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**WHO FOUNDED
THE LIBERAL PARTY**



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WHO FOUNDED THE LIBERAL PARTY

Inaugural Lecture

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by

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WHO FOUNDED THE LIBERAL PARTY

The traditional date for the establishment of the Liberal Party is the 6th of June 1859 at the famous meeting in Willis's Rooms in St. James's Street, when the former prime minister, Lord Palmerston, reached down his hand to help the diminutive Lord John Russell, also a former prime minister, climb up onto the platform beside him, and they were joined by the Quaker, John Bright. The new political alignment was completed on 17 June when William Gladstone, who had been drifting back to the Tories and had even voted with the Tory government in the critical vote of confidence on 11 June, agreed to serve as Chancellor of the Exchequer in Palmerston's new government. Palmerston's last administration, that of 1859 to 1865, is in turn regarded as the first Liberal, as distinct from Whig, administration in British history.

Jasper Ridley in his biography of Palmerston makes much play (rightly) with the fact that Willis's Rooms which saw the reconciliation of what might almost be called the broad left of the day, from Whig to radical, was a setting already very familiar to Palmerston. (1) Fifty years earlier it had been Almack's, the most famous and exclusive club in London. To become a member you had to satisfy the scrutiny of the seven formidable Lady Patronesses. Palmerston, a young Tory dandy, had had no difficulty in doing so. Scurrilous rumour suggested that all seven had at one time or another been his mistresses. A cooler appraisal of the evidence would seem to establish that only three of them were - Lady Jersey, the famous society

hostess, Lady Cowper, his long-standing mistress, who became his wife after the death of her first husband, Lord Cowper, and Princess Lieven, the very formidable wife of the Russian ambassador.

But seeds of doubt may already be sown. Was Lord Palmerston, the man whom Philip Guedalla once described in a famous phrase as the last candle of the eighteenth century - that cheerful, amoral, free-thinking epoch - and of whom A.J.P. Taylor said that he had Regency buck written all over him, the most probable leader of the party which tradition regards as the embodiment of middle-class nonconformity? Lord John Russell too does not fit easily into this picture - a younger son of a great aristocratic family, headed by Duke of Bedford. It is true that he had been one of the chief architects of the Great Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832 but he had also earned the nickname 'Finality Jack', believing that with the passing of that Act, reform had gone far enough. Of the three men who had stood on the platform at Willis's Rooms, only Bright could be regarded as representing middle class business or nonconformist interests. There is the further point that Palmerston's last ministry, far from being a revolutionary, or even progressive one, was quite singularly devoid of reforming legislation.

Perhaps the paradox can be explained by John Vincent's thesis that the Liberal party evolved first in the country and only later sought parliamentary leadership? (2) I will return briefly to that point but this evening I am concerned with the foundation of the parliamentary party.

Before proceeding further, however, it is desirable to define 'Liberalism' in this context. I spoke before of a broad left coalition from Whig to radical but contemporaries saw Liberalism as something much more specific and dynamic than that. Liberal, like all political terms, is a chameleon word. It has altered its meaning over the years and often meant different things even to contemporaries. How it has changed its meaning over time can be well illustrated by contrasting the evolution of the words 'liberal' and 'democrat'. In the middle of the 19th century most politicians would have liked to have been called 'liberal' in some sense. They would not have liked to be called a democrat. To them demos was still the people in the sense of the mob - the mass of ill-educated, ill-disciplined beings, whose horizons were necessarily limited to grabbing what they could to survive in daily life, who were all too readily the prey of demagogues and should certainly not be allowed to control government or policy - the untamed tiger which so terrified Palmerston and later Lord Salisbury. Today, of course, it is fashionable to redefine the mob as the crowd, to seek out the individuals in it and to establish that they were far from brutish and only sometimes gullible. But the nineteenth century view, at least among the political classes who counted, was much closer to the Roman mob so brilliantly portrayed in the recent English Shakespeare Company's production of Coriolanus. Contrast this with the usage in the last American Presidential election. All politicians, whether formally Democrat or Republican, would have proudly claimed the title 'democrat' and seen, or at least publicly proclaimed that they saw, all wisdom residing in the

people. The word 'liberal' on the other hand had become almost an insult - an effective smear word to use against an opponent. How the word has changed its meaning is revealed in a passage in the New Yorker from as early as 1969, quoted in the last edition of the Oxford English Dictionary - 'I don't think he is a liberal. He's tight with his money, and wants to see the poor work for their money.' That is not a definition of liberal which would have readily occurred to the nineteenth century.

Where then does the word come from? Once again a dictionary, this time the New (Oxford) English Dictionary of 1908 is enlightening. Clearly the word fascinated the compilers. They point out that it was originally used of those arts and sciences which were considered 'worthy of a free man', as opposed to those which were servile or mechanical. It has never entirely lost that meaning - not even in modern America. It is associated with the free man who can stand on his own feet, think his own thoughts, make his own decisions. It was for that reason, as the N.E.D. of 1908 again perceptively observed, that when the word was introduced into British politics in the early nineteenth century as a term of abuse, those attacked, far from rejecting the word, embraced it with pride until it became the official title of one of the two great parties of British politics.

Why then was it levelled as a term of abuse in the 1820s and 1830s? Here the connection was a foreign one. The term 'liberal' or at least its Spanish equivalent had been used to describe those Spaniards of what contemporaries would have called 'advanced' views, who supported and wished to restore the Spanish

constitution of 1812. The 1812 constitution was a genuinely radical one. It specifically recognised the Rights of Man and the Sovereignty of the People. The Assembly, elected on universal manhood suffrage, controlled the executive.

The Spanish connection reminds us that liberalism was a European, not just a British, creed and some aspects of it show up more clearly in a continental context. What after all was the essence of liberal political philosophy? It goes back to the idea of the free, not servile, man. In practice it meant freedom of thought, freedom of speech and freedom of religion. The British watched with interest as their fellow Europeans won those freedoms in the nineteenth century. They probably deluded themselves that they had won them much earlier than they had. Only with the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and Catholic Emancipation the following year were many serious civil disabilities finally lifted from the shoulders of Nonconformists and Roman Catholics. Jews did not gain the right to sit in the House of Commons until 1866 and those of no religion, like the atheist, Charles Bradlaugh, did not gain admission to the House until 1886. Many members of the 'crowd' or 'mob' would have doubted the reality of freedom of speech with the continued threat of action for seditious libel, even after the repeal of the stamp and paper duties had made newspapers cheap enough to achieve mass circulation.

That other great cause of nineteenth century liberalism, representative government, however important, was secondary to the basic freedoms of the individual. It was, in fact, connected to one I have not yet mentioned - the right to private property.

You may remember that the 'inalienable rights' in the American Declaration of Independence were originally meant to read, not 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' but 'life, liberty and property' - and this would have been entirely in accordance with eighteenth century progressive thinking, which certainly did not subscribe to Proudhon's idea that 'property is theft'. On the contrary, it was the guarantee of a man's independence and, because he could not rightfully be deprived of it, even by the state, he had to give his consent, either directly or through his representative, before taxation could lawfully be levied.

Property leads one naturally to that other important liberal definition of freedom - economic freedom. Economic freedom is not the norm. Throughout most of history the economy has been controlled by governments - admittedly, using 'government' in a rather wide sense. Think of the minute regulation of crafts and guilds in medieval times, of the statutes of Elizabethan England, or of the centuries when mercantilism, and with it the more or less complete state control of the economy, was the universally accepted economic theory. Here the nineteenth century was the innovator with its ideas of laissez-faire and free trade - everything that is conveniently bundled into the package labelled 'classical liberalism'. Yet what of the passage I quoted earlier from the New Yorker which associated liberalism with welfareism and implies that a man who believes in hard-nosed economics cannot be a liberal? Or what, one might ask, is the free market economy but laissez-faire writ large? Yet today that is the doctrine of the Conservative party.

Merely posing the question may lead one to suspect that there have been some strange crossing of paths in the evolution of British political parties in the last 150 years and that is really the theme of this evening's lecture.

The great guru of the Free Trade movement, then as now, was Adam Smith, who welded the ideas into one enormously influential book, The Wealth of Nations. Smith himself was part of the Scottish Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century and there was a very direct connection between his ideas and some of the leading figures of mid-nineteenth century liberalism. Smith had been, briefly, a lecturer in the University of Edinburgh and then, more famously, a professor in Glasgow. Since the Scottish universities were then recognised to be much better than the English ones, Lord John Russell had been sent to Glasgow - although after Smith's time - and Henry Temple, later Lord Palmerston, was the pupil of Smith's disciple, Dugald Stewart, in Edinburgh. Later in life Palmerston never ceased to lecture foreign statesmen on the virtues of free trade. Stewart held that the economy was more important to public happiness than constitutions and perhaps one should remember that, although we associate Palmerston with foreign affairs, his original expertise was supposed to be in finance - he had close family connections with the City of London - and the government office he was always expected to take was that of Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Yet Free Trade was introduced into British politics by the Tories in the 1820s and, much more systematically and deliberately, by Sir Robert Peel's conservative government in the 1840s. Once again the lines of descent and succession are far

from clear. The middle years of the nineteenth century, after Peel's government had fallen over the repeal of the Corn Laws, have always been regarded by historians, and were regarded by contemporaries, as years of confusion, transition and reconstruction. Plainly it was some time during that period that the Liberal Party was born - or perhaps a better metaphor would be conceived.

The eighteenth century had not liked parties. Of course, there had been factions but the idea of a 'formed opposition' which opposed the King's government, not just on a particular issue but systematically, was not seen as 'His Majesty's loyal Opposition', the alternative government with a leader paid from public funds, but as something not far removed from traitorous conspiracy. That idea had changed in the early nineteenth century and Peel's government of 1841, built on the party which Peel had carefully nurtured since the Tories had decided they must come to terms with the Great Reform Act of 1832, was in many ways the first genuinely modern government. But, with the repeal of the Corn Laws, the new construct fell to pieces.

The Conservatives, or as they are perhaps better called in this period, the Protectionists, were still the largest party in the Commons but they did not command an absolute majority and, more fatally, all the talented and experienced leaders of the party had left with Peel. The new party leader, Lord Stanley (later 14th Earl of Derby) was in the Lords and the only man of first class talent left to them in the Commons was Benjamin Disraeli, who had no ministerial experience and was, in any case,

unacceptable as a leader to the majority of the party.

The problem was in part Peel himself. Tired of being accused of three times betraying his party - over Catholic Emancipation, Parliamentary Reform and now the Corn Laws - he was adamant that he would never again lead a party or seek office. His close friend, the fourth Earl of Aberdeen, carefully and correctly explained to Queen Victoria, who still considered Peel the ablest man in politics, that strictly speaking Peel no longer had a party because the only 'permanent bond of party ... was the possession of Office, or the pursuit of it' and Peel had renounced both.⁽³⁾

An entirely new combination had to be found. My contention this evening is that it was found, not in 1859 as tradition has it, but in the formation of the Aberdeen coalition in 1852, when a quite deliberate and carefully thought out 'fusion' - the word was repeatedly used - was planned and eventually carried out between the Whig and the Peelite traditions. The new party name was debated and the name 'Liberal' was found to be the only one which really over-arched all traditions. You may ask why this has not been obvious to historians and why the fusion was transferred, not very convincingly, to 1859. The first and most obvious answer is that the *débâcle* which overtook the Aberdeen coalition within two years in the shape of the disastrous Crimean War meant that no one - least of all its supporters - wanted to look back to the Coalition for the party's origins. The second and more surprising answer is that some historians, who have perceived the significance of the Coalition, have shied away from drawing the obvious conclusions. John Vincent, for example,

remarks, almost in passing, 'Aberdeen had clearly laid down the principles of fusion which were to lead to a popular Liberal Party.'⁽⁴⁾ The third answer is that, although the essential fusion took place in 1852, one other element, the party's stance on foreign policy, was not in place until 1859. But let us first look at the evidence for the view that 1852 is the really crucial year.

It is not easy to give exact party strengths in the Commons after 1846. Party discipline was loose, many M.P.'s independent, and party programmes far from clear. The best analysis is still that of Professor Conacher in his The Peelites and the Party System. He calculated that 113 'Free Trade Conservatives' were returned at the 1847 election from which Peel could have reconstructed his party if he had wished.⁽⁵⁾ Since he did not so wish and given that hope of office is the only real cement of party, these men had only two choices - to rejoin Derby or cross the House to the Whigs.

At first a reunion of the two wings of the Conservative party seemed the most likely outcome. many wanted it and Stanley did his best to lure back individuals to remedy the woeful lack of talent in his own ranks. In particular, he wanted Aberdeen back as a potential Foreign Secretary. Aberdeen, his reputation as yet untarnished by the Crimean War, was regarded as a safe pair of hands, who had served both the Duke of Wellington and Peel well in that office. In 1850 Stanley's chances of achieving that looked good. He and Aberdeen had worked well together in the Lords, leading the attack on Palmerston's foreign policy over

the notorious Don Pacifico affair. Don Pacifico was a Portuguese Jew, who happened to have a claim to British citizenship because he had been born in Gibraltar. He had submitted wildly exaggerated claims for losses sustained during what was, undoubtedly, a very nasty anti-Semitic riot in Athens in 1847. For reasons of his own Palmerston had backed him, even to the extent of blockading Piraeus. In the debate, Stanley supplied the wit, Aberdeen the gravitas. How, asked Stanley, did a man who was trading on £30 of borrowed capital, manage to have a house furnished like Aladdin's, 'with full command of the Genii of the ring and the lamp', in particular a lit conjugal of solid mahogany, worth £150.⁽⁶⁾ The world remembers Don Pacifico as a comic character but the debate was deadly serious. It was a full-scale attack by the Protectionists and the Peelites on what they saw as Palmerston's dangerous and opportunistic policy during the great European crisis of 1848-9. The government was defeated by 169 votes to 132 in the Lords. Princess Lieven fainted with delight but her rejoicing was premature. Although Peel joined in the attack, the government rallied its forces and secured a majority of 46 in the Commons. Reunion between Stanley and at least some Peelite peers, led by Aberdeen, seemed likely but a few days later Peel died as the result of the Victorian equivalent of a road accident, when his horse reared and threw him on Constitution Hill. The Peelites generally now looked to Aberdeen as their leader and he felt that he had to negotiate for the group, and not just as an individual.

The only thing that now united the Peelites was loyalty to the memory of Peel and a determination to see his policies

safeguarded, just as loyalty to William Pitt's memory had held the Pittites together after his death in 1806. They sometimes interpreted this in a rather narrow way. Sir James Graham, Peel's former Home Secretary, wrote in the summer of 1852, 'The paramount duty, perhaps the sole remaining duty, of Peel's Friends as a Party is the Defence of his Financial and Commercial Policy.'⁽⁷⁾ In subsequent discussions Graham and Aberdeen agreed that Peel had had no policies on a number of matters which, by 1852, they felt had to be faced. They could only guess what he would have done. But Peel's great achievement had been to restore economic health in the 1840s and they believed he had achieved this by Free Trade.

Until 1852 the Derbyites would not renounce the idea of a return to agricultural protection. Prince Albert, who was in his way a Peelite, was greatly alarmed by the possibility of the spread of what he termed 'a violent spirit' among the working classes, if the Protectionists regained power and re-imposed a duty on corn which would raise the price of bread.⁽⁸⁾ The Court increasingly favoured the idea of a juncture between Whigs and Peelites and I would content (although the opposite case has been argued ⁽⁹⁾) played an active role, indeed went to the limits of its constitutional power in bringing the Aberdeen Coalition into being.

Apart from agricultural protection, the other sensitive issue of the time was religion. Derby made a play for some of the High Church men among the Peelite leaders, including Gladstone, by promising the restoration of Convocation, which had

not met since 1717. The attraction to the High Church party was that this might provide an alternative tribunal to decide matters like the Gorham case, ⁽¹⁰⁾ where they had suffered what they saw as the indignity of an ecclesiastical judgement set aside by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. Aberdeen deplored this use of religious issues for party advantage, fearing that the stirring of old passions could lead to civil war in Ireland.

The 'No Popery' issue in fact torpedoed the first attempt at the Whig-Peelite coalition in February 1851. In 1850 the Pope had announced his intention of conferring territorial titles on Roman Catholic bishops in England and Wales for the first time since the Reformation. The result was an explosion of Protestant anger from a public already alarmed by Romanising tendencies within the Church of England and by Cardinal Wiseman's ill-judged declaration that this was the beginning of the reconversion of England. The public was not reassured by the fact that the Pope was at this time dependent on the support of the French army for his own throne. Russell, who was then Prime Minister, introduced a Bill to make the conferment of such titles illegal. It cost him important Irish support and, after his government had been defeated on another issue in February 1851, it was the final stumbling block in the negotiations between Russell, on the one side, and Aberdeen and Graham, on the other, for a coalition; Aberdeen taking the view that it was a government's duty to calm that kind of public excitement, not to pander to it. The Prince was extremely annoyed and, as late as 1855, reproached Aberdeen for a missed opportunity, which, he believed, had led to many later difficulties.⁽¹¹⁾ Aberdeen himself wrote to a friend that

he expected to be included 'in the list of Popish martyrs'.⁽¹²⁾

The coalition was postponed but not aborted. A year later, in February 1852, Derby took office with the notorious "Who? Who?" ministry of nonentities. Norman Gash in his well-known *Politics in the Age of Peel*⁽¹³⁾ only really revealed to the 20th century what Victorians had known very well - that elections after the Great Reform Act of 1832 were more violent and corrupt than ever before. Parliamentary reform was back on the agenda. Aberdeen himself wrote to a fellow Peelite, the Duke of Newcastle, 'For myself, I must confess that I think our whole system of Representation is attended with so much real corruption, whether in the shape of personal influence, intimidation, or direct venality, that I am by no means reluctant to attempt some change. I should view even the [secret] Ballot itself without much dread, if I did not think it calculated to increase, rather than to diminish the evil.'⁽¹⁴⁾

Despite the corruption, the 1852 election had produced a hung House of Commons. Again definitions of party allegiance are not straightforward but *The Times* calculated that there were 284 Derbyites, 34-50 Peelites and 309 assorted Whigs, radicals and 'Irish Brigade'. But Russell had lost the support of the Irish Brigade over the Ecclesiastical Titles Act and his own estimate of his supporters a little later was 270.⁽¹⁵⁾ No one supposed that Derby's administration could last long. A new political alignment was urgently needed.

Many alternatives were suggested, including the so-called 'Lansdowne project', by which the elderly Lord Lansdowne would

have been brought out of retirement to head a coalition to ward off parliamentary reform, by conceding the form without the substance. Even more astonishing in the light of later history, a conjunction of Palmerston and Disraeli to oppose reform more openly, was a real possibility. At first too, it seemed that Russell might try, as Derby had done before him, to detach individual Peelites, and he came near to success with Sir James Graham.

But I would suggest that it was the discussions and negotiations of the summer of 1852 which produced the alignment between the Whigs and the Peelites, which was the real genesis of the parliamentary liberal party, and that the participants were quite conscious of what they were doing. The accident that the negotiations took place in the middle of the summer, when leading politicians were scattered throughout the United Kingdom and even abroad, had the fortunate result - for the historian - that they were conducted by letter and the evidence preserved.

On 21 July Russell wrote to Aberdeen outlining the political situation as he saw it. Derby's government would depend on two things - encouraging the agricultural interests to look for compensation for Peel's actions and encouraging the Protestants to oppose the Catholics. Neither could be acceptable to the Peelites. They had only three choices - to continue to remain aloof, which would only prolong the political uncertainty; to act in friendly concert with the Whigs but preserve their independence; or join the Whigs in a 'fusion', with or without Richard Cobden, that is, the radical wing of the party. He proposed practical co-operation when Parliament met and asked

Aberdeen to sound out his fellow Peelites, the Duke of Newcastle, William Gladstone and Sidney Herbert.⁽¹⁶⁾

Aberdeen wrote to Newcastle in general commending Russell's proposals. He now had little sympathy with Derby who, he believed, was prepared to sacrifice everything for electoral advantage and quite happy to play the card of religious bigotry, 'pregnant with mischief' for the future.⁽¹⁷⁾ The Whigs and the Peelites agreed on Free Trade and financial policy, were not far apart on education and could probably reach agreement on parliamentary reform.

Newcastle wrote two letters in reply. The first dealt with the immediate political situation but it was the second which tackled the radical question of what 'fusion' really meant. He wrote, 'It strikes me forcibly that with a view to a real fusion of all Liberals in one party the name of Whig as well as Peelite should as far as possible be abandoned. In the eyes of the public names are things and I am convinced that the late Government and its Friends would act wisely if they followed the example of 1832 when we abandoned the unpopular and unmeaning name of Tory and adopted that which at the moment was significant and distinctive - Conservative.' The change of name (in 1834) drew to Peel many who would not have identified themselves with the Tory opposition. Many who would never 'join the Whigs' would join an administration which included leading Whigs. If a new 'Liberal Party' was to be constructed and that was what the country wanted, it must be on a new basis and not simply a matter of one party joining another.⁽¹⁸⁾ Aberdeen agreed and the

correspondence was then sent on to others, including Gladstone.

Gladstone was more difficult to convince. He replied that he was not 'unconditionally committed against any alliance or fusion' but he did not feel the time was ripe for it.⁽¹⁹⁾ He disapproved of many of the things the Derbyites were doing - and blamed Disraeli for them - but he did not feel that the Whigs had a much better track record on either the economy or religious issues.

Russell made difficulties about giving up the name 'Whig'. The name of the new party became a matter of great importance - later parties have had the same problem! The title 'Whig' presented no problem to men like Graham, who had entered politics as a Whig, but Aberdeen felt it would smack of disloyalty to his first mentor, the Younger Pitt. In vain Russell argued that William Pitt had been 'as tenacious' of the name as Charles James Fox himself and had called himself a Whig even after his juncture with the Tories during the French revolutionary wars.⁽²⁰⁾ Aberdeen contended for the term 'Conservative progress'. He wrote to Goulburn, 'I think it clear that all Government in these times must be a Government of progress; conservative progress, if you please; but we can no more be stationary, than reactionary. I do not know that there is any great reason to fear Democracy at this moment. Perhaps there is even less than at any former period.' Whig and Tory had become 'titles without meaning' and even 'Conservative and Radical' were growing to be 'cant terms'.⁽²¹⁾ Russell was still reluctant to give up the title 'Whig'. 'It has the convenience,' he wrote tartly 'of expressing in one syllable what conservative Liberal expresses in seven, &

Whiggism in two syllables means what Conservative Progress means in another seven.⁽²²⁾ (Russell could not count!) The debate went on for some time. It was not a trivial matter. All the participants now felt that they were creating something new. Although the exact mix varied with the individual, all now seem to have been thinking of fusion and not of a mere coalition.

This was of the utmost importance when the new alignment was put to the test when Derby's government finally resigned in December 1852. Aberdeen agreed to serve as prime minister since Russell was still unacceptable to the Irish and to some sections of his own party. But the disparity in party strength in the Commons was great. According to Russell's own calculations, the Whigs and radicals together numbered 270, the Peelites only 30. Yet Aberdeen insisted upon, and got, parity in the Cabinet for the Peelites. In a Cabinet of 13, there were 6 Peelites, 6 Whigs and one radical. It is true that, during the earlier discussions in 1851, Russell had insisted that offices must be allocated according to merit and not in proportion to voting strength but the Whigs, unlike the Derbyites, had many talented and experienced men who might reasonably feel aggrieved at being left out. This could surely only be justified on the grounds that this was not an ordinary coalition but the fusion of two major and equal traditions, the Peelite and the Whig, which had been discussed in such detail in the summer. The inclusion of the one radical, William Molesworth, strengthens the case for saying that this was the first Liberal Cabinet for, while it is true that Molesworth was a landowner, not easily distinguishable socially

from his colleagues, he held 'advanced' political views, including advocacy of the secret ballot. The new Cabinet blended Peelite financial rectitude and competence (where the Whigs had been notoriously weak) with the Whig willingness to put through practical reforms on a broad front, with a dash of Benthamite radicalism. Many leading politicians, including the new Prime Minister, had read Benthamite theories in the 1830s, not with any sense that they were dangerous leftist nostrums, but as interesting possible solutions to pressing problems.

No less an authority than Walter Bagehot believed that the Aberdeen Coalition was potentially a great reforming government. It was, he said, 'the ablest we have had' since the Great Reform Act and 'eminently adapted for every sort of difficulty save the one it had to meet' i.e. the Crimean War.⁽²³⁾ A similar conclusion was reached by Professor J.B. Conacher in his massive *The Aberdeen Coalition*.⁽²⁴⁾ Until the government was blown off course by the Eastern crisis, it showed remarkable solidarity and activity. Reading the same mass of public and private documents, I would not dissent.

Members of the Coalition remarked that, in domestic affairs, the government was harmonious from the beginning. The youngest member of the Cabinet, the Duke of Argyll, recalling their first meeting on 29 December 1852 wrote, 'taken together, it was a body of men who, in personal experience, spanned the whole political history of the country from the days of Pitt and Fox ... it embraced every school of politics which had been of any distinction for more than half a century. Yet there remained absolutely nothing to divide these men, so far as any living



political questions were concerned. Gladstone too believed that the cabinet never showed its 'dual origins'. (25)

The first year was largely taken up with Gladstone's reforming budget. The matter was urgent because the income tax, always a deeply unpopular tax, still regarded as a temporary expedient for emergency use, re-introduced by Peel in 1842, needed new parliamentary sanction. Gladstone determined to initiate a complete overhaul of the British fiscal system. It was later said that Gladstone's real objection to the Crimean war sprang from the fact that it destroyed his attempt to put the whole fiscal system on a new base. Although meant as a sneer, not only was there some truth in it but it would seem to have been an eminently reasonable reaction. The chance did not come again.

The urgency of the Budget meant that other matters, including parliamentary reform, had to be postponed until the next session but some important measures were passed. The India Act broke new ground by providing that entry into the elite Indian Civil Service was to be by competitive examination instead of by patronage. But for the outbreak of the Crimean War similar legislation would have been introduced into the Home Civil Service, based on the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of November 1853.

Palmerston, in the unaccustomed role of Home Secretary, secured important penal and health reforms, including the first Clean Air Act for London. Technical, but important, legal reforms were carried through, including the setting up of the

Charity Commissioners.

One of the greatest losses was the projected educational reforms. Aberdeen himself had an almost Benthamite belief in the power of education to transform society. As a Scottish landowner, who had also administered the Irish estates of his step-son, Lord Abercorn, he attributed the gap in the prosperity of those two kingdoms to the differences in their public education systems, highly developed in Scotland, almost non-existent in Ireland. Measures, which would have foreshadowed Forster's Act of 1870, were considered but fell victim to religious and sectarian struggles, which delayed them until the Crimean War aborted almost the whole legislative programme. The reform of higher education did survive. Russell had set up a Royal Commission in 1850 to enquire into the state of Oxford and Cambridge. Aberdeen was an old hand at university reform, having sat on the Royal Commission which enquired into the Scottish universities in 1826-7. (That Commission had never heard of the idea of university autonomy, laying down rules even for the timing of Greek classes.) The long-overdue reform of Oxford and of Cambridge was forced through in 1854 and 1856 respectively.

The greatest legislative casualty of the War was parliamentary reform itself. There had been one major dissenting voice in the Cabinet, that of Palmerston, who at one point resigned but he had returned and the legislation had been drafted for the 1854 session. When war broke out, Aberdeen would have gone on with the measure, holding that the demands of war, including increased taxation, actually strengthened the case for enlarging the franchise, thus coming close to one of the original

liberal arguments for representative government. It was Russell who lost his nerve and as leader of the Commons refused to take the risk.

nevertheless, in what they achieved, never mind in what they projected, the Coalition had a claim to be regarded as an important reforming government. Many of the measures were not taken up again until Gladstone's government of 1868. The Crimean War came, to use a metaphor applied to another reforming period, like a frost on blossoming trees.

In foreign policy there had not been the same harmony as on domestic questions. When the Eastern crisis became threatening the Whigs tended to be the hawks, the Peelites the doves. When the Coalition was formed, those two old antagonists, Palmerston and Aberdeen, were remarkably agreed. Both thought that there was a danger of war. Both thought that they must arm against it. But the war they expected was with the France of Napoleon III, who seemed likely to retain power only by emulating the exploits of his uncle, Napoleon I. Palmerston quickly adjusted to the idea of fighting Russia instead. Aberdeen did not. To Aberdeen, whose early experience of diplomacy had been in the formation of the last coalition against Napoleon I, Russia was an important component in the stability and balance of Europe and, rightly handled, no threat to Britain. To Palmerston, who had tasted the fruits of popular adulation for defying the despots of Europe (as the public saw it) in the crisis of 1848-9, Russia represented the forces of reaction. Palmerston certainly did not seek war, but like Russell and unlike Aberdeen, he was not averse to the

use of threats. Palmerston had discovered, perhaps partly accidentally, in the late 1840s, the secret of retaining popular support at home by representing Britain as the champion of liberal causes on the continent - although his policy was in reality cautious and flexible to the point of being opportunist. Here the Peelites did represent a different tradition.

The Aberdeen government fell in January 1855 on what amounted to a motion of censure on their conduct of the Crimean War. Did the fusion of 1852 survive the break up of the government? Aberdeen persuaded four of the Peelites, Gladstone, Graham, Herbert and the Duke of Argyle to join the new government Palmerston was forming, although only Argyle stayed in it for any length of time. Aberdeen's letters over the next few years show clearly that he felt it vital for the future of the country to keep the fusion, or as he now called it, the Liberal party, in being. Moreover, he was convinced that Russell must lead it until Gladstone was ready. This decision required almost super-human self-control. All his cabinet colleagues were agreed that it was Russell who had let them down and allowed them to be defeated. As Graham put, by refusing to resist J.A. Roebuck's motion, Russell had not only run away from the castle under siege but had left the postern gate open as he went.⁽²⁶⁾ Nevertheless, Aberdeen kept on terms with him for the sake of party unity.

Gladstone himself came very near to rejoining the Conservatives. As we have seen he actually voted with them on the motion of confidence in June 1859. Earlier Aberdeen and Herbert had repeatedly intervened to dissuade Gladstone from burning his boats and throwing in his lot irrevocably with

Derby.⁽²⁷⁾

Ironically, the issue which finally persuaded Gladstone to break with Derby and join Palmerston in 1859 was Italian unification on which, by modern standard, Aberdeen had always been illiberal, that is to say, he believed that Italian loyalties were local and that there was no real demand among the Italian people for unification. Italy was the great issue of the summer of 1859. War had broken out in April. Gladstone and Palmerston were agreed, although for different reasons, that Austria must relinquish her influence in Italy. Only a united Italy would be able to resist the substitution of French for Austrian influence. Realpolitik suggested the same course as that sympathy for Italian national aspirations, which Gladstone and Palmerston shared with many Englishmen of their class.

Perhaps Peelite and Whig/Radical views on Europe only finally coalesced in 1859. perhaps, as John Vincent argues, the creation of a Liberal party in the country took place over decades (as did the creation of the Conservative party, as it moved from the days of Derby to those of Disraeli and Salisbury). But I would submit that the quite conscious and deliberate marrying of the two great traditions, the Peelite and the Whig, by politicians who were well aware of what they were doing, in the summer and autumn of 1852, was the real genesis of the Liberal party of the late nineteenth century.

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