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THE 10th APRIL OF SPENCER WALPOLE:  
THE PROBLEM OF REVOLUTION  
IN RELATION TO REFORM, 1865-1867<sup>1</sup>

The 10th April 1848 is one of the most famous days in the history of the nineteenth century. The Chartists of London had screwed themselves up for a decisive trial of strength with the ruling classes. They found themselves outnumbered by the combined resources of the civil and military powers. They shrank back before the prospect of a collision with the vast forces of law and order and property commanded by the Duke of Wellington and Richard Mayne. What was to have been a triumphant demonstration of the overwhelming power and determination of the people, ended in the anything but triumphal progress of a few hired hackney coaches carrying a dubious petition. "The 10th April, 1848 will long be remembered as a great field day of the British Constitution", announced the *Times*. "The signal of unconstitutional menace, of violence, of insurrection, of revolution, was yesterday given in our streets, and happily despised by a peaceful, prudent, and loyal metropolis. That is the triumph we claim . . . . This settles the question. In common fairness it ought to be regarded as a settled question for years to come. The Chartists and Confederates made the challenge, and chose the field and trial of strength. They must stand by their choice. They chose to disturb the metropolis for the chance of something coming of it. They fished for a revolution and have caught a snub. We congratulate them on their booty, which we hope they will divide with their partners in Dublin. It is, perhaps, a fortunate circumstance that so momentous a question as the *free action of the British Legislature* should be settled thus decisively . . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Chartism was not extinguished by the events of the 10th April and had the economic and social conditions which characterised the late

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the Sheffield University Publications Committee for a grant which enabled me to consult materials held in the British Museum and in the George Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute, London. I am obliged to Professor Asa Briggs and to Mr. John Saville for valuable criticism and encouragement. For such errors as may remain, I alone am responsible.

<sup>2</sup> *Times*, 11 April 1848.

thirties and forties continued into the succeeding decade it would, no doubt, have revived. Yet on the Kennington Common it suffered a blow to its prestige from which it never fully recovered. The Government had the initiative and the arrest and imprisonment of chartist leaders became the order of the day. "Respectable society" could henceforth indulge in the agreeable reflection that Revolution might sweep across Europe and leave England "sound". Quite as much as the great Exhibition of 1851, the 10th April 1848 contributed to the popularity of Mr. Podsnap's interpretation of history.<sup>1</sup>

## I

It took twenty years for the British working class to raise once again the question of its political rights into a great national issue. It did so, not upon the basis of the Charter as a whole, but by agitating for only two of the six points: universal manhood suffrage and vote by ballot. Although the Reform League of the eighteen sixties was a predominantly working class body, it never insisted as emphatically as the Chartists had done upon its independence. Indeed it was conceived as a result of negotiations between a group of labour leaders and a number of "influential gentlemen", advanced liberals, who promised to raise £5,000 to work up an earnest agitation.<sup>2</sup> The rivalry between the League and the middle class Reform Union was always limited and contained by the dual membership of wealthy manufacturers upon whom both bodies were largely dependent for financial support.

The Reformers of the eighteen sixties were not above references to Revolution. As early as 1865 one Labour paper could observe: "The granting of Manhood Suffrage", they say, "would effect a Revolution. Well let us be plain and say that it would be of small value if it did not."<sup>3</sup> But the occasional blasé reference of this kind ought not to conceal the distance which had been travelled since the thirties and forties. Behind Chartism lay boundless, if inchoate, dreams of social reconstruction; behind the Reform League lay little more than the

<sup>1</sup> The above is based upon the standard interpretation of 10th April, 1848. In an article entitled *Chartism in the Year of Revolutions*, in: *Modern Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Winter 1952-53, pp. 23-33, Mr. John Saville has suggested a number of important corrections to this account. However, he does not deny that there was a direct confrontation between the organised workmen and the Government which resulted in a "defeat" for the former. G. J. Holyoake, *Bygones Worth Remembering*, 1 (1905), pp. 73-83, had already questioned the generally received version of these events.

[In the case of books, place of publication is London, unless otherwise stated.]

<sup>2</sup> *Times*, 21 February and 24 February 1865.

<sup>3</sup> *Miner and Workman's Advocate*, 19 August 1865.

expectation of “rising in the social scale”.<sup>1</sup> Yet the limited demands and modest ambitions of the League did not prevent it from being drawn into a direct confrontation with the ruling powers. In 1867 the scene at Kennington Common was re-enacted with some of the principal actors still playing their old roles, but this time there was to be a very different *dénouement*. London, which had disappointed the hopes of the Chartists, was the main bastion of the Reform League. In establishing its headquarters in London, the League was not repeating the old error of separating the leadership from the main body of its supporters.

During the early months of 1866, while the Russell-Gladstone Reform Bill was being debated in Parliament, there was little agitation in the country. Tories and Adullamites taunted the Government with its failure to interest the public in its measure. Horsman declared that Bright had tried to use “all the machinery of uproar”, but “the agitation has failed – failed ridiculously, failed ignominiously.”<sup>2</sup> Lowe mocked the Gladstonians’ attempt to frighten the House with the spectre of the serious unrest which would follow a rejection of the Bill. He observed that in the speeches of Government supporters the working men came in like lambs and went out like lions.<sup>3</sup>

The Government’s difficulty had been correctly anticipated by E. S. Beesly before the terms of the Bill became known. He foresaw that every £ off the qualification for the electoral register would increase the number of the old Palmerstonians who would be ready to join forces with the Tories. “A strong popular enthusiasm might encourage him [Russell] to risk these desertions, but no strong enthusiasm can be got up for anything less than manhood suffrage, which Lord Russell would resist as firmly as Lord Derby.”<sup>4</sup> The Government’s measure not only split its own supporters, but divided the League. Beesly, out of regard for Bright, supported the Bill, others followed Ernest Jones in his bitter denunciations of it.<sup>5</sup>

### The resignation of the Government healed the breach in the League

<sup>1</sup> “Let us once be able to maintain by the force of intellect and truth our rights as workmen in that House, and depend upon it we shall rise in the sociale scale . . . .” Address by the Reform League “To the Trades Unionists of the United Kingdom”, no date – but in George Howell’s hand, “first issued in June 1865 a few weeks before the General Election”. This “Address” is pasted into the front of the second volume of Minutes of the General Council of the Reform League, Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute, London. Herein after referred to as H.C.

<sup>2</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd Series, cxxxii (12 March 1866), 107 & 109.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. (26 April 1866), 2104.

<sup>4</sup> E. S. Beesly, *The Liberal Majority*, in: *Workman’s Advocate*, 27 January 1866.

<sup>5</sup> For this split see, for example, *A Word in Reply to Mr. Ernest Jones on the Reform Bill*, in: *Commonwealth*, 21 April 1866. Also Jones’ letter in same issue.

and opened the way to months of intense agitational activity. Frederic Harrison, who with his colleague and fellow Positivist, Beesly, was one of the most trusted and influential advisors to the Labour Movement, announced: "Compromise has been carried to the last point, but it is now over." He explained that workmen could and ought, "to make Government after Government impossible – to oppose everything, to accept nothing, and to force to its extreme point this palpable mockery of popular government. Let them from this moment declare themselves in permanent opposition to every Government and to every Government measure."<sup>1</sup>

Following immense demonstrations in Trafalgar Square at the beginning of July, the League resolved to meet in Hyde Park. The chief of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Richard Mayne, was charged with preventing any entry into the Park. The events which followed are sufficiently familiar. Edmond Beales, the President of the League, having demanded and been denied admission departed with his immediate followers and supporters to the Square. The crowd, possibly incensed by this and by the arbitrary manner in which the police allowed well-dressed and well-spoken people to go through the gates,<sup>2</sup> burst down the dilapidated railings and three days and nights of intermittent scurrying followed. The Home Secretary in the new Conservative government, Mr. Spencer Walpole, received a deputation from the League which offered to go back to the Park and attempt to restore order on condition that a halt was called to all further exercises by the police and the military. The Home Secretary was "much affected"<sup>3</sup> by this offer – popular tradition had it that he actually wept – and he gratefully accepted it. It was believed by the League leaders that he had also agreed to the holding of a meeting, not for the purpose of clearing the Park, but for the advocacy of manhood suffrage. G. J. Holyoake – "the thin voiced, intrusive, consequential Holyoake", as Marx was to call him in consequence<sup>4</sup> – supported Walpole's denial that he had ever entered into such an agreement.<sup>5</sup>

Although Sir Stafford Northcote told his wife on 23rd July, "We are expecting to have all our heads broken to-night, as the mob are now trying it on in Hyde Park, and perhaps if they are defeated there, they will come on here (the House of Commons)",<sup>6</sup> the moment of

<sup>1</sup> F. Harrison, *The Government Defeat*, in: *Bee-Hive*, 23 June 1866.

<sup>2</sup> This was recalled as the occasion of the riots, *Daily-News*, 6th May 1867.

<sup>3</sup> *Times*, 25 July 1866.

<sup>4</sup> K. Marx to F. Engels, 27 June 1866. (Marx and Engels on Britain [1954], p. 496.)

<sup>5</sup> G. J. Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life*, vol. ii (1893), pp. 186–190. But as to Holyoake's reliability see A. R. Schoyen, *The Chartist Challenge* (1958), p. 269, fn. 2.

<sup>6</sup> A. Lang, *Life of the Earl of Iddesleigh* (1891), p. 161.

greatest danger came after the Reform League had restored order. "After the riot very dangerous elements really appeared. There was complete preparation for a grand street fight. I know", wrote Frederic Harrison, "of men of good position who travelled up to London from the North to fight, and that clerks in business houses had their rifles beside their desks."<sup>1</sup> It is clear, from more than one source, that "*political* forces of a fighting kind came on to the scene or rather behind the scenes."<sup>2</sup> Gustave-Paul Cluseret, soon to be chief of staff of the Paris Commune, appears to have been at work trying to promote a Fenian-Reform League alliance.<sup>3</sup> Beyond doubt, a number of working-class leaders were bent on defying the Government and holding their meeting in the Park. It was at this point that a Conference was called between the Council of the League and a number of Radical M.P.s. It was at this conference that J. S. Mill had recourse to what he described as "les grands moyens". "I told them that a proceeding which would certainly produce a collision with the military, could only be justifiable on two conditions: if the position of affairs had become such that a revolution was desirable, and if they thought themselves able to accomplish one. To this argument, after considerable discussion, they at last yielded: and I was able to inform Mr. Walpole that their intention was given up."<sup>4</sup>

But it was only given up for a time. On both sides feeling was running high. Walpole and the Government had only barely scraped home and there was much indignation that he had, by treating with the League, made it appear that he was dependent on its good will for the preservation of order. Beales was able to assert that "Hyde Park was handed over to myself and the other members of the Reform League for the express purpose of our maintaining that order in it which the police could not maintain, and we completely accomplished our object. . . . by the Reform League alone was not only the Park but all London preserved that night from most disastrous scenes of violence and bloodshed."<sup>5</sup>

Emily Eden expressed her sense of anger and humiliation to the Earl of Clarendon: "I attempted a drive round the park and am so indignant at the sight that I feel boiling and bloodthirsty. As for Beales, I suppose the meekest of babies would hang that man as soon as look at him, and also I do not see how we are to die peacefully in our beds without having exterminated that wretched coward Bright

<sup>1</sup> F. Harrison, *Order and Progress* (1875), p. 184, fn.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> J. B. Leno, *Aftermath* (1892), p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> J. S. Mill, *Autobiography* (1873), pp. 290-1.

<sup>5</sup> E. Beales, letter in *Times*, 28 July 1866.

..... Poor dear Walpole! there never was anybody so little up to the hauteur des circonstances. How could he *cry* to Beales? However, it seems to have answered.

‘Twas too convincing – dangerously dear –  
In Walpole’s eye the unanswerable tear.’<sup>1</sup>

Disraeli assured the Queen that the discussion in the House on the riots in the Park was “highly and unexpectedly satisfactory”. The Queen thanked her Chancellor for his reports, but most of all for carrying the vote for the gun-metal for “her dear great husband’s memorial”.<sup>2</sup> As for the rest of “respectable society”, its feelings were somewhat mollified by the fact that Beales was deprived of his appointment as one of the revising barristers for Middlesex and by the severe sentences which were passed on those who were alleged to have been involved in the disturbances. The magistrate told a bystander who had been injured by the police that he ought not to complain about the constable but about “those who turned loose the scum and refuse of the town on the peaceable inhabitants.”<sup>3</sup> Marx observed that while “the old ass Beales” went in for “peacefulness and dissoluteness”, the “cur Knox, the police magistrate of Marylebone, snaps out summary judgement in a way that shows what would happen if London were Jamaica.”<sup>4</sup> In the months which followed the July days there were men on both sides who began to think and talk as if London might well become Jamaica.

The end of 1866 and the beginning of the following year were marked by an economic depression and tens of thousands were thrown out of work. The cholera, which was ever the companion of political disturbance, made its appearance. Like the depressed state of trade, it was felt with particular severity in London. Meanwhile, there was a growing preoccupation with political violence as a result of the Jamaica Committee’s attempt to prosecute Governor Eyre, the activities of the Fenians, and cases of “rattening” and murder in Sheffield. The ruling classes viewed with the greatest apprehension the prospect of an amalgamation between the Reformers on the one side and either the Irish or the Trade Unionists on the other. In the workers’ press Beesly and others linked up martial law abroad and police violence at home. “The impunity accorded to Eyre is part of a system recently introduced and steadily carried out. Public servants

<sup>1</sup> H. Maxwell, *The Earl of Clarendon*, vol. i (1913), pp. 321-2.

<sup>2</sup> W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, *Life of Benjamin Disraeli*, vol ii (1929), pp. 183-5.

<sup>3</sup> Cited by P. A. Taylor M.P., *Parl. Debates*, 3rd series, clxxxiv (7 August 1867), 2134.

<sup>4</sup> K. Marx to F. Engels, 27 July 1866. (*Marx and Engels on Britain*, 1954, p. 496).

are to be uniformly screened from the consequences of any illegal act provided that the act was done in the interests of wealth and respectability.” “Every policeman now understands that when he is acting in defence of the swells he may use his truncheon just as he pleases, without any fear of the consequences.”<sup>2</sup> “The Eyre Committee recently published in the *Standard*, and thereby endorsed, a letter which openly threatened ‘Reform Leaguers and Trade Unions’ with the treatment of Gordon. Nothing is commoner than to hear the wish expressed that Mr. Bright may find his way to the gallows.”<sup>3</sup> By the end of 1866, *The Commonwealth*, “The Organ of the Reform Movement” reached the conclusion that “we have slightly over-done ‘moral force’ here lately” and added, “like ‘lovely woman’, moral force may stoop to folly, and when she does it is invariably discovered too late that men betray.”<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, Bright had placed himself at the head of a series of impressive Reform demonstrations in the North. Behind bands and banners the working men of Glasgow, Leeds, Birmingham and Manchester showed that, no less than the men of London, they cared for political equality. But in the winter of 1866-67 the Reformers began to discuss forms of direct action which made John Bright himself extremely uneasy. Sir Richard Mayne had declined to accept responsibility for the preservation of the peace at a great meeting and demonstration to be called by the London Working Men’s Association in December.<sup>5</sup> Beesly declared that this left the workers no choice but to organise themselves on physical force lines and establish a Reform constabulary.<sup>6</sup> The League resolved “that each London Branch be requested to furnish a number of men as ‘peace protectors’ in consequence of the refusal of Sir Richard Mayne to provide proper police constables.”<sup>7</sup> Bright saw that “If the thing goes off well and in great force it will help the Derby Conspiracy in their deliberations, and Walpole’s tears will be shed amid the sighs of his colleagues.” But he was also alarmed: “It would be easy to induce many scores of thousands of men to provide themselves with arms – to form something like a great national volunteer force, which, without breaking the law, would place the peace of the country on a soil hot with volcanic fire.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. S. Beesly, *The Trial of Mr. Eyre*, in: *Bee-Hive*, 18 August 1866.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> E. S. Beesly, *The Prosecution of Governor Eyre*, in: *Commonwealth*, 20 October 1866.

<sup>4</sup> *Physical Force*, in: *Commonwealth*, 15 December 1866.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Austin’s reply, on behalf of the First Commissioner, to R. Hartwell’s letter of 17 November 1866.

<sup>6</sup> E. S. Beesly, *Reform Constables*, in: *Bee-Hive*, 25 November 1866.

<sup>7</sup> *Minutes Executive Cmtee, Reform League*, 23 November 1866. (H.C.)

<sup>8</sup> G. M. Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright* (1913), p. 364.

Bright always insisted that 1832 had demonstrated the possibility of peaceful constitutional change. Yet it was not just a threat, but a genuine expression of anxiety when he told a great Reform Banquet in September 1866: "These great meetings, as Mr. Mill very justly said, were not meetings so much for discussion, as they were meetings for the demonstration of opinion, and, if you like, I will add for exhibition of force. Such exhibitions, if they are despised and disregarded, may become exhibitions of another kind of force...."<sup>1</sup>

When the working class reformers copied this sort of language and warned that their mightiest demonstrations of the autumn of 1866 were but "dress-rehearsals", they were told that they were attempting to over-awe Parliament, a thing which could scarcely be distinguished from rebellion. "We cannot believe that (such attempts) will be tolerated. We trust and believe that if attempted they will be immediately put down. All the respectability of London turned out when the capital was threatened some years ago with an invasion of Chartists, headed by Mr. Fergus O'Connor. All the respectability of London will turn out again, and disperse whatever mob Mr. Beales and Mr. Potter, with Mr. Hartwell's combination, may collect. We are not friendly to letting loose troops against any portion of Her Majesty's subjects, however unlawfully engaged. And in the event of the threatened outrage on Parliament taking place, we are confident that the civil power will prove strong enough to hold its own, and to put down the disturbers of the public peace...."<sup>2</sup> This confidence was not entirely shared by the Government. It was thought expedient to prepare a confidential memorandum on the aid which could lawfully be given to the civil power by the Regular and Auxiliary Forces.<sup>3</sup> General Peel told the Home Secretary that "numerous applications have been received from Lords Lieutenant of Counties, and officers commanding Volunteer Corps, for instructions for their guidance in cases of civil commotion; and as to the liability or the competence of the Volunteers to act as a Military Body under Arms in aid of the Civil Power".<sup>4</sup> The Minister of War drafted a "Reserve Force Bill" which, in its eighth clause, sought to strengthen and clarify the position.<sup>5</sup>

In 1867, the Government introduced its resolutions. The suspicion

<sup>1</sup> H. Jephson, *The Platform: Its Rise and Progress*, vol. ii (1892), p. 451.

<sup>2</sup> *Blackwood's*, January 1867, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> Charles M. Clode's confidential memorandum of 20 December 1866 (Home Office stamp, 2 February 1867), H.O. 45.O.S. 8060.

<sup>4</sup> General Peel to S. H. Walpole, 20 February 1867 (H.O. *ibid.*).

<sup>5</sup> Reserve Force Bill, war office solicitors, 23 February 1867 (H.O. *ibid.*)

that it had come by the “Hyde Park Rail-Way” to Reform was expressed by *Punch*:

“In framing our scheme, let’s enlist the whole House,  
So Reform’s Bill won’t be Revolution’s;  
And as Walpole had got no resolution to move,  
Let’s get Walpole to move resolutions.”<sup>1</sup>

The League held an impressive meeting to co-incide with Disraeli’s speech in Parliament, but it was not content with this. In its search for new ways of twisting the Government’s arm, it hit upon a plan for a day of Individual Petitions in Favour of Reform. This was a dodge for staging something like a march on Parliament without (it was thought) risking arrest. At intervals of a few minutes, parties of not more than ten men were to set off from the Reform League’s Offices and walk to the House of Commons carrying petitions. Walpole wanted to prevent it, but the Law Officers advised him that, although it was illegal, he could not have those taking part arrested on the spot and that it would be difficult to use force.<sup>2</sup>

Encouraged by their own successes and the evident weakness and hesitancy of the Government, the leaders of the workmen grew bolder. Voices from the past had for long been calling for a “People’s Parliament” chosen by the non-electors and a “Grand National Holiday”.<sup>3</sup> Although these voices were never too distinct, they became more audible and menacing.

By the end of February 1867 they were loud enough for Mill to complain to W. R. Cremer of “a readiness to proceed at once to a

<sup>1</sup> *Punch*, 16 February 1867.

<sup>2</sup> Opinion of Law Officers of the Crown, 28 January 1867 on “Individual Petitions in Favour of Reform”. (H.O. 45.O.S. 7854).

<sup>3</sup> A proposal for a “People’s Parliament” had been discussed as early as 29 September 1865. It was raised again and rejected on 12th October 1866 (Minutes of General Council, Reform League [H.C.]). With respect to a General Strike, at a delegate meeting on 27 February 1867 it was resolved that “Unless a satisfactory prospect is held out in Parliament of the working classes being universally enfranchised upon the principles of the Reform League, it will be necessary to consider the propriety of these classes adopting a universal cessation from labour until their political rights are conceded”. (Minutes of General Council, Reform League [H.C.]) George Potter, leader of the London Working Men’s Association and manager of the Bee-Hive, took up this threat in a speech in Trafalgar Square. He posed the issue as either household suffrage (sic) with a lodger franchise or else a week’s cessation from labour aiming at a complete stop being put to all traffic and all business. *Times*, 4 March 1867. The far fiercer temper which the Reformers were displaying at the beginning of 1867 is evidenced by the need for appeals to avoid all expressions “involving in the slightest degree any indication of physical force”. Minutes, General Council of the Reform League, 20 April 1867 (H.C.).

trial of physical force if any opposition is made either to your demands or to the particular mode, even though illegal, which you may select for the expression of them". He found in one speech evidence that Reformers asserted the "superiority of physical force as constituting right, and as justifying the people in 'riding down the ministers of the law'."<sup>1</sup> This was the background against which the leaders of the Reform League, in the Spring of 1867, came to their decision to throw down the gauntlet to the Government and to try, once again, the right of public meeting in Hyde Park. With the help of 40 billboard men, hundreds of posters, and 35,000 handbills, they announced that they would hold a Reform Meeting in the Park at half past six o'clock; Edmund Beales, Esq., M.A. presiding.<sup>2</sup>

To this challenge, the Government replied by issuing a proclamation: "Whereas it has been publically announced that a meeting will be held in Hyde Park on Monday the 6th of May, for the purpose of political discussion: And whereas the use of the Park for the purpose of holding such meeting is not permitted, and interferes with the object for which Her Majesty has been pleased to open the Park for the general enjoyment of Her People: Now, all persons are hereby warned and admonished to abstain from attending, aiding, or taking part in any such meeting, or from entering the Park with a view to attend, and, or take part in such meeting. S. H. Walpole. Home Office, Whitehall, May 1st 1867."<sup>3</sup>

On the evening of 1st May, three superintendents of police attended a full delegate meeting of the Council of the League and informed them of the Government's decision. A majority of those present resolved that they would not yield. "The Government", declared Charles Bradlaugh, "had invited a contest and upon it depended the question whether they would have a real Reform Bill or not. If they all bore themselves like men through all this – if they took care there was no disorder, if they took care they were not the first to strike, if they took care to go upon their legal right, they might depend upon it, if the Government attacked them, out of this Monday's meeting would come more than out of months of Parliamentary debating. (Loud and prolonged cheers). He concluded by moving a resolution to the effect that the meeting should be held, and that the crime of interfering to prevent it must rest upon those wicked enough to pursue such an infatuated course."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Mill to W. R. Cremer, 1 March 1867, in: H.S.R. Elliot, *The Letters of John Stuart Mill*, vol. ii (1910), pp. 77-9.

<sup>2</sup> Minutes of the Hyde Park sub-Committee of the Executive Cmttee of the Reform League, 20 April 1867. (In E.C. Minute Book [H.C.].)

<sup>3</sup> Times, 2 May 1867.

<sup>4</sup> Minutes General Council of Reform League, 1 May 1867 (H.C.).

On Friday, 3rd May, the Commons had one of the most unnerving days it had experienced for twenty years. First, a number of Honourable and Gallant Members took the most unusual step of dividing the House on the question of whether a petition should be allowed to lie upon the table. This petition had been drawn up by Beesly and his friends and been introduced by John Bright. After rehearsing the crimes of the British Army from 1798 to the Jamaica Outrages, it expressed understanding for Fenians and prayed that the Fenian prisoners should be treated in a humane and civilised fashion.<sup>1</sup> Having reminded itself that there were English sympathisers with Fenianism who were ready to question the honour of British officers, the House went on to debate the Government's preparations for meeting the challenge to its authority in the Park. Many Members recalled that they had served as special constables in 1848 and demanded assurances that Beales and Bradlaugh would be arrested if they dared to address their supporters on Monday.<sup>2</sup> Beales had made it quite plain that this time he would not confine himself to demanding admission to the Park, but would, in his words, "enforce that admittance if required".<sup>3</sup> The Home Secretary observed that such language was of a kind which "no Government could submit to with due regard to the interests of the country".<sup>4</sup>

The following day the *Times* reported that, "Nearly all the proclamations issued by Mr. Walpole and posted all over London have been either torn down or defaced. In some cases they have been completely covered by what is called 'the yellow placard' .... it calls on the people to disregard Mr. Walpole's proclamation .... this placard has been more extensively posted throughout the metropolis even than the proclamation itself. The credit of the agitation party is thus staked on holding the meeting and the Government and the authorities are as firmly resolved to prevent it by all means in their power."<sup>5</sup>

The Government decided to strengthen the hand of Sir Richard Mayne, who twenty years earlier had helped subdue Fergus O'Connor, by recruiting 12,000 to 15,000 special constables, while troops, including cavalry, were sent into London from Aldershot and elsewhere. Rumour had it that several batteries of Armstrong guns were

<sup>1</sup> Parl. Debates 3rd series, clxxxvi (3 May 1867), 1929-33 and also debate of 14 June 1867, clxxxvii, 1886-1906.

<sup>2</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxvi (3 May 1867). See particularly speeches by Denman (1982-3), Selwyn (1981-2), and Neate (1964-6).

<sup>3</sup> *Working Man*, 4 May 1867.

<sup>4</sup> Parl. Debates 3rd series, clxxxvi (3 May 1867), 1972.

<sup>5</sup> *Times*, 4 May 1867.

being brought to the Metropolis. All Sunday, 5th May, men at the Woolwich Arsenal worked over-time producing staves for the special constables.<sup>1</sup>

In the face of these massive preparations some of the Reformers began to loose heart. From the beginning, Connolly, a stonemason and one of the most powerful orators in the League, had warned his colleagues against talking as if they were generals commanding a well-disciplined army. "The whole question was not worth shedding blood for, or resorting to physical force in any way."<sup>2</sup> Joseph Collet, who edited the journal of Bronterre O'Brien's old "National Reform League", generally criticised Beales for being too soft and compliant, but on this occasion he cautioned the Reformers against behaving like "bombastic children". He told Beales, "it would appear that you, with the Executive, are determined to call forth a demonstration similar to that of July last and that if the authorities adopt the same course they did then, either an appeal to force must be the result, or Reformers would have once more to retire. I believe that it would be, not only impolitic but criminal to bring the question to such an issue as this, and I will give you my reasons: – If the people of this country are really prepared to join issue with the government, then they have something better to do than fight their fellow men of the army and the police about a question of admittance into the park.

However important the question of the right of meeting may be, if to settle it force must be resorted to and blood spilt, then the people must be prepared either to submit or to destroy the present political fabric. I think they are not yet ripe for such an issue . . . . Suppose that the Reformers were even to force their way into the park, what then? Do you think that the Government would stop there?"<sup>3</sup>

But there had been a curious reversal of roles; while the old chartist League urged caution, the new one was intransigent and defiant. "Let but a single drop of blood (be) shed on Monday next", wrote the *Commonwealth*, "and, if we are not mistaken, the word will go forth that such blood must be avenged. We at least will be prepared to admit that the reign of terror has commenced and must be played out."<sup>4</sup> Although Gladstone and others expressed their solidarity with the Government in the interests of order and Tom Hughes and other influential friends urged them to abandon the meeting,<sup>5</sup> the League appeared to be settled upon what the Tory press referred to as its

<sup>1</sup> Times, 6 May 1867.

<sup>2</sup> Times, 2 May 1867.

<sup>3</sup> Working Man, 4 May 1867.

<sup>4</sup> Commonwealth, 4 May 1867.

<sup>5</sup> Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Reform League, 6 May 1867 (H.C.).

“madly wicked purpose”. “We gather on the green sward”, wrote Bradlaugh, “we shall have to gather there as a People’s Parliament, denying that you (the Commons) are the parliament of the nation; and we will gather there with or without your permission for it is our right.”<sup>1</sup>

On the morning of 6th May one of the leading conservative newspapers wrote, “Today, more than on any other occasion since the pitiable episode of 1848, the working men of London are on trial. They are invited to band themselves together and offer a public defiance to the constitutional authorities, to violate the law, and the plainly defined rights of the Crown, to insult the House of Commons, to annoy and outrage the upper and middle classes, and to jeopardise the peace of the Metropolis.” If necessary, the military would have to teach the Reform League that “sedition is a dangerous game to play in England”.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the civil and military forces were taking up their positions. “A part of a regiment of Hussars, having been brought in from Hounslow, was stationed near the Park and in the Royal Mews. A strong detachment of Life Guards was at Knightsbridge, while another was under cover at the end of Park Lane. The Horse Guards (Blue) were in readiness to move at a moment’s notice from Regents Park, and the Guards were kept to their barracks in anticipation of any emergency. Behind the police barrack in the park itself is a very pretty enclosure known as the Wood-yard .... Here a regiment of the Guards were placed, under the Command of the Hon. Colonel Keppel .... Here too, were mounted orderlies, superintendents of police on horseback, officers passing continually to and fro. This spot was ..... the headquarters, and though from the outside scarcely more than a dozen sentries and police were to be seen; yet all within this quiet looking enclosure was war-like in its every aspect. Altogether more than 10,000 men, police and military, were kept ready to move and close in upon the park within half an hour’s notice.....”<sup>3</sup>

At about 6.00 p.m. the Clerkenwell Branch of the Reform League appeared at the Gates of the Park carrying a red flag surmounted with a cap of liberty. Half an hour later there were between 100,000 and 150,000 people in the park.<sup>4</sup> The leaders of the League entered to the sound of great cheering and proceeded to address the crowd from no

<sup>1</sup> C. Bradlaugh, *Reform or Revolution*, n.d. (1867?; 8 pp.).

<sup>2</sup> *Standard*, 6 May 1867.

<sup>3</sup> *Times*, 7 May 1867.

<sup>4</sup> *Daily News*, 7 May 1867. (There was as usual, an enormous difference in the estimates made of the numbers present. The top figure was 250,000 – 500,000, the lowest 20,000).

fewer than ten separate platforms. They tried to avoid giving full expression to their sense of triumph, but every reference to Beales and the League was saluted by prolonged applause while mention of Walpole or the police was the signal for hisses and groans. From one platform the call was given for a great national convention to prepare a Reform Bill. If their demands were rejected 300,000 men should be brought into London from the North and no man return until either the Commons passed the Bill or “until England had found its new Cromwell to turn out the men who had misrepresented the people in St. Stephens”<sup>1</sup> Those who could not get near enough to hear the speeches listened to “ballad singers without number” tell of the defeat of Walpole and the coming victory of Reform.<sup>2</sup> The police were hissed and a few stones were thrown, but crime was confined to a couple of pick-pockets and three cases of thimblerrigging.<sup>3</sup>

The working-class press was exultant: “..... the triumph of the working men was complete and bloodless. They had everything their own way. The enemy, notwithstanding his insulting defiances and incessant vapourings during the last six weeks had not the courage to show his face.”<sup>4</sup> Beales, who reported that as late as 5.00 p.m. on 6th May the Government had served further notices on all the leaders in the League’s premises, summed the issue up: “The Government gave them all to understand that they had an enormous array of military force – infantry, cavalry, and artillery (laughter) – yes artillery at the railway stations – cutlasses without end at Scotland-Yard, batons fabricated at Woolwich, and special constables – (great laughter) – ridiculous and absurd as they were sworn in in all directions ..... Supposing he had flinched for one instant, what would have been the result? Why, that the Government would have triumphed over them and against the law, and the Reform cause would have been irreparably damaged. Supposing he had given way and issued an address requesting the men of London, in consequence of the powerful appeal of Mr. Gladstone on Friday, not to go to the Park. Many of them would not have gone, but many would, in bad temper, under the impression that they had been dealt doubly with, and that there had been something in the shape of treachery, and riot and tumult would have inevitably occurred .....

It was impossible to conceive a more marked contrast than was presented last Monday between the feebly, insulting conduct of the Government and the ruling classes, and the admirable, orderly,

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Sharman of Bradford reported in *National Reformer*, 12 May 1867.

<sup>2</sup> *Times*, 7 May 1867.

<sup>3</sup> *Bee-Hive*, 11 May 1867.

<sup>4</sup> *Reynold’s Newspaper*, 12 May 1867.

peaceable, self-possessed, and dignified conduct of the people. (Loud cheers). It was a great moral triumph – a triumph greater than any language of his could express.”<sup>1</sup>

Beyond question, it had been a much more clear-cut victory than the one which had been claimed in the July Days. Then the League had shown that the Government could not preserve order without its help; now it had demonstrated that it was able to impose its will upon the Government.

The lesson could not be escaped. In the House of Lords, Earl Cowper declared that the Executive had brought itself into contempt. “No greater blow could, in his opinion, have been struck against all respect for law and authority.”<sup>2</sup> Earl Granville said: “He knew nothing more powerful in this country, as was shown in 1848, than the power of calling out special constables to aid the regularly organised police. But if the Government called out special constables when there was no need for them there was a danger of their crying out ‘Wolf’ once too often, and thus diminishing the readiness with which these classes had hitherto responded to the call of the Government. He had sometimes heard it said in that House, with regard to foreign Powers, that you should never menace them unless you were prepared to carry out that menace . . . . If it were true with respect to foreign nations, it was still more true that a Government should not threaten any portion of their own countrymen unless they were strong in the power to carry out those threats, and strong in the justice of the course of action they adopted.”<sup>3</sup>

The Prime Minister admitted that the Government had been “humiliated” or, as he chose to express it, had “suffered some slight humiliation in the public mind”.<sup>4</sup> He announced that he had received and had accepted the resignation of the Home Secretary, Mr. Spencer Walpole. The Leader of the Opposition, Lord Russell, declared that the course pursued by the Government had “exposed the authority of the law and the dignity of the Crown to a degree of contempt that I hardly ever remember before”.<sup>5</sup> Challenged to explain what he would have done had he been in office, he replied in a single sentence: “I would recommend the course which was taken in 1848”.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, 6th May 1867 became the 10th April of Spencer Walpole. But

<sup>1</sup> Minutes of the General Council of the Reform League, 8 May 1867 (H.C.).

<sup>2</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxvii (9 May 1867), 217.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 250-1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

just as O'Connor's disgrace had, in a measure, to be shared by all his followers, so with Walpole it was not merely that unfortunate Minister and the Government of the day who shared the defeat. It went much further than that. "What is lost is, not honour only, but the cause of Society".<sup>1</sup> The *Times*, which had received advance notice, of the Government's capitulation, led the way in sack cloth and ashes. Beales and his colleagues, it declared, reigned not only in Hyde Park, but might be considered "the actual Government of the country". "We have reached what may be called the very bottom of this question, and cannot fall lower".<sup>2</sup> The *Saturday Review* observed that if the tulips and hyacinths escaped, something much more important had been trampled under foot on 6th May. "Perhaps no more disgraceful day has ever marked the political history of this country. The dangerous classes in their most dangerous aspect, have been formally assured by authority that authority is impotent to preserve the peace and order of society whenever it suits illegal violence openly to defy and challenge the law . . . . It is, as they say, an era, and may as well be marked with the blackest charcoal. We now date constitutional history from the WALPOLE period".<sup>3</sup>

The *Saturday* was not alone in sensing a profound historic and constitutional significance behind the events in the Park. Carlyle, looking at the whole period of Walpole's tenure of the Home Office, wrote: "when Beales says, 'I will see that the Queen's Peace is kept', Queen (by her Walpole) answers: 'will you then, God bless *you*' and bursts into tears. These tears are certainly an epoch in England; nothing seen, or dreamt of, like them in the History of poor England till now". It was, he thought, "Nigger philanthropy", condemnations of Governor Eyre, and strictures against martial law that had brought everyone down to tremble before "Beales and his Roughs".<sup>4</sup>

But what had been gained on 6th May? What were to be the characteristics of this new era? "A 'famous victory' has been achieved over a gentleman already well known for a certain 'alacrity at sinking' . . . . Mr. Walpole has once more found himself unequal to a Fabian policy. But there remains to be asked the question which has been asked of a thousand other victories, and which it has sometimes taken the whole world many centuries to answer. What is the worth of the victory? In what cause has it been gained?"<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Saturday Review*, 11 May 1867.

<sup>2</sup> *Times*, 6 May 1867.

<sup>3</sup> *Saturday Review*, 11 May 1867.

<sup>4</sup> T. Carlyle, Shooting Niagara, in: *Macmillan's Magazine*, August 1867, p. 324.

<sup>5</sup> *Times*, 8 May 1867.



BUT FOR WALPOLE!

The first and most certain consequence of the events of 6th May was the enormously enhanced prestige of the League and its increasing independence of its parliamentary and middle class patrons. It was soon receiving graciously worded communications from Prince Bismarck and Garibaldi as if in acknowledgement that it was "itself a power".<sup>1</sup> It now referred to its own class character with a new sharpness and pride. "The movement of the League had been eminently a working man's movement. They had great cause of complaint against the middle classes for not having given the League either personal or pecuniary assistance."<sup>2</sup> The repeated attempts of the Government to introduce a new Parks' Bill which would enable the authorities to enforce the alleged rights of the Crown, were met by promises of an unrestrained class struggle. Beales said that the right to meet in the Park was not to be "sacrificed to the fastidious and insolent whims of Rotten Row. If there was to be a war of classes, which we have anxiously endeavoured to avoid, let it come. To the Park we shall go more determinedly than ever."<sup>3</sup> In its efforts to introduce a Parks' Bill, the Government met with repeated, complete and unquestionable failure.<sup>4</sup> It was peculiarly appropriate that upon the very day on which the Reform Bill was passed the Royal Parks Bill was finally withdrawn.

In July 1866, the *Times* had declared: "It is against all reason and all justice that motley crowds from all parts of the metropolis should take possession of Hyde Park, and interfere with the enjoyments of those to whom the Park more particularly belongs." After 6th May it discovered that the Park really belonged "to the whole British family" and that it was this family over whom the League had gained its victory.<sup>5</sup>

It was not until 6th May that Gladstone discovered the importance of the Lodger franchise and "the immense anxiety of the working men of London to obtain it".<sup>6</sup> Within a fortnight Hodgkinson's amendment had been accepted by Disraeli. This was the amendment which extended the franchise "almost four times as much as was originally contemplated. The character of the Bill was so materially altered that

<sup>1</sup> Prince Bismarck replied to a resolution of congratulations to the people of North Germany on securing vote by ballot and full representation: Minutes of the General Council of the Reform League, 22 May 1867. At the next meeting, 29 May, it was recorded that Garibaldi had accepted the office of Honorary President of the League (H.C.).

<sup>2</sup> Minutes of the General Council of the Reform League, 22 May 1867 (H.C.).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 July 1867.

<sup>4</sup> Jephson, *op. cit.*, pp. 467-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Times*, 24 July 1866 and 8 May 1867.

<sup>6</sup> *Parl. Debates*, 3rd series clxxxvii (6 May 1867), 38-41.

for all practical purposes it became a new measure.”<sup>1</sup> In the Commons, Disraeli denied that in accepting this amendment, he was in the least influenced by the presence or prospect of agitation. But Gladstone in recommending it stressed the agitation out of doors. This had to be extinguished or it “may become to us a source of public danger, involving, possibly, much that has not yet been drawn into the vortex of political controversy”.<sup>2</sup> Some of the Government’s own supporters confessed, “We cannot pretend that it is a matter of option with us whether we will undertake this question or not”. Successive governments had raised the question of Reform till they were obliged to ask themselves, “‘is it a more conservative policy to endeavour to settle the question, or, if I may use the expression, to let the pot go on boiling till it overflows and brings us to a much worse state of things?’”<sup>3</sup> In the laconic words of Trevelyan, “During April little had been done to improve the Bill in Committee. But in May the tide turned”.<sup>4</sup>

If the 6th May has been forgotten while the 10th April is remembered, that reveals more about the values of historians than it does about the magnitude of the events themselves.<sup>5</sup> The humiliation of the Governing classes in Hyde Park can provide quite as good an insight into the laws of motion of the British political system as does the humbling of the Chartists at Kennington Common. To suggest, as one able historian has done, that the issue on 6th May was the right of public meeting rather than the question of Reform,<sup>6</sup> is to indulge in finer distinctions than either political theory or historical experience warrant. At least from Peterloo onwards – and Peterloo was recalled on more than one occasion in May 1867<sup>7</sup> – there had been the closest of associations between the the two. It would be the height of naivety to suppose that what was involved at the Common in ’48 and the Park in ’67 was simply the right to hold meeting or stage processions. Two powers confronted each other – “The Secretary of

<sup>1</sup> H. Cox, *A History of the Reform Bills of 1866 and 1867* (1868), p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> *Parl. Debates*, 3rd series, clxxxvii (17 May 1867), 717.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, (20 May 1867), 800-1.

<sup>4</sup> Trevelyan, *op. cit.*, p. 375.

<sup>5</sup> Neither of the standard histories, Woodward, *The Age of Reform* (Oxford 1937) nor Briggs, *The Age of Improvement* (1959), mention 6th May. H. Paul, *A History of Modern England*, iii, 1905, p. 83 misses the significance of the event by writing as if Walpole had merely warned the public against attending the meeting and as if the Prime Minister had said *in advance* that nothing would be done to prevent it.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Park, *The English Reform Bill of 1867* (New York 1920), p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> By John Bright, who asserted that Peterloo had left an animosity that still endured; *Parl. Debates*, 3rd series, clxxxvi (3 May 1867), 1957. Also by C. Bradlaugh in his speech in the Park, *National Reformer*, 12 May 1867.

State's proclamation is confronted by President Beales' proclamation"<sup>1</sup> – both parties had settled upon a trial of strength in the knowledge that whichever side prevailed must gain enormously in self-confidence whilst the other would, to a degree, be broken and demoralised. An explanation of why the Government surrendered in the Park cannot but be relevant to an understanding of why it yielded on Reform. The historians, however distinguished and luminous their writings, who have omitted all mention of 6th May have inevitably understated, and misunderstood the part played by mass agitation in carrying the Second Reform Act.

## II

Why did the Government, having declared that the meeting was "prohibited" and having assembled an army for the apparent purpose of suppressing it, make no attempt to arrest the speakers or disperse the crowd? A section of the conservative press suggested that there had been a last minute discovery that the Government had no legal authority to act in this manner. However, as early as 28th July 1866 the Government had received an opinion from the Law officers of the Crown as to its right to disperse by force a meeting held by persons who had already entered the Park, presuming that a general notice prohibiting such a meeting had already been given. The Law officers had replied that persons who attended prohibited meetings could be treated as trespassers and removed. "But", they added, "we are bound to state that, though the legal right of removal is such as we have described, we do not consider that in the case of any large assembly the right could practically be exercised with safety, or that such an assembly could be 'dispersed by force' in the sense in which that term is ordinarily understood. The right of removal is a right to remove each separate individual as a trespasser, by putting him out of the Park, using just so much force (and no more) as is necessary for that purpose. It is a separate right against each individual. The assembly (assuming it to be orderly) are not united in doing an illegal act, and there is no right to disperse them, or coerce them as a body of rioters or disorderly persons. It appears to us that it would not be practicable to remove each individual, or any considerable number of persons, and to prevent them returning; and it is also highly probable that the effort to remove any particular person or persons with the degree of force that would be justifiable would or might soon become confused by a resistance from bystanders, which would introduce into the operation elements of great difficulty and embarrassment. On the

<sup>1</sup> Standard, 6 May 1867, citing the Saturday Review.

whole, we should answer the question proposed to us by saying that, in our opinion, there is not for any practical purpose a legal authority to disperse by force a meeting of the kind supposed, consisting of a large number of persons, and that whether notice has or has not been given beforehand.”<sup>1</sup>

It will be observed that in this opinion the Law Officers did not confine themselves to legal technicalities, but offered their views on political expediencies. The Government would have been within the law had it chosen to remove Beales and his colleagues, but in fact it would have been a perilous proceeding. In the House of Lords, the Prime Minister insisted that they had never really intended to take the risk, but hoped to conceal this from the League. “I did not think it expedient to say to these persons. ‘You may hold your meeting in defiance of the Government with perfect impunity’. I preferred that the course of the Government should be left to their discretion, instead of giving public notice that although the holding of the meeting was prohibited it was not our intention to take any steps whatever.”<sup>2</sup> Beales, however, had grasped the meaning of the studied ambiguity with which Government spokesmen talked about how they would deal with the meeting. He read the signs of weakness in the announcement that there was to be a Parks Bill ostensibly designed to make the existing rights of the Crown more easily enforceable. The arguments which Mill had employed successfully nine months before had lost their persuasive power. Conscious of the challenge which he would have to face from the more militant members of his own Council if he shrank from the issue, he resolved to act and Lord Derby found that his bluff had been called.

The Prime Minister left it to his more vulgar supporters to pretend that it was the “pendulous” character of Mr. Walpole which was responsible for the disaster. It might plausibly have been suggested that had General Peel of Lords Cranborne of Carnarvon been at the Home Office matters would have turned out differently. But then these “strong men” had already despaired of the Government and resigned their seats in the Cabinet. Robert had done his sums and knew that fifteen minus three equalled nothing.<sup>3</sup> If Walpole was vacillating and weak, he possessed the qualities appropriate to the character and situation of the Government in which he served. He made a convenient scapegoat, but it was his Cabinet colleagues who were alleged to have pressed him to issue his proclamation of 1st May;

<sup>1</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxvii (9 May 1867), 221-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>3</sup> A. Briggs, *Victorian People* (1954), p. 285.



A BULLY THAT <sup>OR</sup> MUST BE PUT DOWN

a step which he took against his own better judgement.<sup>1</sup> The advice which was offered to him both before and after the meeting had been held was singularly unhelpful and obscure. Thus, on the eve of 6th May, the *Times* expressed its uneasiness about Walpole: "He may desire, as the mood takes him, to show his conciliation or his firmness, to fraternise with Mr. BEALES or to rout his followers. He will go surest", it added, "in the middle path."<sup>2</sup> The unfortunate Home Secretary might be forgiven for failing to discover where that path lay. A similar objection applied to Lord Russell's dramatic recommendation of "the course taken in 1848". What did this mean? O'Connor had not called the Government's bluff since there was little reason to suppose that the Government was bluffing. Russell's advice ignored the weakness of authority.

There was one contemporary observer who furnished a shrewd and penetrating analysis of this weakness. Frederic Harrison, rightly relating the Parks issue to the wider question of Reform, saw in "the great Surrender" of 1867 the character of panic. Various forms of authority were growing feeble, lacked presige, and were practically denuded of real power. "A centralised bureaucratic system", he wrote, "gives a great resisting force to the hand that commands the Executive. Our Executive has nothing to fall back upon. There are practically no reserves. The few bayonets and sabres here and there are perfectly powerless before the masses, if the people really took it into their heads to move; beside which it is an instrument which they dare not in practice rely on. A few redcoats may be called upon to suppress a vulgar riot; but the first blood of the people shed by troops in a really popular cause would, as we all know, make the Briton boil in a very ugly manner. There are only the police, hardly a match for the 'roughs' as we know to our cost. The Government would be mad which seriously attempted to face an angry people on the strength of seven thousand police staves. It was very easy to abuse an unlucky set of ministers about Hyde Park. But what were they to do? To have used the army would have been the end of the British Constitution. There were seven thousand policemen, but what were they among so many? The Executive in this country has absolutely nothing to fall back upon but the special constable, the moral support of the cheesemonger and the pork-butcher. Real and powerful so long as the pork-butcher is in good humour. But wait till the windows of the pork-shop are being smashed, and all about a quarrel to keep you in office and you will see the ungrateful pork-butcher turn and rend you like one of his own herd . . . .

<sup>1</sup> S. Walpole, *The History of Twenty Five Years*, vol. ii (1904), p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> *Times*, 3 May 1867.

Property has, no doubt, an enormous social and moral vis inertiae. But Government as such, has singularly small material forces. Our greatest soldier in this age saw it perfectly and so did Lord Derby last year [1867]. The fact is that our political organism of the constitutional type was based on a totally different theory from that of force at all. The governing classes never pretended to rely on force. They trusted to maintain their supremacy by their social power, and their skill in working the machine. Local self-government, representation of the people, civil liberty, was all the cry, until at last the tone of English public life became saturated with ideas of rule by consent, and not by force. Very excellent theories of a certain kind – but you must abide by them, and never dream of force, for you have cut yourself off from the right to appeal to it. The least suggestion of force puts the governing classes in an outrageously false position, and arrays against them all the noble sentiments of liberty on which they based their own title to rule. Club blusterers jeering at trades' unionists in Pall Mall may talk about grapeshot and dragoons, but men with heads on their shoulders know that an appeal to force would be the end of English society; and what is even more to the purpose, that there is no force to appeal to . . . . for years the governing classes had kept Democracy at bay behind some imposing ramparts. But one day the Reform League discovered that they were mounted with canvass and logs."<sup>1</sup>

Used as a rejoinder to Lord Russell, Harrison's analysis is marred by an over-emphasis on the Government's lack of material forces. For the purposes of 6th May they would, no doubt, have proved sufficient. Lord Cranborne had a very good, if young, head on his shoulders and he would not have hesitated to prosecute Beales and his colleagues for conspiracy or to have removed them from the Park. Armed with his "natural history of Revolutions" the future Prime Minister was not to be intimidated by the prospect of an insurrection in London. London, as John Bright also pointed out, but to a very different purpose, was not Paris. "One night's neglect may place a mob in the Tuilleries and terminate a dynasty." But in England the authority of the capital was not so decisive. If a mob took control of London it would be "a frightful thing", but it would not "shake the allegiance of a single English county". From this it followed that "the British Constitution has nothing to fear from revolution unless the owners of property are beguiled into helping to undermine the institutions which protect them."<sup>2</sup> To invite an attempt at proletarian revolution was, in

<sup>1</sup> F. Harrison, *Order and Progress* (1875), pp. 182-185. (Reprinted from the *Fortnightly Review* for April 1868).

<sup>2</sup> *Parliamentary Reform*, *Quarterly Review*, April, 1865, pp. 562-3.

Cranborne's eyes, clearly preferable to yielding to Democracy. "Discontent, insurrection, civil war itself, will, in the long run, produce no worse dangers than absolute or unrestrained democracy. Such commotions can only end in a military government; and the despotism of a successful soldier is a lighter burden than the despotism of the multitude. Resistance, therefore, even to the uttermost, to such claims as these (manhood suffrage and the ballot) may be contemplated without misgiving as to the result; for it may, and probably will succeed, and at worst; its failure will be no worse than yielding".<sup>1</sup>

Cranborne's hopes about the probable outcome of a collision would appear to have been entirely justified in any short run view. If the balance of material forces had been the decisive consideration on 6th May, than the warnings of Collet and Connolly would have been well advised. If the police force was small it was expanding rapidly. Indeed, in London the absolute and relative increase in the number of full time police officers was greater in the 1860's than in almost any other decade in police history.<sup>2</sup> Had the Government adopted the policy of Cranborne or Peel, the police and soldiers would have broken up the meeting and given the London workmen a sound thrashing. The day would have ended, not in a humiliating surrender for the Government, but in the rout of the League which, despite its slight essays in organising its own constabulary, would have proved no match for a disciplined force.

It was not, in Cranborne's view, want of material power, but want of nerve, which explained the "Conservative Surrender". "When the troops run away at the first charge, it is of course difficult to decide whether they have lost because they could not win, or because they dared not try to win..... the world generally assumes that when an army does not discover its hopeless inferiority of strength until the powder begins to burn, its nerves are more to blame for the result than its numbers. A school, however, has arisen in recent days that formally denies that the bloodless conflicts of the political world have any analogy, either in the feelings of honour which should animate them, or the rules by which they should be judged, with the conflicts of the field. According to their teaching, nothing ought ever to be fought out..... The desperate resistance which our fathers made to the last Reform Bill is blamed, not so much because their views were mistaken, as because it was madness to defend those views against so formidable an assault. It is said, – and men seem to think that condemnation can go no further than such a censure – that they brought us

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 570-1.

<sup>2</sup> J. M. Hart, *The British Police* (1951), p. 34. – Much of the expansion may have been concentrated in the last years of the decade.

within twenty-four hours of revolution. Their successors boast that their prudence will never go so near to the heels of danger. No one will suspect them of it. But is it in truth so great an evil, when the dearest interests and the most sincere convictions are at stake, to go within twenty-four hours of revolution?"<sup>1</sup>

Was the Government's surrender on Reform, to which, it is insisted, its surrender of 6th May served as harbinger and analogue, to be explained by an unjustifiable timidity and cowardice? If Derby is to be believed then, in relation to the Park, he had been bluffing all along. He had been driven to this course because he did not wish it to appear that the Government was acting under duress on the Reform Question. He needed a moral victory over the League so as to remove the impression that he was not a free agent. But being a more mature statesman than Lord Robert, he recognised that it had to be a moral and bloodless victory or none at all. He might look confidently to the immediate issue of an engagement between the Reformers and the military, but the triumph would have been bought at too high a price. At best, it would have meant the exclusion of the Tories from office for the rest of the century, (for if the Whigs had given their approval in private, they would certainly have protested in public); at worst, it would have struck at the very foundations of the political system and have caused the ruling classes to be confronted, not by a Reform agitation, but by a Revolutionary Movement. Marx was not the only one to appreciate that "these thick-headed John Bulls, whose brainpans seem to have been specially manufactured for the constables bludgeons, will never get anywhere without a really bloody encounter with the ruling powers."<sup>2</sup> That encounter had to be avoided even if it meant that instead of preserving its dignity the Government exposed its weakness.

It was, of course, most inconvenient that the London working men refused to be overawed by the impressive proclamations of the Government. In consequence, poor Walpole had to be offered up as a sacrifice to the outraged dignity of the upper and middle classes and the Prime Minister had to face the bitter reproach of having fought just long enough to "betray the weakness of the garrison and the poverty of the defences". This was precisely the charge which Cranborne brought against the Government's management of the entire Reform question. "It may", he wrote, "be a bed of roses upon which we are now swiftly descending; but even if that be the issue, the surrender will scarcely be less disastrous. If the upper and middle classes had made up their mind to this tender trust in the people with which they have

<sup>1</sup> Quarterly Review, October 1867, pp. 542-3.

<sup>2</sup> K. Marx to F. Engels, 27 July 1866. (Marx and Engels on Britain, 1954, p. 495.)

become suddenly inspired seven years ago, or even one year ago, no harm would have been done beyond that which might result from the particular measure they were passing..... But they have fought just long enough to betray the weakness of the garrison and the poverty of the defences. The dullest of their antagonists perfectly understands that they have not yielded to argument or sentiment; that the apostles of reform who have the real credit of their conversion are the mobs who beat down the pailings of Hyde Park, or went out marching with bands and banners in the towns of the North.”<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately what separated Lord Robert from the great majority of men of influence and power was that while he wished to suppress revolution, they desired to break up the formation of forces which were potentially revolutionary. To this majority the disintegration of such forces was the overriding priority, but how and by whom this should be accomplished was a matter which was necessarily decided, not “objectively”, but in relation to sectional and party interests and in the light of differing estimates of the degree of menace from without. Within a regime which allowed full play to these interests, strategic withdrawals were bound to be associated with dissension and delay, exposing those in command of the operation to just those charges which Cranborne brought against his Party leaders. But what Lord Robert missed was the capacity of the system to withstand the shock of such surrenders. And the source of his error here was that he mistakenly supposed that there was no hope of protecting the “garrison” with part of the “besieging force”.

Cranborne’s aristocratic instincts unfitted him for government. He had to learn to operate the system by practice and experience. He was so far unreconciled to a bourgeois society that he wanted to treat it as if it was the *ancien régime*.

In the end, all the most influential men of property and power were persuaded that they must make a substantial concession in order to break up the agitation and remove the danger that prolonged intransigence, accompanied by police violence, would cause the popular forces to assume a truly menacing character. With the exception of the small group close to Cranborne, no one quarrelled with the principle of Gladstone’s advice that they must “be wise in time”.<sup>2</sup> They differed only as to the lateness of the hour and to the exact form and extent of the concession to be made. It was also true that to the extent that Reform could be made to appear as a “boon granted”

<sup>1</sup> The Conservative surrender, in: *Quarterly Review*, October 1867, p. 556.

<sup>2</sup> *Parl. Debates*, 3rd series, clxxxii (12 April 1866), 1149.

rather than as a “fortress stormed”, it would be an object of Party ambition to have the credit of the measure.

In the Spring of 1866 John Bright did his best to rouse the House to the danger that prolonged resistance would provoke. He recalled how in 1848 a Noble Lord had sought him out and anxiously impressed upon him that he (the Lord) had always favoured an extension of the suffrage. The nobleman had believed that there was going to be revolution and thought that Bright would be in the provisional government. “Of all the follies and crimes which Governments commit”, concluded the great Radical, “that of a constant distrust of their subjects, of their citizens, of their country, is about the wildest and most foolish”.<sup>1</sup>

This argument was developed with exceptional clarity and force by “educated Liberals” outside Parliament. “When the rich declare their own interests to be incompatible with those of the rest of the nation”, wrote James Bryce, “and resolve upon this ground to keep the government, or the chief share in it, to themselves, they give a formal challenge to the poorer part of the community, and oblige it – unless it be wholly helpless – to assert its rights by agitation. Abnegating their own functions of leadership for the common good – a function which the poor, when fairly treated, have always been found willing to concede to them – they throw the humbler class into the hands of men who come forward as its advocates and their assailants. Such men may do their work better or worse. They may ally themselves with the more liberal members of the ruling class, and seek to improve or widen the Constitution without destroying its ancient features. Or they may – as happened in Greece and Rome, and might happen even in England were agitation to be long protracted – they may appeal to the lower passions of our nature, and proclaim a war of the poor against the rich. But in either case it is primarily upon the mistaken policy of those who rule the state that such agitation must be charged, for experience shows that the working class, unless under the pressure of the severest physical misery, is in a large country comparatively indifferent to political power, and does not clamour for it until irritated by a long course of scornful refusal.”<sup>2</sup>

The point was made with more brutal directness by another contributor to the same volume. “. . . .the introduction of a larger popular element into our ancient constitution is, after all, not a matter of free choice, but an alternative. If we refuse this Reform, we accept the responsibility of governing an unwilling and reluctant people: if we reject what may be, in some instances, a representation of defective

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 221-2.

<sup>2</sup> J. Bryce, *The Historical Aspect of Democracy*, in *Essays on Reform* (1867), p. 272.

knowledge and short-sighted speculation we must be prepared to encounter an organised ignorance from without and the boundless Utopia of revolutionary expectations: if we will not admit the Working-men into the great school of Public Life, we leave them to the free exercise of their instincts and their passions: if we will not teach them political wisdom, they will teach us political disaster."<sup>1</sup>

But even when the issue was only Gladstone's relatively small Bill and when it was proposed to enfranchise "only those who are already powerful" so as to enlist their help against the ignorance and turbulence of the lowest stratum, Lowe failed to see the force of the argument. "If driven to it we must, of course, submit, and it may perhaps be better to do so than to give rise to a great internal commotion or civil war; but it will take a very severe compulsion to induce me to counsel suicide. The advice to yield at once lest a worse thing befall us, reminds me of the lines –

'He thought with a smile upon England the while,  
And the trick that her statesmen had taught her,  
Of saving herself from the storm above  
By putting her head under water.'<sup>2</sup>

As for the Tories, they showed an understandable distaste for any change and strongly suspected that Gladstone's proposals exactly expressed the small tradesman class from whom they felt they had, as a Party, most to fear.<sup>3</sup> So long as they were out of office they supposed that they could treat the warnings of Bright and Gladstone with contempt. But from the second half of 1866 onwards the agitation rapidly undermined their confidence. The Queen sounded the first note of alarm and warned her Prime Minister that unless he and his colleagues took up Reform in earnest "very serious consequences may ensue".<sup>4</sup> Derby was the first to understand; Disraeli followed, and soon all the ablest among the Tory gentry were afraid, "with that wise old English fear of their fellow countrymen which has done as much to save England as many more heroic virtues."<sup>5</sup>

*Blackwood's* mirrored the progress of Tory thinking. The valour of January gave place to the discretion of March. In January bloodshed

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66. (Lord Houghton, On the admission of the working classes as part of our social system and on their recognition for all purposes as part of the nation.)

<sup>2</sup> A. P. Martin, *Life and Letters of the Rt. Hon. Robert Lowe, Viscount Sherbrooke*, vol. ii (1893), p. 255.

<sup>3</sup> Carnarvon's Memorandum on Reform, 8 November 1866, Cabinet Notes 1866-7, 99-108 (Carnarvon Papers, P.R.O.).

<sup>4</sup> Monypenny and Buckle, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>5</sup> G. M. Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright* (1913), p. 363.

was contemplated with a good imitation of comparative equanimity.<sup>1</sup> In March it was discovered that the Irish were ripe for armed uprising and that there was a danger of a coalition being formed with the League. "Who can doubt, had the attack on Chester Castle succeeded, but that in St. Giles, perhaps at Islington, not less than in Kerry, disturbances would have broken out? And, blood once drawn, especially in the metropolis, it would be hard to say what consequences might not follow. In like manner, the Trades Unions, departing from the purposes for which they came at first into existence, are ranging themselves on the side of democracy..... A weak Government confronted in the legislature by a numerous yet divided Opposition, while both are libelled and threatened by well organised bodies of men out of doors, – this is a state of things which no thoughtful person can contemplate without alarm. It is precisely such a disposition of moral forces as has in all times past preceded and worked up to revolution; and there is too much reason to apprehend that, unless counteracted and restrained in the Legislature by a principle loftier than mere impulse of party, it will, in our case, precede and work up to revolution again."<sup>2</sup> From this followed the conclusion that to postpone legislation on Reform "would be tantamount to challenging the masses to do their worst, and thought we entertain no doubt respecting the issues of a collision, if collision with roughs be forced upon the Government, there is nothing which we would more deprecate, save only the surrender of the Constitution itself."<sup>3</sup>

Had there been any reason to suppose that there was a ceiling to the agitation, some limit beyond which it could not go, Disraeli would never have been able to boast that he had "educated" his party. If he had introduced a measure more advanced than Russell's he would have split his own party while a smaller one, not having been worth carrying, would have been laughed out of the House. But as month by month the agitation grew more menacing, the realisation came home to more and more Members that fifteen years of "busy idleness" on Reform could no longer be continued. For the House to reject a Liberal measure one year and a Tory one the next would be taken as evidence of "a permanent Parliamentary incapacity to deal with the subject";<sup>4</sup> a thing of the utmost danger. Hence the discovery in May 1867 on the Tory backbenches that "If events had become too strong for them, and they were being hurried beyond what most of them desired, it behoved them to come to some agreement on the question

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 357.

<sup>2</sup> The Ministerial Resolutions, Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, March 1867, pp. 381-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387.

<sup>4</sup> G. Cecil, *Life of Robert Marquis of Salisbury*, vol. i (1921).

with all speed, for no one could watch what was passing in the country, or read the newspapers, without coming to the conclusion that, if the question of Reform were kept open much longer, the hon. Member for Birmingham (John Bright) would be in the position of a Girondin."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Lowe's demolitions of historicist fallacies were no longer received with rapturous applause, the Tories had discovered "destiny and fate". "Surely there were social tendencies and movements of events so strong as almost to amount to destiny. M. Guizot once declared 'Destiny stands before you and is greater than you are'."<sup>2</sup> Thus, under the expert direction of Mr. Disraeli, the House learnt to convert each fresh humiliation into a triumph. To "settle the question", to "extinguish the agitation", became its ruling idea. The leader of the House might pretend that he was uninfluenced by danger signals from without, but he admitted in private that his object in accepting Hodgkinson's amendment was to "destroy the present agitation and extinguish Gladstone and Co."<sup>3</sup> The possibility of reaching the second of these objectives rested entirely upon the necessity of accomplishing the first.

The argument for yielding so as to prevent the formation of revolutionary forces had a power to convince members of the upper and middle class only to the extent that they were already persuaded that the working class was still "loyal"; that their heads were not full with "the boundless utopia of revolutionary expectations"; that they would answer to "good will" shown by their "betters"; and that the new political opportunities which were going to be opened to them were in fact of a very limited sort. Were the "occult and unacknowledged forces which are not dependent upon any legislative machinery"<sup>4</sup> strong enough to allow the upper classes to make even a far-reaching measure into a "good Reform Bill"? A good Reform Bill being one which would silence the agitator and satisfy the criterion laid down by Lord Cranborne: "The test by which a good Reform Bill may be distinguished from a bad one is that under it the working classes shall not now, or at any proximate period, command a majority in this House."<sup>5</sup>

One of the contradictions in the history of the second Reform Bill was that assurances of the required sort were likely to become scarcer the longer Parliament delayed. But such assurances there had to be if

<sup>1</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxvii, (13 May 1867), 417 (Grant Duff).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., (20 May 1867), 810 (Baillie Cochrane).

<sup>3</sup> Monypenny and Buckle, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

<sup>4</sup> Leslie Stephen, *On the Choice of Representatives by Popular Constituencies, Essays on Reform* (1867), p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxiii, (27 April 1866), 16.

Lowe's objection, from analogy of sheltering from storms by putting one's head under the water, was to be removed.

Perhaps the consideration which weighed most heavily with the upper and middle classes and which helped to prepare them for far-reaching concessions to the urban working class was what might be termed the "Rochdale" argument. Gladstone argued that that place "has probably done more than any other town in making good to practical minds a case for some enfranchisement of the working classes".<sup>1</sup> Rochdale was used as a symbol for all the advances made by labour since 1832. "It is not denied on any hand – whether we take education in schools; whether we take social conduct; whether we take obedience to the law; whether we take self-command and power of endurance, shown under difficulty and privation; whether we take avidity for knowledge and self-improvement – if we take any one of these tests, or any other test that can be named, there can be no doubt at all that if the working man was in some degree fit to share in political privileges in 1832 he has, at any rate, attained some degree of additional fitness now."<sup>2</sup> Within Parliament Baines, Hughes and many other Members enlarged on this, while out of doors Beales pointed out that "the working classes themselves are deeply interested in the preservation of law and order, of the rights of capital and property; of the honour and power and wealth of our country. They are as members of co-operative building and other societies, daily becoming themselves capitalists and land-owners; there are among them men of large intellectual capacity, and earnest unaffected christian principle...."<sup>3</sup> Bright was able to point out that neither the President nor the Secretary of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society had the vote and that there were many men charged with the management of co-operative enterprises, in which tens of thousands of pounds had been invested, who were non-electors.<sup>4</sup>

Observing that many a wild elephant had been tamed ere now by being coupled with tamed ones, W. Graham M.P. asked what confiscatory measures had they to fear? "Look at the savings banks and the trade unions. Are not the working classes learning the value of capital? Look at the co-operative building and manufacturing societies. Are they ignorant of the value of property? Are they dishonest more than ourselves that they should wish to seize what they know is not

<sup>1</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxii, (12 March 1866), 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Speech of Edmond Beales, Esq., M.A., President of the Reform League, At the Meeting of St. Martin's Hall, In Support of the League (1865), pp. 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Parl. Debates 3rd series, clxxxii (23 April 1866), 1891-7.

theirs?"<sup>1</sup> W. E. Forster scorned the familiar bogey that the trade unions would become engines of political power. "We who are employers know how difficult it is to maintain these trade organisations and we are not afraid of them." But he added that they might have some cause to fear them if Parliamentary obstinacy organised them into a class. He explained that the real object of the Russell-Gladstone Bill was to "fight against a class much more to be dreaded than the holders of the £7 franchise – I mean the dangerous classes in our large towns. If we can get into Parliament those who are more immediately above them, we shall be able to legislate more effectively for them."<sup>2</sup>

These arguments, as presented in 1866, failed to convince the Adullamites and Tories for two reasons. First, they suspected that while the elite of the working class might be safe as far as the Constitution and property in general were concerned, they would provide a decidedly dangerous contingent of supporters for Bright and Mill. It was considered most ingenuous of "advanced liberals" to ask why, if large employers of labour were unperturbed, the holders of broad acres should be alarmed.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the exact extent and distribution of this elite was unknown.<sup>4</sup> It was extremely difficult to tell precisely what sort of electoral qualifications would let them in while excluding the "residuum". And there was uncertainty as to the size and characteristics of that stratum which was thought to lie between the "labour aristocracy" and the residuum. Gladstone offered no satisfactory definition of the "working class". His figure of the existing working class electorate, which he estimated at about a quarter of the whole, included small employers, keepers of beer shops and the like.<sup>5</sup> An examination of the papers of Tory Cabinet ministers reveals that Gladstone's opponents were in dire need of information and were really uncertain about the make up of the class with which they had to deal. Dean Mansel begged Carnarvon not to let the Cabinet act without a preliminary enquiry. Everything was dark and obscure. "Would the representatives of many of our towns be at the mercy, not of the working men as a body, but of Mr. George Potter and his brother terrorists?" Would the religious consequence of a serious measure of Reform not be

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, (19 April 1866), 1657-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, (16 April 1866), 1392-4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* (16 April 1866). 1464-76. (These remarks by Sir Hugh Cairns clearly express the fear that workmen would follow Bright in seeking abolition of the law of primogeniture.)

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent account see E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Labour Aristocracy in 19th century Britain*, in: J. Saville (editor), *Democracy and the Labour Movement* (1954), pp. 201-239.

<sup>5</sup> "I am bound to say that our definition (of the working man) is a large definition." *Parl. Debates, ibid.*, 36.

the “preponderating influence of secularism and infidelity?” “Is Bright’s portrait of the lower classes or Lowe’s the better likeness?”<sup>1</sup>

“I wish”, noted Carnarvon, “we could get information on the component parts and proportion of the ‘working class’.”<sup>2</sup> Bagehot told him that if the Tories had to act they could only do so by going down very low in the suffrage. Then rank and position and wealth combined might give them control of the big towns.<sup>3</sup> But the editor of the *Economist* plainly thought that they would have to stop well before they reached the residuum. For the residuum had no known system of internal stratification. It might be cowed, but it did not know the meaning of deference. If it was found to answer without conscience to the temptations of corruption, it might equally, without pangs of conscience, rouse itself to violence and pillage. “Is that”, Mr. Punch asked the carpenter pointing to a drunken “rough”, “is that the sort of ‘Manhood’ you wish to be mixed up with?”<sup>4</sup>

It was not. There was almost complete agreement, even if it was only tacit, about the exclusion of the residuum. The differences arose over the problem of just how extensive this group might be. Its supposed boundaries were being continually redrawn in accordance with political expediency. Its size depended on the degree of the speaker’s pre-occupation with it. Thus, it came to loom larger in Bright’s thinking in 1867 than it had done in the previous year, while for most Tories, it grew “wonderfully less” as the agitation progressed. But no matter who the speaker happened to be the term was generally employed to cover more than the lumpen proletariat or lazzaroni, even if it was the inclusion of this element which gave the residuum its cutting edge. For the bourgeois, thinking in the tradition of the New Poor Law, extreme misfortune and destitution shaded into crime: “the labouring classes merged into the dangerous classes”.<sup>5</sup> It was unthinkable that the sort of people who were known to respectable society only through the police, the courts and the guardians, should become electors. They were not to be enfranchised, because, having no organisation there was no need to enfranchise them<sup>6</sup> and, had they

<sup>1</sup> H. L. Mensel to Carnarvon, 26th October 1866. Carnarvon Papers, op. cit., 71-75.

<sup>2</sup> Cabinet 21 November 1866, Carnarvon’s Memo, Carnarvon Papers, op. cit., 110.

<sup>3</sup> Memo of conversation with Bagehot on Reform, 2 November 1866, Carnarvon Papers, 89-90.

<sup>4</sup> Punch, 15 December 1866. (See cartoon.)

<sup>5</sup> See J. C. Symons, *Tactics for the Times as Regards the Condition and Treatment of the Dangerous Classes*, London, 1849, p.1. “Every country has its dangerous class. It consists not only of criminals, paupers and persons whose conduct is obnoxious to the interests of society, but of that *proximate body of the people who are within reach of its contagion, and continually swell its number.*” (My emphasis.)

<sup>6</sup> J. Bryce, op. cit., p. 273.

CREAM  
OF THE  
VALLEY



MANHOOD SUFFRAGE.

MR. T. C. DO YOU MEAN TO SAY, MY FRIEND, THAT *THIS* IS THE SORT OF MAN  
TO BE MIXED UP WITH?

been able to attain to organisation, they still would not have been enfranchised since they would have been far too terrible to have been assimilated by the political system.

It was a fact of very great importance that the Reform League hedged its demand for Manhood Suffrage with the qualifications "Registered and Residential". Its leaders insisted upon these qualifications in a way which suggested that they were not to be dismissed as a mere form. They would not and could not relinquish a slogan which had all the traditions and the attractive simplicity of "Manhood Suffrage", but they could show that they were realists and sensible men. In emphasising that they were demanding "Registered and Residential Manhood Suffrage" they implied that they being "business-like" and "practical". These clauses released the League leaders from the old, uncompromising rigidity and opened the way to several attempts at trimming. Thus, after the fall of the Liberal Government, Beales wanted to collaborate with the National Reform Union. He told his followers that "household suffrage in combination especially with the lodger franchise, is, practically and substantially, all but equivalent to what the advocates of residential and registered manhood suffrage require."<sup>1</sup> No more than the "advanced Liberals" in Parliament were they seriously concerned to press the claims of "the class of persons they saw at the corners of the streets of the Seven Dials . . . . the stalwart navvies with red handkerchiefs who made our railways . . . . the hordes of Irish labourers . . . . that class which, on common Parliamentary language, was designated as the dangerous class." Rather did they stand for men who had distinguished themselves by "great ingenuity, by great skill, by the most unshaken loyalty to the Throne". Men of whom it was said, – with some exaggeration – that they had not "existed in 1832".<sup>2</sup>

Karl Marx apparently sensed that there was something behind the League's insistence on "Registered and Residential". Ernest Jones did his best to reassure him: "Registered manhood suffrage means that the elector shall have been *registered* as having *lived* in a boro' for a certain time (say six months) before he can give his vote at an election. It was embodied in the "Universal Suffrage" of the Charter, and is nothing new."<sup>3</sup> Had the lawyer not momentarily eclipsed the politician in Jones, he would have had to admit that the emphasis was quite new. Behind this difference lay the fact that the Leaguers, unlike the Chartists, lived lives which were remote from the experience of

<sup>1</sup> Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

<sup>2</sup> G. Leeman, M.P. Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxii (26 April), 2127.

<sup>3</sup> E. Jones to K. Marx, 25 February 1865. (Micro-film from Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute Moscow. Courtesy of Mrs. D. Thompson.)

the lower depths. They had quite lost the old sense of the indentivity of the poor, of the wage earners. When they talked about the “working class” in a laudatory way it was a comparatively narrow stratum of it which they had in mind. They never looked like calling the entire working class into united political action.<sup>1</sup> One of the most astute observers of Mid-Victorian England found it difficult to decide whether the most important break in the social structure occurred along the line that separated the propertied from the propertyless or at the one at which the skilled were distinguished from the unskilled.<sup>2</sup>

This difference between the agitations of the forties and the sixties was of fundamental significance. To grasp its meaning is to understand the difference between the two and, in a measure, the reasons for the failure of the one and the success of the other. It was a difference that expressed itself at every level and not least in slogans and in songs. A few Reform League Minstrals still sang Ernest Jones’ “Song of the Low”,<sup>3</sup> but the music halls rang with chorus of “Don’t Stop, Let ‘Progress’ be the Word.”

“For Queen and for Country together we’ll stand,  
And you’ll find us both loyal and true,  
And if any danger should threaten our land,  
As of old, we shall know what to do:—  
We’ll follow the plough or we’ll follow the drum,  
But don’t seek to fetter our will,  
For no matter how good the time that has come  
We mean to have a better time still.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dr. A. D. Bell, in his unpublished thesis, *The Reform League from its origins to the Reform Act of 1867* (D. Phil., Oxford 1961), has shown (p. 157) that of the 114 branches of the League in London only 27 were in the East End. There were 23 south of the Thames. Hobsbawm, *op. cit.* p. 204 points out that in 1871 the Engineers, Bricklayers, Carpenters and Masons unions had 10 branches in the East End, but 31 south of the Thames. Since membership of these unions was confined entirely to members of the labour aristocracy the relatively higher number of East End branches of the League provides a rough guide to the extent of its infusion with ‘plebeian’ elements. However, the main conclusion to be drawn from a study of the geographical distribution of the London branches of the League is that it relied heavily upon the same stratum as that which belonged to the “new model” unions.

<sup>2</sup> F. Harrison, *Order and Progress* (1875). “There is no greater break in our class hierarchy than that between the lowest of the propertied classes and the highest of the non-propertied classes” (p. 171). “Perhaps throughout all English society there is no break more marked than that which in cities divides the skilled from the unskilled workmen” (p. 274). The first judgement was originally made in April 1868, the second in March 1874. Harrison reprinted both without apparently detecting the inconsistency.

<sup>3</sup> Y. V. Kovalev, *An Anthology of Chartist Literature* (Moscow 1956), pp. 174-6.

<sup>4</sup> Theatre Royal Astley’s “Don’t Stop, Let Progress Be the Word”, Sung by Miss Nellie Nisbett, *Reform League Miscellaneous Papers* (H.C.).

The political leaders of the upper and middle classes might resist Reform, they might be uncertain about the implication for parties of going down to different social levels, but here they could find their ultimate security. The prospect of all the heterogeneous elements within the "working classes" being drawn into a disciplined force behind leaders inspired with the "boundless Utopia of revolutionary expectations" seemed highly remote. Derby, who had learned to overcome his terror of the working class as a result of his experience in Lancashire during the cotton famine,<sup>1</sup> could freely speculate on the possible success of his party among the factory populations of the North. The Gladstonians could look with some optimism towards the skilled craftsmen and trade unionists. Disraeli, in turn, could look "to household suffrage giving birth to a class of electors who would be independent of the influence of the Trade Unions and their leaders, and pro tanto less revolutionary in their views and a less danger to the state."<sup>2</sup> He might have to retreat, but it was "to a new position to carry on his defence of the British Constitution".<sup>3</sup> If Reform had become imperative that was, in part, because it had also become safe.

### III

"Rochdale" certainly helped to convince the upper and middle classes that if it was dangerous to resist it might be safe to yield. By 1867 the ideals of self-help had found solid institutional expression among the highest stratum of the working class. Benefit Clubs, co-operative societies and new model unions had given the workmen a stake in the country. Such developments were mainly due to the operation of the impersonal forces of economic and social change. But Gladstone and others saw that the benign influence of such forces might be effectual re-enforced by what he termed "good will".

As early as 1847, Sir Robert Peel (from whom Gladstone learned so much) had said: "I do feel that the point at which we all ought to strive is to improve the conditions and elevate the feelings of the great labouring class. I tell you it is not safe unless you do it."<sup>4</sup> When Gladstone was taken to task by an aristocratic relative for encouraging the demand for Reform in 1865, he replied: "After all, you are a peer, and Peel used to say, speaking of his peer colleagues, that they were beings of a different order. Please to recollect that we have got to

<sup>1</sup> W. D. Jones, *Lord Derby and Victorian Conservatism* (Oxford 1956), p. 323.

<sup>2</sup> Earl of Wemyss and March, *Memories 1818-1912*, vol I (1912). Printed for private circulation. (Courtesy of the present Earl of Wemyss.)

<sup>3</sup> C. J. Lewis, *Theory and Expediency in the Policy of Disraeli*, in: *Victorian Studies*, March 1961, p. 252.

<sup>4</sup> Jephson, *op. cit.*, p. 418.

govern millions of hard hands; that it must be done by force, fraud or good will; that the latter has been tried and is answering; that none have profited more by this change of system since the corn law and the Six Acts, than those who complain of it.”<sup>1</sup>

Sir William Hutt, the Member of Gateshead, gave a clear, if crude, illustration of this complex idea. During one of the Reform debates he recalled how, in 1843 Gladstone had brought in a Bill to release the coalwhippers of London from the bondage in which they were held by the owners of beer shops and gin shops. In 1848 these men had thanked Gladstone for his kind interest and announced their intention of being sworn in as special constables. Their spokesman had called on Sir William himself and had assured him “that wherever else there might be disturbance, he might depend upon it that peace and order should be preserved at Wapping”!<sup>2</sup>

The argument was supported by less parochial examples. Reactionaries who expressed their fear of a House of Commons filled with Fergus O’Connors<sup>3</sup> betrayed their ignorance of the altered stage of things. Where was the Charter? Where was the *Northern Star*? Where the prosecutions for sedition? “All these things have passed away.” By objecting “altogether to the use of the word ‘class’”; by recognising that there were “as many divisions and subdivisions” among workmen as any other section of the community; by putting “trust” in the people; the employment of the “demogues” who had flourished thirty years ago had been greatly reduced.<sup>4</sup> In place of the dreadful utterances of Bronterre O’Brien or George Julian Harney, opponents of Reform had nothing better to frighten themselves with than a few odd remarks by George Odger or Professor Beesly.<sup>5</sup> They might try

<sup>1</sup> J. Morley, *Life of Gladstone*, vol ii (1903), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxii (19 April 1866), 1683.

<sup>3</sup> “He was not afraid of the working classes, but he should not like to see the House of Commons filled with Feargus O’Connors; yet that Gentelman was looked up to as a great oracle in Yorkshire”, J. Hardy (Dartmouth), Parl. Debates, 3rd series (13 March 1866), clxxxii, 237.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* (16 April 1866), 1438-50 (A. H. Layard).

<sup>5</sup> Odger was attacked for a speech in which he argued that one of the objects of Reform must be to help agricultural labourers who were trying to live on 8/- a week. See Lowe (13 March 1866) 152 and Cranborne on the same evening 233. Beesly had expressed the belief that recasting our institutions would before long supersede the question of reforming them. For this he was attacked by Lowther (16 April 1866) 1403 and by Cairns on the same evening (1490). Layard (1457-8) (16 April 1866) and Goschen (23 April 1866) 1970 ridiculed the idea of making the working men responsible for the opinions of a Professor who had been educated at Oxford. However, on 26 April 1866, Lowe returned to the attack on “inspired apostles of a new Religion of Humanity” (2078). All in Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxii. Beesly defended himself in the *Spectator*, 21 April 1866. For his attitude to Reform and Parliamentary Government see my E. S. Beesly and Karl Marx, *International Review of Social History*, vol. iv, pts. 1 & 2, 1959.

and make John Bright serve the purpose, but he was not really a lion, but only Snug the Joiner.<sup>1</sup> “Good will” had been tried and was answering.

Of course, it had to be clearly recognized that “good will” was to be understood, not in the Kantian, but in the Gladstonian, sense of the term. It belonged not so much to the realm of ends, as of means. If it was conceived as the “better way” than force or fraud, it was also the substitute for them. Its moral excellence was matched by its political convenience. It was the condition whereby “we” were to continue to govern “millions of hard hands”. It was the policy with which to eke out what Beesly, criticising Bagehot, called “all the most contemptible tricks and hypocrisies of the British Constitution”.<sup>2</sup> To carry it to the length of enfranchising a large part of the urban working class would, in the absence of pressure from without, have required considerable daring. But to have used cutlasses on 6th May, or to have shown prolonged resistance to the League would have been to squander an immense fund of valuable social and political capital. Beesly might sneer at a policy of cheating the masses being regarded as the crowning proof of political sagacity, but long before 1867 there was evidence that “good will” was viable. It was left to a few immature or seemingly incorrigible reactionaries like Cranborne to complain of it. After the passing of the Act, he reported, with feelings in which incredulity was mixed with indignation, that the upper and middle classes flattered the new electors to their faces while in private they discussed their boundless pliability.<sup>3</sup>

Upper class confidence in “good will” was under-pinned by their faith in the efficacy of the “occult forces”. These were evidently at work already for if the working classes wished to plunder the rich, they had no need to wait to be enfranchised before they set about it. They already had the physical power to do so.<sup>4</sup> “Where”, as Sir Francis Goldsmid asked, “would the landowners and great employer of labour now be if their influence in elections were merely proportionate to their numbers in the constituencies?”<sup>5</sup> Those who knew the workmen did not share Bagehot’s doubts as to whether the saving

<sup>1</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxii (16 April 1866), 1453 (A. H. Layard).

<sup>2</sup> “A clever writer in the Fortnightly Review has lately been picking out for special eulogy all the most contemptible tricks and hypocrisies of the British Constitution. To cheat the masses . . . . is in this gentleman’s eyes the crowning proof of political sagacity. Some kinds of education seem to be worse than none at all.” E. S. Beesly, *Spectator*, 14 April 1866.

<sup>3</sup> *The Conservative Surrender*, *Quarterly Review*, October 1867, pp. 533-4.

<sup>4</sup> Goldwin Smith, *The Experience of the American Commonwealth*, *Essays on Reform* (1867), p. 220.

<sup>5</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxii (13 April 1866), 1278.

quality of deference was as prevalent among them as it was with the petit bourgeoisie. "Take the English, as a nation, at home. They are devoured with the idea of 'bettering themselves', and that idea with them means 'rising in the social scale'. 'Respectability' is consequently their idol . . . . They look up to the higher classes as a sort of divine Olympus, beautiful, sacred, above all things *intelligible*, just near enough to be perhaps not quite unattainable by their children, just far enough to lend enchantment to the view. So far from these men being levellers or potential levellers, if you could dive into their hearts (for what they exactly say with their lips is not the test) you would find what every unconscious indication reveals – that to deprive them of their Olympus would be to deprive them of their earthly heaven and ultimate aspiration. To offer to pull it down for them would fill them with horror, grief and concern, by offering to deprive them of their only earthly ideal. And those are the men whom you are afraid of admitting to the Constitution, to tell you in your own House, in their own words, where the shoe pinches them, and what they want".<sup>1</sup> Lowe's fears that Reform would destroy the character of the House of Commons were, according to this writer, quite unjustified. It was imperishable. "In this country if you had manhood suffrage, with womanhood suffrage thrown into the bargain, you would not and could not have democracy, for democracy in this country, in Mr. Lowe's sense of democracy, is impossible."<sup>2</sup> The wage-earners, as Forster told the House, admired "gentlemen". And if, after Reform, England were to become "a little less of a rich man's country and gentlemen were to fall in the market, they would still have excellent cards in their hands."<sup>3</sup>

Reform did not mean any substantial transfer of power. It was said that a substantial measure of Reform would make the workmen "masters of the situation". "They may be able to decide whether a Whig or a Tory shall be elected", replied J. S. Mill, "they may be masters of so small a situation as that."<sup>4</sup> It was obvious to informed and intelligent men that there was little immediate prospect of workmen being elected. The vast "cousin-hood" of the parliamentary families had largely survived 1832 and they would survive 1867.<sup>5</sup> And

<sup>1</sup> B. Cracroft, *The Analysis of the House of Commons, Or Indirect Representation, Essays on Reform* (1867), p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>3</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, cited in Blackwood's *The Progress of the Question*, July 1867, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> *Parl. Debates*, 3rd series, clxxxii (13 April 1866), 1257.

<sup>5</sup> B. Cracroft, *op. cit.*, p. 173, refers to an ex-governor of the Bank of England who declared that he was related to thirty other Members of the House all of whom were sitting with him at that time. One imagines that Cracroft would be suitably gratified to learn of the impressive kinship ties of contemporary governors of the Bank of England;

even if workmen were elected they would soon catch the tone of the House. "To a careful observer there is nothing more interesting than the growth of moderation and justice which unconsciously takes place in the minds of violent or narrow men, after they have taken a parliamentary position. Nothing short of fanaticism can withstand it; and fanaticism soon becomes silent and slinks away."<sup>1</sup>

Why, with all these assurances, did the House resist Reform for so long? Why did men of outstanding intelligence, such as Cranborne and Lowe, resist to the end and even after the Bill was passed spend their curses on those who feared to go "within twenty four hours of Revolution"?

The approximate answer is that the House as a whole was too comfortable to move until it became an evident necessity. As for the incorrigible resisters, their intelligence was not matched by the quality of their information. No one who reads the speeches of Lord Robert could suppose that he was a reliable authority on the political disposition of the mid-Victorian workman. When he went on his sleep-walking expeditions at Hatfield House the phantoms whom he prepared to repulse came in the guise of Federal soldiers or of sansculottes at the head of a revolutionary mob.<sup>2</sup> When awake, he still saw his adversaries in much the same insurgent shapes. There were occasions when Robert Lowe, a very different personality, showed himself to be scarcely better informed. He was apparently ready to believe every story about the indolence, extravagance and violence of the working man which any down-at-heel commercial traveller or failed professional man chose to tell him.<sup>3</sup> The forebodings of these most capable men often appeared far-fetched, trivial or over-dependent upon foreign experience which was of doubtful relevance. Thus, it

see C. S. Wilson and T. Lupton, *The Social Background and Connections of "Top Decision Makers"*, in: *The Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies*, Vol. xxvii (1959), pp. 30-51. Cracroft p. 162 et seq. tried to demonstrate the socially exclusive character of the House of Commons by reference to its educational background and argued that Reform would make little difference to this. He gives the following figures for the House of Commons elected in 1865. The figures in brackets relate to the House elected in 1951 and are taken from J. F. S. Ross, *Elections and Electors*, 1955, p. 415 et seq. *Public School Boys*, 429 (321); Eton, 105 (81); Harrow 52 (24); Oxford 136 (141); Cambridge 110 (89). In interpreting these figures it has to be remembered that in 1865 the House was larger than it is now and numbered 652 Members. Although the social composition of the undergraduate population has been greatly altered, it is believed that 80% of the boys at Eton today are the sons of fathers who also went to Eton. (See *Sunday Times*, 13 August 1961.)

<sup>1</sup> Lord Houghton, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> G. Cecil, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> A. P. Martin, *op. cit.*, pp. 313-4.

was assumed that Reform would require the Commons to turn itself into an academy for the refutation of the fallacies of Fourier or Saint Simon<sup>1</sup> and that much time would have to be spent in resisting proposals for the establishment of *ateliers nationaux*.<sup>2</sup>

There were occasions when the eloquence of the extreme reactionaries struck a false and faintly comic note. Thus, Beresford Hope talked of the 1867 Reform Bill as if it was the equivalent of 4th August 1789. Primogeniture and freedom of bequest would be dashed down. "Then farewell to the old halls rising over the tall trees, and the spacious deer parks, for the peasantry in their ignorance and cupidity would soon be set fancying that these broad acres would best serve their purpose if cut up into freehold allotments."<sup>3</sup>

While Beresford Hope saw the Jacquerie in the countryside, Lowe and Cranborne imagined levellers and socialists in the towns. They were unaware that virtually the only clear-headed revolutionaries in the country were German refugees. It was true that these revolutionaries had a high opinion of their own influence. Marx claimed that the Reform League was the work of the International<sup>4</sup> and that he himself had played a great part until he saw that the agitation was "set going",<sup>5</sup> but this was probably tall talk. Marx had a penchant for taking the credit whenever a success was scored by anyone who happened to belong to the I.W.M.A.<sup>6</sup>

Of course there were also the Positivists. Cranborne and Lowe made the most of them and plainly saw in them that "auxiliary contingent from among the educated classes"<sup>7</sup> which is necessary for the success of the multitude. "The inspired apostles of a New Religion

<sup>1</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series clxxxii (26 April 1866), 2099 (Lowe).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. (13 March 1866), 233 (Cranborne).

<sup>3</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxvii (20 May 1867), 802-3.

<sup>4</sup> K. Marx to F. Engels, 1st May 1865, op. cit., p. 494.

<sup>5</sup> K. Marx to L. Kugelmann, 9th October 1866, Marx/Engels, Sel. Corr. (1956), p. 223.

<sup>6</sup> Marx kept up a close correspondence with Ernest Jones during the early stages of the agitation, but there is no evidence that he was aware that political forces of a fighting kind came on the scene in July 1866. Indeed, he expressed doubt as to whether they had. (See his reply to George Howell in the *Secular Chronicle*, 4 August 1878. He never attempted a sustained analysis of the Reform Question nor did he refer to the debate on the nature of Revolution which went on during it. Yet this debate provided a valuable test of the perspicacity of the "class enemy". Marx, had he bothered with it, would have been forced to allow that Cranborne had some correct insights. There was much discussion on the relation between "base" and "superstructure". Thus, progressives like Leslie Stephen complained that it was "too common to argue as though constitutional arrangements created, instead of giving effect to, the existing social forces . . . ." Lowe tried to rebut this type of reasoning, but was not at his most lucid. (Parl. Debates, clxxxvii [20 May 1867], 788-790.)

<sup>7</sup> Parliamentary Reform, *Quarterly Review*, April 1865, p. 574.

of Humanity”, as Lowe called them,<sup>1</sup> had influence over trade unionists and might be able to direct their energies into dangerous courses. The Positivists were certainly bent on social reconstruction and they were pleased to state that it was the political function of the working class to bring the revolutionary element into the British political system.<sup>2</sup> Such language concealed the fact that they had no desire to destroy existing property relations, but sought only to “moralise” them. During the Reform Agitation Frederic Harrison explained, “I would never say anything which could have an incendiary effect”. He thought it “impossible to produce any strong feeling much less action”. Besides, in the most “sacred circles” of the ruling families, like the Russells, they quite liked a little “playful radicalism”.<sup>3</sup> His tone is well represented by an enigmatic remark he made on 6th May 1867: “I think I have put a stopper on one of the dirtiest tricks that d-----d Jew ever tried on about Hyde Park. What fun it is. I am off to it.”<sup>4</sup>

The opinions of the English Positivists co-incided with those of Marx over a range of issues and Beesly and Marx had an affectionate regard for each other, but the Positivists were neither revolutionaries nor socialists. It was absurd to regard them as being actually or potentially leaders of a revolutionary proletariat.<sup>5</sup>

However, to understand Cranborne and Lowe one must recognise the correctness of their insights as well as the absurdity of their mistakes. They were to be proved right over an impressive range of issues. They saw clearly that the Bill must be the first step towards complete political democracy. Mill might talk of the workmen being masters only in relation to the small matter of whether they would be represented by Whig or Tory; but they recognised that with a working class electorate Whig and Tory must become much altered. They were right in observing that land, which was a sedative in the New World, must be an irritant in England and that Reform would be followed by attacks on the landed interest. However mistaken their opinions about the then existing characteristics of trade unions, they were right in believing that they could and would become engines of political power. They were right in believing that this surrender could not be the last, but must form a precedent for many more in the future. In the longer run they were right about the advent of subsidised housing and the progressive income tax and the coming of socialism.

<sup>1</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxii (26 April 1866), 2078.

<sup>2</sup> F. Harrison, *Order and Progress* (1875), p. 221. Being a lecture of March, 1868.

<sup>3</sup> F. Harrison to Mrs. Hadwen, 3 March 1866, F. H. Papers, L.S.E. Box 1.

<sup>4</sup> F. Harrison to E. S. Beesly, (6?) May 1867, F. H. Papers, L.S.E. Box 1.

<sup>5</sup> See my *Professor Beesly and the Working Class Movement*, in *Essays in Labour History*, ed. A. Briggs and J. Saville (1960), pp. 205-241.

Lowe, when he knew that all was lost, asked if any Member of the House would favour him with a précis on the political opinions of unskilled labourers earning 8/-a week. He fancied that some of his new constituents would fall into this class. "The fact is", he said, "that the great mass of those you are going to enfranchise are people who have no politics at all . . . . But they will not be always without politics; and what will they be? What must be the politics of people who are struggling hard to keep themselves off the parish? . . . .their politics must take one form – Socialism. What other aspect can politics bear in their eyes. . . .What man will speak acceptably to them except the man who promises somehow or other to re-distribute the good things of this world more equally, so that the poor will get more and the rich and powerful will get less? . . . . History affords no instance where political power has been given to the lower classes and taken back from them without civil war or violent convulsion. What you do now is absolutely irreversible; and your repentance – bitter as I know it will be – will come too late."<sup>1</sup>

It has been said that the division on Reform crossed party lines and really lay between the optimists and the pessimists.<sup>2</sup> But if Lowe and Cranborne were pessimists that was because they were reasoners before they were observers, and philosophers before they were politicians. They were more concerned with what the logic of the situation would cause the working class to become than they were with its present characteristics. They were ready to run close to "the heels of danger" for the sake of a hypothesis. If Lowe denounced the *a priori* method in politics at one level, he applied it himself at another. He tended to argue from certain supposed laws of history and human nature to what the political character of the working class must be. Similarly, Cranborne granted that the working class were, in essence, like everybody else. However, their circumstances were different, exposing them to special temptations which necessarily made them dangerous. Assuming that everybody was alike "in essence", these philosophic reactionaries concluded that the proletariat must exhibit the same degree of class consciousness as they possessed themselves. This assumption was, perhaps, the greatest hindrance to the discovery of the conservative possibilities of democracy.

The preoccupation of men like Cranborne and Lowe with the more remote consequences of Reform lent to their utterances a deceptive air of statesmanship. They were unsparing in their criticisms of the "short sightedness", timidity and the absence of principle by which they

<sup>1</sup> Parl. Debates, 3rd series, clxxxvii (20 May 1867), 788-799.

<sup>2</sup> A. Briggs, *Age of Improvement* (1959), p. 515.

supposed their colleagues to be characterised. When someone remarked that the Tory country gentlemen displayed greater zeal in the matter of the cattle plague than in opposing the Reform Bill, Lowe remarked: "That is quite intelligible for the cattle Bill ruins ourselves, the Reform Bill only our children."<sup>1</sup> Cranborne preferred to run a risk of a collision with the Reform League rather than submit to what he termed a "revolution by inches".<sup>2</sup>

Speaking in the House of Commons, Sir E. Bulmer-Lytton distinguished between Revolution and Reform. The former consisted of the transfer of power from one class to another; the latter, of the modification of the conditions under which power was exercised by the existing ruling class, by the correction of "abuses".<sup>3</sup> At any particular moment this distinction might appear to be clear and satisfactory, but it did not distinctly preclude the possibility of a long Revolution, a Revolution by a thousand "modifications". For a time the House was ready to be terrified by this prospect of a "Revolution by inches". It lost its fear only when the progress of the agitation obliged it to choose between removing an immediate peril or coping with distant dangers. The commonsense conception of Revolution is essentially "holistic". In theory, the same results might be accomplished over a long period and in a piecemeal manner. There is, however, a deep-seated belief that the results which are produced by the one process will not, in fact, be the same as those produced by the other. A "Revolution" which works itself out within the existing political tradition is not a Revolution at all.

To this consideration was added another of still more compelling force. The English empiricist tradition taught that the politician who took account of the second order consequences of his actions was a statesman; and that to try and do more than this was metaphysics or megalomania. Cranborne and Lowe were ignoring this lesson and inviting immediate disaster on the pretext of avoiding ultimate catastrophe. It was all very well to complain that Derby adopted an attitude of "après moi le deluge", but there were circumstances in which that discredited maxim became the last word in sagacity.

#### IV

It is widely acknowledged that the history of the Second Reform Act raises problems of exceptional complexity. Some historians have been

<sup>1</sup> M. E. Grant Duff, *Notes from a Diary 1851-1872*, Vol. II (1897), p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> *Parliamentary Reform*, *Quarterly Review*, April 1865, p. 564.

<sup>3</sup> *Parl. Debates*, 3rd series (13 April 1866), 1238.

content to proceed eclectically,<sup>1</sup> while one or two dispense with the labour of enumerating the various factors involved and simply refer the reader to “the Spirit of the Times”.<sup>2</sup> However, the great majority of historians of the Second Reform Act fall into one or other of two camps according to whether their interpretation is couched in terms of class struggle or of party conflict.

The first camp is by far the smallest and the best of its contributions is so cursory and dogmatic that its opponents can be excused for neglecting it altogether.<sup>3</sup> In a more or less a priori fashion, historians of this persuasion argue that the ruling class was forced to concede Reform as a result of pressure by the masses. They do not explain why it was that a revolutionary proletariat confronting a relatively weak state apparatus in the thirties and forties was unable to force this concession which was secured by a reformist labour movement against a far more powerful executive two or three decades later. They make light work of the immense significance of the concession itself. They neglect the fact that this was the first occasion upon which a substantial portion of the working class secured the vote in a country in which the Executive was accountable to the popularly elected branch of the legislature. They ignore, rather than rebut, the argument that Reform was the result of the party system and party manoeuvring. They make the cardinal error of treating party rivalry as *mere* simulacra behind which one discovers the *arcana imperii*: the realities of class rule. In doing so they cut themselves off from an understanding of how party conflict may cross as well as express class antagonisms; how, in intriguing for office, the ruling oligarchies find their rivalry becoming informed by external interests and purposes; how the habit of peaceful political change and the appeals to the principle of consent debilitates the propertied classes, undermines their powers of resistance, leaving them, to a degree, imprisoned by their own hypocrisies.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Park, *The English Reform Bill of 1867* (New York 1920) is the best example of eclecticism. It is also one of the best and fullest accounts. Park inclined to the view that the bill was the result of public opinion as stirred up partly by economic and social conditions, partly by the Reform League, partly by John Bright, partly by trade unions. It was also partly the result of party competition and, in particular, the calculations of Disraeli (pp. 232 et seq.). F. E. Gillespie's useful *Labor and Politics in England, 1850-1867*, (Durham, North Carolina, 1927) is in the same tradition, but attaches less importance to Tory statesmanship.

<sup>2</sup> W. D. Jones, *Lord Derby and Victorian Conservatism* (Oxford 1956), p. 326.

<sup>3</sup> T. Rothstein, *From Chartism to Labourism* (1929), p. 187. A. L. Morton & G. Tate, *The British Labour Movement* (1956), pp. 118-121.

<sup>4</sup> In practice, Marx himself did not entirely neglect the importance of “party”. As early as 1855 he foresaw that “a real change might come about only under a Tory Government” (Marx & Engels on Britain [1954], p. 406). But most of his followers prefer to recall only his grander over-simplifications. See, for example, R. Fox, *The class struggle in Britain*, n.d. (1932?), p. 27.

However, if it is grotesque to write a history of Reform without reference to Party it is scarcely better to attempt it without regard to the problem of Revolution. This would be freely acknowledged in relation to 1832, but it is taken to be possible in the case of 1867. Thus, at the end of the Victorian years, G. Lowes Dickinson thought it clear that "the disturbance of the settlement of 1832 and the series of measures which culminated in the Reform Act of 1867, are to be attributed not to popular pressure from without, but to the free and spontaneous choice of the governing class." He suggested that "the phenomenon curious thought it be, might no doubt be explained by the manoeuvring of parties....reform of Parliament was treated merely as a weapon in the political game."<sup>1</sup>

Lowes Dickinson's contention that "the Bill of 1867 was introduced not so much in deference to public opinion, as in pursuance of a series of measures which had originated in the House itself, and in redemption of voluntary pledges of a succession of governments",<sup>2</sup> has been taken up and elaborated by Professor Herrick.<sup>3</sup> He asserts that "the idea of revolution present in the agitation preceding the act of 1832 and close to the roots of Chartism was conspicuously absent."<sup>4</sup> In an earlier article, he declared that "there is absolutely no evidence that Bright or Beales or Odger, the popular leaders, ever considered the use of violence, as was most certainly done by Reformers in 1832.<sup>5</sup> If their followers could not vote and did not make trouble, why should Conservatives give in to their demands? Real disturbances had not moved them during the Chartist agitation."<sup>6</sup> He tries to interpret the Act of 1867 in terms of the maturing of certain ideas and in terms of

<sup>1</sup> G. Lowes Dickinson, *The Development of Parliament During the Nineteenth Century* (1895), p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> It is not only historians who have followed Lowes Dickinson. One of the best and most influential textbooks in political philosophy contains the following passage: "The extensions of the franchise in nineteenth century Britain were carried out by parties outdoing one another in the search for votes, rather than pursuing the interests of the propertied classes which financed them. Those classes have unquestionably lost many of their former advantages as a direct result of this competition." This highly simplified and misleading account occupies a crucially important position in a chapter devoted to "Democracy". (S. I. Benn and R. S. Peters, *Social Principles and the Democratic State* [1959], p. 339.) Is it wise of our educational reformers to assume that a knowledge of the second law of thermodynamics is more important than a knowledge of the second Reform Act?

<sup>4</sup> F. H. Herrick, *The Second Reform Movement in Britain*, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 9, 1949, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> It has been shown that Bright and Beales did "consider" violence, although they did not encourage it. J. B. Leno, *The Aftermath* (1892), p. 71 alleges that at the meeting with Cleusart in July, 1866 at which he (Leno) was present, Odger spoke in favour of violence.

<sup>6</sup> F. H. Herrick, *The Reform Bill of 1867 and the British Party System*, in: *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. iii, p. 223-4.

the earlier proposals for Reform – the abortive Bills brought forward in 1852, '54, '59, and in 1860 and '66. In his first contribution to this discussion, Herrick places special emphasis on “The necessities of political parties”.<sup>1</sup> The point being, presumably, that both the Radicals and the Tories had an interest in ending twenty years of Whig supremacy while the Whigs themselves had to feign an interest in the question.

Professor Herrick has completely missed the problem of Revolution in relation to Reform. Many of his propositions about party calculations are undoubtedly correct but they hardly add up to satisfactory interpretation of events. The Lowes Dickinson-Herrick analysis is open to a whole series of challenges. For example, if Reform was a gamble taken in the interests of party expediency, what was it that transformed the harmless flutters of the fifties and early sixties into the relentless game of brag which began in February and ended in August 1867? The Act went far beyond anything which had been desired before 1866. It was surely the presence of the Reform League which stopped the players crying off as they had done so often in the past. If the pressure exerted by the League is held to be negligible, then innumerable public and private admissions about the influence of its agitation have to be discounted; the widespread preoccupation with preventing the formation of revolutionary forces has to be ignored; and the proximity to revolutionary situations in 1866 and '67 has to be neglected.

Of course, party rivalries and calculations were important, but such rivalries and calculations all depended upon the stage of development attained by the Labour Movement. Unless a synthesis is made between the “party conflict” and “class struggle” interpretations, the history of 1866-67 is unintelligible. Unlike the Chartist years, the agitation of 1866-67 had a character which allowed the leaders of the traditional parties to think of Reform in terms of what might be “in it” for them. Unlike the years of the abortive Reform Bills, there was an agitation which could only be ignored at the cost of reviving and sharpening the class consciousness of the workmen and helping on the formation of revolutionary forces.

In the eighteen sixties the British working class exhibited certain “contradictory” characteristics. If it was increasingly “respectable”, it was increasingly well organised. If it had abandoned its revolutionary ambitions, it had not wholly lost its revolutionary potentialities. It left no doubt that these potentialities might be speedily developed if it was too long thwarted in its desire to secure political equality. In

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* p. 229-230.

short, it had attained precisely that level of development at which it was safe to concede its enfranchisement and dangerous to withhold it. It was this circumstance, rather than the death of Palmerston, which determined the timing of Reform.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Briggs has attempted the kind of synthesis which is required. He makes a distinction between the *timing* of events and their *pattern*.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Lowes Dickinson and Herrick he finds room for the Reform League. He contends that the agitation determined the timing of events. "Pressure from without" was necessary in order to break through the barrier presented by the complex of petty, parliamentary interests and to open the way for the already mature aim and strategy of the Tory Statesmen. However, for Briggs this is a "subsidiary factor . . . . More important than external pressure was the desire of the Conservative leaders to secure a comprehensive settlement."<sup>3</sup> He sees in this desire the main determinant of the "pattern" of events.

It is not clear whether Briggs' distinction between "timing" and "pattern" would allow him to accept the statement made on page 379 above. There it was suggested that when Disraeli asserted that he aimed "to destroy the present agitation and extinguish Gladstone and Co.", the possibility of reaching the second objective depended entirely upon the necessity of accomplishing the first.<sup>4</sup> If this contention is accepted then the attempt to assign relative weights to "parliamentary manoeuvre" and "pressure from without" would have to be revised or discarded as unrewarding.

Perhaps the difference between Professor Briggs' position and the one taken up in this article reduces itself to a matter of emphasis. There can be no question about the fact that the mysterious nature of Disraeli's genius made its contribution to the passing of the Reform Act. The problem is how far he should be regarded as the master, rather than as the not unwilling prisoner, of circumstance. It is certain that for a number of years Disraeli had sensed that there might be a possibility of using a section of the non-electors to help restore the

<sup>1</sup> Trygve R. Tholfsen, *The Transition to Democracy in Victorian England*, in: *International Review of Social History*, Vol. vi, 1961, pt. 2, pp. 226-248, provides a useful corrective to the narrowly "political" interpretations of Reform. However, the tensions, conflicts and inconsistencies which characterised the mid-Victorian Labour Movement tend to be obscured by his emphasis upon the way in which workmen acted out roles prescribed for them by middle class radicalism.

<sup>2</sup> A. Briggs, *Victorian People* (1954), p. 281.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>4</sup> In discussing Disraeli's response to Hodgkinson's amendment, Briggs only cites that part of Disraeli's phrase which refers to Gladstone. (See A. Briggs, *The Age of Improvement*, 1959, p. 511.)

fortunes of his Party. As the prospect of restoring the old Toryism faded the preoccupation with ending a prolonged period of Whig supremacy grew. He had never had scruples against using the Radicals to further his own ends. But Disraeli's skill at self-advertisement has encouraged his vague premonitions to be treated as if they were cold calculations. Ideas which were half-formed or slowly maturing are taken for developed aims and a clear cut strategy.

Those who try to make the history of Reform intelligible in terms of Disraeli's skill and cunning are inclined to forget that in the first months of the Tory Ministry he was not at all anxious to deal with the question and had to be convinced by the Queen and Lord Derby that it was imperative.<sup>1</sup> There is a tendency to overlook the fact that he was forced to make his mind up about important amendments on the spur of the moment.<sup>2</sup> He and Derby frequently talked with a flippancy which is only possible for men who have surrendered to events. Thus, while the Prime Minister could refer to household suffrage as a wonderful hare to start,<sup>3</sup> the Chancellor of the Exchequer could request Stanley to come and speak on the Lodger clause explaining that it made no difference whether he spoke for it or against it so long as he spoke.<sup>4</sup> The Tory Statesmen were bowing to a process which it was beyond their power to control. To employ the equestrian imagery which was so popular at the time: Disraeli gave the horse its head without care for how far it might carry him so long as he managed to stay on its back. If a minority Government was to carry a measure it could not be too particular about what sort of measure it was. Walpole's successor in the Home Office understood it perfectly. He shared the conviction of his colleagues that "our security is going lower than the combining classes".<sup>6</sup> This conviction helped to reconcile him to developments which he neither whole-heartedly welcomed nor pretended to control. He found in the experience of 1867 "a new proof that a great measure ought not to be in the hands of a minority but with those who can mould and resist the moulding of others."<sup>6</sup>

The strength of the Government lay, not so much in the weakness and division of the Opposition, as in the fact that a Reform Act had become essential. A great majority in the House was brought to the conclusion that the whole institution of Parliamentary government would be discredited and imperilled by yet another false start. Had it

<sup>1</sup> W. E. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli* (1929 New Edition), vol ii, p. 187 and p. 191.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>5</sup> A. E. Gathorne-Hardy, *Gathorne-Hardy, First Earl of Cranbrook* (1910), Vol. 1, p. 211.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210

not been for this consideration then Disraeli could never have carried so many members of his own party with him. Peel, Carnarvon and Cranborne would have become the leaders of a Tory "cave". All the Adullamites would have followed Lowe in offering a continued resistance. The Radicals, many of whom were uneasy about the extent of the measure as well as its supposed paternity, would have made it their first interest to defeat the Government.

The largely forgotten events of 6th May throw light on the character of the challenge with which the Government had to deal. When it allowed a reformist movement to score a revolutionary triumph, it showed that it understood the choice before it. A humiliation had been suffered; a humiliation which gave notice that henceforth "good will" rather than "force" or "fraud" was to be the main instrument. It was in accordance with the curious dialectic of the British Political System that it was able to make a strength of its weakness. It exchanged the associations of Peterloo for those of Hyde Park. After 6th May, Hyde Park gradually became an established tradition. It stood for freedom in relation to the pretensions of aristocratic privilege, but it also stood for the powerlessness of democratic enthusiasts in the face of those "occult and unacknowledged forces which are not dependent upon any legislative machinery".