

## *Chapter Sixty-One*

# COMING TO TERMS WITH DEMOCRACY

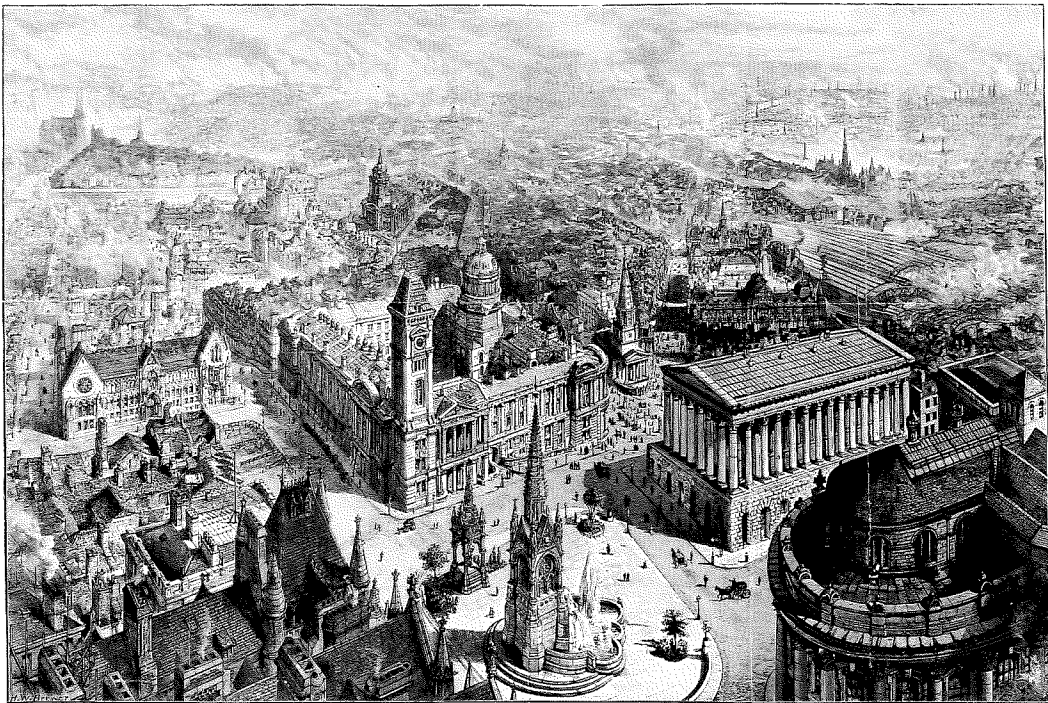
THE half-century following the first major extension of the franchise in 1867 was to see it progressively widened, giving the vote to more and more of the population. After further reforms in 1884 and 1885 two out of every three males could vote. Although this still meant that the electorate only totalled eight million of the total population of some forty-five million, in 1914 (the year in which the First World War broke out) it now included members of the working class. The political system which had carried this revolution through, however, ostensibly remained what it had been for centuries, one of Crown, Lords and Commons in Parliament. Members of whatever persuasion all remained at heart devotees of the old rule of the élite. Their problem was to salvage as much as possible of that world, and make it work and appeal to a very different kind of society. What is so striking is that regardless as to whether a particular administration was Liberal or Conservative both henceforth channelled their energies, with enthusiasm or reluctance, into social legislation.

With the advent of a mass electorate, political parties had to present programmes for future action in order to get elected, which meant that both Liberals and Conservatives needed to clarify as far as they were able what each stood for in the eyes of voters. Both parties were fortunate in being able to enter this new age with two political giants at the helm, men whose contrasting personalities were so strong as to divide people into one camp or the other. And it was to be these leaders as much as anything who were to define what their respective parties stood for. The Liberal leader, William Ewart Gladstone, was a Scot by descent, a man of high principle and a devout churchman but with the moral zeal of a Dissenter. He also had the energy and drive to pull into coherence streams within the party's make-up which were not only Liberal but also Whig and Radical. Beneath it all, Gladstone was no revolutionary, for he revered the inherited institutions of monarchy and aristocracy. The Liberals billed themselves as devotees of economic freedom and also of the free market, believers,

As Lord Mayor of Birmingham he had transformed that city, but he also organised the Liberal political machine within it in a way which the party was to copy elsewhere.

So the scene was set for three swathes of social legislation marking three periods more or less of dominance by one or other of the two parties, the first Liberal, the second Conservative and the third Liberal again, covering in total over fifty years. A major factor besetting any administration (which will be dealt with separately) was the increasing problem of Ireland upon whose events governments both rose and fell. But when it came to domestic issues nothing could arrest the ever-increasing flood of social reform.

Gladstone's first ministry (1868-74) introduced a competitive examination for entrance into the Civil Service and abolished the purchase of commissions in the army. The Education Reform Bill of 1870 allowed the setting-up of schools by the Education Department in any district where provision was either not efficient or suitable. His second ministry (1880-85) was less clear-sighted but went on to extend the franchise in 1884, and the year after in the Redistribution Bill to create single-member constituencies in the towns, thus further eroding what was left of landed interest. He was to return for a third (1886) and a fourth term (1892-94) but his energies were taken up with Ireland and an attack on the House of Lords ended in



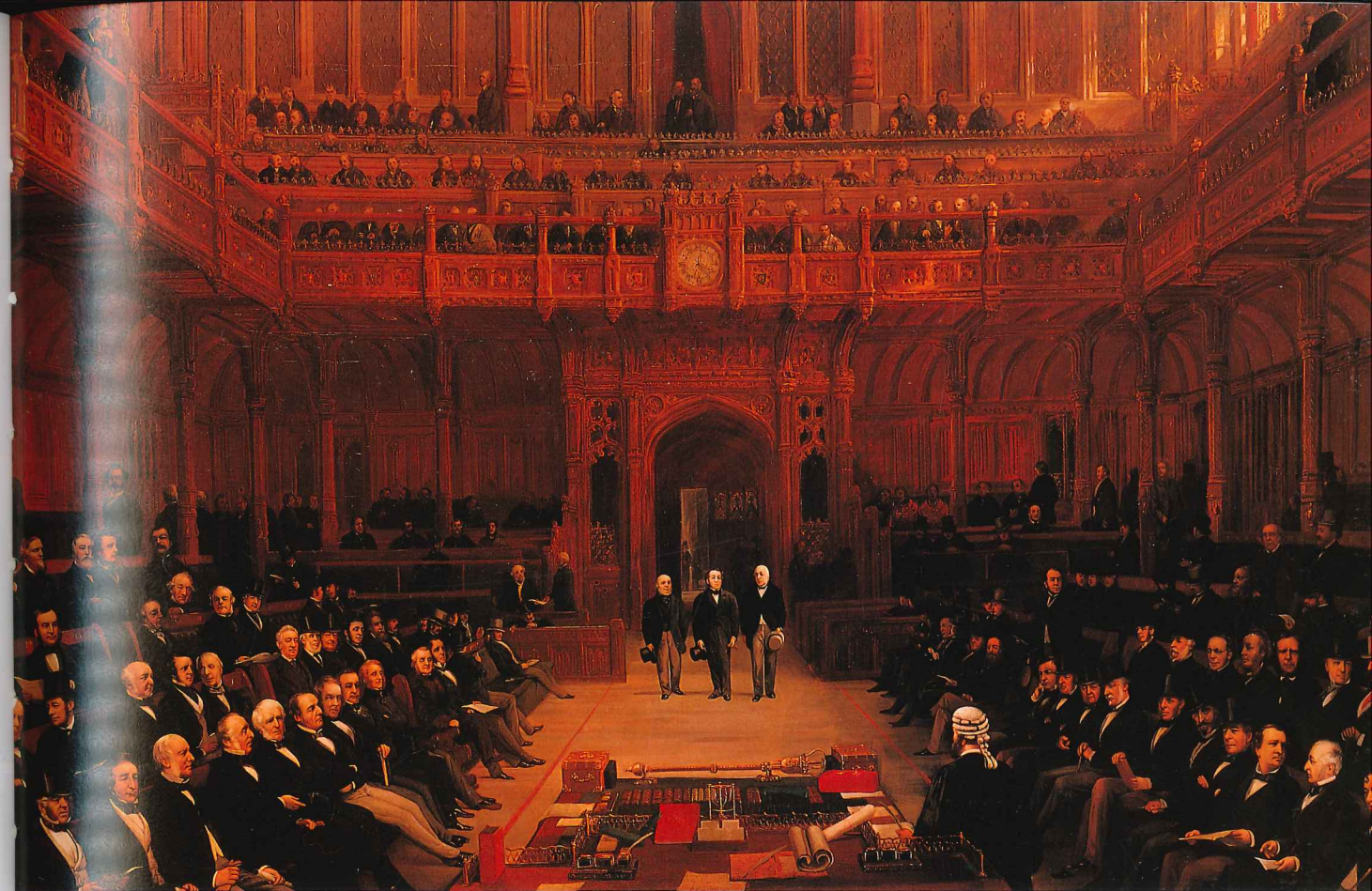


failure. However, in 1894 the Liberals did introduce death duties, thus establishing the principle that the state could tax capital.

Gladstone died in 1898 and was accorded a state funeral. By then he belonged to a world that had vanished. No one, when the franchise was extended, could have imagined that a two-party system would have emerged as the norm, nor that both sides would successfully draw in voters across the classes, averting polarisation. That that did not happen may have owed much to rising living standards and the availability of cheap food, but it must also have owed something to the GOM or Grand Old Man as Gladstone was called. His government had carried through forward-looking social legislation which responded exactly to the public mood of the period. But at the same time the House of Lords remained untouched, the Church of England was not disestablished and, although he promised to introduce local government, it never happened. What he did enshrine into the new politics was a strong moral dimension which was to survive him.

Disraeli was seventy when he became Prime Minister in 1874. The Tories came to power with no real programme, but they also found themselves carrying through social reform. The Employers and Workmen Act (1875) put both employers and employees on an equal footing for the first time. The Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act (1875) freed trade unions, making a strike no longer an offence as a conspiracy. The Tories repealed the Criminal Law Amendment Act, in this way legalising peaceful picketing. The Artisan's Dwelling Act empowered local authorities to purchase land compulsorily for building and rehousing people at a reasonable rent. All of these measures and others were appeals by the old élite for the 'villa' and working class vote. Disraeli was to lose the 1880 election due to the prevailing economic depression, and to die a year later.

His successor was an aristocrat of the old school, Robert Gascoyne Cecil, third Marquess of Salisbury, a brilliant and witty man whose mission was to ensure that as much as possible of the old scheme of things survived. But even he could not stem the demand for social reform. In 1888 a Local Government Act set up sixty-two elected county councils which took over the management of roads, asylums and running the local police. The following year the London County Council was created, providing an overall authority to deal with the planning problems of what had grown into the world's greatest city. There was legislation which reflected the need to lift educational standards, essential in an age when literacy and technical skills were fast becoming a necessity. Elementary education became free in 1891. Five years after, powers were given to local councils to erect council houses. When Salisbury returned for his third term of office in 1895 he was more resistant to implementing further



change. By then demands for that within the party were embodied in Joseph Chamberlain, who had deserted the Liberals over Ireland. Salisbury succeeded in staving off Chamberlain's plan to introduce Old Age Pensions.

The marquess retired in 1902, shortly after the accession of Victoria's son as Edward VII. He was succeeded by his nephew, A. J. Balfour. Nicknamed 'Pretty Fanny', Balfour was a scintillating but bored bachelor. He was a strange combination of courage and languor and, even more than Salisbury, he found democracy distasteful. Unfortunately he showed it. He too, however, pursued the pathway of further social reform. The 1902 Education Act placed education in the hands of the recently created county and county borough councils with the aim of raising standards. Although far less ideological than the Liberals the Conservatives had to move with the times, albeit in a piecemeal and pragmatic way. Billing themselves as the defenders of time-honoured institutions, they could yet demonstrate that such a defence need not exclude adaptation and change. Balfour was to be brought down not by his own

The old Houses of Parliament were destroyed by fire in 1834. The present building was designed by Sir Charles Barry in co-operation with Augustus Pugin in the Gothic style. The new House of Commons, depicted here by Henry Barraud, began to be used in 1850.



actions but those of Chamberlain who came out publicly in favour of protectionism, that is, lower duties on Empire imports which became known as the 'Imperial Preference'. Balfour resigned on this issue and the Conservatives suffered a landslide defeat by an electorate for which free trade was the sacred totem of their prosperity.

The Liberals returned to power. They came in with no master-plan but gradually, during a decade of dominance, they were to a great extent to set the agenda for the new century, one which was to embody a fundamental shift in attitude. Government may have passed an abundance of social legislation during the Victorian period but it delegated its execution to the local authorities whose response was variable. Now the state itself, bit by bit, was to take on those tasks. Already by 1914 the number of civil servants had risen to 200,000. The belief that the state could somehow miraculously provide a cure for every kind of ill in society was progressively to become an entrenched idea, unquestioned until the 1980s.

These Liberals were very different from those of the Gladstone era. Instead of being landowners they were a mixture of men of private means, trade unionists, and professional politicians drawn from occupations like law or journalism. Indeed one of the Liberals' most significant acts was to award MPs a salary of £400 p.a., thus enabling the working class to aspire to a political career. This was a time when the party was blessed with abundant intellectual vigour, epitomised less by their solid initial Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (1905-1908), than by his successor Herbert Henry Asquith (1908-16). Although an alcoholic and womaniser, Asquith was possessed of a refined and disciplined mind, alert, to the point and efficient. He was a superb debater. His period in office was adorned by a galaxy of talent with the young Winston Churchill as President of the Board of Trade and the Welshman David Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Energetic and charming, Asquith abounded with fresh ideas, many of which owed their origins to another rising star, the civil servant, William Beveridge.

The Acts passed by this government read like a roll call of the foundation stones of the society in which we still live. The Trades Disputes Act (1906) granted trade unions full legal immunity, a status unequalled anywhere else in Europe and one which was not to be challenged until the 1980s. In the same year the School Meals Act enabled local authorities to provide free school meals. In 1907 probation for offenders was introduced. Then, in 1908, came a whole spate: Old Age Pensions with a government allowance of five shillings a week for those over seventy; an eight-and-a-half hour day for miners, the first time that Parliament had taken on the task of limiting the working hours of men; children under fourteen were no longer to be sent to prison and the Borstal system was set up to deal with young offenders; Labour



Cartoon by Linley Sambourne from the 5 August 1908 issue of *Punch* on Lloyd George's introduction of Old Age Pensions.

#### THE PHILANTHROPIC HIGHWAYMAN.

Exchanges were established as a mechanism towards finding work for the unemployed. The most important of all these Acts was the National Insurance Bill (1911), which more than any laid the foundations of what was later to take the form of the Welfare State. Part One of this Act provided for payment for workers during sickness, something to which government, worker and employer alike were to contribute. Part Two went to provide for payment during unemployment, a provision designed specifically to meet the problem of seasonal laying-off. Unemployment however, was already being recognised as potentially one of the greatest social problems of the new century. It was one which was to haunt successive governments.

In addition to these achievements the Liberals added another which directly affected the centre, the taming of the House of Lords which still had the power to block any bill from the Commons. In 1909 Lloyd George brought in a budget which introduced a super-tax for those with incomes above £2,000 p.a., besides increasing duties on tobacco and other commodities. The Lords rejected it. Asquith realised that he would require two elections in order to curb their power. The first was fought on 'the peers against the people'. When the Liberals were returned with a much reduced majority, Asquith launched a bill which curtailed the right of the Lords to oppose any money bill. In addition, any other bill which passed the Commons three times became the law, regardless of rejection by the Upper House. The life of Parliament was also shortened from seven to five years. During the crisis the old king died and

was succeeded by his son, George V, who was persuaded that if it proved necessary he would flood the Lords with new Liberal peers in order to pass the bill. In December 1910 Asquith went to the country for a second time, and was returned again to power. The Lords, faced with the prospect of as many as five hundred Liberal peers, caved in. The right to oppose any money bill was lost, and in the case of other bills the Lords' power was reduced to that of delay for a period of up to two years. This battle represented more than the constitutional subjugation of the Lords to the Commons. At a deeper level it recognised that political power was no longer based on the ownership of land but sprang from a record of achievement. To both the aristocracy and the upper classes it was a bitter blow.

All of these measures were responsive to public mood and embodied a shift in perception that what had been acceptable in 1870 was no longer so in 1910. These reforming bills also averted what could have been a rapid polarisation of voting along class lines, and in a way delayed the ascent of the new Labour party. In the end, however, the Liberal government foundered. There was a sea of strikes in 1912 which forced it down the fatal road of wage regulation. The outbreak of war in 1914 forced Asquith ultimately to seek a way out by means of a coalition with the Conservatives led by Bonar Law.

In spite of all these changes, British society on the eve of the Great War must have seemed remarkably unchanged. One per cent of the population still owned sixty-six per cent of all property and only a million people paid income tax. As an era, the Edwardian period has remained enshrined in the popular imagination as a golden age, all the more so because what followed it was a dramatic contrast. Edward VII and his beautiful queen, Alexandra, reigned over a glittering court which revived monarchical pomp and splendour. The upper classes indulged in great outward show of a kind which depended on retinues of poorly paid servants. The old hierarchy of the Victorian age with its worship of respectability still seemed firmly in place. And yet beneath the surface the seeds which were to destroy that society were already there. The advent of modern plumbing, electric light and central heating, for instance, rendered much that the servant class did redundant. The *avant garde* in the arts, in theatre, literature, painting and sculpture, were already producing shock waves. Inventions like the telephone were revolutionising daily communication, while the typewriter heralded the modern office and secretary.

Perhaps the greatest change of all was to be that of the role of women, a change which affected concepts which had been held for centuries about the family, the nature of sexuality, and the role the sexes played in every sphere of human activity. Already in the 1890s women were increasingly taking jobs in nursing, teaching, or in

offices. At the same time the demand for women's political rights accelerated, first with the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (1897) and later with the far more militant Women's Social and Political Union (1903), under the leadership of Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst. The Liberals were in favour of female suffrage, albeit treating such a measure as an appendage to some further reform of the male franchise. The violent phase of the suffragette movement which set in from 1912 in fact did more harm than good to the advancement of their cause, but it was only to be a matter of time before the vote was granted.

Although a third of the population still lived in poverty, everywhere people looked they could see tangible evidence of a new urban civilisation which had been created without revolution or bloodshed. Homes with running water and plumbing, streets which were lit, trams instead of horse-drawn buses, an efficient police force which ensured public safety, libraries, parks, art galleries and museums which provided free information and entertainment for everyone. On the whole Britain would seem to have entered the twentieth century in triumph. Sadly, this was to prove pride before the fall.

The canker was there from the onset. Britain was unique in that the vast changes caused by industrialisation had not been accompanied by either polarisation of society or a revolution. Any friction between the old and new classes had disappeared by the close of the century when a compromise was reached, one which does much to explain the failures of our own century. The aristocracy and gentry may have lost their political and even their social dominance but they held onto their cultural one. Indeed they did more than that, for they imposed it on the classes which should have replaced them. The melting-pot was the public school in which the young of both the old and new élite were educated side by side to a common code of behaviour and attitudes. The attributes which had made up the Victorian entrepreneur, hard work, money-making, inventiveness and a driving zeal for production, had to be discarded in favour of those seen as appropriate to the gentleman, the cultivation of style and the pursuits of leisure, along with those of political service. This meant turning away the reality of a massively urbanised society in favour of a cultural ideal which was rural, epitomised in the country house, the shoot and hunt, the garden, and a devotion to the past and its preservation as somehow embodying the true spirit of England. This was to have fatal consequences in the new century, contributing to the erosion of the country's economic dominance which depended precisely on the virtues which had been rejected. Technology, the new, and change, were all to be distrusted. The genius of Britain was held to lie in its innate conservatism and caution. Instead, these attitudes were to contribute dramatically to its slide downhill.