How Political Eras End:

1906 and 2017

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By

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For Karen, Daniel and Adam

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AV	Alternative Voting
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CCHQ	Conservative Campaign Headquarters (formerly Conservative Central Office)
CDU	Christian Democratic Union of Germany
CRD	Conservative Research Department
DLV	Direct Local Veto
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EC	European Commission
ECJ	European Court of Justice
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
EEC	European Economic Community
EFTA	European Free Trade Area
EMU	Economic and Monetary Union
ERM	Exchange Rate Mechanism
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LCC	London County Council
LRC	Labour Representation Committee
NACODS	National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers
NAFTA	North Atlantic Free Trade Area
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCB	National Coal Board
NEC	National Executive Committee of Labour Party
NEDC	National Economic Development Council
NHS	National Health Service
NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
OEEC	Organization of European Economic Cooperation
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
PMQs	Prime Minister's Questions

QMV	Qualified Majority Voting
RBS	Royal Bank of Scotland
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SNP	Scottish National Party
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UKIP	UK Independence Party
UTFWA	United Textile Factory Workers' Association
WEU	Western European Union

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There is a variety of ways in which time is packaged. Such packaging occurs in almost every sentence we utter. Many pronouncements combine specific and more general references to time. "I shall be leaving at 8.30 and will probably not be back for some hours". Some are deliberately vague. "In future, I shall try to be less judgemental". Some bracket events, some are intentionally open-ended. "I was fined for smoking pot when I was 14. I was a real tearaway in my teens". Some try to illuminate and make specific references to time more precise. "I was born in 1936, the year of the Hitler Olympic Games and Edward the VIII's abdication". Some try to connect ideas. "When Margaret Thatcher was elected, the economy was in a mess". Time never stands still, and much of one's time is spent trying to locate oneself on a spectrum which has no definite beginning and no foreseeable end. We all have a life span and the older we get, the more time we spend looking back rather than peering into the future, the simple fact being that there is more to look back on than there is to look forward to, though this can be frustrating. "I can't remember … it must have been somewhere around … I'm just hopeless with dates". Our view of the future is based on what we have learned in the past. "We have the nuclear deterrent. Kim Jong-un won't dare start a nuclear war". "I shall never trust MPs after the expenses scandal". "Surely, it can't happen again?" We compare the ages of people. "She must have been born just after the war; she must have gone to university in the 60s". All such time-based statements invite speculation and involve attempts to locate people in time. We structure memory around events. "My mother died when I was 49". "I went on the anti-Iraq War march in 2003". But the significance of such statements is unknowable without further explanation.

Historians contrive to keep their speculations about what happened in the past within manageable bounds by using such constructs as, "during the Tudor period". The Tudor period did begin with the accession to the throne of Henry VII in 1485 and ended with Elizabeth's death in 1603, but can it be the case that the period can be regarded as a free-standing insertion into the continuum of the history of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries and that

what happened during the period happened in detachment from what preceded and what followed it? Such an approach implies, moreover, that history is shaped by people—the history of Kings and Queens—and not, or not as well as, by ideas, movements, scientific innovations and so on, though similar difficulties are also encountered when referring specifically to such movements and cultural or political developments. What do descriptors such as the Enlightenment and the Renaissance signify as expressions of time as well as of intellectual shifts? This general difficulty is probably best exemplified by the habit of basing history on centuries. Centuries do of course have the precision of a defined span but these are no more than calendar conveniences, more meaningful to those alive at the time than to later generations, a problem grasped by those historians who, not wishing to be confined by the calendar, have taken to referring, for example, to "the long nineteenth century".

But such terms as "reign" and "century" as used by historians—however artificial in the way they may be used—are at least specific expressions of time. They have a definite beginning and end. But there are other words in common historical use which are entirely open-ended and beg the questions of when the phenomena to which they are attached began and ended. The most obvious example of these is probably "age(s)", as in The Ice Age, The Middle Ages or The Age of Steam. It implies some distinctive difference from what has gone before—a difference perhaps symbolised by a strikingly innovative event, like the invention of the steam engine—but more often than not the "ages" described are not recognised as qualifying for the description until they themselves have clearly been superseded by a new age. Amidst this plethora of attempts to define periodicity, no term is more allusive or difficult to isolate than the term "era", noticeably used only as in "the end of an era", not as in "the beginning of an era".

Since the shocking, in the most literal sense, outcome of the June 2016 referendum—the decision that Britain should leave the European Union—commentators have opined, with almost monotonous regularity, that Britain was approaching or had arrived at "the end of an era". What exactly were they intending their readers or listeners to understand by their use of that term? Simply that this was the end of a not very lengthy period when the UK had been a member, though not a fully committed member, of a formal organisation underpinned by Treaties which it were now ready to abjure, a period with a precise beginning and a foreseeably precise end? Or did the British voters' renunciation of those Treaty obligations fall into a wider and longer pattern of change, of which departure from the EU was merely a contributory and confirmatory factor. In other words, was the era it was suggested was coming to an end a phenomenon requiring a much wider,

deeper and complex explanation than the analysis of the unexpected outcome of a single referendum vote could provide?

My aim in this book is to find a justification for the use of the term in the present situation, by comparing it with an earlier period of history which I believe presents us with a set of circumstances comparable in many respects with what confronts us at present and which, if I can show that the term has any validity, could also be described in the same way. The period I have chosen to use as my comparator is that ending with the general election of 1906—or perhaps I should say the period symbolised by the 1906 election since I shall be attempting to show that the EU referendum vote in 2016 was in the same way no more than a symbol of something much more fundamental in terms of the developing political life of the country. In sum, the periods I shall be examining in detail are the periods between the 1832 Great Reform Act and the 1906 Liberal landslide, and the period from the end of the Second World War to 2017, periods of similar length and both ending with an event which can be regarded as a catalyst of future change.

An "era" suggests a lengthy span of time manifesting underlying stable attributes, which may have undergone modification as time has passed but which have not been overtaken by irresistible alternative forces or entirely reshaped by unforeseen developments. What is interesting, I believe, is that in presenting my two symbolic votes in this light, I have found in them certain common factors. Not that I am claiming that eras always end in the same way and for the same reasons but that there are some striking similarities between the shifts which were taking place in 1906 and immediately afterwards and those which appear to be taking place at the present time. Moreover, it becomes evident that what was happening in 1906 was shaping the systems which are now under threat.

One further comment will, I hope, clarify the nature of the eras I shall be examining. They are not eras brought to an end by a single momentous event such as, for example the Allies' victory in the Second World War which rejected Nazism as an acceptable political credo. My interest is in tracking, over periods of time, the accumulation of forces and impulses which, acting to change attitudes and modes of thought within western-style democratic systems, reshape in an unmistakeable way the balance of power within those systems and the manner in which that reshaping affects how the systems themselves operate. The key change agent is to be found in the way voters express their views through the electoral process, and throughout the book—and particularly in chapter 7—I try to draw out the factors which affect voter behaviour and lead them to act in such a way as to justify the claim that, as commentators put it, "we are seeing the end of an era".

PART I:

1832–1906

CHAPTER 2

THE STATE OF THE PARTIES IN 1900

In order to arrive at a reasoned evaluation of whether, as it has been claimed, the term "end of an era" can be applied to particular points in history, I attempt to identify the main influences and pressures shaping politics in two particular periods—between 1832 and 1906, and between 1945 and 2017—a roughly 70-year period in both cases.

In Part I of this book, I assess first of all the effect of these pressures on the condition of the political parties as they readied themselves for the 1900 general election and how prepared they can be seen to have been for a future which, on any count, can be described as challenging—though it was clearly impossible for them to discern at the time the precise course which that future would take and what events would shape it. I examine in detail the programmes offered to the electorate in 1900 and track the course of the election campaign. I then go on to appraise the events of the years between 1900 and 1906 and seek to account for the swing, a particularly violent swing, of the electoral pendulum at the 1906 election. As part of that appraisal, I include short studies of two by-elections in 1902—in Clitheroe and Wakefield—in order to draw out the nature of the developing relationship between the Liberal party and the forces which coalesced in 1906 to form the Labour party. Finally, I review the "end of the era" claim in the light of the foregoing assessments.

The stability of the two-party system—Tory/Conservative and Whig/Liberal—from the 1830s to the end of the 19th century and into the early years of the 20th century, reflected the limited state and nature of the franchise; the longer-term effects of the Second and Third Reform Acts did not become evident in terms of party configuration until the early years of the next century. There were of course movements between the two parties as the century progressed, most notably the movement away from the Conservatives as a result of the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and the movement in the reverse direction over proposed Home Rule for Ireland in the 1880s. The former led to a lengthy period of Liberal hegemony; the latter resulted in a lengthy period of Conservative domination of Parliamentary politics.

The two most fundamental challenges to which the parties had to respond during the 19th century were the three-fold extension of the franchise in 1832, 1867 and 1884—accompanied, as it was, by a continual reshaping of the pattern of representation through the redistribution of seats and the reordering of constituency boundaries—and the changing basis of the economy from a rural, agricultural one to an urban, industrialised one, the latter stimulating an attitudinal shift with habits of deference slowly being replaced by class-consciousness. As I shall demonstrate, these two developments were closely linked.

The initial questions to be addressed, therefore, are who, at any particular time during the century, was entitled to vote and what factors influenced the manner in which they exercised their right to do so. Only if this is understood will it be possible to come to a well-balanced view of the state of the parties at the turn of the century. Though the process which this examination will reveal has been described as "a peaceful revolution", it was nevertheless influenced by "conflicts between industry and agriculture, between town and countryside, between church and chapel and between labour and capital".[1]

To put matters into perspective before examining developments step by step across the century, it will be helpful to bear in mind the following set of facts. After 1832, about one person in every 24 possessed the right to vote; this rose to one in 12 in 1867 and one in seven in 1884. By modern standards, therefore, Victorian democracy, in the sense in which the democratic principle of "one man, one vote" is understood today, was still, at the end of the century, underdeveloped, to put it mildly. "Victorians, however, did not claim that their system was democratic, a term which [they believed] smacked of continental abstraction and implied an excess of equality characteristic of American society". What the system permitted was to allow those "considered fit by reason of their independence, their material stake in society, their education and political knowledge to exercise the parliamentary franchise with beneficial effects upon political life. Men wholly absorbed in the daily struggle for existence were unlikely to develop the capacity for political judgement".[2] We shall see below how this view was challenged as the century progressed. It was still the fact, however, that as late as 1911, only 63 per cent of all adult males—and no females—were on the electoral lists.

The First Reform Act in 1832 can be seen, in the most immediate sense, as a response to widespread disturbances, stimulated by rumours of recent

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[1] D. G. Wright, *Democracy and Reform 1815-1885* (London: Longman, 1970), 10.
[2] Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1939* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 3.

events in France, and their brutal repression in 1831 in the agricultural counties of Southern England. Some thought these disturbances presaged the emergence of a prospective struggle between the "mob and the Government" or between "conservative and subversive principles". Lord Grey, Prime Minister at the time, believed it necessary to put in place a "sure ground of resistance to further innovation". In terms of the social composition of the House of Commons, the Act had a minimal effect, with 71 per cent of MPs being either aristocrats or landed gentry. Despite some redistribution of seats, the Act retained the 658 seats of the unreformed system. Though redistribution largely benefitted the larger boroughs at the expense of smaller ones, borough representation fell from 465 to 399 seats, while that of the counties rose from 188 to 253, thus strengthening the landed interest. This reflected the Government's view that they "felt the necessity while they were adding to the democratic share of the Representation … of preserving … the aristocratic share by increasing the influence of the great landed proprietors in the counties". It was not intended that "mere popularity … should result in the return of members … to the exclusion of gentlemen of retiring habits, holding large properties in the county, and well qualified to represent its interests".[3]

Voting was still open. Before 1832, there had been no official lists of voters but the larger franchise which the Act produced made a list necessary, if only to reduce delays at polling-booths where electors had to prove their identity. Many voters, however, did not feel it worthwhile to pay the registration fee of a shilling.

Standing for election was fiercely expensive, which accounts for the vast number of arranged "compromises"—agreements between the various "interests" in a constituency that a seat would not be contested in order to avoid the expense of an election. Elsewhere, corruption (or as it would then have been called, "the exercise of influence"), commonly involving bribery and intimidation, was widespread and would remain so until after the 1867 Reform Act. Attempts at intimidation often took the form of disorderly public rioting, which compelled the authorities to extend the poll over a period of two or three weeks to enable the deployment of police resources between neighbouring constituencies.

In 1867 as in 1832, it was public agitation, based in a realisation that the electoral system was grossly unrepresentative, which provided the spark for the passing of the Second Reform Act. After the failure of a Liberal reform package, a violent demonstration in Hyde Park near some of the wealthiest

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[3] Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815-1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 78-79.

residential areas in London convinced Conservative opinion that electoral reform could not be delayed—though there were obviously other underlying causes behind the disturbances. Among the most important of these were attacks on the legal position of trade unions and perceived aristocratic mismanagement of the economy which had resulted in a financial and economic crisis in 1866. In the first half of the 1860s, Parliament was still basically aristocratic and cabinets were composed almost exclusively of members of traditional ruling families.

Disraeli's intention, on becoming the leader of a minority Conservative Government after the fall of Gladstone's Ministry in 1866, was to increase the representation of the labouring classes without giving them a majority; it would be against the constitution, he said, to allow any class a predominance. The Bill which he would introduce would extend "a liberal measure of popular privileges" but would not be "an attempt to confer democratic rights". He trusted that "it would never be the fate of this country to live under a democracy". But what began as an intended limited addition to the borough franchise ended, for a variety of reasons, as a rudimentary form of household suffrage. The Act extended the borough franchise to all householders with twelve months' residence and to £10 lodgers, also with a year's residence. The county franchise was extended to £5 property owners, £12 ratepayers and £5 copyholders and leaseholders.

In terms of redistribution, the Bill did little to reduce existing inequalities. It disenfranchised 60 boroughs with fewer than 2000 inhabitants and took one member from boroughs with a population of between 2000 and 4000. One hundred and sixty eight seats disappeared and 97 new seats were created. In towns, working-class voters were in a majority but most new county voters came from the middle-classes. The overall result was judged to be marginally in favour of the Conservatives and to have consolidated rather than undermined the landed interest.

Corruption was still rife. In the 1865 Lancaster election, for example, £1400 was spent on corrupting the 1408 electors. In 1867, the borough was disenfranchised as being incurably corrupt.[4] A proposed amendment to the Bill designed to allow the payment of legal election expenses from local rates was defeated, leaving the cost of electioneering still excessively prohibitive for working-class candidates.

One of the marked imbalances left by the 1867 Act was that, although the electorate in the boroughs had been increased by 135 per cent, that in the counties had risen by only 45 per cent. In 1877, therefore, the Liberals

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[4] *Parliamentary Papers* 1867, xxvii, XII, Report of the Lancaster Bribery Commission, quoted in Wright, 137.

formally committed themselves to extending the suffrage to rural voters and to eliminating the difference between county and borough franchises. Their commitment was eventually honoured by the passing of the Reform Act of 1884, despite disputes between the Commons and the Lords on the question of the further redistribution of seats, which Joseph Chamberlain, who had come to be seen as the progressive heir to John r after the publication of his first radical programme in 1872, presented as a "peers v. the people" issue. The Act, which gave the counties the same voting rights as the boroughs— all adult householders and men who rented unfurnished lodgings to the value of £10 per year being given the right to vote—allowed Gladstone to project himself as a populist politician and reformer. Lord Salisbury, though less enthusiastic about the measure, hoped nevertheless to pick up many of the new county votes to go with the growing support of the middle classes resulting from anxieties about the extension of the franchise to the working class. Overall, the Act was essentially a compromise between the parties, with little debate on broader principles having taken place during its passage through Parliament.

The disproportionate distribution of Parliamentary seats produced by the Act, with Wiltshire and Dorset, for example, having 25 MPs representing 232,431 voters while London with 3 million voters had only 24 MPs, was addressed in the Redistribution Act of 1885, which aimed to construct new electoral districts of roughly equal size. The 142 seats created were distributed more or less equally between counties and boroughs. All counties and most boroughs became single-member constituencies, with an average population of 50,000. The changes weakened the landed interest as a result of county constituencies being more strongly influenced by urban and suburban voters.

Rising ethical standards, a result of economic prosperity and education, made bribery in all its forms and other election malpractices increasingly publicly unacceptable. Bills in the House to make such forms of corruption illegal had been rejected in both 1881 and 1882 but the Liberal Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883, passed with Conservative support, outlawed open voting and imposed penalties for bribery and attempted bribery and for excessive spending over and above a prescribed scale.

That the Governments bringing forward the three reform measures should have been anxious to avoid outcomes disadvantageous to themselves, either through direct extensions of the franchise or through the redistribution of seats, is not surprising. As we have seen, Grey explained that the purpose of the 1832 legislation had been to prevent "the necessity for revolution", but he also believed that the measure proposed was worthwhile in its own right. In particular, he was recognising the benefit of

bringing the experience of the wealth-producing middle classes into Parliament to strengthen the *status quo*. Lord Brougham considered them "the genuine depositories of sober, rational, intelligent and honest English feeling … whose proper link was with the aristocracy". The Tories, in opposing the measure, thought that recognition of increases in population was less important than the preservation of the pattern of property ownership and that, according to Robert Peel, what was being advocated would "subvert a system of Government which ha[d] combined security to personal liberty, and protection to property, with vigour in the executive power of the state".

Both points of view were clear representations of self-interest. Grey's Whigs, out of office for many years, needed to enfranchise a section of the population to which they could look for substantial support in future. The Tories, not unnaturally, were disinclined to disturb a system which had operated in their favour for three decades. But the public agitation ensured that reform could not be resisted; indeed, some have seen it as an inevitable start of a self-sustaining momentum of democratic progress. However it is seen in terms of its intentions, it certainly proved to be the start of a long-drawn-out change in the way politics was publicly conducted. It brought about a greater consciousness of the importance of paying closer attention to the pressure for social and economic improvements, of the development of party organisation and of programmes dedicated to competing for the support of a widening electorate.

Having opposed what was seen as a radical Liberal measure for reform—"a patent mark progressivism"—in 1866, the Bill introduced by a Conservative minority Government in the following year, in its eventual outcome, went much further. Which raises the question of how the party can have believed at the time that this could possibly be in their long-term interests? Three explanations have been advanced by historians. The first is that the measure in its final form was forced on Disraeli by Gladstone, and accepted by him as the price to be paid for staying in office—though the newly enfranchised householders turned his Government out at the next election. The second is that, despite some appearance of reluctance, Disraeli had always wanted to present the Conservative party as the truly democratic party, representing an alliance between aristocracy and the urban working class, by-passing the Liberal middle-classes. The third explanation, advanced by historians of the Labour movement, is that the Government simply bowed to mass working class pressure exerted through lobbying and street protests. A more balanced view might be that—given that during the 35 years from 1830 to 1865 the Conservative party had had a Parliamentary majority for less than five—Disraeli's prime motivation in 1867 was to

establish the party as a party of Government which, 35 years later, it could be claimed that he had been successful in doing.[5]

Following the 1867 Reform Act, the 1868 general election has been seen as confirmation of the new awareness of the need for politicians to relate more closely to the expectations of a growing electorate which had resulted from the 1832 franchise reforms. By 1868, the hardening of political divisions into a two-party mould after the "relative laxity and confusion of the Palmerston era" was unmistakeable.[6] But it was the 1880 general election which is regarded by most historians as the first truly "modern" election featuring, as it did, recognisably modern campaigning. This was epitomised by Gladstone's Midlothian campaign, during the ten days of which he addressed local audiences on weighty issues in terms more suited to perorations in Parliament, many of which, for example on the state of affairs in Afghanistan and the Balkans, would have been of little concern to the local enthusiasts who gathered to hear him. Nevertheless, it was the start of the process of regular speech-making by political leaders in other candidates' constituencies, of formal organised canvassing and of presenting voters with programmes clearly distinguishable from those of their opponents.

The electoral reforms of 1884 and 1885 have been described, in terms of their effect on the political system, as "the greatest there have been in this country". Wright points out, however, that "the principle of democracy having been admitted in 1867, the Act of 1884 owed even more to cold political calculation" in that "Liberals had long realised the need to broaden the basis of their support in the countryside, especially since the appearance of the new suburban [so-called] villa-Toryism".[7] Not only was the electorate considerably expanded by the Act but the English constituencies were changed from a predominantly two-member to a predominantly one-member basis.

Though the Irish Home Rule crisis had a major destabilising effect on the Liberal Party, the 20 year period of Conservative stability and ascendancy after 1885 owed much to the reforms, the party benefiting in particular from the capture of many of the new county votes and, as mentioned above, from the middle class reaction to the extension of the franchise to the working classes. Gladstone, however, was reconciled to the measures because he was "projecting himself increasingly as a populist

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[5] Robert Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), 97-101.

[6] J. P. Dunbabin, 'British Elections in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', *English Historical Review,* LXXX (1966).

[7] Wright, *Democracy and Reform 1815-1885*, 13.

politician and … wanted to round off his term of office on a creditable reforming note".[8]

With a slightly broader vision, Lord Rosebery, newly-appointed successor to Gladstone in 1894, welcomed the extension of the franchise for the way it "lit up the conscience of the community", carrying into politics "the principles of higher morality". He expressed delight in what he saw as a new spirit in politics "which aim[ed] more at the improvement of the lot of the worker and the toiler than at those great constitutional effects in which past Parliaments have taken their pride". And he went further, predicting the rise of the Labour movement. "I am certain", he said, "there is a party in the country, not named as yet, that is disconnected with any existing organisation, a party which is inclined to say, 'a plague on all your parties, a plague on all your politics, a plague on your unending discussions which yield so little fruit'. Have done with this unending talk and come down and do something for the people".[9] Such views branded Rosebery "a closet Tory" for many in his party. But in any case his euphoria was relatively short-lived. As *The Times* wrote when Rosebery began his short spell as Prime Minister a decade later, he "[found] himself with a chaotic party on his hands, fettered in all sorts of ways by all sorts of incompatible engagements and destitute of any coherent body of conviction or any intelligible principle of action".[10]

The economy and its effect on political allegiances

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, continued industrial growth, with its concomitant of urbanisation, was reducing the comparative economic importance of agriculture and the land. Agricultural interests, dominated as they were by the landed aristocracy, were protected by high tariffs until Sir Robert Peel determined that the widespread starvation which followed crop failures in Ireland in 1817 and 1845-46 would be repeated and become more general unless action were taken to push farmers into adopting scientific methods for improving productivity. This, he believed, would only be achieved by removing the shelter which tariffs provided. Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, though bitterly opposed by two-thirds of the Conservative party who argued that repeal would be economically disastrous and lead to the ruination of farming interests, initially vindicated

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[8] Stephen J. Lee, *Aspects of British Political History 1815-1914* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 145.
[9] Leo McKinstry, *Rosebery: Statesman in Turmoil* (London: John Murray, 2006), 309-10.
[10] McKinstry, *Rosebery: Statesman in Turmoil,* 300.

Peel's view to the extent that in the 1850s and 1860s agriculture experienced what has been called a "golden age". Despite free trade being impeded by the Crimean War (1854-56) and the American Civil War (1861-65), the technological developments which Peel had suggested helped to avoid the possible deleterious effects of these interferences with the international flow of goods. From the late 1870s, however, the effect of improved transportation arrangements, which facilitated, for example, bulk grain imports from the American plains and wool and frozen meat from Australia, together with a succession of harvest failures extending into the early 1880s, caused a profound agricultural crisis.

The political effect of the split in the Conservative party caused by the repeal of the Corn Laws made possible the mid-century revival of the Whigs with whom the Peelite deserters combined to form the Liberal party, which then governed for 28 of the next 33 years. The fact that farmers could no longer rely on high prices, as a result of increases in imports, simply underlined their vulnerability. In effect, the triumph of economic liberalism had reduced the privileges previously conferred upon the landed classes who still dominated British politics. This caused a degree of widespread insecurity, a condition heightened by the extension in 1884 of household suffrage to agricultural labourers. Governments across Europe responded to the crisis by introducing agricultural protection but Britain, bound by the decision taken in 1846, could not respond. In the two decades after 1875, cereal prices halved and prices of other products too felt the effects of cheap imports. The effect on many rural communities was disastrous. In simple terms, agriculture, as a way of life, could no longer support a growing rural population. Nor could the other great reservoir of pre-industrial labour, the traditional practice of home-working, prevent the drift of large numbers into new and expanding labour-intensive primary and secondary industries in the cities and towns. In short, the agricultural depression also had significant urban consequences. In many places the industrial economy itself was not geared up to absorb the flow of migrants from the land. Agitation about unemployment and slum housing, as well as about sweated labour, was typified in dramatic fashion by the "Bloody Sunday" clashes in Trafalgar Square in November 1887. Studies such as those undertaken by Charles Booth made urban poverty a pressing political issue.[11]

The combined effects of the enfranchisement of the urban working class in 1867 and the agricultural labourer in 1884, were both expected and unexpected and were nowhere more marked than in the changes they

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[11] John Davis, *A History of Britain, 1885-1939* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999), 1-22.

brought about in the relationships between employers and employees, changes which affected political attitudes and, hence, voting patterns. The agricultural depression, while not leading to widespread class warfare between landlords and tenant farmers, obviously threatened class harmony in the countryside, and hostility to landlords was evident in some areas of rural radicalism. Urban families uprooted from the countryside were open to persuasion that rural landowners had robbed them of their heritage, not to mention their livelihoods, and driven them into towns where conditions were often barely above subsistence levels. "Landlordism", therefore, became an issue in both rural and urban locations and the idea of the landlord as a "parasite", which had a long cultural history, took on a new lease of life. Indeed, in its earliest manifestations in the 1880s, the concept of "socialism" amounted basically to not much more than an attack on landed property. "Landlordism" as a social evil lay at the root of the message of American writer Henry George, whose visit to England in 1882 had been vociferously supported by Joseph Chamberlain. George's book *Progress and Poverty,* which advocated, *inter alia*, a single tax on the unearned increment in the value of land, attracted wide attention, including from an English writer A.R. Wallace who called for the nationalisation of land. This idea found a ready response among people on the fringes of radical activity who were bitterly disappointed at the performance of the Liberal Government over the previous two years. Some of these people formed socialist societies to give labour an independent voice, though the loyalty of labour to Liberalism remained generally unshaken. Though Chamberlain recognised the political dilemmas in Wallace's prescription, he nevertheless recognised that "the enormous increase in general wealth [had] not been accompanied by proportionate improvements in the conditions of the poor" and that, as he put it, "socialism [was] in the air".[12]

Against this background, it is unquestionably the case that as the nineteenth century progressed, the decline of deference as a key element of social relationships was replaced by a growing class consciousness. Wright talks of the tendency of electors before 1868 to vote in "geographical units or deference communities … In [some] counties the eighteenth century system of 'influence' was preserved like a fly in amber, until well into Victorian times". In his view, "politics in Victorian England had its roots … more in the contest for political power than it had in economics … in 'bread and butter' issues".[13]

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[12] Joseph Chamberlain to E.R. Russell, 22 January 1883, Chamberlain papers JC5/62/4, quoted in Peter T. Marsh, *Joseph Chamberlain: Entrepreneur in Politics* (London: Yale University Press, 1994), 164.
[13] Wright, *Democracy and Reform 1815-1885,* 103-105.

But before accepting this view at its face value, it is important to recognise that both terms—deference and class—have various shades of meaning which need to be drawn out in trying to determine how this change affected attitudes to the political parties and voting patterns.

Working backwards, as it were, at the end of the century slightly less than 12 per cent of the male population worked in agriculture, a number which was still declining. At the same time, about 85 per cent of the total working population were employed by others and about 75 per cent were manual workers, which suggests that at that time Britain was a working-class nation. The question which this raises is whether relations between employers and employees in agriculture were close and direct and underpinned by deference, while in industry the link with employers was often at arms' length and, in the larger industries, not infrequently mediated by sub-employers and trade unions. Did agricultural work encourage individualism while employment in industry fostered a collectivism based on sameness, a collectivism which could also be described as class consciousness? Did size and the distancing of employers from employees in industry encourage the transmission of political radicalism and did smallness and familiarity between employers and employed result in alienation from it?

Bagehot believed that deference was achieved by the "theatrical show of society", the parading before the eyes of the people of a spectacle of the pomp and wealth of great men. Such a spectacle was most clearly associated with rural life and employment on great landed estates—that is, with a political system dominated and manipulated by the upper and upper middle-classes. Such a system also incorporated wider forms of deference—to the monarchy and to our form of Government, the honours system, patriotism and what have been called "British" ideas, such as "fair play"—inherited forms which were essentially conservative, albeit not necessarily Tory.[14]

While many of these ideals were shared by urban factory-workers, some of them were expanded simply as a result of being applied in a different context. For the industrial worker, for example, "fair play" meant the right to bargain with the employer unhindered by state interference. Similarly, most were supportive of free trade because of its analogy with unfettered collective bargaining. But free collective bargaining was something of a double-edged sword, since it also allowed the working class to "exert a political pressure on the state", while at the same time making it more difficult for employers to enforce the degree of orderly production necessary

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[14] Walter Bagehot, ed. by Miles Taylor, *The English Constitution,* (1867; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

to sustain profitability. And it was not a large step from there to a position where "kow-towing" to employers could be regarded as a breach of solidarity and hence also a further step back from any feeling of deference.

But the emergence of a movement with its roots in a consciousness of membership of a class which stood outside the existing class structure or felt positively alienated from it, depended upon its acceptance of a leadership preaching both cultural and political independence. Perverse as it might seem, the leadership of the Labour movement which eventually emerged was a middle class leadership composed of men who were divorced from the realities of working-class life.[15]

The Conservative Party in 1900

If, as Geoffrey Wheatcroft writes, every 19th century leader from Robert Peel onwards assumed that "the future belonged with [their] progressive opponents … and that their own task was to hold back [the progressive] tide as best they could, if not with good grace, [and, in effect] to conduct the political equivalent of a fighting retreat", the events of the last two decades of the century did no more than confirm that belief. As progressivism grew, as the expansion of the franchise started to change attitudes, however gradually, as the effectiveness of central planning became obvious and unarguable, as rising taxes—however reluctantly imposed—redistributed wealth, many on the right of politics were convinced that it was only a matter of time before the old order was swept away for ever. They accepted, as American Vice-President Henry Wallace was to put it in 1942, that the 20th century was to be the Century of the Common Man.[16]

This was a view essentially shared by Lord Salisbury who, philosophically if not temperamentally, was a pessimist. It is said of him that he believed that all change is for the worse, even change for the better. He was suspicious of mass democracy as a matter of principle and in particular of the enfranchisement of the working man. He had fiercely opposed both the Second and Third Reform Acts. He considered the country to be in the "throes of a bloodless civil war" in which "to loot somebody or something is the common object, under a thick varnish of pious phrases". His conservatism has been described as balancing retreat and doggedness; he was prepared to concede measures of social reform provided they were not

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[15] Ross McKibbin, "Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain", in *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1-41.

[16] Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *The Strange Death of Tory England* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 22-23.

likely to disturb the Conservative core vote nor to threaten relations with the Liberal Unionists. He shared Disraeli's "only fixed political principle … that the party must on no account be broken up", a comment on Disraeli's continuing difficulty in managing the party, both before and after the Second Reform Act. Robert Blake summarised Salisbury's character, as it affected his political behaviour, in the following insightful terms:

> a man can be personally sceptical about the trends of his time, pessimistic about the prospect ahead, dubious about the stock panaceas of intellectual fashion—and yet by no means ready to opt out, by no means convinced that the effort to delay what others call 'progress' is not worth making … Such a man may be … quite ready to make limited tactical concessions to the 'spirit of the age' without feeling obliged to bow down to it, still less to believe in it.[17]

In general terms, Salisbury's policy was to do as little as possible when in office and when in opposition to use the Conservative majority in the Lords to kill off Liberal legislation. In party management terms, he accepted the general view which held that low turnouts at elections were advantageous to the party, and Tory agents were expected to keep tight control of electoral registration with a view to ensuring that polls were kept low. High turnouts were regarded by the party as "ominous harbingers" of a bad result.[18] J.A. Gorst, national party agent, had resigned before the 1880 election over the party Whips' encouragement of corrupt electoral practices at local level. A second "negative" factor, as it were, contributing significantly to positive election outcomes, was that the party was most successful in those elections with most uncontested seats. In the 1900 election there were 59 uncontested seats, up from 34 in 1895 which was double the number in 1892. In the 1906 election there were only three uncontested seats. All these steps, taken together with Salisbury's attitude, do seem to confirm the view that in the years before 1900 the party was indeed fighting, or believed it was fighting, some sort of rear-guard action against the incessant advance of progressive forces.

Religion was the most important shaper of Salisbury's political outlook. This set him somewhat apart from the younger generation of Conservatives who were becoming "more secular, more doctrinally liberal and more materialistic". The party benefited immensely from the marriage between

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[17] Robert Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), 133.
[18] Robin Harris, *The Conservatives: A History* (London: Bantam Books, 2011), 199, 204, 206.

Liberalism and Nonconformity, which repelled as many as it attracted, and the further espousal by the Liberals of the temperance agenda, with its almost undisguised final objective of prohibition, was an additional political gift.

Salisbury's focus, as an erstwhile Foreign Secretary, was not surprisingly on foreign rather than domestic affairs. Reflecting his unshakeable religious convictions, he regarded foreign policy as being underpinned by morality, which led him to tell his War Minister, Lord Lansdowne, at the start of the Boer War in October 1899, that England was forced to act on a moral field which left no choice but to resort to force of arms, albeit that the military effort required would be for the benefit of people the country despised and for territory which would bring no profit and no power to England. God's will was inscrutable and war with the Boers was His answer to the "self-righteous scrupulosity" which characterised Liberal foreign policy. Can any other Prime Minister ever have conducted his foreign policy from such a standpoint?

Again, seemingly in tune with Salisbury's inclinations, is the fact that in the field of international relations, the period between 1895 and 1902 has come to be seen as years when Britain pursued a policy of "splendid isolation", eschewing the pursuit of alliances or close diplomatic ties with other powers. Whether such isolation can justifiably be described as "splendid", the policy certainly seems to have been deliberate, as explained in 1986 by Viscount Goschen, a Liberal who had served under Gladstone but, having become disillusioned with Liberal party policies on electoral reform and Home Rule, succeeded to high office in Conservative administrations:

> There may be the isolation of those who are weak and who therefore are not, the isolation of those who do not wish to be entangled in any complications and will hold themselves free in every respect … Our isolation is not an isolation of weakness; it is deliberately chosen, the freedom to act as we choose in any circumstances that may arise.[19]

What served to take the shine off the "splendour" of Britain's isolation from continental affairs was the fact that the greater European powers had imperial aspirations of their own and these led to a number of crises which made Britain feel isolated in an altogether different and less pleasant sense. Among these was the so-called Fashoda incident of 1898, involving a dispute with France over control of the Upper Nile, the last of a series of crises before the Boer War, the outcomes of which resulted in a significant

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[19] Christopher Howard, *Splendid Isolation* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 22.

expansion of the Empire—which is rather surprising given Salisbury's expressed distaste for jingoism. And at a time of some economic stringency, these acquisitions also reflected Salisbury's ability to prevent the Treasury undermining his foreign policies by starving the War Department of funds. He was of course, for the greater part of his premiership, also his own Foreign Secretary.

The downside of all these successful confrontations, however, was that it put Britain at odds with almost all her major European neighbours and effectively ensured that when the Boer War broke out, the sympathy of the whole of Europe was with the Boers, as typified by the Kaiser's congratulatory telegram to President Kruger in 1896 after the crushing of the Jameson Raid. Which leaves open the question of whether Britain's avoidance of alliance entanglements and the sense which it fostered of "splendid isolation" was illusory, given the undermining of relations with almost all the great European powers individually in the contest for imperial expansion in many other parts of the world. It was a question which, at the time of the 1900 election, few Conservatives seemed to want to answer, though the economic challenges being offered by Germany and the United States in particular were causing some concern.

One reaction, with far-reaching implications, can be seen in the prescient words of influential historian J.R. Seeley who, in a series of lectures delivered in Cambridge in 1883, urged the creation of what he called a "Greater Britain", requiring an acknowledgement of the fact, as he saw it, that "England has left Europe altogether behind it and become a world state" and more critically that "if the United States and Russia hold together for another half century, they will at the end of that time completely dwarf such old European states as France and Germany … and they will do the same to Britain", unless "Greater Britain" was to become "not only a reality but a robust reality". Seeley's insights, as they bore upon the early years of the new century, are not difficult to appreciate but, even more disturbingly perhaps, they are resonating once again as Britain contemplates the possibility having to redesign a "Greater Britain" outside the European Union.[20]

Judging the approach of Salisbury's party to domestic reform is, if anything, even more difficult than judging the mainsprings of its approach to foreign affairs. Joseph Chamberlain's defection from the Liberal ranks in 1886 left that party bereft of ideas and energy throughout the entire period up to 1900, and though they still attracted more working class votes than the Conservatives, even this advantage started to wane as Labour's distinctive

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[20] J.R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London: Macmillan, 1883).