. 55–86; Philip Harling, 'Rethinking "Old Corruption"', *Past and Present*, 147 (1995): pp. 127–58.

[16] For these topics, recently updated, see Joanna Innes, 'The Local Acts of a National Parliament: Parliament's Role in Sanctioning Local Action in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Parliamentary History*, 17/1, (1998): pp. 23–47; Rosemary Sweet, 'Local identities and a National Parliament c. 1688–1835', in Julian Hoppit (ed.), *Parliaments, Nations and Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1660–1850* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 48–60.

[17] *First Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Municipal Corporations in England and Wales* (London, H.M.S.O., Parliamentary Papers, 1835), vol. XXIII–XXVI.

[18] It plays a particularly important part in the works of Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act. The Manor and the Borough* (London, Longmans, Green and co, 1908), 858 p.

[19] Most authors say 283 since some, very small corporations were not visited.

[20] Hugh Mac Dowall Clokie and Joseph William Robinson, *Royal Commissions of Inquiry. The Significance of Investigations in British Politics* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1937), viii–242 p.

[21] *Report on Municipal Corporations* vol. XXIII–1, pp. 53–132.

[22] Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties*

[23] For a global approach, see Ian Gregory and Paul S. Ell, *Historical GIS: Technologies, Methodologies, and Scholarship* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), xii–227 p. To date, French urban historians have tended to work on individual towns; Jean-Luc Arnaud, *Analyse spatiale, cartographie et histoire urbaine* (Marseille, Parenthèses/MMSH, 2008), 233 p. Jean-Luc Pinol; Maurice Garden, *Atlas des Parisiens de la Révolution à nos jours: population, territoire et habitat, production et services, religion, culture, loisirs* (Paris, Parigramme, 2009), 287 p.

[24] The countless huge volumes of the *Parliamentary Papers*, which were until recently open to the public at the London School of Economics Library (BLPES), have been digitized (House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, and are available on line at http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk, accessed on 31 August 2010, but not, unfortunately, freely accessible by French researchers. Britain's university libraries do have these resources, however, thanks to the Athens system. During my time in Leicester, I was able to download the vast majority of volumes as a member of the Centre for Urban History.

[25] Published on a regular basis since the eighteenth century, Hansard's Parliamentary Debates for the period 1803-2005 may be consulted on line (free to access) at http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/, accessed on 29 August 2010. The *Journal of the House of Commons* and the *Journal of the House of Lords* are also published and complement the information in *Hansard's*. In particular, they

publish a summary, albeit a short one, of every petition forwarded to one or other of the two houses, containing valuable information about the signatories and subjects of the petitions which, combined with a study of the press, added to the database on this subject.

[26] *A Bill to provide for the Regulation of Municipal Corporations in England and Wales* (London, H.M.S.O., Parliamentary Papers, 1835 vol. I), 68 p.
A Bill [as amended by the Committee] to provide for the Regulation of Municipal Corporations in England and Wales (London, H.M.S.O., Parliamentary Papers, vol. I, 9 July 1835), 82 p.
A Bill [as amended on re-commitment] to provide for the Regulation of Municipal Corporations in England and Wales (London, H.M.S.O., Parliamentary Papers, vol. I, 14 July 1835), 88 p.
A Bill [with the amendments made by the Lords] entitled An Act to provide for the Regulation of Municipal Corporations in England and Wales (London, H.M.S.O., Parliamentary Papers, vol. I, 28 August 1835), 118 p.

[27] *An Act to provide for the Regulation of Municipal Corporations in England and Wales*, *5 & 6* William IV, c. 76, 9 September 1835. The statutes of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (London, Spottiswoode, vol. XIII, 1835), pp. 1013–65.

[28] The Times Database was searched via key words at the British Library. It is also available on line at http://archive.timesonline.co.uk/tol/archive/, accessed on 29 August 2010. Initially in favour of the reforms, The Times became a Conservative mouthpiece in 1833–34.

[29] The 19th Century British Library Newspapers Database, containing 49 national and local press titles, was searched via key words at the British Library. Available online at http://newspapers.bl.uk/blcs/, accessed on 29 August 2010.

[30] The famous 1851 census is known to have shown that most people in England and Wales lived in an urban environment.

CHAPTER ONE

THE NEED FOR REFORM

> "When questioned as to the state of her health, [the Old Lady] said that her constitution was excellent and that her health was never better; although it was but too evident that her condition was truly deplorable."[1]

Studies of the history of Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century depict the reform of municipal institutions as a major landmark in the Age of Reform. It was part of a legislative process which, from the repeal of the Test Acts in 1828 and the introduction of the Catholic Emancipation Act to the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, substantially altered the economic and social landscape of Britain as it entered the industrial era. It is most frequently presented both as a direct consequence of the 1832 Reform Act and as a precondition for political change. While the period of reform extends beyond the purely political framework into what historians now see as the relatively long term,[2] the decade of institutional reform of the 1830s sheds particular light on the thinking that governed the work of the commission of inquiry and the parliamentary debate about municipal status.[3] For institutional reasons (most of the parliamentary seats redistributed by the Reform Act had been taken away from the boroughs) as well as tactical ones (the vast majority of boroughs were in Tory hands and the reform sought to bring down these bastions of Toryism), the debates in Parliament and in the press that accompanied these three successive reform bills until they were eventually passed paid a great deal of attention to the situation of the municipal corporations. Inasmuch as the Liberal reform project never included a genuine programme of institutional democratisation, thereby distancing itself from Radical demands, and once the right to vote had been settled in the counties, the debates came to focus on representation in the municipal corporations.[4] As a result, it is fair to say that when the issue of municipal reform appeared on the agenda in 1833, most of the arguments were very largely familiar across the political spectrum. This was to have a marked influence on the remit of the royal commission that took over the work of a parliamentary select committee.

A) A consequence of the Reform Act?

The issue at stake in the various procedures in the run-up to the vote on the Municipal Corporations Bill lay elsewhere. It was to complete parliamentary reform by changing the balance within the municipal corporations but also by revealing the towns' close bodies to a public opinion already mourning the lack of democratic change in the political regime. G. B. A. M. Finlayson defends the notion that the changes brought about by the Reform Act clashed to some extent with the great degree of influence retained by the old corporations which continued to manage their property and distribute their revenues, rendering their reform essential.[5] The tense political and social context surrounding the Reform Act, the popular uprisings[6] (the example of Bristol being the best known), the symbolic impact of France's July Revolution in 1830 must also be taken into account in order to analyze the context of the years immediately after the 1832 reform of Parliament. While the Whigs appeared to be the great political victors at this point, the act's passage in no way signaled the start of a period of Liberal omnipotence, since they had to reckon not just with the Conservative opposition, especially in the House of Lords, but with royal political strategies too. These led in particular to the December 1834-April 1835 interlude of Sir Robert Peel's government just when the Municipal Corporations Commission was writing its report.

1) "English exceptionalism"[7]

British historians share with their French counterparts a tendency to view their own national history as unique. Even as he plays down the exceptional nature of the British case and places it back in a European perspective, David Eastwood highlights the peculiar features of the British state, setting them in the long term while also indicating the significance in nineteenth-century political debate of the British state's resistance to the ideology and practices of the French Revolution, which led to a broad-based consensus around the promotion and celebration of an alternative model:

> "It [the English state] came to celebrate the non-revolutionary character of its development, and it achieved representative democracy not by overthrowing parliament and monarchy but by transforming them."[8]

Traditionally, two major moments in the construction of the British state are highlighted: the sixteenth century and the mid-nineteenth century. In traditional Whig historiography, the 1832 reform embodies the

progressive development of the English political system. The reforms of the next decade would enable this progress to be consolidated and would prepare the next steps in the advance towards political democratisation (with the reforms of 1867 and the 1880s) and a welfare policy at the turn of the century. The issue of the true nature of the reform of Parliament and its real impact on the electorate has fuelled and continues to fuel numerous controversies. In the introduction to his book,[9] Philip Salmon provides an interesting analysis of the various stages of historiography on this issue. After the predominance of Whig thinking already mentioned, he highlights the Conservative challenge to that interpretation from Namier and Norman Gash,[10] (who stressed the durability of the political system before and after reform, in part because of the strong local roots of the landed gentry), and the most recent rehabilitations of the role of parties and political principles in the reform.[11]

What social significance[12] is attached to the reform evidently depends on how its importance is interpreted: 1832 did not–and this concept has long since been proven–see the advent of a bourgeois England that would supersede an aristocratic system. The social composition of the reformed House of Commons was sufficient in itself to demonstrate the limits of social change. The huge popular demand for participation in politics that was expressed going into the 1830s meant the 1832 reform was presented as a concession from the Liberal aristocracy, motivated in part by fear of revolutionary upheaval, whereas traditional Whig historiography placed the emphasis on the specifically English open-mindedness of some of the landed gentry.

In particular, the strength of urban radicalism among the petty bourgeoisie was one of the features that explained the great investment in local politics once the bill had passed into law and after the disillusion that ensued. Its echoes were sometimes to be heard in the commission of inquiry's debates and hearings.[13] Geoffrey Crossick comments on the strength of this lower middle-class radicalism in towns that were not run by a municipal corporation but also gives the example of Bath, a royal borough where there was much activity by, and a great deal of social and political cohesion among, the lower middle-classes, from whom Roebuck drew his influence.

The consequences of the 1832 reform as regards suffrage, political change and the structuring of public life have been the subject of numerous studies, with the novelty of having to register to vote often stressed. The need for voters to register or deregister resulted in the establishment or strengthening of a local political organisation in each constituency in order to influence the composition of the electorate. The

effect was not to create a local political culture *ex nihilo* (the works of F. O'Gorman and J. Phillips in particular have demonstrated the vitality of pre-reform politics[14]), but to make political support more sustainable. Philip Salmon stresses the novelty for individual voters of being counted and registered. They were no longer active citizens only at election time but had gained a permanent status. A major effect of the Reform Act was then to individualise the franchise and to define it nationwide since, particularly in the parliamentary boroughs, it led to the introduction of rules for participation in the election of Members of Parliament which applied throughout the country.

2) Local and national

The concurrence of political and parliamentary reform and the establishment of new forms of government on a national and local level have produced numerous studies. Often developed from the example set by the new Poor Law,[15] the notion of central government imposing new forms of local authority domination and organisation appears to indicate a break with a sociopolitical model in which the local elites enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. The defence of English liberties is often confused with a ferocious challenge to state centralisation, its every excess embodied in the person of Joshua Toulmin Smith.[16] The reform of poor relief, together with the creation of new constituencies[17] and the establishment of a centralised administration, amounted in Conservative eyes to an unacceptable attack on the very nature of Britain's political and social system.[18]

This mechanistic view of local/national relations has certainly been widely criticised by reconsidering the state structures in England that predated the Age of Reform. Critical, in particular, of Peter Hennock's largely teleological approach,[19] geographer Miles Ogborn stresses that by emphasising centralisation in the 1830s, historians, some of whom, like Hennock, talk up the strengthening of central power while others insist on the continuing importance of local authorities after the reforms,[20] have too often ignored the link between space, power and the formation of the state.[21] He criticises the notion that the debates can be summed up as a struggle between the local and the national or, for example, that change in the case of each reform or law should be evaluated in terms of the local power that was withdrawn by the centre, as if "more power at the centre means less at the local state level".[22] One disadvantage of such an approach is that it insists on the localisation of power rather than emphasising the temporal and spatial relationships between the local and national authorities. Ogborn stresses that since the nineteenth century the