*Chapter Fifty-Seven*

# THE FINAL DECADES OF ARISTOCRATIC RULE

THE passing of the Great Reform Bill in 1832 achieved what it had set out to do, prolong aristocratic rule, but it could not do so indefinitely. After 1870 it was finally to spiral downwards in a spectacular decline to the present day. But that decline was to be gradual. To all intents and purposes the aristocracy still dominated the political, social and economic scene and also the powers, such as the army and the police, which underpinned it. Only a fifth of the population had the vote and their attitudes, too, were based on land and property. At the time it must have seemed that nothing had changed, indeed that the status quo had been reinforced. In the long term that was to prove an illusion.

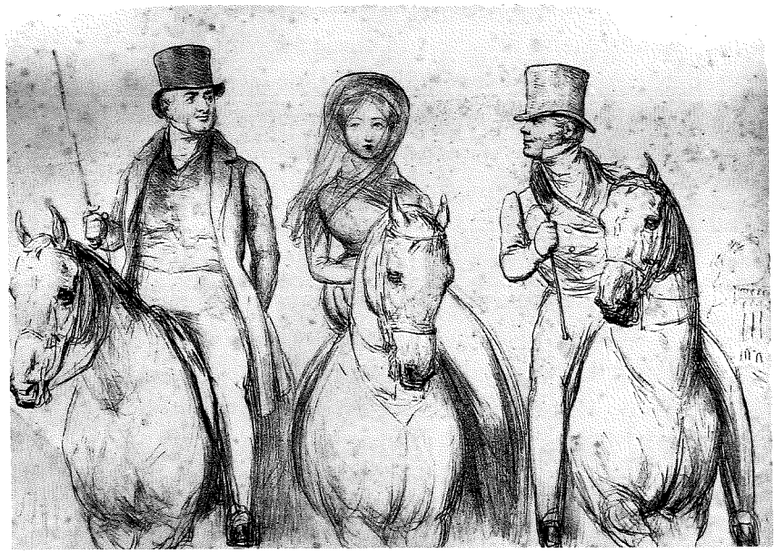
The forty years which followed 1832 seemed unbelievably complicated as ministries came and went. Although a two-party system was gradually emerging, no one envisaged that system as the future pattern of politics, even as late as 1860. There were confusing and shifting alliances of Whigs, Conservatives, Peelites, Irish nationalists and radicals. Regardless of these alignments, however, the majority came together, sharing certain premises as to the nature and objectives of government, in particular a strong sense of the importance of national and imperial security, which pervaded the entire political world. Government was above all to be cheap, and although it intervened, that intervention was done with reluctance and remained still essentially limited. Regardless of party, the prime aim of any government was seen as ensuring freedom of action to the individual from state interference, and creating conditions in which private enterprise and endeavour would flourish. To achieve that, ministries of different persuasions passed the long series of social and political legislation which was eventually to spell the death knell of aristocratic power.

During these decades there occurred one by one the changes which cumulatively were irrevocably to alter the power structure of the country. The reduction in the position of the monarchy with George IV and William IV, neither of whom commanded respect, accelerated. Although all acts of government continued to be



carried out in the name of the sovereign (and are even to this day), this merely provided a convenient framework, giving an illusion of continuity. One by one, royal powers quietly vanished. Ever-increasing professionalism of government progressively marginalised the crown's political role in the state. Although the monarch still chose the Prime Minister and asked him to form a ministry, his choice was narrowed to someone who had the general confidence of Parliament and especially the House of Commons. In 1834 William IV granted the Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel's request for a dissolution. Henceforward such a request by a Prime Minister was never again to be refused. Peel failed to win from the electorate a Commons majority and although he enjoyed the king's support he was forced to resign. This signalled another erosion of royal power: no Prime Minister could ever again be sustained in office by the monarch. When the young and ill-educated Victoria came to the throne in 1837 the crown was to slip still further. Her open preference for Lord Melbourne and the Whigs became a danger to the monarchy even affecting her choice of the women in her service at court. The queen was saved by her marriage in 1840 to Prince


A satire in which the young Robert Peel dreams of a peerage as a reward for his part in achieving Catholic Emancipation in 1829. Its title *The Vision – the rewards of perfidy* record the views of those who opposed the motion.



The eighteen-year-old Queen Victoria satirised as caught between Lord Melbourne, who was Prime Minister, on the left and Lord John Russell, on the right.

Albert who hewed out a new role for the crown as a unifying force rising above transitory demands of political party. The monarch's role in home affairs henceforth could not extend beyond one of advice and warning, however strong personal preferences might be. A diminished power over foreign policy was to linger until the 1860s.

Parliament's role too evolved from that of previous centuries into one of intervention as an agent of change. Until about 1850 most bills remained local or personal, as they had been in the past. After that date the balance decisively shifted to a preponderance of public general statutes and many more of them, indeed ever-multiplying as the century wore on. Their implications, often affecting the whole population, were such that they called for meticulous drafting, and that expertise was to develop only gradually. Although members of the Lords still had immense powers of political patronage, retaining even into the 1880s control over certain constituencies, the influence of the Lords was on the decline, and was in the end to be dramatically curtailed by two further Reform Acts in 1867 and 1884 which extended the franchise to classes beyond their control. Political power now firmly lay with the Commons whose members were still drawn from the wealthier sections of the community, increasingly from those whose riches came not from the land but from commerce and industry. As the electorate widened the whole character of elections changed, leading to the development of party machines to rally the voters. That in turn gradually led to the elimination of what had been the backbone of the Commons in the previous century, the independent members. By 1870 they had vanished, and solid voting along a two-party system developed.



Ministers still had to be men of wealth, status and standing in society. They were mostly either peers by birth or were soon ennobled. What this system had in its favour was the wide age range it embraced plus the fact it contained a mixture of old and new aristocracy who, because their estates were scattered all over the country, embodied an abundance of grassroots knowledge. Any aristocratic ministry in the end remained loyal to its creed of putting country before class. This reflected the awareness of the ruling élite that although only a fifth of the population voted, it was their duty to protect and act in the interests of those who did not have the franchise. When Peel repealed the Corn Laws in 1846 he presented his action in this light, as averting starvation and famine for ordinary people, although by doing so he split his own party in two. The time had not yet come when legislation would only be attempted which had the imprimatur of the party. The gradual widening of the electorate and the rise of literacy was to mean a far more widespread knowledge and interest in political issues than ever before, leading to figures such as W. E. Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli becoming household names in a manner up till then unthinkable.

One of the greatest statesmen of the century was Sir Robert Peel, the man who, in the aftermath of the shock of 1832, was to revive the fortunes of the Tories in a new guise, that of the future Conservative Party. Hard work and dedication to the cause, aligned to a remarkable intellectual agility and mastery of detail, ensured that he dominated the Commons through his knowledge and brainpower. A politician who was still in one sense cast in the old aristocratic mould, Peel took the bold decision that the only way to revive Tory fortunes was to accept the Reform Bill. The Tamworth Manifesto, an address to his constituents in 1834, was the first time a party had ever offered a programme to a national electorate, the progenitor of today's party manifestos. It was addressed not only to Tories but to all people of a conservative temperament who accepted the 1832 Bill, laying down the principles upon which, should they come to power, they would act. In his belief church and crown were sacrosanct but he conceded that the country's age-old institutions should be subject both to review and to change. In short, evolution rather then revolution. If the idea of a national manifesto setting out a programme for action was new, so too was the organisational drive to secure voters. That centred on local associations who searched electoral registers and recruited voters on a scale unheard of before 1832.

In 1841, owing much to such work in the constituencies as well as to fear by the landed interest of a repeal of the Corn Laws, Peel was swept to power, bringing with him one of the ablest administrations of the century. Income tax was brought back in order to obtain a freer hand for tariff reductions, and by progressively removing

A top-hatted policeman, known as a Peeler, helping people in Trafalgar Square in the early 1860s. Sir Edwin Landseer's lions had yet to be added to Nelson's Column.

export and import duties Peel was to pave the way for the heyday of free trade after 1850. He was to be looked back on as a great Prime Minister. In party terms he refashioned the Tories as the Conservatives by forging an alliance between the old traditionalists with men attuned to the new age of industry. That reorientation was to survive even the blow dealt by his repeal of the Corn Laws.

Agriculture had stood protected by the Corn Laws since the close of the Napoleonic wars. These had guaranteed the price of corn and kept out the importation of cheap foreign grain. Such laws were increasingly an affront to the commercial and industrial classes, who believed in free trade and resented the special status thus accorded the landed rural classes. In 1839 the Anti-Corn Law League was established, sponsoring a nationwide programme of rallies, meetings and lectures. Those who supported it were largely urban and middle class, belonging to a group which also brought in Dissenters, radicals and those opposed to the establishment. Its opponents could be described as the landed interest, rural, Anglican and conservative. The League was a new form of protest movement which lacked neither money nor organisational drive. From the outset there was a realisation that in the post-1832 world the only way to achieve their objective was via the ballot box. They



had to capture voters and through them MPs, and in doing this they set a precedent which other protest groups were later to emulate. The irony was that their objective was achieved not by them but by an act of aristocratic paternalism. Peel carried the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 with the support of opposition Whig votes. Shortly after that the Whigs promptly allied themselves with his own backbenchers, who regarded him as having betrayed an election pledge, to bring him down.

The Anti-Corn Law League worked within the framework of how things were to be in sharp contrast to another countrywide movement, the Chartists, whose means of protest were a throwback to the years immediately after 1815. Chartism, however, was the most important political movement of the century, vividly reflected in the fact that five out of their six demands were granted by 1918. What was called the People's Charter was drawn up by a London cabinet-maker and a radical master-tailor called Francis Place in 1838. It called for universal male suffrage, the abolition of the property qualification for MPs, annual Parliaments, electoral districts of equal size, the payment of MPs and a secret ballot. None of these ideas were new but they resurfaced in a forceful way as a revival of artisan and middle class radicalism based in London and Birmingham. In the context of the late 1830s such demands would have been seen as revolutionary. In 1839 a National Convention was held in London and reconvened in Birmingham where it provoked riots and unrest which were suppressed by the army and the police. Huge petitions were presented to Parliament

The earliest photograph of a mass protest rally, the Great Chartist meeting on Kennington Common in April 1848, a daguerreotype taken by William Kilburn. It encapsulates in one image the established classes fear of revolution from below.

which promptly threw them out, one in 1839 with 1.3 million signatures and a second in 1842 with 3.3 million. In 1840, under the aegis of Feargus O'Connor, the National Charter Association was formed and meetings and demonstrations punctuated the 1840s until 1848, when they finally petered out in a vast rally on Kennington Common. The campaign, demonstrations and strikes achieved nothing in the end, but they did leave a bitter and deep legacy amongst the working classes which was to surface later in the century.

In Europe, 1848 was the Year of Revolutions, with governments facing challenges to their authority all over the Continent. In England that year was to be the preface to a decade of prosperity as the country entered its Victorian apogee. The Chartists were doomed to failure from the outset. They cast themselves in a struggle against what they viewed as a rich and indolent aristocracy allied to a perfidious middle class which had sold out to them. In a way they were right, for the Reform Bill had hitched the middle classes firmly to the aristocratic bandwagon. But the Chartists were themselves disunited, worse, they were devoid of money or weapons or even the sense to work via the electorate. Their only means of exerting pressure was by way of petition. Any unrest they caused was also easily contained in an age when both police and troops could be moved around by the new railways. Government astutely avoided making any Chartist a martyr. The movement lingered on after 1848 but it was a spent force, neutered by Victorian prosperity. It had been at its height in the years of industrial slump. After its failure radicalism was to move north to the industrial cities, where the strong egalitarian legacy of the Chartists was to pass into the labour-based politics of the working man.

After Peel's resignation came a shifting kaleidoscope of ministries for over a decade, in which party labels counted for little. What dominated the 1850s more than any other issue was the Crimean War. The popular nationalism which swept through Europe in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars naturally evoked strong sympathies with a country fed on the myth of British freedoms. The public supported Garibaldi in his mission to unite Italy but, at the same time, wanted to sustain the Austro-Hungarian Empire north of the Alps as a buffer against Russian expansionism. The great Foreign Minister of the period was Lord Palmerston who saw his role as guaranteeing Britain's place as the leading world power in naval and commercial terms, but not even at its apogee was Britain able to prevent Prussia's creation within Europe of a single massive German state. The consequence of that in the next century was to be momentous. Russia's expansionist policies at the expense of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire in the Near East, however, did warrant Palmerston's attention because of its repercussions on British trade in the area.



In the summer of 1853 Russia invaded what is now Romania. In the autumn a joint Franco-British force was sent to the Black Sea followed by war being declared in February of the next year. It had huge popular support from a public unaware that the country's army and navy were in a state of decay. The next two years brought nothing but sagas of ineptitude and disaster. The army laid siege to Sebastopol and there were bloody battles. What set this war apart from any other was that for the first time people at home read on-the-spot accounts of it in the newspapers. They were appalled. Although Sebastopol fell in September 1855 and peace was made the following March, the repercussions at home were tremendous. The government, headed by Lord Aberdeen, was seen to be made up of incompetent aristocrats and the war brought about its downfall. And Lord Palmerston, who succeeded, was forced to accept an enquiry into the conduct of the war. The cynical view from the street was one of disenchantment with dilettante aristocrats who had allowed the country's forces and war machine to lapse into chaos.

Three years after the close of the Crimean War the years of ever-changing ministries came to an end when the followers of Sir Robert Peel (who died in 1850), the Peelites, came together with the Whigs, Liberals and Radicals to form the future Liberal party, with Lord Palmerston as Prime Minister and William Ewart Gladstone emerging as a major force within the new party. When Palmerston died in 1865 he was succeeded by Lord John Russell and electoral reform, which had been off the agenda since 1832, returned. By the 1860s British society, with its ever-growing pop-

The first notable war reporter recorded by Roger Fenton. William Russell was correspondent for *The Times* during the Crimean War bringing its readers hitherto unknown graphic descriptions of the realities of war. His vivid reports of the appalling conditions of the troops inspired Florence Nightingale.

ulation and ever-burgeoning middle classes, was very different, calling for an extension of the franchise. The problem was how to achieve this without granting the vote, still viewed not as a natural right but a privilege bestowed, to people who might endanger the existing scheme of things. The perception was that it would be wiser to make an adjustment at a time of general prosperity and an absence of pressure rather than wait for protest to mount. The Liberal bill was defeated in 1866, however, and the Conservatives, headed by Benjamin Disraeli, were called upon to form a ministry. The Conservatives had been in the political wilderness for a generation, ever since Peel had split them down the middle over the Corn Laws. Disraeli realised that there they would dwell for as long as they were regarded as the party only of landed interest. He therefore set out to outwit Gladstone (his great rival) and the Liberals by pre-empting their role as reformers. Thus, he believed, a sure path would be laid to power. The bill the Conservatives compiled was a ramshackle, ill-thought-through affair into which Disraeli bounced his party wholly unaware of its consequences. The Act was passed in 1867 and this time granted the vote to all urban householders and to those paying £10 in rent. In the counties the occupational qualification was lowered from £50 to £15. As a result the electorate was doubled, and two people in five now had the vote. The redistribution of constituencies in response to the shifts in population was, however, minimal, thus greatly curtailing any threat to the status quo. This was in no way a landmark of the magnitude of 1832 but it was a significant marker. No one could control how that number of people would vote, especially as the secret ballot was introduced in 1872. On the surface much that was familiar remained in place. The redistribution of seats maintained a balance in favour of rural areas and an eighth of them continued to be filled by aristocratic patronage. But that was a mirage. The 1867 Act sounded the death knell of the rule of the élite. A huge electorate running into millions called for the development of party machines on an even larger scale, with a central office and active local party associations. This time the make-up of the electorate firmly reflected the changed reality of Victorian Britain in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, for it was urban and working. Whether Conservatives liked it or not, if they wished to remain in power in the future they would have to play to the electorate which they had created. The Liberals had to come to terms with the same dilemma and also with increasing pressure from the middle classes for a share in the control of the party. With a vast electorate, those who hoped to become MPs stood little chance of being elected without adherence to, and support from, one of the major party machines. By 1870 the monarchy had lost control of government. Now it was to be the turn of the aristocracy.