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## Government and society in England and Wales, 1750–1914

PAT THANE

The theme of this chapter is the manner in which Government influenced the lives of citizens of England and Wales, their behaviour and conditions of life according to which principles and with what effects. A central assumption – widely shared for a substantial portion of the period, most fully developed in the ideas and actions of Peel and Gladstone, though with earlier roots, and most dominant from the 1840s to the 1870s – was that the government's role was at most strictly limited, that it not only should not but could not determine the structure and working of society. Rather its role was to provide a firmly established and clearly understood framework within which society could very largely run itself.

Even in the mid-Victorian period the reality of government action did not wholly match this ideal, but it was widely enough shared at all social levels for government transgression of it long to require justification against challenges. It had distinctive institutional effects. In contrast with most other societies of the period in England and Wales, many of the functions performed by central government elsewhere were, throughout the period, performed by groups of self-governing citizens either on an elective, but unpaid, official basis, as in the various institutions of local government, or through voluntary associations. Though Britain certainly possessed highly effective central government institutions, unlike other European countries she did not develop in the nineteenth century a strong bureaucratic stratum with powerful interests of its own, a strong set of popular expectations of the role of the state or a sense of popular identification with it. Victorian central government involved itself in the lives of its citizens in many ways and had a clear vision of its role, but its methods of, for example, taxing and policing the population were, compared with other societies of the time, indirect and discreet. A range of buffer institutions, both official and voluntary, developed between this

central state and the citizen such that by the 1880s the only agent of the central state whom the provincial citizen could regularly expect to encounter was the benign post office clerk.

Such a system of government was both a product and a reinforcement of a relatively homogeneous and stable society. England in the later eighteenth century had the advantage of being linguistically and geographically far more homogeneous than other European states. After the Act of Union Scotland was increasingly integrated into the British whole. Improved roads, postal communications, an expanding press furthered this integration. The system of government did not emerge without challenge and Victorian society was by no means free from conflict, though compared with much of continental Europe tensions were muted and contained. The flexibility provided by a system of government which was not rigidly centralised or bureaucratized left space for negotiation and rapid adaptation, within limits, in periods of conflict or crisis, such as war.

This approach to government emerged from the somewhat different circumstances of the eighteenth century, and from the 1880s the visible power of the central state grew, as did demands for further growth, although the dominant ideas of the immediately preceding period retained significant force until at least 1914. The state in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries went, as it had in previous times, through a continuing process of change and adaptation, not usefully characterised as progress. What was the nature of these changes and how did they come about?

## 1

Characterisation of the eighteenth-century state is taking on a new but yet not wholly distinct shape in a period which historians are at last bringing excitingly to life. Current interpretations range from its description as: 'an *ancien régime* state, dominated politically, culturally and ideologically by the three pillars of an early modern social order: monarchy, aristocracy, church'<sup>1</sup> to emphasis not only upon its decidedly powerful character but also upon its increasing accommodation to structural change (including rapid population growth, the capitalisation of agriculture and industrialisation) and to the

<sup>1</sup> Publicity handout for J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688-1832* (Cambridge, 1985), quoted in Linda Colley, 'The Politics of Eighteenth-Century British History', *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (1986), p. 369 n. 26.

associated, changing needs and demands of assertive social groups among the prosperous and confident gentry, financiers and other business people, and among the lower orders.

New interpretations are reactions against an older perception of the eighteenth-century state as limited in ambitions and activities, such that 'the work of the British government was virtually restricted to preserving the constitution (which meant doing nothing in home affairs) and conducting foreign policy';<sup>2</sup> domestic affairs (such as maintenance of law and order, relief of the poor) being seen, in this view, as largely delegated to the local responsibility of landowning elites, in contrast to their conduct by armies, police forces and bureaucracies as in continental autocracies.

It has long been hard to understand how so modest a state could so effectively have achieved victory in a succession of eighteenth-century wars, extended its empire (if with a major loss in North America), acquired extraordinary economic and political power in international terms and maintained domestic harmony in a period of considerable structural change. Assessing the exact nature and extent of the activities of the eighteenth-century state is complicated by the lack of good institutional histories, for example of the influence of the crown or of the House of Lords. But it is clear that in the eighteenth century Parliaments met more frequently and for longer periods than before 1688 and were increasingly, as the century went on, considering more items of national domestic legislation than before, in addition to the local and private bills with which its time has previously been assumed to have been absorbed; that the army was trained and dispersed with the maintenance of order at home at least as much in mind as winning victory abroad (with considerable success on both counts); and (an important indicator and reinforcement of its power) the British state could extract more taxation, more regressive in its incidence, whilst arousing less opposition from its citizens than could its more openly authoritarian European peers. In the 1760s Britain succeeded in appropriating about 20 per cent of the nation's output in taxation, almost twice the comparable French figure.<sup>3</sup>

The amount of revenue which a government can raise through taxation strongly influences the range of activities it can undertake without risking debilitating debt. The means whereby the British government maximised its revenue through taxation, in comparison with its major

<sup>2</sup> Colley, 'The Politics of Eighteenth-Century British History', pp. 372–3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359.

European rival, is instructive about its methods of government and its relationship with society more generally. Between the mid-eighteenth century and 1810 Britain was able more effectively and flexibly to appropriate an increasing share of rising national income even than Napoleon following his administrative and institutional modernisation of the French state. Yet taxation was a cause of major political crisis in France as it was not in Britain. In Britain direct taxes, including land taxes, were paid by all social groups with no privileged exemptions; they were paid by landowners who passed them on to tenant farmers, labourers, artisans and other tenants in rents and other charges, a form of tax payment which was 'invisible' to the lower orders as direct taxes were not to the independent, *taille*-paying French peasantry. They were levied and assessments made locally by unpaid representatives of the taxpaying gentry and magistracy. This amateur administration minimised corruption and evaded the resentment aroused by the professional collectors backed by the more openly severe legal powers prevalent in France. It was a method of amateur, decentralised but effective administration widely employed by the British state.

Indirect taxes were levied on a wider range of goods in France, directly upon the household by officials with strict powers of enforcement, at levels of incidence which varied regionally. In Britain also officials with strict enforcement powers levied customs and excise duties, which provoked skirmishes on occasion and frequent evasion. But the tax was upon a narrower range of goods, was nationally uniform and levied not upon the purchaser but upon the manufacturer or importer, who passed it on to the consumer for whom, again, the tax was 'invisible' and involved no direct contact with officialdom. The result was a higher tax yield in Britain than in France, efficiently collected by means which strictly contained potential points of conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Nor did British governments risk trouble over matters of taxation by overstepping the limits of consent in this highly sensitive area. The income tax, introduced in 1799, to help pay for the war, which evolved during the war into a reasonably efficient and equitable tax, was summarily ended by Parliament in 1816, against the preference

<sup>4</sup> P. Mathias and P. O'Brien, 'Taxation in Britain and France, 1715-1810: A Comparison of the Social and Economic Incidence of Taxes Collected for the Central Government', *Journal of European Economic History*, 5 (1976), pp. 601-50.

of the Treasury and of government leaders, but following pressure from landed and other monied taxpayers. It obliged all with incomes above £200 p.a. to declare their income and was regarded as a serious encroachment upon liberty, acceptable in time of war but not of peace.

By the mid-eighteenth century, indeed, England had developed an apparatus of central government comparable with most European states. In addition to the effectiveness of the standing army and of the fiscal system, though it acknowledged no regulatory role over the economy, through the legal system it was the enforcer of business contracts and through private acts of Parliament sanctioned enclosures, dock building, turnpike trusts and canal companies. The mercantilist inheritance remained powerful: British overseas trade was protected and promoted. A complex range of tariffs and prohibitions protected production, notably of corn, timber and sugar. Under a series of ancient statutes labour mobility might be curtailed, wages fixed and crafts protected through regulation of apprenticeship. Unlike in most other European countries the indigent were relieved within the framework of a national poor law, financed through local taxes (rates) and administered very largely in accordance with local needs and preferences.

There are strong indications, then, that the eighteenth-century British state had the will and the capacity to influence the lives of its citizens in a variety of ways, which may explain the increased appetite of members of the landed elite for official employment later in the century. However, it did so by methods markedly less visible than those of its European counterparts, operating through channels which were decentralised though closely linked with central government, and it showed some sensitivity to the dangers of overstepping too far the limits of consent. Compared with other eighteenth-century states, England was unusual in the combination of strength and liberality of its government, the two qualities being mutually reinforcing. The roots of this combination lay in England's long tradition of unusually strong royal government and, compared with much of continental Europe, somewhat weaker feudal nobility, combined with an equally strong indigenous tradition of attachment to 'liberty', popularly believed to be embodied and upheld above all in the common law and by Parliament.

This strong central state was associated with an unusual range of 'free institutions', official and voluntary, enabling local communities to achieve a high degree of self-government within the broad

the vote - through the similar intervention of non-voters in parliamentary elections in which voting was not secret, even the lower orders could express their views and exert some influence. As, still more effectively, could disaffected sections of the gentry and the middling classes aided by their capacity to use an expanding press, to organise public meetings, to vote for and to petition Parliament.

The country was governed through a process of negotiation in which, of course, the sides were strictly unequal and the poorest played least part, but which could avoid severe conflict because the rulers were not wholly cut off from popular aspirations nor the population at any level without hope of redress or the capacity to express grievances. Eighteenth-century society was not 'democratic' in any meaningful sense, but nor was that of the 1900s; what is not plain is that those outside the limited circles directly able to influence government were necessarily or always *more* excluded from negotiation over matters of crucial importance to their lives than they were to become, although major changes occurred in the channels and processes of negotiation.

The combination of strength and overall control by central government linked with decentralised liberal institutions enshrining a strong sense of local community and of the duty to safeguard individual rights within that community created a distinctive type of *ancien régime* state, which was neither a simple expression of social relations, nor an accidental product of historical accumulation, but a partially autonomous creation operating according to clear and widely understood principles.

## II

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, largely in response to the pressures of demographic and economic change and of war, successive governments set about the task of making central government more professional, more efficient and, in relation to the economy, in particular under Pitt, more liberal. Steps were taken to reduce the role of influence and patronage in the civil service. The Treasury was reorganised, sinecures reduced, a new career structure initiated. The first moves were made towards a new conception of 'service' which gave salience to responsibility and efficiency. Government placed more reliance upon expertise and greater specialisation of work in



departments. The Treasury began to emerge as the department crucial to central control of administrative efficiency and financial accountability. The civil service remained small and change was gradual but it became better suited to carrying greater power and responsibility delegated by Parliament.

Associated with the changes was the belief on the part of government that political liberalisation and constitutional reform were unnecessary and undesirable. Rather it was thought that efficient, clear-sighted central government promoting equitable and expedient laws could best promote the nation's prosperity, international position and internal stability. It might effectively and justifiably be led by men of landed background since land, though increasingly diversified and commercialised, stood at the core of capitalist expansion and landowners recognised that governing responsibility lay with them.

The period of the French wars, from 1793, demonstrated the effectiveness of the central state apparatus in its successful conduct of the war administration and of war finance. The costs of war, its organisational demands and, not least, the fear in elite circles of the spread of the revolutionary contagion from France brought about changes in the structure and activities of government, difficult though these influences are to disentangle from those of the significant economic, demographic and social changes of the twenty-two years of war. Most clearly, fears of political upheaval drew the government into a more overtly interventionist role than was customary in peacetime with the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1794 and 1798, the Treason and Sedition Act, 1795, the Unlawful Oaths Act, 1797, the Corresponding Societies Act, 1799, the Stamp Duties Act, 1796, restricting circulation of the press, all designed to prevent or silence organised opposition. In the absence of systematic comparisons with other eighteenth-century wars, however, it is not clear that the government did impose stricter controls in this war. It was, for example, standard practice to suspend Habeas Corpus in wartime.

Social questions continued to be addressed at central and local level in wartime. Demographic pressure combined with rising food prices caused a crisis for the rural poor law, for which parishes and justices devised a variety of responses in accordance with local pressures and needs, most commonly parochial employment of paupers, or a labour rate, or variants on the Speenhamland provision (initiated in 1795) of relief in proportion to size of family and the price of bread. In the prosperous war years landowners could, more willingly than they

were always inclined, afford to acknowledge the rights of the poor to subsistence.<sup>8</sup>

At parliamentary level investigative select committees proliferated, some in response to organised pressures, producing some legislation, notably the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act in 1802. Equally notable was the inability to enforce the latter attempt to improve the conditions of cotton factory children. Enforcement was placed in the hands of local magistrates and clergy, provided that they were not themselves mill owners, with exiguous effects. Effective enforcement was impossible through existing machinery in the absence of consent from powerful groups materially affected by the legislation. Government was unwilling to incur disapprobation by developing new machinery for enforcement except under urgent pressure, which was, in this case, absent.

Public order remained a problem after the war, from the Pentridge rising of 1815 to Peterloo in 1819, fuelled by postwar unemployment, demographic pressure, the ebbs and flows of a still unstable industrialism, fluctuations in the economically dominant agricultural sector and the effects of a rapid, government-guided deflation which appeared unduly to favour the rich. Habeas Corpus was once more suspended in 1817; the Six Acts followed Peterloo. At the local level justices mollified expressions of discontent where they could, applied summary punishment where they could not; maintained, with the parishes, a flexible if never generous poor relief policy; encouraged the increased use of imprisonment of offenders; and sought to pacify or to destroy the centres where the lower orders made the associational links which could turn to discussion of grievances: beer places, fairs, Guy Fawkes celebrations, prize fights, footraces, cockfights were more strictly policed, controlled, pacified or banned, though not everywhere or without opposition.<sup>9</sup> The other side of the controls was the further official and unofficial encouragement of virtue through, for example, the formation by local social leaders of voluntary institutions (such as Sunday schools or friendly societies) for those below them, attempting, not always successfully, to substitute 'rational' for turbulent recreation, channels for exhortation to stability, responsibility, sobriety and hard work.

Against this background, following the temporary derangement brought about by the war, the moves of Pitt and his contemporaries

<sup>8</sup> Mandler, 'Poor Law', pp. 134-5.

<sup>9</sup> R. D. Storch, ed., *Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth-Century England* (1982).

towards more professional, and economically liberal, if politically authoritarian, government were carried forward by the 'liberal Tory' governments of the years after 1815. Underlying and promoting change in this direction was a changing approach to the role and theory of government which achieved increasing support in aristocratic, gentry, government and business circles in and out of Parliament. Its theme was further reconstruction of the powers of Parliament, executive and party with the aim of reducing them to the provision of a framework within which individuals and free institutions could operate with maximum safety and freedom. Government should maintain but modernise and streamline its irreducible public order and foreign policy functions whilst stripping away the great pre-modern weight of intrusive legislation, custom and regulation especially in relation to economic activity and the remaining bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption. In their place should be constructed mechanisms which would emulate and assist, or at least not impede, the automatic mechanism of the 'natural order' which was believed to lie beneath and to be impeded in its beneficial working by the unnecessary superstructure created over the centuries. Thus liberated individuals and the economy would be freed to achieve optimal fulfilment of their potential. Society would be freed from the shackles of customary rights, the elite of their responsibility for enforcing them. In this view the maximisation of the freedom of the individual to enjoy his property and the development of his intellect and aptitudes in a framework provided by minimal, efficient and undemocratic government was more important, a more certain guarantor of 'liberty', than the extension of political rights currently being demanded by constitutional reformers.

The theory of government could be and was sustained by selective reading of political economy and utilitarian thought. Equally importantly in a period when political and religious thought were a unity in most minds and evangelicalism was becoming a major medium through which members of powerful social groups constructed their understanding of a changing world (as Methodism was for many of the lower orders), evangelicals could equate the 'natural order' with the workings of Providence.<sup>10</sup> Moral and material rewards would come to individuals and to society as a whole in return for the exercise

<sup>10</sup> Boyd Hilton, 'The Role of Providence in Evangelical Social Thought', in D. Beales and G. Best, eds., *History, Society and the Churches* (Cambridge, 1985).

of responsible independent activity. Human constructs like constitutions risked interference with this natural order which provided the only secure basis for social stability and progress. Such a theory competed with older ideas of rights and responsibilities and even those who embraced it were not in agreement as to the desirable role of central government. Hence the boundaries between the permissible activities of the strong central state and those of free institutions and individuals, between public and private spheres of activity, were at the core of political contention throughout the nineteenth century as the state went through the long process of adaptation.

The repeal in 1815 of the ancient Assize of Bread, whereby prices of bread and ale could be controlled through the courts, following a select committee recommendation that 'more benefit is likely to result from the effects of free competition',<sup>11</sup> was accompanied by the introduction of the Corn Law in the same year, protecting a powerful economic interest. Interest in constitutional reform was limited in government circles, but the Sturges Bourne Select Vestries Acts of 1818 and 1819 were moves towards the equation of political participation with property rights. Whereas previously all ratepayers had held votes of equal weight, where select vestries were formed ratepayers were granted between one and six votes according to weight of property.

It was in the 1820s that a strategy of constructing a minimal but firm regulatory state within which a free economy and free individuals could flourish clearly took precedence in government circles. The movement towards liberalisation of the economy was most evident under the Tory governments of the mid to late 1820s. Huskisson, Peel and their colleagues operated in the belief that it was both useless and immoral for governments to try to rescue economic victims whether they were bankrupt capitalists or unemployed handweavers (in 1826 Peel refused financial relief to companies which had crashed). It was useless because the government's effective powers of intervention were extremely limited; immoral because economic actors who failed were deemed not to have exercised conscience in their commercial dealings. Rather, by dismantling ancient restrictions on trade, reducing the range of protective duties, beginning the construction of a system for regulating the conduct of banking and the supply of money, enabling joint stock companies to be formed by, in 1825,

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: a Social History of Diet from 1815 to the Present Day* (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 111.

ideals of self-determination, advancement, improvement, innovation. Though not hostile to the liberal preference that such guidance should be by voluntary means, they instinctively preferred extension of the sphere of government: 'The times required a bold lead from the liberal aristocracy to march all the classes together along the road of spiritual and material improvement.'<sup>15</sup> But the Whigs were as divided as everyone else as to how extensive the sphere of government should be and constrained by the strength of liberal forces.

Within these broad principles they promoted constitutional reform in 1832. The Act of 1832 defined more clearly than ever before the distinction between those who were and were not sanctioned to wield power and did so entirely in terms of property ownership, entrenching the power of landed wealth whilst acknowledging new sources of power. They further promoted reconstruction of essential institutions of government. In particular the serious delays in the higher courts, due to confusions over procedure and a chaotic appeals system, were dealt with by restructuring the Privy Council and House of Lords appeals procedures; and legislation in 1832 and 1833 sought to establish clear and simplified rules of pleading at common law.

Althorp at the Treasury until 1835 pursued policies of economic liberalism indistinguishable from those of the Tories. However, it has been convincingly argued that the positive commitment of the Whigs to social intervention has been underestimated.<sup>16</sup> Social questions were investigated with unprecedented thoroughness. The Royal Commission overtook the select committee as the chief method of official investigation. Forty-one were established between 1832 and 1841. They were chosen and appointed by ministers and not, like select committees, by proponents of parliamentary bills, and they could include members from outside Parliament. They could investigate in greater depth than a select committee; sittings were not confined to parliamentary terms and staff could be appointed for investigations additional to the oral evidence of witnesses.

What remains unclear is the precise role of the Whigs in relation to members of Royal Commissions, pressure groups, energetic reformers of the kind of Edwin Chadwick – to all of the forces commonly given greater credit for the social measures of the 1830s. Who influenced whom? The Whigs appointed the Royal Commission, used

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

their patronage to appoint Chadwick and others to administrative posts and the Whig leadership supported most of the social reforms enacted before 1841. Whig ambitions almost certainly went beyond the rather limited outcomes. Two areas of action illustrate the limitations they faced.

State entry into the field of working-class education was a Whig ambition, but it was unprecedented, encroached upon the entrenched interests of Anglicans and Nonconformists and was controversial both on grounds of cost and of its presumed social effects. A succession of Whig bills to foster national education failed to pass both Houses of Parliament. The most that could be achieved was from 1833 an annual grant of £20,000, for school building alone, administered by the religious voluntary societies who continued to take responsibility for the content of education without subordination to government control. The Factory Act of 1833, hastily put together and much influenced by the recommendations of Edwin Chadwick, was much modified in Parliament by mill owner pressure. It restricted the hours of work and attempted to enforce school attendance among mill workers under the age of fourteen. It was largely ineffective, but probably the most that could have been achieved in the climate of the 1830s. It was notable for introducing a new species of agent of the central state and a new method of enforcement: the inspectorate. The inspectors were centrally appointed, specialist, professional civil servants, responsible to the Home Office with, initially, the powers of justices to enter factory premises and enforce the law. Their appointment was an attempt to create an enforcement mechanism independent of customary institutions. It was a cumbersome mechanism - another brainchild of Chadwick - and there were only four of them, covering vast districts (one for the whole of Lancashire and Yorkshire), with too few and poorly paid assistants and the act was widely evaded. The inspectors were reluctant to use their judicial powers due to the opposition they aroused, hence their withdrawal in 1844. More effective enforcement would have faced opposition on grounds of costs, and opposition in principle to state intrusion in industry and upon the liberty of mill owners, if in the interest of that of their workers. Inspection was a method of enforcement and supervision of state legislation which continued to be employed with gradually increasing effectiveness into the twentieth century. Inspectorates with varying powers were appointed to supervise or enforce regulation of the poor law, public health, prisons, mines, public health and schools over

the following twenty years. They were an important growth point in the civil service, providing Whitehall with its first provincial arms of administration.

Education and factory reform were new areas of state action. In 1834 the Whigs sought to reconstruct an older one with the Poor Law Amendment Act. This they could do more effectively in view of the closer congruence of the principles underlying the reform with the ideas coming to dominate thinking in ruling circles. It was a further step in ensuring the primacy of property over customary rights and enforcing individual self-responsibility, withdrawing in principle the right of the able-bodied labourer to sustenance and the responsibility of the propertied for him or her. The indigent and helpless retained such rights provided that their pauperisation was indeed judged to be no fault of their own, due to drink or other misbehaviour, and that they had no immediate family able to support them. Along with new (if long proposed and debated) principles of relief was introduced a new administrative structure. The role of magistrates in the poor relief system was reduced, enabling them thereafter to concentrate their efforts more fully upon maintenance of public order. The vestries were replaced with 'unions' of parishes presided over by Boards of Guardians who were elected triennially by ratepayers, allowed multiple votes on the property-related scale introduced in the Sturges Bourne Acts. The act introduced the first nationally uniform and nationwide system of elected local government in Britain.

The guardians appointed the paid officials of the poor law and were responsible for local administration within guidelines established by legislation and administrative orders from a new Central Poor Law Commission composed of three administrators whose membership included Chadwick (who had again been largely responsible for the proposals on which the act was based) and supervised by a regional inspectorate.

The new poor law faced opposition from some landowners still supportive of customary rights and stronger opposition from defenders of local autonomy. The latter became muted as it became clear that a certain local flexibility was permissible, indeed unavoidable if serious crisis was to be avoided. Local poor law practice indeed remained highly variable for the remainder of the century. Labouring people opposed it more fiercely, especially in the north, where implementation, from 1837, coincided with economic downturn. This further loss of customary rights, sanctioned by a reformed Parliament, was

an important contributor to the demands for more wholesale reform of Parliament embodied in Chartism.<sup>17</sup>

In the eyes of many (though not all, there were acute divisions of opinion on all of them) of their supporters the education, factory and poor law measures were complementary means of providing a framework within which individuals could become self-supporting actors within the natural order. Educated people freed from degraded work lives and without expectation of community support except for reasons beyond their personal control would become independent contributors to and beneficiaries of increasing abundance. In the cases both of elementary education and factory reform central supervision became somewhat more effective over time. By 1850 the education grant totalled £189,000 p.a., by 1860, £724,000 p.a., supervised from 1839 by a new department, the education committee of the Privy Council. It was not, however, a history of smooth administrative growth.

This enlargement of the public sphere which gathered pace in the 1830s has been described as a 'revolution in government',<sup>18</sup> carried forward by a new type of bureaucrat, brought in from outside the civil service, often from a professional, middle-class, provincial background, said often to have been inspired by the ideas of Jeremy Bentham. Such new men were indeed prominent. Edwin Chadwick, lawyer by training, influential in the construction of the new poor law and of the Factory Act of 1833, public health activist in the 1840s and thereafter a tireless if less influential supporter of reforming causes until his death, was the archetype. At least as influential was James Kay-Shuttleworth (originally James Phillips Kay) initially a medical man, from 1840 secretary to the Privy Council committee for education and until 1849 a remarkable force behind the expansion of state provision for education; Leonard Horner, one of the first factory inspectors; William Farr, another medical man, from 1837 the first Registrar General of Births, Marriages and Deaths, who used his role to investigate the major causes of disease and death and to stress the importance of healthy 'human capital' for a thriving economy.

These men, and others like them, were indeed different in experience and, generally, age from other recruits to the civil service, though like others they were appointed by patronage. Their approach to their role was specialist and professional and also more assertive than was

<sup>17</sup> Mandler, 'Poor Law', p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> O. Macdonagh, 'The Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Government: A Re-appraisal', *Historical Journal*, 1 (1958).



civil service custom. They assumed, and were allowed by ministers to do so, a role of advising on policy, where possible making as well as administering it and of advocating it publicly – theirs was a very public role. They had an historically unique opportunity due to the demand in the 1830s for new areas of expertise in new spheres of government action which the existing service could not provide at the level required, at a time when ministers could still appoint by patronage the advisers they wished. They flourished in a temporary atmosphere of encouragement of such initiatives; though, as already suggested, their precise relationship with the Whigs remains unclear.

They were neither rigid dogmatists seeking to implement a prescribed and unified set of theories, Benthamite or otherwise, though selected elements of Benthamism as of other contemporary theoretical currents plainly influenced them to varying degrees as they did most of those actively concerned about social and economic issues in this period. Nor have historians interpreted them in such crude terms, whatever some commentaries might imply. As Macdonagh and others have recognised, they were influenced in their fields of action by a blend of ideals, ideas and imperatives previously held or pressed on them by discoveries in the course of their professional and subsequent administrative experience.<sup>19</sup> They have been, however, described as initiating a 'self-expanding administrative process',<sup>20</sup> which, acquiring its own momentum, carried state intervention forward despite ideological and political resistance through the middle years of the nineteenth century. Macdonagh proposed a five stage model of such growth: first, public exposure of an intolerable social evil; secondly, legislation to deal with it, which due to inexperience was ineffective; thirdly, the introduction of more effective procedures of enforcement or detection, which continually revealed new problems; fourthly, recognition that occasional parliamentary legislation was inadequate and continuous regulation was required in the light of growing and changing experience; finally, discretionary initiative was given to executive officers to deal with problems as they were continually revealed.<sup>21</sup>

Plainly, administration and government have independent dynamics broadly of this kind, though equally plainly they do not operate

<sup>19</sup> O. Macdonagh, *Early Victorian Government* (1977). U. R. Q. Henriques, *Before the Welfare State: Social Administration in Early Victorian England* (1979), pp. 259-66.

<sup>20</sup> R. Lambert, 'Central and Local Relations in Mid-Victorian England: The Local Government Act Office, 1853-1871', *Victorian Studies*, 6 (1962).

<sup>21</sup> Macdonagh, 'Revolution in Government'.

employed effectively to resist this. Hence London government remained largely an unreformed assortment of vestries, plus the City of London, increasingly reinforced by *ad hoc*, London-wide bodies, until 1888. Unincorporated large towns (such as Birmingham and Manchester) were enabled to seek incorporation and proceeded to do so, Birmingham in 1837, Manchester in 1838; by 1851 the number of municipal boroughs had risen to 196; in 1871 there were 224, by 1891, 295.

For each borough the act established a town council composed three-quarters of councillors elected by male ratepayers (on a one person one vote basis) and one quarter of aldermen chosen by the councillors. There was a property qualification for councillors. The council's accounts were to be audited annually by elected auditors. In theory, every head of household was eligible to pay rates but in practice rates were only levied on those occupying property valuable enough to make the rate worth the trouble of collecting. Hence, poorer householders often did not qualify for the municipal vote. The many single women and widows who did pay rates as heads of households were also excluded until 1869 when Parliament quietly gave them the municipal vote, two years after refusing women the parliamentary vote. The value of a property deemed worth rating was a matter for local discretion and varied widely. In many boroughs the local franchise at least until the 1850s was more limited than the parliamentary franchise.

The principle behind the changes was that of making the corporation more truly responsible to the local community. Whereas members of the former corporations had not infrequently been resident elsewhere, the new municipal franchise was restricted to those residing within 7 miles of the borough, as was council membership. The role of the corporations was not initially seen as primarily governmental or administrative. Indeed they lost one major source of power the unreformed corporations had possessed: that to appoint magistrates, who were thereafter appointed by the crown, i.e. the Lord Chancellor. They acquired only one new function, though a significant one: that of setting up a watch committee responsible for the establishment and conduct of a police force, establishing a framework whereby police forces on the model pioneered by Peel in London could be extended through the country without arousing antagonism against centrally controlled policing. By 1842, 125 boroughs had established a police force, though by 1853 six still had not.

Some corporations carried on functions they had previously

performed where no other body existed to perform them, e.g. Hull and Plymouth supplied water, Leeds and Nottingham did not; Bristol provided street-lighting, Nottingham owned a market. Elsewhere improvement commissions continued their separate existence, although increasingly over the following decade the corporations took over and extended their powers, especially in the 1840s when environmental health issues took on a new prominence. Under the 1848 Public Health Act they were to constitute the local Board of Health, where this was required. By the end of the 1850s in most boroughs the municipal corporation had become the recognised sanitary authority. This was primarily because the extensive environmental improvements which localities were under increasing popular and central pressure to provide, such as comprehensive drainage systems, necessitated a degree of ratepayer consent and resources available only to elected local government. This led on to a widening range of responsibilities as the century went on and councils increasingly became significant governing institutions.

But their chief function in the 1830s was seen as the representation of local opinion on national and local issues to Parliament, through resolutions and petitions, and it was not uncommon for them to do so on a wide range of issues. Local urban elites often regarded the solution of social problems as the role of voluntary rather than municipal action. The extent and form of the activities of the municipalities for the remainder of the century depended to a great extent upon the outcome of power struggles among ratepayers, crucial to which was the level and disposition of the rates themselves. For many taxpayers local rates were the most substantial direct tax leaving their pockets and lower middle-class ratepayers, for whom rates were a substantial burden, were often especially reluctant to pay for local improvements until crisis (such as an epidemic arising from water pollution) made them inescapable. Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield among others fell in the middle decades of the nineteenth century into the hands of 'shopocracies' reluctant to innovate or spend.

But if municipal corporations with governmental and administrative potential were established in most sizeable towns, government in the counties and in London remained unreformed and non-elective until 1888. This continued to limit the capacity of central government to extend social intervention, or necessitated cumbersome innovations, generally the creation of *ad hoc*, elected or non-elected, bodies. The

poor law guardians as the only elected authorities covering the whole country acquired a miscellaneous collection of further tasks over the following decades. For expensive, extensive and specialised tasks concerning the entire country, separately elected authorities had to be established, with powers to levy separate rates and generally with distinct boundaries, such as Public Health Boards from 1848 and School Boards under the 1870 Education Act. As a result by the 1880s the picture of local government in England and Wales was one of some chaos.

The Whigs' ambitions to satisfy a variety of conflicting constituencies aroused more opposition than support by the later 1830s. Popular expectations had been raised, then dashed by parliamentary reform and its outcome, by education and factory reform followed by a widely disliked poor law. The outcome was both Chartism and the election of Peel's Tory government in 1841.

#### IV

Peel's fundamental approach to government was unchanged since 1830; however, he and his colleagues had learned the necessity to take some account of the effects of that approach upon subordinate groups, that whatever the abstract desirability of self-improvement and individual moral responsibility the mass of the population could not achieve these ideals without assistance. Peel remained unconvinced of the importance of constitutional matters - his 1841-6 Ministry notably neglected them - or of party. He was prepared to smash his own party in 1846 over corn law repeal, in pursuit of the higher goal of economic liberalism.

Peel returned to his pre-1830 trajectory in a position of enhanced power, above all devoted to further liberalisation of the economy. Tariffs were further reduced, culminating in corn law repeal; the income tax was reintroduced in 1842 to replace revenue lost due to the abolition of tariffs. The annual Budget began to take on a central political role. The Ministry also moved further towards the construction of a framework of government designed to enhance business efficiency and reward fair dealing, providing a more reliable banking system and money supply and moving towards an enforceable commercial law which safeguarded contracts and provided adequate protection against fraud. It also sought to establish a more efficient set of institutions through which the law could operate. In 1842 district

bankruptcy courts were established, to provide speedy redress for creditors and hence to increase the availability of credit. The Railways Act, 1844, protected the public and business users against the abuse of local monopoly by enabling government to control charges, inspect companies and impose safety regulations, whilst holding back from the opportunity to control their erratic development more firmly.

Peel carried on the reconstruction of the regulatory state on principles designed to minimise intervention in personal life, whilst establishing a clear and as far as possible unambiguous economic policy designed to facilitate free and fair economic activity. He had, however, learned from the experience of the preceding decade that the mass of the population could not be pushed unsupported into the free market, for reasons both of humanity and of the practicalities of maintaining social stability, though he viewed social intervention with no favour. He was hostile to the ten hours factory movement. The, very limited, 1844 Factory Act was a remodelled Whig measure; it closed some enforcement loopholes and placed greater emphasis upon safety in the workplace than had earlier legislation. It was left to the Whigs to introduce ten hours legislation in 1847. The Tories resisted Chadwick's pressure for public health reform; the first major Public Health Act was passed by the Whigs in 1848. The 1842 Mines Act was slow to take effect, with just a single inspector appointed to enforce it. At the Privy Council committee Kay-Shuttleworth gradually increased government subsidy, supervision to schools and teacher education though with an overextended and understaffed department.<sup>23</sup>

The Ministry remained unresponsive to demands for further constitutional reform. Its main response to the continued force of Chartism was the extension of the machinery of public order. With Home Office encouragement increasing numbers of local police forces were established during the 1840s.<sup>24</sup> Peel's approach to government, however, modified or redirected many of the grievances which fuelled Chartism. His Ministry did not conspicuously intrude further upon customary liberties and did not appear indifferent to popular needs and causes. The Mines and Factory Acts and corn law repeal were popular and felt to be beneficial and the Tories' explicit disapproval of the grosser, more irresponsible or fraudulent capitalist activities further mollified radical criticism.

<sup>23</sup> R. Johnson, 'Administrators in Education before 1870: Patronage, Social Position and Role', in G. Sutherland, ed., *Studies in the Growth of Nineteenth-Century Government* (1972).

<sup>24</sup> J. Saville, *1848: The British State and the Chartist Movement* (Cambridge, 1987).

The minimal regulatory state was not widely experienced as intrusive or oppressive and government presented itself as working for a common good, for a national interest above that of party or of sectional interest, with improved living standards as its aim. Popular radicalism was not imbued with hostility to economic liberalism (rather the reverse) provided that it did not lead to the undermining of living standards. Effectively Peel obtained a significant degree of popular consent to an approach to government on which Gladstone was to build. The conjuncture which had built Chartism as a mass movement in defence of constitutional liberty passed. Popular radicalism did not die after 1848, nor the desire to defend customary liberties, though the latter was somewhat weakened. Rather it was diffused and channelled into a range of spheres of activity tolerated by the state: local government, public health and poor law matters, trade unionism, friendly societies and other forms of voluntarism.<sup>25</sup>

## v

Against this background in the 1850s constitutional questions lost their prominence and government growth was slowed, after another brief flowering under the Whigs in 1846–52. Their coalition with the Peelites thereafter gave the *coup de grâce* to Whig interventionism in pursuit of social progress. Evasion and insufficiencies in factory regulation remained and abuses tended to overtake remedies. The General Board of Health, established in 1848 was wound up in 1858, due to local hostility to central direction, especially as implemented by Chadwick, who had been forced to resign, following bitter parliamentary criticism in 1854. The initiative in public health matters was left largely to the localities who, unevenly, gradually and contentiously, extended their powers.

The Peelite ideal of government reached its zenith after 1853 in the hands, pre-eminently, of Gladstone, whose political and intellectual position had reached maturity during his period of office under Peel in the 1840s; though in Gladstone's hands it was politicised and dramatised. As Chancellor of the Exchequer he restored fiscal policy to its pre-1846 trajectory, progressively dismantling duties and tariffs and reconstructing the income tax, until by 1860 the fiscal system was as open as it would ever be and considerably more so than that

<sup>25</sup> G. Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 90–178.

under his premiership in 1871 was partly rooted in a desire for the creation of a professional service comparable with that of the Prussians; but he also saw it as a further step in the reconstruction of the mores of the 'vast, leisured and wealthy class' which officered it, to enhance their sense of duty by, among other things, introducing promotion by merit rather than by purchase. He wanted 'court and country to follow the middle class values of efficiency, application, economy'.<sup>30</sup>

Gladstone's approach to the reconstruction of leading institutions was, however, cautious, and designed to minimise the tensions that might be caused. In reforming Oxford he rejected radical Liberal proposals for overthrowing tradition and replacing the collegiate system with a faculty structure, on 'the principle of working with the materials which we possess, endeavouring to improve our institutions through the agency they themselves supply and giving to reform in cases where there is a choice the character of return and restoration'.<sup>31</sup> The role of Parliament, that is, was 'to permit regeneration rather than to impose novelty, to work from within a set of historic institutions rather than from an *a priori* plan'.<sup>32</sup>

Gladstone's work on the reform of Oxford led him directly to reform of the institution which Oxford was expected to feed. In 1853 he asked Sir Stafford Northcote and Sir Charles Trevelyan, of the Treasury, to investigate and report on the civil service. The purpose was to take further the moves towards a more efficient service. Corruption, though it still occurred, was no longer the main criticism. Greater pressure of government business was changing the role of the service, demanding more work and more responsibility delegated from ministers. In addition a certain tension had built up between the zealous public men of the type of Chadwick and the increasing numbers of professional civil servants entering directly from Oxford or Cambridge, more discreet, less public or openly political, pioneers of the classical nineteenth- and twentieth-century service. Gradually, they were already replacing the 'new men'. When the General Board of Health was wound up its work went partly to the Local Government Act office of the Home Office, under the career civil servant Tom Taylor, who urged local authorities forward in the public health field less contentiously than had his predecessors. The medical work of the General Board, concerned with epidemic disease and the causes

<sup>30</sup> Matthew, *Gladstone*, p. 210.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

and prevention of ill-health, was directed from 1858 at the medical department of the Privy Council by a medical man closer to the Chadwick mould, John Simon, until his replacement in 1871 by John Lambert, a career civil servant, determined to separate administration and policy formulation from the research and propaganda which had been Simon's main interest. In 1849 Kay-Shuttleworth was replaced at the education committee by Robert Lingen, one of a group of Balliol educated men who came in the 1840s to dominate the department and amongst whom Kay-Shuttleworth felt insecure and 'uneducated'. Under Lingen, at least until 1861, the department continued to expand, but its initiatives were less exclusively concerned with popular education and were directed also to such issues as the reform of Oxford.

The Northcote-Trevelyan report (1854) recommended means to recruit an efficient, professional, apolitical service. They made three main proposals: the service would be divided into two categories, a higher or 'intellectual' grade, concerned with key decisions, and a lower or 'mechanical' grade, concerned with routine copying. Both were to be recruited through open competition rather than through patronage, the higher grade via examinations which were effectively a repeat of Oxford and Cambridge degree examinations and largely impenetrable from any other source. The exam would yield for the service the cream of high-minded, liberally educated men. 'It was a means of extending, confirming, cleansing and legitimising an existing elite.'<sup>33</sup> Thirdly, promotion was to be by merit, not by seniority; and pensions were to be instituted to facilitate removal of those rendered inefficient by ill-health or advancing age. A unified system of recruitment, grading and pay was intended gradually to break down the autonomy of the departments of the service.

The changes spread slowly through the service, especially in the more elite departments, jealous of their independence. Theoretically the reform was completed by Orders in Council under Gladstone's premiership in 1870, whereby all departments, except the Foreign Office, were to observe the new norms. However, the Treasury avoided appointing anyone by open competition until 1878 and few even in the 1880s and 1890s.

Other institutional reforms were carried forward by the Coalition and Liberal governments of the 1850s and 1860s. The Common Law

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.



Procedure Acts, 1854 and 1860, sought further to simplify and speed proceedings; the Court of Chancery Acts, 1852 and 1858, to speed up the notorious slowness pilloried by Charles Dickens. They showed less interest in constitutional reform. The role of Parliament in the Gladstonian state was to check the excesses of government, to maintain stability, rather than to initiate; to debate and give sanction to the actions of the executive. Gladstone kept the all-important planning of expenditure firmly in ministerial hands rather than in those of Parliament; the parliamentary Public Accounts Committee (established in 1862) was introduced with power only to check abuses of expenditure retrospectively. Big bills and big Budgets represented a means of regular renewal of the legitimacy of Parliament and of the political system. Unlike Peel, Gladstone did not risk appearing to underestimate the importance of gaining parliamentary sanction for executive action; he recognised the need to maintain popular consent.

He shared Peel's belief in a strong, initiating executive and his lack of conviction that fiscal need be accompanied by political liberalism. Though he was the most effective promoter of the minimal state in modern history it was no mere 'nightwatchman state', with its connotation of largely inert guardianship. It was to be a strong, decisive and efficient state, firmly moulding the framework within which the moralised citizenry would enjoy their freedom. It was 'an almost corporatist view of the state'.<sup>34</sup> It was designed to foster social stability, by being seen to deal evenly with all classes, to imbue all with the sense of political responsibility and probity; the citizenry were the guardians of the probity of the state and the state reciprocated by safeguarding their well-being. For all the 'People's William's' unprecedented (for a Victorian politician) and calculated wooing of all classes especially in the 1860s, he was no democrat in any conventional modern sense. Constitutional reform had as an abstract principle as little appeal for him as for Peel. Pragmatically, in the 1860s he became increasingly convinced, due to his contacts with trade unionists, that moderate artisans if allowed the vote would strengthen the economical wing of Liberalism. They possessed the intelligence, probity and sense of responsibility which in his view should be the prime qualification for active membership of the constitution. His 1866 proposals for parliamentary reform were designed to extend the vote to such eminently worthy men, and of course to palliate discontent arising from their

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

exclusion. He believed that the 1867 household franchise, introduced by Disraeli, went too far, risking upsetting the delicate balance he had erected by bringing too many indirect taxpayers into the electorate; they might be tempted to try to push government into excessively redistributive measures bringing 'class politics' to the fore. He viewed the introduction of the secret ballot as a regrettable necessity.

Yet Gladstone's view of the minimal state did not, at least by the 1860s, incorporate total conviction that market forces alone could produce a just society. Some interference was acceptable and necessary, at least at the margins, on grounds of social justice. As he put it:

Once security has been taken that an entire society shall not be forced to pay an artificial price to some of its members for their production, we may safely commit the question [of cheapness of goods] to the action of competition among manufacturers and of what we term the laws of supply and demand. As to the condition of the workpeople, experience has shown, especially in the case of the Factory Acts, that we should do wrong in laying down any abstract maxim as an invariable rule.<sup>35</sup>

Absence of an 'abstract maxim' allowed a certain flexibility, enabling him, for example, to introduce a Post Office Savings Bank and Post Office annuities, despite the hostility of friendly societies to this competition in the field of self-help. His government accepted and consolidated the Tory nationalisation of the telegraphs immediately upon coming into office in 1868.

Nevertheless, 'no industrial society can ever have existed in which the state played a smaller role than that of the United Kingdom in the 1860s'.<sup>36</sup> The government had foresworn responsibility for economic management. It had abolished virtually all tariffs save for those non-protective duties required for revenue purposes. Government responsibility for education was confined to its limited relations with the established church and the universities and through small grants to non-established denominations. Despite growing fears of the economic ill-effects of Britain's apparent educational backwardness, especially in relation to Prussia and especially in the technical sphere, Gladstone's attachment to the classical curriculum was such that he and his colleagues refused a government grant to Owen's College (Manchester) or aid for the establishment of the University College at Aberystwyth. He deplored 'the *low* utilitarian argument ... for giving [education] what is termed a practical direction'.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201

Government involvement in industrial relations was non-existent outside the royal dockyards. Factory legislation remained in place but was not significantly pushed forward. In the field of social welfare, government accepted overall responsibility for public health and the poor law, but in both cases left a high degree of discretion to the localities. The minimal state was, indeed, premised upon the capacity of a vast network of voluntary organisations, in co-operation with local government, to superintend most moral, charitable, education and welfare services. The limited extent of initiative by central government in these areas was premised on the vigorous involvement of its citizens, of the kind Gladstone himself undertook throughout his life. How effective and extensive were such local initiatives?

## VI

Devotion to local autonomy against central state intervention in what were perceived as local affairs remained powerful and the powers and activities of local authorities expanded in the mid-Victorian period. Throughout the period the most direct experience of most people of government was of local government; it affected their lives more visibly than did central government. But the energy of local citizens and the speed and direction of local government expansion varied considerably from place to place for reasons not always easy to explain. In Rochdale (Lancashire) a secure employer elite of Liberal non-conformists created 'one of the most alert and socially creative towns in England'.<sup>38</sup> In Bradford (Yorkshire) a similar elite, after an initial burst of energy following incorporation in 1847, fell into an 'almighty stillness'<sup>39</sup> running a police force and sanitation efficiently, but resisting innovation in any other field.

For the municipalities the period was one of local battles over incorporation and associated struggles for control of guardians, vestries, police, improvement and highways commissioners and over church rates; struggles as much, or more, about which social group or party achieved local status and influence as about administration and reform. Still in 1861 towns as large as Bury (pop. 87,563), Merthyr Tydfil (83,875) and Birkenhead (41,649) had no municipal corporation.

<sup>38</sup> J. Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party, 1857-68* (1966), p. 96.

<sup>39</sup> A. Elliot, 'Municipal Government in Bradford in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', in D. Fraser, ed., *Municipal Reform and the Industrial City* (Leicester, 1982), p. 122.

possible be borne by voluntary organisations. The mid-Victorian period indeed saw a proliferation of voluntary effort directed towards almost every conceivable type of social casualty. Its total receipts and expenditure can never be fully quantified since so much charity was ephemeral and ill-recorded, but it must at least have equalled the social expenditure of central and local government throughout the period up to 1914. But its extent and direction was locally uneven, dependent upon the capacity and will of individuals to give money and effort and their inclinations as to the desirable direction philanthropy should take.<sup>42</sup>

Another important reason for the variety of local activity was the reluctance of ratepayers to pay the growing costs of local government. In 1868 national taxation raised £67,800,000 and local rates in England and Wales £19,800,000. Local expenditure amounted to £30,140,000, the gap being made up of loans, government subventions and the rents on property owned by local authorities. The incidence and levels of assessment of rates varied from place to place according to local needs and policies and fell unevenly on different forms of property. It was a persistent source of dispute that land was more heavily rated than manufacturing business, since rates were levied only upon the value of real estate and not upon moveables, such as stock in trade. In London nominal rates in the pound varied from 2s. 1d. in the wealthy parish of St George's, Hanover Square, to 6s. 9d. in the much poorer St George the Martyr, Southwark. Moves to equalise London rates began in 1855, largely as a result of the need to meet the cost of Metropolitan Board of Works capital projects, such as the building of the Thames Embankment. A Metropolitan Common Poor Fund was established in 1865 to equalise part of the burden (above all the costs of workhouses) of this major item of rate expenditure. The Board and the Fund were two of the *ad hoc* bodies which had to be established to overcome the lack of unitary government in mid-Victorian London.

In the 1860s rating was a national political issue. Leading Tories argued that where local authorities had to deal with essentially national issues, the cost should be borne by the Exchequer. Gladstone was hostile to the notion of using the Exchequer for local purposes, in keeping with his belief in local responsibility and the moral and

<sup>42</sup> F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1980). D. Owen, *English Philanthropy, 1660-1960* (1964).

political functions of taxation. It was an issue of which he and his colleagues were acutely aware, but to which they found no solution, though by constraining the willingness of citizens to promote active local government it risked undermining one of the pillars of the minimal state.

Concern about the complexity and cost of local government – George Goschen complained that one of his suburban properties, assessed at £1,100, attracted eighty-seven separate rate demands in a year – was such that in 1869 Gladstone's government appointed a Royal Commission to undertake a drastic reconsideration of the structure of local government in England and Wales. Its report, in 1871, recommended principles which were gradually to be implemented over the next half-century. In particular, it discredited the policy of establishing separate local authorities for each major task. It proposed the consolidation of local powers in the hands of single local authorities, to be established throughout the country. It failed to find a solution to the rating problem. Whilst it was sitting the last new single purpose authorities, the School Boards, were established in 1870. They survived until 1902, when their powers were merged with those of local councils. Until elected local government could be established in the counties and in London there was little option in the case of such an expensive and specialised task as education. Once county councils were established, in 1888, including in London, special purpose authorities were gradually assimilated to municipal and county councils, though the oldest established, the Board of Guardians, survived until 1929.

The government did, however, immediately take steps to impose greater uniformity of practice upon local authorities by, in 1871, consolidating in a new department, the Local Government Board, responsibility for public health, the poor law and miscellaneous other local activities. If this seemed to run counter to Gladstone's belief in local self-responsibility it illustrates the flexibility of his principles in respect of social needs and his preference for strong executive action to provide a clear framework for action of national and highly political importance when local initiative failed to do what was expected of it.

The new department immediately set about trying to achieve greater uniformity. In a memorandum to poor law authorities, Goschen (the first President of the Board) initiated a policy of striving to systematise and co-ordinate with publicly funded poor relief the mass of voluntary effort directed at the poor. Outdoor relief was to be reduced, and

ideally abolished, the deserving poor to be directed to local charities with whom Poor Law Boards were expected to work closely. Ideally also the disparate mass of charitable effort would be co-ordinated and assimilated to operate on common principles under the guidance of the Charity Organisation Society (founded 1869, with Gladstone among its early supporters). The poor law authorities could then concentrate their efforts upon punishment of the feckless in the workhouse and the provision of improved institutional care for those for whom this was appropriate: children, the sick, the helpless elderly, the mentally ill. The outcome was steady but uneven improvement in such institutional provision and a serious reduction in aid especially to the elderly and to single mothers who had been the chief recipients of outdoor relief. Few had families able to support them and voluntary action proved to be neither extensive enough to take the burden nor willing to be organised and controlled by either the Charity Organisation Society or the Local Government Board. Such proposals conflicted with ideals of the independence of voluntarism from outside control.<sup>43</sup>

The Public Health Act, 1872, compelled local authorities to act, whereas the new poor law policy was in principle merely advice to local Boards, though advice very firmly relayed by the inspectorate. From 1872 local health authorities were compulsory throughout the country, the responsibilities to lie with municipal councils, elected Boards in non-corporate towns and Boards of Guardians in the counties. The appointment of Medical Officers of Health became compulsory and half their salaries were met by the Local Government Board – the third central government subsidy to local government following those in respect of police (increased to 50 per cent in 1874) and education.

Variability in local government practice in these and other spheres, however, continued and central government was well aware that there were limits to the control that could be exerted without incurring opposition. And the problem remained that more active local government necessitated either higher rates, to which there was strong resistance, or larger government subsidies, which would increase the national tax burden. Disraeli, who did not wholly share Gladstone's principles as regards taxation or central/local government relations, increased the total Exchequer grant to local authorities from £1.15m

<sup>43</sup> M. E. Rose, 'The Crisis of Poor Relief in England, 1860-1880', in W. J. Mommsen, ed., *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany* (1981).

to £2.24m in his first two years in office following Gladstone's defeat in 1874, but this was far from sufficient to remove the problem.

Municipalisation of services was the form of local self-help adopted by increasing numbers of urban authorities, either as a means of limiting rate rises by using the profits from municipal services partially to finance their further development, or of subsidising ratepayers by providing cheaper gas and water supplies. Manchester was first to municipalise its gas supplies; Leeds followed, disastrously, in 1870, Glasgow at too high a price in 1869; forty-seven other authorities followed by 1870, sanctioned by Parliament by local statute. From 1875 it was permitted on Local Government Board sanction alone.

Joseph Chamberlain, as Liberal mayor, proposed buying the Birmingham gas companies in 1873, when the city was at the peak of its nonconformist-inspired period of civic improvement and ratepayers were showing signs of rebellion. Chamberlain indeed erected municipalisation into a – distinctly non-socialist – principle of local government. For him it was the application of good business principles to government. Services should be bought at a good price, efficiently run and the profits devoted to town improvement – to make Birmingham the Paris of Midland England. In the boom of the mid-1870s, he was able to use the profits of municipally built city centre shops and offices to finance slum clearance, improved sanitation and house building.

By the time Chamberlain left the Birmingham council chamber for national politics in the late 1870s this new approach was firmly established. It asserted that elected authorities could achieve for their communities what voluntary organisations could not. Chamberlain proclaimed: 'Private charity is powerless, religious organisations can do nothing to remedy the evils which are so deep-seated in our system ... I venture to say that it is only the community acting as a whole that can possibly deal with evils so deep seated.'<sup>44</sup>

The local government problem points up especially clearly some of the limitations to the possibility of the minimal state's fulfilling Gladstone's ambition as to its effects, or his hopes for its permanency. Local and voluntary bodies did not, even in the 1870s, appear able to bear the full weight of social responsibility placed upon them.

Another major premise on which the theory of the Gladstonian state was built was that a free economy would employ capital and

<sup>44</sup> Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons*, p. 174.

labour at the optimum. Continuing evidence of underemployment and pay inadequate for basic needs suggested that it could not and that the outcome would be further pressures for central government intervention. The willingness of Gladstone and his contemporaries to accept, at least in principle, that market forces alone would not necessarily create a good society left the door ajar for the disintegration of the minimal regulatory state. As Gladstone's biographer puts it:

There were always substantial qualifications both in Gladstone's view and in the minds of most mid-Victorians to the view that minimal 'interference' was the best government. It is probably the case that although the minimalist state was achieved in Victorian Britain in the fullest form compatible with the social requirements of an industrialised population, nonetheless, in these qualifications were contained the assumptions which were to lead to its gradual disintegration.<sup>65</sup>

This was, however, hardly perceived in the 1870s. Gladstone and his colleagues continued to pursue retrenchment and the minimal state with the greatest earnestness.

## VII

The Liberal hegemony of the mid-Victorian period was followed by a period in which Conservative governments held office for twenty-three of the years from 1874 to 1906. This did not imply a fundamental change in attitudes to government at any level, not surprisingly given the common origins of Disraeli and Gladstone in the Tory party of Peel's day. Disraeli and most of his colleagues shared Toryism's traditional stress upon the role and responsibilities of established authority, associated with disbelief in social views based on individualism or a doctrine of natural rights. More important than recognition of any particular or personal claims was the achievement of stability and well-being through properly constituted control. They saw society as an organic hierarchy in which a sort of natural aristocracy must rule; levelling was not so much undesirable as impossible. But it was not a leadership attained through property and inheritance alone, but one justified by talent, probity, experience, service and a sense of duty. Devotion to public service and the general welfare was a matter of the greatest significance. They believed in leadership and strong executive authority, legitimated by popular consent secured through Parliament and the gradual extension of the parliamentary

<sup>65</sup> Matthew, *Gladstone*, p. 170.



however, was to use the state in this fashion only with the utmost caution and, despite the important and continuing undercurrent of preference for more decisive social intervention (combined with continuing commitment to economic liberalism) represented in the 1880s by Lord Randolph Churchill and his 'Tory democratic' associates, this was the dominant view in the party.

The major structural changes which Britain was undergoing in the later nineteenth century, however, increased pressure upon government to adapt constitutional mechanisms and extend the social role of the state. The growth of industry and of urbanisation, in a situation in which the country's economic stability and economic and political position in international terms seemed less assured and international rivalries were intensifying; the decline of land as a primary contributor to wealth and employment and the associated rural disturbances in the 1880s; the spread of mass communications; the existence of a more prosperous, better educated working population, potentially and increasingly actually more assertive in defence of their interests, all necessitated steps to maintain internal stability, to integrate all who safely could be into the constitution, to secure a sense of national cohesiveness overriding sectional interests. Hence Disraeli's, largely successful, use of nationalist and imperialist rhetoric and the successive extensions of the national and local franchise. In a period of intensified awareness of nationhood, and of race, in most advanced countries and urgent international rivalries, British governments also, more than before, were comparing their performances in all respects, not always unfavourably, with those of their major rivals, above all newly unified Germany. If some looked to Germany as a model of efficient organisation, others deplored what they perceived as its excessive bureaucratisation, which stifled individual freedom and initiative. France, already formally more democratic than Britain, having introduced universal manhood suffrage, with a more developed system of popular education and a distinctly more meritocratic administrative structure, was no longer seen as the chief enemy and aroused less interest than did Germany.

In 1884 rural householders were granted the vote, by Gladstone's second ministry, on the same terms as voters in the boroughs, with especially dramatic effects in rural Ireland and Wales. Equally important, in 1885 the long overdue redrawing of constituency boundaries gave something closer to equal representation for each voter by creating constituencies of approximately equal size. With an electorate of

about 5 million, all women and in practice about 40 per cent of adult males still lay outside the official definition of citizenship by 1914.

The absence of elected local government in the counties, other than for *ad hoc* bodies, appeared the more anomalous when rural householders acquired the parliamentary vote. The ancient system of non-elected landowner authority seemed antiquated as agriculture lost its economic predominance and it presented a definite barrier to any extension of rational and efficient social intervention. Also the multiple problems of the sprawling capital of the Empire could evidently no longer be left to the Corporation of the City of London and an assortment of vestries and *ad hoc* bodies.<sup>51</sup> Hence in 1888, the Tories introduced elected county councils, firmly overriding landlord opposition,<sup>52</sup> and a council for London, to be elected on a householder franchise. Initially, the functions of these county councils were confined to policing and the control of highways and bridges. The new units were deemed too large to administer other social welfare activities. In 1894 lower tier urban and rural district councils were created, with responsibility for the range of public health duties by now imposed or permitted by legislation, and in whose hands were gradually consolidated the remaining functions of local authorities, other than for poor relief. In 1899 second tier authorities, the boroughs, were also established in London with similar powers (including for housing and libraries). The property qualification for membership of these authorities was at first minimal and then (in 1895) opened to all householders, increasing the numbers of women and workingmen eligible to stand. Women in particular were playing an increasingly significant role in extending and humanising the social functions of local authorities, especially Poor Law and School Boards. They were debarred until 1907 from seats on county and municipal councils, though if they were independent ratepayers, as very large numbers of widows and single women were, they might vote for both. As their participation in local government grew, their exclusion from the national vote was ever more visibly absurd; their success in local government contributed to the growing women's suffrage movement.

The numbers of workingmen elected to local authorities were fewer (86 were elected in 1907, 196 in 1913) due partly to the lack of time

<sup>51</sup> John Davis, *Reforming London: The London Government Problem 1855-1900* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 1-67.

<sup>52</sup> J. Dunbabin, 'The Politics of the Establishment of County Councils', *Historical Journal*, 5 (1963).

and capacity to forgo income of most of them, especially since most authorities held daytime meetings and did not pay expenses. Those who stood mainly had trade-union or independent labour support. The involvement of workingmen and women in local social politics on issues which directly affected their lives (housing, education, health, poor relief) in which state involvement was growing was one of the roots of the organisational development of the political labour movement. This did not imply that their demands for state intervention were necessarily far in advance of those of radical Liberalism or Toryism. Suspicion of the central state and attachment to independence and voluntary effort was strong among working people, though the more politically active tended to favour more state action in such fields as housing and unemployment, provided that it did not undermine aspirations to independence and remained, so far as possible, under local control.<sup>53</sup> Also, as central government showed signs of intervening more directly in their lives, their desire for more active participation in the decision-making process and administrative apparatus of the state was, understandably, strengthened. Working people nowhere obtained a majority in local elections until a trade-union and socialist alliance captured West Ham municipal council in 1898. Nor could they assume that workers would vote for independent labour candidates even when they were eligible and registered to vote, as many of their potential electorate were not. However, in a number of localities in alliance with progressive Liberals representatives of labour were able to bring about changes in the relief of the unemployed (as in Poplar, East London, from the mid-1890s), promote municipal ownership and improve municipal working conditions, and extend housing and infant care, as in Bradford, also from the 1890s. The increasing number of manual workers employed by local authorities (e.g. as gas or water workers) on occasion translated dissatisfaction with work conditions into political opposition to the ruling parties, as in Leeds in 1890 and several London boroughs in the 1900s.<sup>54</sup>

All of these changes stimulated further the still uneven growth of local government activity, though it left unresolved the problem of the rates. Local government expenditure in England and Wales almost

<sup>53</sup> P. Thane, 'The Working Class and State "Welfare" in Britain, 1880-1914', *Historical Journal*, 27 (1984), pp. 877-900.

<sup>54</sup> Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons*, p. 326.

doubled between 1870 and 1890 (from £27.3m to £48.2m), a period of falling prices; and rose to £125.8m in 1910. Goschen, as Liberal Unionist Chancellor from 1886 returned to the issue, recognising the need for central subsidies to local government of a type which did not undermine their sense of autonomy, and aiming also to equalise the incidence of rating between real and personal property which remained a source of political contention. In 1888 the plethora of separate central grants to local government (then amounting to £2.8m p.a.) were abolished. In their place local authorities were 'assigned' revenues totalling £4.8m (which rose to £6.4m in 1891-2). Local authorities were free to choose on what these revenues should be spent. The source of the assigned revenues was that part of probate duty which fell on realised personalty, plus the revenues from excise licences.

This did not solve the problem. Ratepayers continued into the 1900s to resist the cost of the decentralisation which they in principle defended. Further municipalisation was one solution. In 1882 Huddersfield was granted permission to run its own trams because no private company would operate in its steep streets. Plymouth and Blackpool shortly received similar sanction. Many other authorities, including the London County Council, began to run their own services after 1891 when the leases of private companies expired. They estimated that they could run them more efficiently and profitably than private enterprise. Also, increasingly, city corporations tackled the problem by borrowing on the money markets, beginning with Liverpool in 1888. By 1910 local government in the UK was £600m in debt.

The energy and range of activities of local authorities continued to vary, in no clear relationship with the party politics of their control. Unionist Birmingham in the 1880s had passed its great innovatory stage, though it was less inert than Liberal-controlled Leeds. A cholera epidemic in Leeds in 1889 which exposed the poor state of public health provision, combined with the council's inept handling of the gas workers' strike in 1890, brought the Conservatives back to control, businessmen back to local leadership and Leeds into a period in which closely balanced party competition proved highly productive of innovation.<sup>55</sup>

London by 1888 had fallen behind the major provincial cities even in the provision of basic amenities. The Lib-Lab progressive alliance,

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

led by Lord Rosebery, and the focus of much radical and philanthropic idealism, which controlled the London County Council from its formation until 1907, quickly acquired a reforming reputation. It especially promoted working-class education, cultural and leisure facilities, in close association with voluntary organisations such as the settlement houses, and established a reputation for providing favourable conditions for its employees.

Increased capital expenditure (facilitated by falling interest rates), especially on housing, hospital building (authorised by the 1875 Public Health Act) and transport, and further municipalisation of services characterised the activities of the more energetic local authorities in the 1890s. But not all were energetic. The conflicting trends in municipal action indeed became more stark due to two opposing forces: reforming pressure for more action versus resistance to rate rises, an episode in the more general political and social polarisation of the 1890s. Rates rose by between 30 and 50 per cent in London between 1891 and 1906. Organisations of ratepayers grew and blamed municipalisation as the cause rather than the cure of rate rises.

Opposition to municipalisation as an undesirable and ineffective intrusion upon the free market built up in the later 1890s, in response both to its actual extension and to proposals, however improbable of outcome, for more of it, of a more socialist character, from Fabians, the Independent Labour party and some radical Liberals for, among other things, municipal workshops, bakeries, pawnshops and pubs. The struggle culminated in the inconclusive Select Committees on Municipal Trading of 1900 and 1903. In the 1900s enthusiasm even among supporters of municipalisation was, in any case declining. It was not evident that it actually provided better or cheaper services, except for water supplies, or even better working conditions, than private enterprise. The considerable local variation in the quality of provision led many of its previous supporters to advocate national provision and national minimum standards for essential services. Growing Lib-Lab demands for rate redistribution between rich and poor districts contributed to a very gradual decline in the attachment to local autonomy.

Local government by 1914 was more active in social and occasionally economic intervention, somewhat more uniform in its activities and somewhat less independent of central government than fifty years earlier. Its activities were guided until its abolition in 1918 by an increasingly burdened and cumbersome Local Government Board.

Significantly, he was able to take his ideas intact, and to develop them further, into the Conservative party as a Liberal Unionist from the 1890s. It is equally significant that his far-reaching programmes of social reform made little discernible impact upon party policy. The Conservatives in the 1880s and 1890s initiated exhaustive Royal Commissions into a wide range of social problems – housing, ‘sweated’ labour, the condition of the aged poor among others – and reform proposals proliferated. The legislative outcome, however, was slight and taxpayer resistance to legislation favouring the working classes remained considerable and highly influential within the Conservative party. It acted more positively in the field of industrial relations, acting to strengthen ‘responsible’ trade unionism. Following the Conciliation Act, 1896, central government took on the entirely new role of conciliation and arbitration in labour disputes. The Labour Department of the Board of Trade, formed to administer the act and more generally to investigate labour conditions, appointed officials with trade-union experience in a conscious attempt to promote and institutionalise Gladstonian notions of a community of interest between capital and labour. The Workmen’s Compensation Act, 1897, followed trade-union criticism of previous, ineffective legislation. It dealt with the serious problem of occupational injury, made employers liable for accidents at work and obliged them to insure and to compensate the injured, at no cost to the state; the obligation was until 1906 limited to certain dangerous occupations.

Yet simultaneously a series of legal decisions, culminating in the House of Lords decision in the Taff Vale case in 1901, appeared severely to restrict the legal rights which unions believed that they had gained in the 1870s and the Conservative Lord Chancellor, Halsbury, was believed to have played a role in bringing them about. The failure of Parliament to reverse these decisions played an important role in disillusioning respectable trade unionists with the party and constitutional system as it stood, whilst the further involvement of the central state in matters which so directly concerned them made them increasingly aware of the need to participate in that constitution.

When Chamberlain went further, entrenching upon economic liberalism with his tariff reform programme from 1903, he seriously divided the Conservative and Unionist party, but lost. Into the 1900s the mid-Victorian consensus retained its hegemony in both parties; social tensions and crises were still believed to be containable within a slightly modified liberal framework.

x

This framework was put to a further test by the Boer War (1899–1902). This found the government unprepared in particular for the level and cost of weaponry required for this first modern war. The Treasury calculated initially that the war would cost not more than £10m and that most of this would be recouped from a swift annexation of the Transvaal goldmines. This was perhaps understandable in view of the apparent puniness of the Boer opposition to the might of the British Empire. In the event it cost £250m to send almost half a million British and colonial soldiers against an enemy the total population of whose country was scarcely one fifth of that number. It was mainly financed by loans and tariffs (notably the contentious corn tariff introduced in 1902) which imposed considerable pressure upon postwar government finance.

It might have been a little less costly, or at least more cost efficient, had it not also been Britain's last free enterprise war. It required an unparalleled commitment of industrial resources which were given inadequate state support. These resources had to be expanded very rapidly in view of the low level of military supplies stockpiled at the outbreak. Defence expenditure had risen in the 1890s, but by the least amount possible because of opposition in Parliament, among taxpayers and from the Treasury. The War Office had seen little need to build up reserve supplies, apparently in the belief that British free enterprise could achieve the impossible: produce large quantities of supplies quickly, in response to haphazard orders, without government subsidy or guarantees for future use of expanded plant to supplement the limited production of government ordnance factories. With all due effort neither source of supplies could comply with the required immediacy.<sup>60</sup>

The military setbacks of the early period of the war, the cost, together with revelations of the physical unfitness of volunteer recruits (there was no conscription and liberal opposition to enforced recruitment delayed its introduction even in the First World War), gave new urgency and new sources of support to fears of relative national decline. The machinery and competence of government and administration as well as methods of finance were called in question. More 'businesslike' administration, 'efficiency' – this time 'national

<sup>60</sup> C. Trebilcock, 'War and the Failure of Industrial Mobilization: 1899 and 1914', in J. M. Winter, ed., *War and Economic Development* (Cambridge, 1975).

efficiency' - were called for. Demands of this kind came, in particular, from a shifting, cross-party alliance which included the Liberal leader Lord Rosebery, the imperial administrator Alfred Milner and the Webbs, loosely united by varying degrees of commitment to the desirability of efficient, expert administration and strong leadership, ideally on a non-party basis. They did not appear to achieve extensive support but such ideas remained an undercurrent in British politics at least until 1914, some again pointing to Germany as the model to be observed.<sup>61</sup>

The war did not last long enough or make such extensive demands upon the administrative apparatus or upon society more generally (it was not a 'total war') as to enforce significant changes upon the state. The most obvious legacies were the government revenue problem and the pressure for increased state action to improve the health of children, to build (as some had been demanding since at least the 1860s) a stronger race to meet the military and economic needs of the future. The main outcome was the introduction of school meals and medical inspection and treatment for schoolchildren under the post-1906 Liberal government, and some increased local and voluntary activity in the field of child and maternal welfare.

In other respects the lessons of the war were forgotten, to be recalled in 1914-18. Pressures to minimise defence and other government expenditure, against state action to build up military supplies, or to expand the army reserve, remained strong until the eve of the First World War. The Conservatives, who remained in office until 1905, responded by keeping further social intervention to a minimum but could not be wholly unresponsive to the demands for change which had been building up in the 1890s and revived after the war. The major Education Act of 1902 was their most decisive step, though it antagonised nonconformists and also ratepayers by further increasing their commitments. The Unemployed Workmen Act, 1905, was a minimal response to a problem of increasingly pressing urgency, which, classically, placed the main burden of administration and finance on voluntary agencies in association with local government within a framework of central government supervision. The equally urgent problem of reforming a poor law whose principles and practices were increasingly perceived as inappropriate for needs as they were defined in the early years of the twentieth century, and which were

<sup>61</sup> G. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency* (Oxford, 1971). E. P. Hennock, *British Social Reform and German Precedents* (Oxford, 1986).



increasingly the focus of labour and radical Liberal criticism, was met by the establishment of a Royal Commission in 1905.

## XI

Shortly afterwards the Conservatives were succeeded by a Liberal government, brought in on a landslide propelled by disillusion at Conservative inactivity and nonconformist revolt. Since the later nineteenth century the balance within the Liberal party had shifted somewhat towards preference for a more constructive role for the state in minimising social problems, but it remained acutely divided as to how far such intervention should go and was still strongly defensive of voluntarism as embodying a desirable personal commitment to furthering the good of the community and to the need to protect private life from official intervention; a range of views which were almost identically apparent in the strengthened but still small Labour party. The Liberal commitment to economic liberalism had hardly shifted, indeed its commitment to free trade was strengthened by the furore over tariff reform in the Conservative party, set off by Joseph Chamberlain from 1903. There had been a shift of emphasis in the Liberal party rather than a quantum leap from Gladstonianism.

Indeed, the Liberals came into office in 1906 offering few promises of social legislation. Much of its electoral appeal lay rather in its promises of economy by free trade, though minor members of the new government (such as C. F. G. Masterman) were advocating comprehensive programmes of social reform. The Liberals' actions in their first two years in office were either redemptions of their pact with Labour (the Trade Disputes Act, 1906) or initiated from outside the cabinet (the introduction of school meals, by a Labour backbencher in 1906, or school medical inspection in 1907 largely on the initiative of two civil servants, Robert Morant, the force behind the 1902 Education Act, and George Newman). Any desire on the part of the government to go further was constrained by the hostility of the Conservative-dominated Lords (who rejected the Education Bill of 1906 and less important measures) and by the shortage of government revenue.

The revenue problem was compounded by rising prices which raised the costs of day-to-day government activity, and the commitment to free trade limited the available sources of additional income. The unpopularity of the rates and the gains made by Conservatives from

mobilising around ratepayer discontent (they won control of the LCC in 1907, of Sheffield, Nottingham and Leicester in 1908) removed one means of financing social measures. Hence the Liberal legislation which followed was either very cheap or funded from new sources, such as the national insurance contributions introduced in 1911. But a more fundamental solution was needed to the problem. Asquith, as Chancellor, chose to move cautiously towards a graduated income tax.

Such theorists as J. A. Hobson and Sidney Webb provided intellectual reassurance that increased and more equitable direct taxation, an income tax graduated according to income, in place of the flat-rate basis always previously employed, was a means of increasing revenue compatible with free trade. Following a favourable report by the Select Committee on the Income Tax in 1906, Asquith's 1907 Budget took the first step, in the most painless way available, by distinguishing for tax purposes between earned and unearned income and reducing the rate of tax for the former from 1s. to 9d. in the pound. He also introduced compulsory returns for all classes of taxable income, a response to the revelation of widespread tax evasion by a departmental committee in 1905. The yield to the Exchequer was small, but the move opened the way to Lloyd George's more dramatic Budgets to come and to an important break with Gladstonian principles. Higher rates of taxation of the rich would alienate a social group a high proportion of which seemed already disposed to vote for the Conservatives; lower income taxpayers would not be adversely affected and those below the income tax threshold would be encouraged by hopes of redistribution. These were the groups whose support the Liberal party needed to hold. The 'class politics' which the Gladstonian tax policy had been designed to keep at bay was now inescapable.

Asquith also took the first step towards innovative and popular social reform. He was responsible for the Old Age Pensions Act, 1908, though it was guided through the Commons by Lloyd George when Asquith was elevated to the premiership in 1908. On Treasury insistence the amount of the pension was small. It was paid, on a means-tested basis, to the very elderly and very poor who could also pass tests of respectability not dissimilar to those imposed by the poor law. The administration was cheap. The pensions were paid through the Post Office. Local administration was supervised by voluntary committees appointed by local councils and drawn from institutions with relevant experience such as friendly societies, and carried out

to a degree which would have alarmed Gladstone, but it was still not dominant and the Liberals did not propose that it should become so, nor that the obligation to self-help should be diminished. Rather they recognised the limits to self-help and voluntarism as solutions to deprivation when it was not the fault of the individual, and sought to supplement them whilst upholding and where possible extending them. The 5s. old age pension was fixed at 2s. per week below the amount calculated by Seebohm Rowntree as sufficient for individual subsistence; the gap was to be filled by self-help or philanthropy. To a high degree working people shared this approach, regarding state welfare as a poor substitute for full employment, a 'fair' wage and independence, other than to meet the needs of the undeservedly deprived who lacked other resources.<sup>64</sup>

The most striking characteristic of the Liberal social legislation compared with what had gone before was the effectiveness with which it was implemented. Whereas, for example, the considerable amount of legislation passed since the 1860s concerning the care and protection of children had been left to patchy and far from comprehensive implementation by voluntary organisations and local authorities, the intent of the Children Act was largely carried out, in part by these same bodies, but under closer central supervision. The effectiveness of implementation, for example of the Education and Public Health Acts, had gradually increased in the later nineteenth century; but, more than before, the major Liberal measures largely did what they were intended to do. This was partly due to the larger and more efficient bureaucratic resources of central and local government (though the latter are much under-researched). In 1851 there had been 39,100 civil servants, in 1881, 50,900, in 1901, 116,400; in 1911 there were 172,000. The civil service had undergone further gradual transformation, with the introduction by the 1900s of reasonably efficient techniques of recruitment and organisation, and with uniformity of pay, grades and conditions of work close to becoming fully established. The pace of work was still leisurely by later twentieth-century standards and tensions remained among departments and between most of them and the Treasury. Some, like the Local Government Board were seriously overstretched.<sup>65</sup> The service was controlled by administrators of the

<sup>64</sup> Thane, 'Working Class and "Welfare"'. H. Pelling, 'The Working Class and the Welfare State', in H. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (1968).

<sup>65</sup> R. McLeod, *Treasury Control and Social Administration* (1968).

type Gladstone had envisaged; men of liberal education from Oxford and Cambridge (though a very few women had now entered as, for example, factory inspectors), subscribing to an ethos of impartial service, though quite capable, as in the case of Robert Morant, of taking a strong initiating role. The effectiveness of a machine still small and unobtrusive by continental European standards was to be demonstrated by its conduct in the coming war.

At least as important in bringing about the effective implementation of legislation was the will on the part of ministers to bring this about, impelled, presumably, by recognition that more serious gestures were needed than before to palliate evident if not uncontrollable social disharmony (the National Insurance Act passed in the midst of a strike wave). They worked hard to ensure implementation of the measures and to pacify opposition potentially capable of subverting it. Officials visited and persuaded trade-union officials and employers who were dubious about the Insurance Act and won many of them over by incorporating them into local insurance committees.

The Liberal government sought, like its predecessors, to present itself as standing above social divisions and for the national interest. To achieve this successfully necessitated real if not excessive enhancement of the welfare of the bulk of working people and some, if not dramatic, entrenchment upon wealth. Hence Lloyd George's controversial Budget of 1909. Following Asquith's first steps he raised the tax on unearned income from 1s. to 1s.2d. in the pound; raised death duties to a maximum 15 per cent on inheritances of over £1m; imposed a super-tax of 6d. in the pound on incomes over £5,000 p.a.; introduced an allowance in respect of every child under the age of sixteen against incomes under £500 p.a.; raised duties on spirits and tobacco and imposed the first taxes on petrol and on land. Of these, the small tax on the unearned increment of land values was of greater social and political than revenue significance, in view of the distress it caused to landlords, not least due to the national land valuation which it necessitated. The Budget also established a £1m Development Fund, to provide state funding for improvements in rural transport, afforestation and agricultural education and research, all designed to assist the revival of the rural economy. Overall the Budget marked a shift from indirect to direct taxation, especially of the better off, and towards marginally greater state intervention in the economy. Its significance is evident from the fact that it provoked two general elections and a permanent curbing of the power of the

Lords, who lost, as a result, their power of veto over financial legislation.

Lloyd George went further in the Budget of 1914. This projected a record national expenditure of over £200m, introduced a graduated scale of tax on incomes of £1,000 p.a. and above and lowered the super-tax threshold to £3,000 p.a. Death duties were increased and tax relief in respect of children doubled. In seven years maximum rates of direct taxation had risen from 9d. to 2s.8d. in respect of earned income and from 8 per cent to 20 per cent in respect of death duties. The proportion of government revenue obtained from direct taxation was 60 per cent, having been 44 per cent in 1888.

The Liberals were seeking to promote a politics of social harmony in increasingly difficult circumstances in the years before 1914, amid the militancy of the Irish, trade unionists and unenfranchised women. In quelling the more extreme manifestations of militancy, like past governments, they did not hold back from overt interventionism. In the case of industrial militancy they sought where possible to build upon existing preventive mechanisms. The militant suffragists introduced a new kind of social disharmony, initiated by women bewildered and infuriated by their continued exclusion from active participation in national politics. Their fierce treatment of the militant suffragettes won the government some support but also growing criticism and by 1914, due in large measure to the subtler, pressure group tactics of constitutionalist suffragists, government leaders were accepting that they could not for much longer refuse to concede the vote to most, if not all, adult women. Women's wartime service was to offer them a face-saving excuse for doing so.<sup>66</sup>

With industrial militancy the government was on more familiar territory. The government sought to restrain the more extreme tendencies on the part of both employers and workers by accustomed, discreet, methods. The Labour Department of the Board of Trade carried on its role of encouraging a middle course between extremists among both employers and workers, against the intense suspicion of both, seeking channels for the minimisation of conflict and outcomes which disturbed the workings of the market least, facilitated by the fact that neither employers, labour nor the cabinet had united views about how industrial relations should be conducted. When it was suggested to the Home Office that Tom Mann should be arrested during the

<sup>66</sup> S. Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900-1918* (1986), pp. 116-50.

1911 railway strike the permanent secretary replied, 'If Tom Mann is to be arrested there are one or two ship-owners who should go with him to prison.'<sup>67</sup> He showed similar impatience with the pleas of manufacturers for police protection from strikers. Churchill as Home Secretary tried initially, contrary to myth, to avoid coercive action against strikers, including the South Wales miners. His limited patience broke during the 1911 railway strike. He marched soldiers into twenty-four towns, convinced that continuation of the strike would lead to a breakdown of the economy and of public order. The more politically sensitive Lloyd George intervened and brought the strike to a negotiated end.

In other disputes of the period the conciliators appointed by the Labour Department under the terms of the Conciliation Act were generally individuals not directly involved in industrial relations or with state institutions. They were usually professional men, though increasing numbers of workingmen were appointed after 1906. Most of them were not entirely neutral arbitrators between the opposing factions but nor were they simply spokesmen for the employers' interest. Nor were they always successful. Effective conciliation depended upon achieving the consent and co-operation of both sides and in these years of rising costs of living, relatively full employment and strengthened labour willingness to oppose even hard-line employers, this was not always forthcoming.<sup>68</sup> Hence the government felt forced to take the unprecedented step of regulating by legislation miners' hours and wages in 1912 as the only apparent means to achieve industrial peace in a situation in which conciliation was ineffective; though it was taken reluctantly because it appeared to favour one class over another and presented the government as intervening directly rather than, as it still preferred, through the encouragement of voluntary agreements.

In the years before 1914 the government increasingly felt forced to resort to an interventionist role. The practice, successful since the 1840s, of firmly governing an unequal but stable society through a process of negotiation among the major social factions, by an apparently neutral state by means, as Maurice Cowling has put it, of 'manipulation of the electorate to want leadership rather than participation

<sup>67</sup> Jill Pellew, *The Home Office, 1848-1914: From Clerks to Bureaucrats* (1982), p. 91.

<sup>68</sup> Roger Davidson, 'The Board of Trade and Industrial Relations, 1896-1914', *Historical Journal*, 21 (1978).

and to protect the classes by persuading the masses to support the parliamentary conflict through which inequality was sustained'<sup>69</sup> was under pressure; though it was very far from clear that the Victorian liberal consensus had collapsed.

<sup>69</sup> M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920-1924* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 6-7.

tinually changing relationship between British government and society in the twentieth century. This pattern of change to a certain extent reflects global rather than purely national history – the pressures of war, industrialisation, ideological dissent and demographic growth that have remodelled government institutions in all advanced countries. But the history of the twentieth-century British state cannot be explained purely in terms of cross-national convergence. No other state has experienced quite the same degree of rapid imperial expansion and withdrawal. No other major European country in the twentieth century has avoided both a violent overthrow of central government and invasion by a foreign power. These facts alone suggest a political culture of exceptional stability and continuity, and an unusual relationship between government and people. Yet paradoxically the powers and functions of the state have changed more dramatically since the beginning of the twentieth century than in any comparable span of years in earlier history. Though the pace of change varied at different times and there were some impulses towards contraction as well as expansion, nevertheless the British state after the Second World War occupied a very different position both in the lives and in the minds of men from that which it had occupied before 1914. Whereas the nineteenth-century ‘revolution in government’ had been an elusive and essentially limited phenomenon, that of the twentieth century pressed tangibly on nearly every facet of human life. The boundaries of what constituted the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ domain were radically redefined. Expressed in crudely quantitative terms, public authorities in the 1900s spent less than 8 per cent, in the 1960s more than 50 per cent, of gross domestic product; and, perhaps even more important, by the latter date, government had become the single most important customer for producers in the private sector. Expressed in more subjective terms, Englishmen in the 1900s greatly admired their country’s system of government, but on the whole expected it to do very little. By the 1960s they were much more critical of the whole range of governmental institutions; but their expectations of and demands upon government were incomparably more ambitious than they had been half a century before.

Such a profound change in political culture has not passed without scholarly comment, and numerous academic and official monographs supply us with detailed profiles of the state’s role in fiscal, monetary, commercial, social and industrial affairs. The *dramatis personae* of politi-



cal society – ministers and MPs, officials and experts, interest and promotional groups, producers and consumers – have all been the objects of detailed sociological scrutiny. Ambitious attempts have been made to discover the hidden motors of change and to fit them within various patterns of general explanation – such as the revival of ‘corporatism’, the contest between individualism and collectivism, the displacement of a Ricardian by a Keynesian paradigm, the changing character of ‘civic culture’, the entrenchment of capitalism by crisis-management, the growth of humanitarianism and changing perceptions of citizen rights.<sup>2</sup> Yet, unsurprisingly perhaps in the face of such a complex phenomenon, the exact nature of the changing relationship between ‘government’ and ‘society’ remains obscure. Most of the general explanations advanced can be supported up to a point with empirical evidence, yet remain in the last resort disappointingly tautological; they merely redescribe in more abstract terms the trends whose existence they are trying to explain. ‘Corporatism’ in particular offers an unsatisfactory tool to the analytic historian, because the term is often used to refer to two diametrically opposite processes (on the one hand the delegation of state functions to private institutions, on the other hand the absorption of private functions by the state). This brief essay cannot hope to unravel such complexity: but an attempt will be made to map the social history of the state since the First World War and to identify the nodal points of change and continuity.

## II

The relationship between government and society in Britain in the early years of the twentieth century was hedged around by a network of assumptions and conventions that were well understood within

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., R. K. Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society: The Experience of the British System since 1911* (1979); Walter Greenleaf, *The British Political Tradition*, 2 vols. (1983); Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, eds., *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, 1963); Dennis Kavanagh, ‘Political Culture in Britain: the Decline of the Civic Culture’, in Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, eds., *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Boston, Mass., 1980), pp. 124–76; Trevor Smith, *The Politics of the Corporate Economy* (Oxford, 1979); T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1950), pp. 1–85.

the political community.<sup>3</sup> One of the most important of these assumptions was that the political community itself was limited to those capable of such tacit understanding. The traditional equation between political participation and property rights, though marginally eroded by the nineteenth-century reform acts, had not yet given way to a purely capitational notion of democracy. Between the Franchise Acts of 1867 and 1884, which gave the vote to male heads of households, and those of 1918 and 1929, which effectively introduced universal suffrage, lay the assumption clearly articulated by Gladstone: that active membership of the constitution was not a birthright but a prize. It was a prize awarded to those with sufficient education, intelligence, experience and responsibility to enable them to comprehend what the working of the constitution was all about. The constitutional rules that participants were meant to endorse were nowhere codified, but consisted of a series of principles formulated with varying degrees of precision and formality. Those most clearly articulated by early twentieth-century constitutional theorists were the notions of parliamentary sovereignty and the rule of law. Buttressing these twin pillars of constitutional theory were a host of lesser principles, some embodied in statutes, some plucked from the air of everyday political practice: some of long-standing, others recently enunciated to meet the changing needs and constitutional environment of the nineteenth century. These concerned such diverse issues as the powers of the monarch, the independence of the judiciary, the autonomy of MPs, the relationship between Lords and Commons, the frequency of parliamentary elections and the circumstances under which ministers were required to resign. Outside this inner core of constitutional rules was a wide penumbral region of principles and practices which fell short of full constitutional status but which it was widely believed public servants should observe. Much of this informal code of conduct was of relatively recent (Peelite and Gladstonian) origin: it included

<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to offer precise references to such imprecise phenomena as assumptions and conventions, but I found the following works useful and suggestive: Henry Sidgwick, *The Principles of Political Economy*, Book 3: *The Art of Political Economy* (3rd edn, 1901), pp. 395–592; A. V. Dicey, *Law and Public Opinion in England during the Nineteenth Century* (2nd edn, 1914); A. V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (8th edn, 1924); A. Laurence Lowell, *The Government of England*, 2 vols. (New York, 1908); Maurice Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution. The Passing of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge, 1967); Robert Currie, *Industrial Politics* (Oxford, 1979); H. C. G. Matthew, ed., *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 7 (Oxford, 1982), pp. xxv–ciii; Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics* (Oxford, 1982), Parts 1 and 2.

such principles as the impropriety of approaching electorates with 'promises' and 'programmes', the desirability of balanced budgets, the need for 'evenhandedness' in dealing with competing interest groups, and the iniquity of 'class legislation'. Above all there was a belief among politicians of all complexions that the relationship between government and society was essentially a limited one; it was a marriage of convenience rather than a marriage of true minds. The aim of the government even at its most ambitious was not to determine the structure and working of society; such an aim would have been seen as not so much undesirable as inherently unattainable. Rather, it was to provide a framework of rules and guidelines designed to enable society very largely to run itself.

Behind these constitutional rules lay something more intangible: a widely diffused popular political philosophy, often ignored by historians who see social history as by its nature a materialist enterprise, but which constituted one of the most enduring and powerful facts in the life of English society. Because of its very diffuseness this popular philosophy is not easy to define. In contradistinction to much continental political thought, it saw 'civil society' (business, work, culture, leisure, family life, religion) as the highest sphere of human existence and the arena in which men enjoyed some form of absolute rights. 'The State', by contrast, was an institution of secondary importance and dubious linguistic status (Englishmen generally preferred the concept 'government') which existed mainly to serve the convenience and protect the rights of individuals in private life. This is not to deny that there was always a tradition of English theorists who saw the state in more transcendental or sacramental terms, but for most of the nineteenth century this was the view of a dwindling and dissentient minority. An instrumental view of the state did not necessarily add up to a mere atomistic individualism: but the corporate life of society was seen as expressed through voluntary association and the local community, rather than through the persona of the state. Similarly, the state was rarely seen as an indispensable vehicle of collective national identity. The institutions of the state (crown, Parliament, the established church) might in certain respects and at certain times enhance and symbolise such a sense of identity, and Parliament in particular was seen as closely linked with national history. But for most Englishmen, Scotsmen and Welshmen a sense of belonging to their country was very remote from any sense of belonging to its governing institutions (only among the Irish was there a lurking belief

that national identity was somehow inextricably mixed up with institutional separateness and sovereign power).

The practical expression of such beliefs was not the oft-cited but largely imaginary 'nightwatchman state'. Victorian government did involve itself in the life of its citizens in many visible and invisible ways; but such involvement had to be justified in strictly functional and expedient terms. In the few areas where the state laid down a systematic framework for social life (as in the poor law, support for free trade, and management of currency) this was thought to be merely an institutional enforcement of certain universally valid behavioural laws. This is not, of course, to claim that practice always corresponded with principle and theory: interest groups never abandoned the quest for state support, and Victorian politicians never wholly ceased to use state resources to placate their own supporters. But, as a matter of general policy, the state was deemed to be above particular interests. More extensive government was widely viewed as not merely undesirable but unnecessary, in the sense that most of the functions performed by government in other societies were in Britain performed by coterie of citizens governing themselves. The full extent of such informal collectivism is incalculable: but sources such as the Annual Charities Register and the annual reports of the Registrar of Friendly Societies bear witness to the dense network of self-governing social institutions that encircled the citizen at every level. As late as 1911 the gross annual receipts of registered charities exceeded national public expenditure on the poor law – a figure that takes no account of unregistered charities, nor of such bastions of voluntarism as friendly societies, trade unions and other forms of institutional self-help.<sup>4</sup>

This bundle of political ideals and institutional practices found powerful expression in English public life right down to 1914. Since the 1880s, however, there had been gradually accumulating signs of change:<sup>5</sup> change which some contemporaries viewed as a necessary adaptation to modern conditions, others as a reversion to the era of 'old corruption', or to the even earlier period of arbitrary executive power. Politics grew noticeably more programmatic; market forces

<sup>4</sup> A. R. Prest and A. A. Adams, *Consumers' Expenditure in the United Kingdom 1900-1919* (Cambridge, 1954), p. 162; B. R. Mitchell and Phyllis Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics*, chaps. 4-7; Harold Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics* (Cambridge, 1973), *passim*; George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1936), esp. Part 2.

of war led to increasingly bitter conflict between the second and third of these alternatives, and to the gradual displacement of the old style of government by a much more dynamic and arbitrary system geared not to constitutional niceties but to winning the war.<sup>7</sup> Traditional approaches were symbolised by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald McKenna, who clung to free trade and sterling convertibility: and by the Governor of the Bank of England, Lord Cunliffe, who even as late as 1917 spent financial missions to North America on fishing trips to Florida, convinced that no human action could modify relations between the dollar and the pound.<sup>8</sup> The new model of government first began to emerge with the setting-up of the Ministry of Munitions in 1915. The next seventeen months saw a series of running battles within government, Parliament and society at large over such issues as military conscription, direction of civilian manpower, regulation of wages, prices and profits, and the scope and content of government emergency powers. The most crucial and symbolic of these battles was that over conscription: no other issue so trenchantly challenged the mid-nineteenth-century vision of a citizen's autonomy and detachment from the institutions of the state. Conflict between these rival conceptions of government led at the end of 1916 to a crucial change of Prime Ministers: the cautious constitutionalist Asquith was replaced by his more dynamic, more pragmatic, more *étatist* colleague, David Lloyd George.

Lloyd George's wartime premiership may be seen as a crucial turning point in the evolution of modern politics and the modern British state. Though Lloyd George himself had no clear-cut constitutional ideas (and indeed lacked anything resembling a coherent political philosophy), nevertheless he became the catalyst and animator of many of the new political forces already stirring before 1914 and now unleashed by the crisis of war. Indeed, his very lack of principle, combined with his restless innovatory energy, made him a resonant sounding board for fashionable ideas. His move to the premiership was accompanied by radical changes in the structure, personnel and ethos of British government, and in the impact that it made on citizens' private lives. The traditional cabinet of senior ministers (an institution that had evolved over 200 years without acquiring a regular status

<sup>7</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-45* (Oxford, 1965), chaps. 1 and 2; Cameron Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War July 1914 to May 1915* (1971); Kathleen Burk, ed., *War and the State: The Transformation of British Government, 1914-19* (1982).

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Burk, *Britain, America and the Sineus of War* (1985), p. 129.

and procedures) was replaced by a much smaller, more formalised war cabinet, concerned not with rubber-stamping departmental business but with formulating and co-ordinating high policy. Cabinet business, previously recorded only in a few lines penned by the Prime Minister to the monarch, was now managed and minuted by a professional secretariat.<sup>9</sup> At the same time a whole range of new Whitehall departments was set up, to deal with expanding areas of government responsibility, such as Labour, Food, Shipping, Pensions and (somewhat later) Health. The new ministries were staffed partly by professional civil servants, partly by a large body of businessmen recruited into Whitehall for the duration of the war: 'men of push and go', whose proclaimed purpose was to galvanise British government into entrepreneurial standards of speed and efficiency. By 1917 the wartime emergency had propelled these departments into a degree of regulation of civilian life never dreamt of in the prewar era: food rationing, price controls, compulsory purchase and requisitioning of raw materials, bulk importation of essential supplies, control of rents and housebuilding, registration and direction of labour - all the paraphernalia of what a mid-nineteenth-century liberal would have regarded as a classic authoritarian state. In addition to new ministries Lloyd George also set up a range of advisory and policy-making institutions without precedent in British constitutional history; such as his own personal secretariat of policy advisers (the famous 'Garden Suburb') and a Directorate of National Service, whose head was neither a civil servant nor a Member of Parliament but a businessman administrator responsible only to the war cabinet. Finally, the later years of the war also produced an upsurge of what can only be described as 'planning', though the term was not current at the time. In several Whitehall departments groups of ambitious administrators formed themselves into 'think-tanks' to plot long-term policy objectives, and a series of 'reconstruction' committees culminated in the setting-up of a full-blown Ministry of Reconstruction charged with rebuilding British society and institutions in the postwar world.<sup>10</sup>

This explosion of institutional change was accompanied by widespread flouting of long-established norms of public administration. Treasury and parliamentary control over public spending were swept

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets*, vol. 1: 1877-1918 (1970), chap. 12; John Turner, 'Cabinets, Committees and Secretariats: The Higher Direction of War', in Burk, ed., *War and the State*, pp. 57-83.

<sup>10</sup> José Harris, *William Beveridge: A Biography* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 250-62; Burk, ed., *War and the State*, pp. 157-81.