3. Parliamentary democracy

The “industrial revolution” is said to have begun in Britain from around the middle of the 18th century. Although many important inventions were made at this time, and a scattering of factories appeared across the country, real social and demographic change only began in earnest around the end of the century. The pivotal moment came at the end of the century, when the nation was plunged into a series of wars with revolutionary France.

This essay will consider the changes that occurred after the wars that ended in 1815. It will look at post-war repression, changes in life and leisure and the rise of Britain's global empire, highlighting the process of constitutional reform throughout. I will argue that British Government; its structure, outlook and social role changed significantly in this time, creating what is called “Parliamentary Democracy”. I will start by surveying the birth of industrial Britain, in terms of where and how people lived.

Industrialisation

Many small towns in Britain had specialised in small scale manufacturing as early as the 17th century. The Black country, several small towns just west of Birmingham, for example, had supplied most of the weaponry for the Civil War. By the time of the great expansion of canals from the 1760s, it had started adding coal and limestone to its exports.

When steam engines were developed for industrial use, it was an advantage to be near coal mining. Towns like Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Nottingham began to develop. Birmingham, which is near to the Black country, is also on the confluence of several important canals. It developed into England's second city.

Some towns were relatively specialised. Manchester for example, is encircled by moorland, which is rocky, uneven and not very good for agriculture. It's very good for sheep and the area also has many small, fast flowing rivers, which are good for watermills. Sheep's wool is the basis of the textile industry. Its good, but cotton is even better. With the explosion of plantations in America, Britain needed convenient ports to bring it in. Hence, Liverpool and Glasgow, developed. Manchester, being close to Liverpool, specialised in textiles.

Leeds, on the other side of the moors, was also strong in textiles, but diversified, in particular in the cutting of cloth to make clothes. During the Napoleonic wars at the very beginning of the 19th century, the contract for supplying military uniforms to the British army was given to the mills of Leeds. This was the first time that a “production line” had been used in British industry. A significant growth in productivity was achieved, not only by dividing labour, but by putting workers in lines and giving them simple, repetitive tasks.

Sheffield specialised in steel production at a very early stage. In the middle of the 18th century, two important steel production techniques were invented in the area. In the 1860s, these were combined and refined into the Bessemer process at Henry Bessemer's mill. Soon Sheffield cutlery and other steel products came to dominate world markets.

The port towns in the Thames estuary grew and were swallowed up by London. It was in this area that the most dramatic urbanisation occurred, with commercial development in all directions, and industry, especially along the river and the estuary. From 20,000 in 1770, London increased about 15 times, to around 300,000 in 1820.

The economy must have grown significantly in this period but historians don't agree on how much.

Data from the 1820s, suggest it was growing at about 2.9%/year. Some have pointed out that despite the growth, significant price rises would have kept living standards down. In large parts of British cities life was miserable and insanitary, and working conditions in the factories were unregulated, unhealthy and often dangerous.

Despite the general development of the economy, life for most working people in early 19th century Britain was poor and precarious. Every unfavourable economic turn was met with protests, often with the violence of despair. There were for example, campaigns of "machine-breaking" such as those of the Luddites and Captain Swing. The period ended with a decade of depression known as the "hungry 40s".

The United Kingdom

When the 18th century was just starting and England's world trade network was growing, the Scottish tried to compete. Unfortunately for them, they invested heavily in a Central and South American project that ended disastrously. The English government's plan to take on the debts lead to the Act of Union in 1707 and the creation of the United Kingdom.

From then on, Scotland was regarded as a distant, inhospitable, backward edge of the Kingdom. It was a blend of nationalist opposition to the Union and Monarchism that generated enough support for the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745. After the failure of which, Scottish traditional dress and identification with the clans (the old tribal groups of the far North) was made illegal. During the last rebellion, a verse was added to the National Anthem that went:

God grant that Marshal Wade
will by thy mighty aid
victory bring
may he sedition hush
and like a torrent rush
rebellious Scots to crush
God save the King

Between 1814-1832, a famous Scottish novelist, Sir Walter Scott, wrote several stories that romanticised Scotland and created the image we still have today. The association of tartan (a kind of coloured pattern) with historic clans for example, was largely invented by Scott as part of the promotion of Scottish imagery and nationhood. Interestingly, the rehabilitation of Scotland didn't promote separatism but its opposite. It helped to create the idea of Britain as one nation, with diverse parts, feeding into British "nationalism", as Britain's power in the world grew.

Industrial Britain inherited a big world trade network, built in the previous century through war and exploration. Many people saw the opportunity to get rich by importing exotic goods or exporting British goods, and the cheaper you could make things in Britain, the more money you would make.

British trade grew because it encouraged banks to print money and the state serviced it's debts, keeping the price of borrowing down. The French government, which began the 18th century richer than Britain, repeatedly defaulting on its loans (twice each century on average). The British government never defaulted, so while the French state paid about 10% interest on its loans, the British state paid about 5%.

Eventually, the bankrupt and failing French state would fell. A popular uprising in 1789, brought down the French aristocracy. Several foreign states, including Britain, intervened to save it but to no avail. Faced with foreign invasion and vengeful aristocratic restoration, and with many groups

fighting for power, France descended into anarchy. Only when it came under the centralised control of the Charismatic General, Napoleon Bonaparte, could it launch a serious fight back. What became known in Britain as the “Napoleonic wars” ran from 1802-1815.

These wars kick-started the process we are thinking about in this essay. For example, because so much of Britain's land had been given over to sheep for the international textile trade, it was importing grain to make bread to feed it's people. The wars disrupted the supply. Grain and bread prices went up very high, with potentially revolutionary effects.

Napoleon famously said “no country is ever more than two meals away from revolution”. He may well have believed that by cutting Britain off, he would starve it into submission, or revolution. This helps to explain his determination to control all the British access points to the European continent. Ultimately, however, he wasn't successful. Britain, with several allied European monarchies, invaded and restored the old French Monarchy.

After the wars, the British Government imposed heavy taxes on grain imports, by what were called the “Corn Laws”. The idea was that this would make foreign grain expensive and local grain cheap. It would increase profits for local growers, creating incentives and investment money for local production. This marks a political shift in emphasis from “free trade” to “protection” (it also incidentally, marks a shift in power amongst Parliamentary factions, see essay 5)

War and repression

The revolution in France had a big effect on British politics. Unfortunately there were no polls that could tell us just how revolutionary the people of Britain were at the time. History records some clues, such as stories of crowds singing the “Marseillaise”, the revolutionary song that became the French national anthem, and revolutionary pamphlets selling in huge numbers. History also records the government's nervous reaction.

Between the year of the revolution, 1789, and the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, a lot of repressive legislation was enacted. These included making Trade Unions illegal, allowing imprisonment without trial and prosecuting anyone who criticised the King. These were justified as emergency measures to fight the war. Yet rulers are more inclined to increase their powers than reduce them, and when the war ended the measures did not. The continued use of such measures provoked calls for reform and MPs went for the easiest target first: the outdated, confused and iniquitous make up on the Commons.

When it was created representation in the Commons seemed reasonable enough: two Knights for every shire, two Burgesses for every chartered town. Variations in population distribution however had always been neglected. Yorkshire, for example, had about 20,000 people, while tiny Rutland had about 1,000, yet both sent two Knights to Parliament. Now, industrialisation had made the issue glaring. Most new industrial towns had no representatives at all, including Manchester for example, which had 250,000 people.

There were also what were called “rotten” boroughs and “pocket” boroughs. A rotten borough is one that had changed significantly. So, the town of Old Sarum, for example, had been a main town, but it had lost its population to nearby Salisbury. With a population of only 13, it had still had 2 representatives in Parliament. Most of the town of Dunwich in East Anglia had fallen into the sea. It now had only 20 people, and it too had 2 representatives in Parliament.

Voting qualifications were also outdated and iniquitous. They had been developed locally and differed in different areas. In Preston, for example, any adult male who happened to be in the

borough during an election could vote. More often however, the electorate was limited. There were maybe 15-25 “potwalloper” boroughs. The qualification to vote in such as place was that you had to be the male head of a household that had a hearth (or fireplace) large enough to boil a pot.

In the vast majority of places voting was only open to people with property. This meant that about 366,000 people could vote. This stayed roughly the same as the population rose from about 5 million in 1700 to 10 million in 1730. The proportion of voters was less that 10% and falling.

Mass rallies in major towns such as Birmingham and Manchester were held. The plan was to elect people to Parliament and demand their admittance. At the rally in St Peter's field, Manchester in 1819, the army shot and killed 11 people, and many more were injured. In an allusion to Waterloo, which was the final battle of the wars with Napoleon, it became known as the Peterloo massacre.

The Government, instead of looking to its own conduct, blamed the people for the violence and increased measures of repression. Laws were introduced making political meetings of 50 or more people, or with people coming from outside the local area, possible only with the permission of the local Sheriff. Publishers of newspapers were required to “post a bond”, that is to say, pay some money which would only be returned if they were judged to have behaved properly. There was also a general increase in the severity of punishments. For example, punishment for political writing that was judged “seditious” was increased to 14 years “transportation”, that is to say, exile to a distant colony.

The First Reform Act

The old settlement called “Constitutional Monarchy” was supposed to keep the King irrelevant to politics. Yet the conservative King George IV had an influence over MPs, using his position to rally resistance to reform. Then in 1830 he died. The new King, William IV, was George's brother, an old man with no significant experience or interest in politics, and of a more liberal state of mind.

William IV wanted to mark his reign with a positive move for social peace. He chose the liberal, Earl Grey (who his brother had disliked) as the new Prime Minister. He was the last monarch in British history to choose a Prime Minister who was not the leader of the biggest party or coalition in Parliament.

Two years later the Reform Act was passed. It equalised constituencies and voting qualifications, introduced secret ballots and lowered and standardised the property requirement to vote. Earl Grey, by the way, was quite a significant reformer. His government abolished slavery throughout the British empire, introduced the Factory Act: protecting women and children in factories, introduced state funding for primary education, and started the process of giving independence and making peace with Ireland.

On the less progressive side, this Government also introduce the Poor Law, which created workhouses in place of parish relief. The Reform Act was also heavily criticised. While it increased the franchise to around 650,000 people, perhaps around 18% of the population, it took no account of population growth. Over time the number of voters would drop back down below 10%.

Meanwhile, the other great political issue was The Corn Laws. As noted earlier, these laws were enacted immediately after the war, taxing imported grain to help British producers. Many of these “producers” were large landowners who either financial backed, or were, MPs. The law kept prices up at the expense of urban workers and the companies that had to pay them higher wages to feed them fed. Opposition to the laws was common cause for both workers, businesses and advocates of “free trade”. A mass organisation called the Anti-Corn Law league emerged.

Landowners, still overly represented and influential in the electorate, voted for the Tories in 1841, to defend the Corn Laws. The Tory leader, Robert Peel, however, felt that these were dangerous times, with widespread hunger, protests and revolution in the air. He wavered, but by 1844 decided to put his fear of revolution first and proposed abolition.

Knowing he would struggle for Tory support, Peel resigned to trigger an election. He seems to have guessed that his liberal, Whig opponents would win. He calculated that they could do what was necessary and suffer the anger of the wealthy landowners. In the event, Peel won again. He had no choice but to repeal the Corn Laws himself. He told his Tory colleagues that in order to maintain aristocratic control of Parliament, a concession was necessary. The Tories split, with about 1/3 forming a new group known as the Peelites. This was enough to have the Laws repealed.

This process of Governments being elected to prevent reform, yet carrying out the reform themselves, will happen again. It is indicative of the need to manage contending interests in society. Whatever the repeal of the Corn Laws did to Peel's reputation amongst landowners, it dramatically enhanced his popularity in the rest of the country. It also had a significant social and economic impact. In the 1830s a negligible amount of food was coming into Britain from abroad. By the 1880s more than half of the nation's food was imported. The late 40's fall in the price of grain probably played a big part in moving Britain from hunger to prosperity.

Leisure

The economic boom that began in 1851, was strong and lasting. It seems to have marked the beginning of a general upswing, that is to say, a period of strong booms and weak recessions. People got used to the cycle. In this time, people became less radical during the bad times. Perhaps attitudes changed and people began to look at recessions as brief interruptions. It is best, they thought, not to panic but to look to the future.

Two other things happened that year that may have contributed to a psychological shift. Firstly, partly with the efforts of Prince Albert and the Society of Arts, a great exhibition was held in London. A spectacular glass house was built that held 14,000 exhibits from around the world. This magnificent display of the power of scientific and technological innovation may have affected people's minds and British culture from then on. There was a strong sense of awe and optimism and the belief that humans could conquer nature.

Secondly, at this time, the first New Model Trade Union was founded, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. This, and the others that used this model, promoted an idea of “professions”, so workers were encouraged to think of themselves as not part of the unskilled “masses”. This social psychological division would help to prevent revolution in Britain, while it was engulfing other parts of the industrial world.

During this period British workers became well-paid compared to many others in the world. Relative prosperity drew in labourers and service workers from abroad, millions came from Ireland for example. Britain became an increasingly cosmopolitan country. Education and innovation were stimulated, and new forms of leisure were taken up.

“Civil society” developed, a significant part of which was driven by religiously motivated philanthropists, who wanted to improve the morality of the nation. For example, there were Quakers, a Protestant sect that values good works, who ran financially institutions like Barclays and Lloyds, which are now major banks. The main chocolate and confectionery companies, which encouraged alternatives to alcohol, were owned by Quakers, such as John Cadbury, Joseph

Rowntree and Joseph Storrs Fry. These names are still associated with charities and public works.

Interestingly, the idea of the typical good Englishman before the mid 19th century was John Bull. He was a fat, rude, drinker. Being fat in those days was a sign of prosperity, and indulgence a sign of freedom. Some time from around the 1850s the desirable image changed. People like W.G.Grace, the cricketer, became a big star, and the idea that it was good to be lean and healthy caught on.

Around the same time, ambitious sports events began. From 1860 in a small town called Much Wenlock, on the English/Welsh border, a medical doctor called William Penny Brookes, launched what he called the Olympics. When the modern Olympics was founded by a Frenchman in the 1890s, he cited this as his inspiration. A similar attempt to start an Olympics was made around the same time in Liverpool. An athlete and businessman, John Hulley, set up the Olympic Association there in 1865.

It's also interesting that before this time, the sports that people enjoyed in the towns were those they'd brought with them from the countryside: things like, dog fighting, cock fighting, bear baiting (which is a man against a tethered bear) and boxing. The rising sports of the late 19th century swapped violence for athleticism and team play.

In the 1860s it became normal for employers, either inspired by civic morals or because they thought it would make their workers healthier, to close on Saturday afternoons. Work was normally 6 days a week, with Sunday rest, but it became 5½ days, with Saturday afternoon for sport. The normal thing was for workplace teams to play against each other, and the sport they played was called “football”. There was a big variety of local rules, usually allowing players to pick up and run with the ball.

In the 1860s and 70s, teams gradually travelled further for games, Local, rather than workplace teams were created and they needed to agree the rules. If you look at the badges of Britain's founding League football teams, you'll see that they often have dates from this period. The rules for football, Rugby, American football and Gaelic football all diverged and were written down at this time.

Along with the health craze came bicycles. The invention of a practical Pneumatic tyre in 1888 by John Boyd Dunlop, was decisive. After that it was possible to ride relatively smoothly along rough surfaces, and hence reasonable distances. This was particularly liberating for women, for whom it became normal to travel safely by bicycle over long distances without accompaniment.

All these things: philanthropists improving living conditions, the organisation of athletic, team sports and the mass production of bicycles, contributed to a change in the character of work and leisure during the later phase of industrialisation. More attention than ever was given to health, freedom and self-improvement.

The Second Reform Act

Meanwhile, the new electorate established by the 1832 reform remained low. It had probably fallen below 10% as the population climbed. Campaigners hadn't stopped. Throughout the rest of the 30s and 40s, a movement focussing on a Charter of Constitutional reform fought on. They were called Chartists, and it was said to be the first, truly working class political organisation in history.

A number of failed or abortive uprisings took place from 1839-1842, including one in Newport, South Wales, and in Sheffield. It was these events that made Robert Peel fearful enough to defy his fellow Tories in Parliament. The Chartist movement culminated in a massive petition, and a rally to

present it to Parliament, which assembled in the spring of 1848. This was a time of massive revolutionary demonstrations in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and many places across Europe. The Police were mobilised on a huge scale to prevent an uprising.

In the event, the rally of about 150,000 was peaceful. After the experience of the violence in Newport, it's moderate leader Fergus O'Connor, called on the people not to provoke the Police. The experience raises what is always an issue for campaigns of this kind. It is always preferable to win reforms by peaceful, moderate means, yet also sometimes necessary to show you are prepared to use force. Achieving this balance is never easy, nor is it easy to say whether the Chartists would have succeeded had they been more militant.

The economic upswing that followed may have quelled desparate and violent protest, but it didn't stifle the desire for progress. An organisation called the International Working Men's Association was set up in London in 1864, linking workers in Britain, France, the United States and elsewhere. It claimed 8 million members by the end of the 1860s. Significant in it was Karl Marx, who gradually won a reputation as a strong leader and theoretician, and more-or-less ran it in the early years of the 1870s.

There was also a prominent Anarchist called Mikheil Bakunin, who opposed Marx and accused him of a dictatorial attitude. They both supported the revolutionary Communards in Paris in 1871, but the moderates, especially the British Trade Union leaders, did not. All these lines of faction fighting and division lead to the organisation breaking up within a decade. Nevertheless, its rise and fall is an indicator of a mood for change at the time.

In the same year that the International Working Men's Association was founded, a group of Whigs in Parliament established the Reform Union. They sought to distance themselves from the old Whigs by calling themselves “Liberals”. They would fight the next election as the Liberal Party. In 1865, a broader based Reform League was formed, and spread rapidly. There were many rallies and demonstrations, some ending in violence, culminating in the 1867 Hyde Park rally, attended by 200,000 people.

The next election appeared to be a straight fight between reform or no reform. The new Liberal Party was committed to change, while the former Tories, now called the Conservative Party, were opposed. The Conservatives won and their leader, Benjamin Disraeli, immediately proposed a Reform Act. Many Tories were angry at this betrayal, but enough went with Disraeli to carry the Act. The Great Reform Act of 1867 gave the vote to all adult male homeowners and the majority of rent payers. More or less all urban working class men could vote.

Empire

Much of the development that allowed reform was made possible by Britain's expanding world trade network. Much of it was transplanted colonies: North America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Some of it however, was colonial outposts in foreign lands, involving the gradual conquest of large numbers of foreign people. The British East Indian Company for example, brought huge quantities of Tea back from India for the British market. In search of protection for its operations it made deals with local nobles and acquired an army of its own.

The story of the East India Company shows how trading enterprises can evolve into powerful organisations, on which economies become dependent and for which states, in the end, take responsibility. It was for the protection of its relatively small outposts in Eastern India that the Company and its allies fought against the French-allied Nawab of Bengal, a kind of local Baron. In 1757, the Company defeated the Nawab and took effective control of Bengal, a big and relatively

wealthy part of India. The Company commander, Robert Clive, became a popular British folk hero known as “Clive of India”,

The Company attracted profiteers and humanitarians alike. Apart from the nobles it deposed, it seemed to have built good relations with local people, until an incident in 1856. Company bosses noticed poor performance at their offices in Lucknow, and decided to sack the local workers and replace them with British people. Presumably this wan't the only act of discrimination committed by the Company, but it came to symbolise a systemic bias. General opposition to the Company rose and within a year there was mutiny in its army.

The trigger of this mutiny, the story goes, was the Company's use of Cow and Pig grease in its bullets. Soldiers had to bite the end off a bullet before loading it. Consuming Cows and Pigs is forbidden to Hindus and Muslims, respectively. It was widely reported that the local soldiers refusal to bite their bullets lead to mutiny. In fact, this minor episode of cultural ignorance was quickly rectified, but the story caught people's imaginations. To this day, we still tend to think of the problems of Empire as to do with alien cultures and local sensitivities, rather than straightforward discrimination.

During what became known as the “Indian mutiny”, the rebels appealed to the Sultan of Delhi. When he gave his support the Company had no choice but to call on the British Government. By 1858 the British expedition had taken Delhi and deposed the Sultan. In 1877, 300 Indian nobles offered their allegiance to Queen Victoria. As she was now officially an Empress, this date is taken to mark the beginning of the British Empire. It would last for 81 years, and at its peak include ¼ of the world's land.

When Victoria became Queen in 1837, at the age of 18, the monarchy was still quite unpopular. Marrying her German cousin Albert, wasn't likely to help. They actually spent a lot of their early reign on the Isle of Wight, away from the poor and volatile people and easy sailing distance from mainland Europe.

Things turned around after the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the economic upturn that followed. The royal couple seized the opportunity to improve their image, working for charity, keeping out of politics and introducing some German Christmas traditions that became very popular. Especially with the use of the newly invented art of photography, they worked to create a public image of good morals and domestic stability.

After Albert's death, in 1861, Victoria became quite depressive and retreated to her country house of Balmoral, in Scotland. This didn't do her image much harm, she became seen as romantic and human, yet still majestic. She was also physically far from Parliament and clearly far from interfering in government. It also helped the image of Scotland, which was portrayed as a beautifully wild place where the Queen felt at home. It was just becoming fashionable among urban British people to have positive feelings about nature.

It was during her retreat that the Queen became Empress of India. At precisely the same time, in Southern India, there was a catastrophic harvest that caused mass starvation and an outbreak of cholera. About 5 million people died while food was being shipped out of the country. Repeating the experience of Ireland in the 1840s, lives were sacrificed to the “free market”. The grand acsension of the Empress in 1877, entered the consciousness of Indians, not as a symbol of British majestic wealth and power, but of callous indifference to suffering.

The scandal reached Britain. People of conscience berated the ideologues and the Social liberal political trend grew stronger. This lead to the rise of William Gladstone within the new Liberal

Party and he gradually gained popularity around the country. He toured the North of England with his message of Pragmatism over Ideology, and won the election of 1880. His Government extended the right to vote to workers in the countryside. As far as reform was concerned, there was now only three significant issues left to address; the power of the Lords, access for ordinary people and the participation of women.

Lords, Labour and the Suffragettes

For a while, in the late 19th century, people had been talking about gender inequality. Both male and female liberal writers argued that the different treatment of men and women in society, for example divorce laws which heavily favoured husbands, was unjust and divisive. Gradually, these feelings focused on the issue of votes.

Women's “suffrage” societies spread around the country. When a newspaper used the word “suffragette” (with the suffix meaning female) this was taken up by the campaigners. The new identity may have helped it grow, with a national organisation finally overcoming its divisions to become the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in 1897.

After a while of peaceful campaigning, a more militant group broke off. The Women's Social and Political Union, founded in 1903, was lead by Emmaline Pankhurst. It's methods involved sabotage, personal protests, such as members chaining themselves to railings, and hunger strikes when put in prison, which they frequently were. On one occasion they even bombed the Prime Minister's country house.

The most famous incident occurred in 1913. A suffragette was killed when she ran on to the course at a popular and televised national horse race. She was attempting to stop, or possibly put something on, the King's horse. The martyrdom of Emily Davidson further shifted public opinion. For the first time many of the men who ran British Government realised that the issue was not going to go away.

Meanwhile, in Taff Vale, in South Wales in 1901, a company bankrupted a worker's Union by sueing it after strike action. Trade Unionism had been growing in Britain, particularly since the late 1880s when they had become more inclusive of workers of all skills. Events had shifted public perception of Unions from being all about exclusion and pushing wages up, to protecting the health, safety and dignity of workers, and of exposing corrupt and immoral business practices. Thriving Unions had established a national organisation, the Trades Unions Congress (TUC).

The Taff Vale incident convinced many Trade Unionists of the need for legal protection. In other words, they couldn't operate safely while laws were made by the friends of businessmen in Parliament. The TUC had already begun to fund a few “Labour” candidates in elections, now there was widespread support for it to back a Labour Party challenging for Government.

Until then, more and more working class people had been using their newly won right to vote to support the Liberals. There was now a fierce debate within the Liberal party, with people like David Lloyd George, arguing that they had to become more clear and forceful in their demands for social reforms. If they didn't come to represent working people, he argued, they would slip into insignificance.

The Liberals in government from 1906, proposed many reforms. They were consistently blocked by the conservative House of Lords, which threw out eighteen Bills. In general, these were for expanding welfare programmes by cutting arms spending. As the threat of war loomed, the Lords appeared as the responsible, guardians of the nation resisting the irresponsible, liberal populists.

Lloyd George became Chancellor in 1908 and true to his word, got forceful and turned the situation around. What became known as “The People's Budget” of 1909, actually increased military spending by heavily taxing the rich. It was met with anger amongst the Parliamentary aristrocrats and was the first ever Government budget to be rejected by the Lords. The Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, told the King to prepare to create over 400 new Liberal Peers (members of the House of Lords). He hoped the threat would force the Lords to concede.

The King, Edward VII, refused. Instead he told Asquith to test the idea by calling an election. No doubt he felt that the Conservatives could persuade the people to reject the Liberals in the name of Constitutional tradition. He was wrong. The Liberals won again in 1910, and a few months later the King died. Asquith and Lloyd George were accused of driving him to death with their revolutionary fervour.

The new King, George V, renewed the promise, saying he would give the Liberals their Peers if they won another election. They did, and the threat was enough to break the House of Lords. The new government resolved to make sure this kind of thing wouldn't happen again. It made the Lords accept a Bill limiting their powers. From this moment on, the House of Lords couldn't block but could only delay Bills.

Despite all this, the rise of the Labour Party wasn't halted. If anything, seeing the squabbling and deal-making may have convinced more working people of the need for their own party. Lloyd George was probably right when he said that the Liberals would lose their support to Labour, but perhaps wrong to think it could be stopped. The real solution was to join Labour. This is an important thing to remember when looking at political history; the fall of one party and the rise of another doesn't necessarily mean new people. Many of the new Labour MPs were former Liberals.

During the First World War from 1914, Lloyd Geoge lead a Coalition government, including Liberal, Labour and Conservative MPs. It prepared for peace, promising “a land fit for heroes”, and introducing the Representation of the People Act in 1918. This finally removed all remaining property qualifications and gave the vote to all adult males. More significantly, it gave the vote to all women over 30 years old. The final significant reform, equalising the voting age of women and men, was made by a Conservative government in 1928.

Conclusion

Ask people in Britain today what kind of system they have and there is a very good chance they will say a “Constituationl Monarchy”. The phrase implies an established balance between the King or Queen and the representatives of other interests in Parliament. This is probably a fair description of how the system worked in the period following the Civil War of the 1640s and the “glorious revolution” of 1688.

However, since the death in 1830 of King George IV, who resisted reform, Britain entered a long period of fundamental change, effectively completed in 1928. In this time, the House of Commons emerged as the indisputable focus of power. Despite the established sources of the Constitution (see essay 2), it is commonly accepted that “Parliament cannot bind itself” that is to say, no laws Parliament makes (nor any actions of a Monarch, legal precedents, conventions or authoritative opinion) can prevent it from making, amending or annulling any laws in the future.

Equalisation of constituencies and the equal participation of all men and women has raised the status of the House of Commons. It has felt empowered to disempower the House of Lords and to reduce the Monarch to a kind of contracted civil servant. It is fair to argue that this makes the British Constitution exceptionally simple and so straightforward there is no need to write anything

down. The principle that Parliament cannot bind itself means that it is soveriegn and can't dilute its own soveriegnty.

It is also fair to point out however, that Britain still has a Monarch. Having a living symbol of national unity, even if only to meet some people's psychological needs, necessarily means the institution retains some power. Some will argue that those powers are residual and irrelevant. Others might say that they are latent and dangerous. All I will say is that the social changes described in this essay have tipped the balance. The formula of Constitutional Monarchy is outdated and it is more accurate to describe Britain as a Parliamentary Democracy.

August 2017
John Gandy

References

Bedarida, Francois (1991) A social history of England 1851-1975
Dean, Phyllis & Cole, W.A. (1962) British Economic Growth: Trends and structures 1688-1959
Fraser, Rebecca (2006) The story of Britain from the Romans to the Present: A narrative history
Hall, Lesley A. (2013) Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880
Hobsbawm, Eric & Ranger, Terence (1992) The Invention of Tradition
Marr, Andrew (2009) The making of modern Britain
Miller, John (2016) Early modern Britain 1450-1750
Morris, R.J. (1983) Voluntary Societies & British Urban Elites 1780-1870 (Historical Journal 26:1)
Paxman, Jeremy (2009) The Victorians: Britain Through the Paintings of the Age
Paxman, Jeremy (2011) Empire: What Ruling the World did to the British
Vernon, James (2014) “Distant Strangers: How Britain became modern