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### **Parliament and Opinion since 1832\***

The role of Parliament in British Society was profoundly transformed in the nineteenth century. Society in its turn was disturbed and reconstituted by the powerful forces of accelerating industrialisation and urbanisation. Faster, easier communications and the emergence of an ever — cheaper press offered new opportunities for political activity to an increasingly politically sensitive nation. The key to Parliament's survival lay in the way it was to adapt to these new developments. It is significant that articulate reforming groups in nineteenth-century British Society, unlike similar groups in continental Europe, had little occasion to take issue with an abstract notion like 'the state': even rebels and radicals focussed their zeal on the reform of institutions, above all of Parliament, which retained a central place in all political discourse. In considering the complex inter-relationship between Parliament and opinion, this paper will pursue a number of very different perspectives, each of which has stimulated extensive research in the last twenty or so years. In this way it is hoped to shed some light on the ways in which Parliament was to be fundamentally transformed. Public opinion seemed to demonstrate its power over Parliament in a most dramatic way during the Reform Bill crisis of 1830 - 1832. Violent demonstrations in support of the campaign for electoral reform, an electoral reform, proved significant in the progress of events which were to ensure the final acceptance of the Bill by the House of Lords. A more „public” era for Parliament seemed to be coming into existence. Great were the hopes of the reformers and great the fears of the opponents for the future. Yet it is clear that, as a recent writer on British politics has asserted, at no point in the period 1815 - 1914 did Britain experience democracy. More importantly, perhaps, Britain did not and has not experienced any type of violent political revolution such as have virtually all continental

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\* Od Redakcji: Tekst stanowi uzupełnioną wersję referatu, wygłoszonego w czasie konferencji *Parliament a społeczeństwo*, która odbyła się w dniach od 14 do 16 września 1987 r. w Poznaniu (por. CPH, t. XL, 1988, z. 1, s. 229 - 230).

European states in either the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. Some explanation of these apparently antipathetic phenomena is to be found in the functioning and responsiveness of Parliament to active external political forces.

1. Parliament and the Electorate. Parliamentary reform in the 1830's meant electoral reform to the Whigs within Parliament as much as to the new Political Unions outside. The same was to be true throughout the nineteenth century and continued to be so in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Only if Parliament became more representative, it was repeatedly argued, could it become more responsive to the needs and wishes of the various interests within the community and, eventually, of all British people. Whatever the aims of successive drafters of the various electoral reform bills, such arguments were used to justify the proposed legislation. The House of Commons was a representative institution and must be seen to be so. The first, 1832, act did not increase the total numbers of seats in the Commons (658), but standardized the qualification for male voting in borough constituencies, and eliminated the worst of the 'pocket' borough seats and redistributed those seats; as a result, the total electorate probably reached just over 650 000<sup>1</sup>. The second, 1867, act extended the borough franchise much more widely and again redistributed small borough seats. The electorate had reached approximately 1 300 000 by natural increase under the 1832 regulations and registration: the 1867 act pushed that total to 2,500,000, the borough electorates benefitting from the largest additions: small borough seats were again eliminated, though, unlike the 1832 act's redistribution, a significant number of these available seats went to the counties especially in England<sup>2</sup>. The third, 1884, act gave the vote to any house-

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<sup>1</sup> The act disfranchised 56 boroughs with less than 2,000 inhabitants which had sent 111 members to Westminster. 30 boroughs with a population of between two and four thousand inhabitants lost 1 member. 97 new seats were distributed to English constituencies, 1 to Wales, 5 to Scotland, 3 to Ireland. The borough franchise was standardised: all householders rated at £ 10 or over could have the vote. In the counties the fortyshilling freeholders kept the vote and were joined by the £ 10 copyholders and the £ 50 leaseholders. The Chandos amendment gave the vote to £ 50 tenants-at-will in the counties (Public General Statutes, 2 Will. IV, c 45). It is estimated that the total electorate in 1831 for the United Kingdom was approximately 366,000 and that the Reform Act increased it by 80% (John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640 - 1832*, (Cambridge, 1973) p. 259 and Appendix 4). It is also estimated that the total population was in the region of 25 million (B. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics*, (Cambridge, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> The Representation of the People Act 1867 extended the borough franchise to householders with a one-year residential qualification, and to lodgers, who had occupied lodgings with £ 10 a year, also for a year. In the counties an occupation franchise was created for those occupying land worth £ 12 a year and a pro-

holder or lodger who had occupied his house or lodgings for a year before the registration date<sup>2</sup>: the electorate went up to about five million in an estimated population of 33 million. The major Redistribution of Seats Act 1885 not only increased the total number of seats to 670 but significantly redrew the British electoral map: it broke up the majority of the old parliamentary counties and boroughs into single-member constituencies: the new electoral districts were defined by boundary commissioners, who were expected to set constituencies of roughly equal size. In 1918 women over the age of 30 and in 1928 over the age of 21 were given the vote. Thus, only by 1928, was universal suffrage effectively achieved<sup>3</sup>.

This brief summary of the stages of electoral reform suggests the kind of difficulties and anomalies which were created at each stage of the process. Since the 1950's, a range of varied research has focussed on the effects of each reform bill on the electorate, in many cases demonstrating how one type of inequality could often be replaced by another. Hasty draftsmanship and sudden changes of mind during the passage of a bill could lead to surprising results, particularly in 1867. Then, several effects were produced, which had clearly not been envisaged by the bill's promoters. Much hinged on the need for voters to be registered, a requirement from 1832. John Vincent points to the unexpected hardship created by the abolition of the compound payment of rates<sup>4</sup>. Organized pressure in the early 1870's has been shown by Norman McCord to have resulted in the revising barristers admitting coal miners living in tied houses in borough constituencies to the electoral registers in considerable numbers unlike those in county constituencies<sup>5</sup>. The situation was even worse after the 1884 act: recent research has shown how possibly as many as 40 percent of adult males did not have access to the ballot box until the fourth reform act of 1918. Not only were anomalies the result of varying decisions by revising barristers but also by increasingly more sophisticated tactics deployed by political party agents<sup>6</sup>. Such anomalies were not foreseen by the legislators and it

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party franchise for those with lands worth £ 5. 4 boroughs were disfranchised and 38 were reduced to one member. Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool and Leeds were to return 3 members, but voters there would have only 2 votes. 10 new boroughs and 13 new county divisions were created. Public General Statutes, 30 and 31 Victoria, c 102.

<sup>2</sup> There was also an occupation franchise for those occupying land or tenements worth £ 10 a year.

<sup>3</sup> Voting was reduced to 18 in 1969.

<sup>4</sup> J. R. Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party*, (London, 1966) p 226.

<sup>5</sup> Norman McCord, *Some difficulties of parliamentary reform*, *Historical Journal*, X, 4 (1967) p 376.

<sup>6</sup> Neal Blewett, *The Franchise in the United Kingdom, 1885-1918*, *Past and Present* 32 (1965) pp 27-56; Peter Clarke, *Electoral Sociology of Modern Britain*, *History* 57 (1972) pp 31-55; Duncan Tanner, *The Parliamentary Elec-*

should also perhaps be pointed out how poorly informed were members of Parliament and government ministers as to the possible numerical effects of changes in voting qualifications. This was understandable in 1832 but substantial census information existed by 1867 which could have guided better forecasts of potential voting numbers.

Much of the debate in Parliament on representation turned as much on the redistribution of parliamentary seats as on voting qualifications. Inevitably redistribution was a highly charged political issue, but again results were by no means always as expected. The importance of the representation of interests was as clear in the debates on the 1885 redistribution as it had been in 1867. Salisbury insisted that 'the pursuits of the people' become the central criterion for identifying a homogeneous constituency and, ironically, agriculture was given that separation from industry that Grey and the Whigs had aimed for in 1832: middle-class areas in the cities gained cohesion through being brought together and isolated from working-class areas<sup>8</sup>. Interestingly, the 1885 redistribution of seats significantly reinforced the power of the Celtic fringe by over-representing the Irish and Welsh relative to their populations.

Thus, creakingly, reforms of the electoral system were moving towards universal suffrage in equal electoral districts. How important was this reform, in strictly electoral terms, in increasing the House of Commons' responsiveness to the electorate? The election of 1830 was important as the first that a government lost. Until 1868, the 1841 election remained the last clear example of the electorate's choosing a government by reducing the representation of the party in power at the time of the dissolution. Thus the first reform act had little effect on the role of the electorate. That situation changed with the election of 1868. Although the power of the electorate at a national level in terms of the election of the government was clear, the opportunity of even registered voters to participate in elections was by no means regularly available. It is here that the phenomenon of uncontested elections is important. Of what use was a vote if there was no choice of candidate? The number of constituencies was approximately 400 in the period 1832 to 1867 and the vast majority elected two seats. The number of uncontested constituencies rose to a peak of 240 in 1859, well over half the total. The number uncontested in 1832 was 124, that is over a quarter, just after the first reform bill. In 1868 when the total number of constituencies rose to 420, 140 of these were uncontested even after the 1868 reform act. In 1874 the number uncontested dropped a little to 122 and from then on the pattern became one of great fluctuation. In 1880, believed to have been the most expensive nineteenth-century election, only 67 constituencies

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*total System, the Fourth Reform Bill and the Rise of Labour in England and Wales* Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research 56 (1983) pp 205-19.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Pelling, *The Social Geography of British Elections* (1967).

were uncontested: in 1885, when the number of constituencies had increased to 643 by the creation of singlemember constituencies and redistribution, only 39 were uncontested. In 1886, at the height of the Irish crisis, 219 constituencies, a third, were uncontested. The number uncontested fell to 74 in 1892 and rose to 185 in 1895 and 236 in 1900. Even at the great 'landslide' election of 1906, 111 constituencies had no election. The first 1910 election saw 72 and the second 158 uncontested\*. The enormous increases in the electorate of 1918 and 1928 did not result in a swift decline in uncontested elections. At the first post-first world war election, 107 out of 707 seats were uncontested with an electorate of over 21 million and the first election when women could vote. In 1923, 50 seats were uncontested, in 1931, 67, when the electorate had risen as a result of the 1928 reform act to nearly 30 million. Even in 1935, 40 seats were uncontested. It was only with the 1945 election when only 3 seats were uncontested that the British electorate as a whole had a real chance to exercise a choice at a general election<sup>10</sup>.

Much modern research has focussed on electoral practice and explained this pattern of uncontested elections. There were often local reasons for the continuance of the uncontested election. In the period up to 1883, local influence by a landowner or employer often made a contest pointless. Also, in the period up to 1883, the great expense of mounting a contested election inhibited interventions with little hope of success. Quite apart from electoral corruption which could cost a candidate vast sums, there were many incidental expenses. County constituencies, because of their size, cost considerably more to fight than boroughs. Also boroughs varied greatly. The cost to the Liberals of fighting Manchester with paid canvassers in 1880 was £9,538, whereas at Birmingham it was only £4,468 as a result of the use of volunteer canvassers. The introduction of the secret ballot in 1872 had prevented the continuance of neither electoral corruption nor the subtler forms of electoral influence. Corruption may if anything have increased over the years until the high cost of the 1880 election provoked a campaign which led to the passing in 1883 of the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act. Although that act reduced the cost of fighting elections, candidates were expected to pay their own expenses and still seemed reluctant to enter contests with little hope of success.

Two great sources are available for the study of the electorate which are currently being exploited by computer technology and new statistical techniques. Until the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872, the magni-

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\* N. Gash, *Politics in the Age of Peel* (1953) appendix E; Trevor Lloyd, *Uncontested Seats in British General Elections, 1852-1910*, *Historical Journal* VIII (1965) pp. 260-65.

<sup>10</sup> D. Butler and J. Freeman, *British Political Facts, 1900-1960* (1963) pp. 122-24.

ficient series of electoral poll books exist and are being analysed extensively for the nineteenth century as they have been in the pre-1832 period pre-eminently so far by William Speck and John Phillips. T. J. Nossiter in his study of elections in the north east of England 1832-1874 has shown with what sensitivity poll book and other electoral data can be used to bring out the complexity of local political opinion<sup>11</sup>. The other valuable source is census and related social data which can be linked to electoral data: Henry Pelling pioneered such work with his *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885-1910* and John Turner is currently using census data to challenge the accepted view of coalition and liberal support in the electorate in the years after 1918<sup>12</sup>.

2. Opinion and Legislation. In 1905 A. V. Dicey published his pioneering lectures on the relation between *Law and Public Opinion in England during the nineteenth century* stating his aim „to exhibit the close dependence of legislation, and even of the absence of legislation, in England... upon the varying currents of public opinion”. He was particularly concerned with what he called „legislative public opinion”, that „public opinion which... told on the course of legislation”. Much of Dicey's analysis, turned on assumptions about the significance of Benthamism in legislative initiatives. Fifty years later, this theme became the subject of lively academic controversy, which circled around Dicey's perception of Benthamism and his interpretation of its impact. In the late 1950's and early 1960's, a wealth of monographs on social reforms and reformers, government departments and administrators, provided the ammunition for a contentious debate about the ways in which „the extraordinary growth in both the volume of legislation and the degree to which its introduction became the responsibility of governments, with the corollaries of changes in parliamentary practice and of the rapid development of parliament's investigatory instruments”<sup>13</sup> came about. Attempts to create models for the process of the initiation of legislation and resulting administrative change stimulated yet more research, all of

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<sup>11</sup> T. J. Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms in Reformed England: Case Studies from the North East, 1832-1874* (Brighton, 1975); John A. Phillips, *Electoral Behavior in Unreformed England: Plumpers, Splitters and Straights* (Princeton, 1982); W. A. Speck, *Tory and Whig: the Struggle in the Constituencies, 1701-1715* (1970); W. A. Speck and W. A. Grey, *Computer Analysis of Poll Books: an Initial Report*, Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research 43 (1970) and Speck, Grey and R. Hopkinson, *Computer Analysis of Poll Books: a Further Report*, *ibid.* 48 (1975).

<sup>12</sup> Henry Pelling, *o.c.*; John Turner, *The Labour Vote and the Franchise after 1918: an Investigation of the English Evidence*, in Peter Denley and Deian Hopkin (eds.), *History and Computing* (Manchester, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Oliver MacDonagh, *The nineteenth-century revolution in government: a reappraisal*, *Historical Journal* (1958).

which has underlined the complexity and variety of the process of that extraordinary growth.

What all this research has underlined is the importance of Parliament in nineteenth-century social and administrative reform. Inertia within Parliament and government, dislike of centralization, resistance to to increased government spending and the marshalling of endangered interests handicapped, delayed and watered down many legislative proposals. Nevertheless, despite such difficulties, constructive legislation was passed and a willingness to accept the need for enforcement procedures not only transformed the role of the executive in society, but also profoundly altered Parliament's own function. By the end of the nineteenth century, Parliament had become pre-eminently a legislative body. The steady pressure of an increasing legislative programme led even to a willingness to accept the practice of delegating legislation to government departments, a practice feared by Dicey. In the period 1898-1901, less than one tenth of the provisional orders proposed under general legislation were opposed in Parliament and only one failed to pass: of the 2,520 provisional orders issued by the Local Government Board between 1872 and 1902, only 23 were rejected. By the end of the nineteenth century, the government had assumed almost complete control of the legislative timetable. Party discipline had enabled it to do so. Balfour's 'parliamentary railway timetable' of 1901 underlined the new situation, though it worried some of his supporters<sup>14</sup>.

After all we have more to fear from legislation than we have to gain from it. Our programme is of necessity of moderate, even of scanty proportions and we need not or should not hasten unduly to carry into effect our good schemes. On the other hand our opponents on regaining power will harry and harrass us at every turn and we shall groan beneath the rules which gave the executive such an increased power.

By the end of the century it was clear that legislative initiative was only rarely to be found outside government departments and the cabinet.

The growth of legislation had placed enormous strains on the parliamentary timetable, which at the beginning of the century was loaded heavily in favour of the private member of Parliament. Over twenty years ago Peter Fraser showed how important was the right of an M.P. to raise debate on the presentation of a petition in enabling the unreformed Parliament to respond to external opinion<sup>15</sup>. The antislavery

<sup>14</sup> Balcarres' diary, 10 April 1902 in *The Crawford Papers: the Journals of David Lindsay, 27th Earl of Crawford and 10th Earl of Balcarres, 1871-1940, during the years 1892-1940* edited by J. R. Vincent (Manchester, 1984), pp. 65-6.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Fraser, *Public petitioning and Parliament before 1832*, *History XLVI* (1961), pp. 195-211.

movement and the campaign for Catholic emancipation deployed that right extensively and successfully. The loss of that right was to be compensated by the emergence of the device of the parliamentary question by a private member to raise an issue in the Commons. The chief spur to the increasing use of the parliamentary question as the century drew to a close was the steady erosion by the government of the rights of private members to raise matters: in 1882, for instance, the restriction of the right of members to raise a matter on moving the adjournment of the House or of a debate led to the growth of the supplementary question. By 1900, more parliamentary questions were regularly asked in one day than in a whole session in the 1830's. The government did not find it easy to achieve its dominance of parliamentary business. It was clear in the 1860's that pressure of supply and private business was preventing the introduction of government bills till late in the session: many of them were failing because there was not enough time, even if all the forces of inertia and opposition had been overcome, to get them through the necessary stages in both Houses before a session ended. Agatha Ramm's recent work on failed bills in Gladstone's first administration shows how, quite apart from difficulties within the governing party, it was to be cumulative legislative congestion which demoralised the administration. So intense was private members' activity, of all parties or of none, in prolonging debate that it verged on that deliberate obstruction which was to be so skillfully deployed by Parnell and his Irish party in the 1880's<sup>16</sup>.

Despite all the procedural handicaps provided by the continuance of long-established practices, Parliament proved able to respond legislatively to pressures and stresses within society as it had been able to reform itself in 1832. The activities of zealots of the mould of Edwin Chadwick and Kay Shuttleworth, humanitarians such as Ashley and Wilberforce, in the manipulation of Royal commissions and Select Committees ensured that Parliament was supplied with adequate evidence to justify their desired legislation. Occasionally governments found themselves pushed reluctantly into legislation by private members or individual cabinet members. The intense battle fought by Gladstone, then out of office, against the passing of the Divorce Bill in 1857 and the repeated obstruction of Contagious Diseases legislation for over 15 years until 1883 give some idea of the difficulties facing social reformers concerned with sexual or moral matters. As much in the 1890's as in the 1860's, a great deal hinged on the attitude of cabinet members, their own perception of social needs and receptiveness to outside opinion, as well as on the political balance within the House of Commons in the pace with which legislation lagged behind or strode ahead of movements in public opinion.

<sup>16</sup> Agatha Ramm, *The parliamentary context of cabinet government 1868-74* English Historical Review 99 (1984) pp. 739-769.



3. Organised Opinion and Parliament. The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the activities of a series of effective extra-parliamentary single-issue pressure groups culminating in the 1840's in the campaign of the Anti-Corn Law League. Each built on the experience and expertise of its predecessor. They were to seize new, cheap methods of communication to mobilize popular opinion to exert pressure on members of Parliament. The exploitation of cheap postal rates for the circulation of literature and easier transport for the organisation of mass meetings, the employment of paid organisers and the effective use of parliamentary opportunities for debate demonstrated how much better organised was the Anti-Corn Law League than any contemporary British political party.

This expertise was recruited by later organizations in the 1850's. The Administrative Reform Association and the Liberation Society provided important links between these extraparlimentary organizations designed to exert pressure on Parliament from outside and those groups who saw their future as benefitting from pressurizing Parliament by working within political parties. The Liberation Society, aimed at the disestablishment and partial disendowment of the Church of England, defended its activities — 'We can hardly do less for Free Religion than the League did for Free Trade'. It set out to create a constituency organisation and to assimilate itself into the Liberal party: in 1858 the Society had paid agents in Leeds and Bristol; in 1864 it engaged an electoral agent: by 1871 it employed thirteen agents, each with his own district. It must be emphasized that at this time the national political parties had no regional organization whatever: the Liberation Society alone had an adequate machine for interfering in constituency politics. John Vincent has charted the influence of the Society's constituency pressure on legislation favourable to religious equality in the late 1860's<sup>17</sup>. Nonconformity was also represented in the link between the Liberal Party and National Education League which was to lead to the National Liberal Federation (1877). Significantly, by 1880 about a quarter of Liberal MPs were Nonconformists. The pioneering Liberal party organization of the late 1860's owed much to the expertise which had been built up by extra-parliamentary groups.

After the 1867 electoral reform both the Liberal and Conservative parties gradually developed central and local organizations which, by the end of the century, were beginning to concern political commentators who saw in the activities of what was described as the 'Birmingham caucus' a threat to parliamentary democracy. Both organizations certainly provided a forum by which the hopes and aspirations of party workers and, at times, hostility to the party leadership could be expressed. The

<sup>17</sup> John Vincent, *The formation of the Liberal Party, 1857-1868* (1966) pp. 70-74.

chief function of these new party organizations was to remain predominantly that of providing a machine to win elections: the channelling of opinion from the grass roots to the parliamentary leadership or vice versa played a very small role in party activities.

Pre-eminently, nineteenth-century pressure groups sought to persuade Parliament by constitutional means. The late years of the nineteenth-century and the early years of the twentieth however, saw signs of a willingness by some groups to use more extreme and violent methods to coerce Parliament: yet even these were aiming at legislative change. Violence had been seen in the electoral reform movement of the early 1830's; 'physical force' was supported by some Chartists in the 1840's; but it was to be the industrial unrest after the emergence of New Unionism in the 1880's and the activities of the Women's Social and Political Union after 1904, which reflected growing frustration among certain groups in society whose aims were not being met by the newly reformed Parliament. Yet even the threat of organized labour and the militancy of the suffragettes did little to ruffle the equanimity of the Liberal government in the years before 1914. Preoccupation with strikes and their suppression did not distract Lloyd George from his aim to destroy the feudal system of landholding: it was to be 1915 before it really worried him. Despite their vilification of him, Asquith could not be unnerved by the suffragettes: by 1914 it was clear that their violence was proving counter-productive. The growing confidence of Labour members in their parliamentary role and the links built up between some Fabians and the Liberal establishment was to ensure the stability of parliamentary socialism.

4. The House of Commons. The social composition of the House of Commons changed little as a result of electoral reform in 1832 and for long afterwards. This was hardly surprising as it had been as possible for a successful manufacturer or professional man as it was for a landowner to acquire a 'pocket' borough. Only two Dissenters were returned for the newly enfranchised seats by 1834. A study of the House in 1847 still found 267 MPs connected with the aristocracy by birth and or by marriage. After 1867, there were signs that the landed interest felt its political leverage to be weakening. It was becoming noticeable that landowning was declining in the background of MPs and that middle-class MPs were coming to be more and more connected with industry and finance. It was however only in the 1880's that this change became significant: it is possible to indicate the rate of change from Michael Rush's analysis of the background of the Conservative MPs between 1832 and 1900<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Bentley, *Politics Without Democracy, 1815-1914* (1984) p. 88; Michael Rush, *The MPs in Stuart Walkland* (ed.), *The House of Commons in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1979), p. 98

	1832	1868	1900
	Percentage of total		
Landed interest	58.3	47.3	21.2
Industrial, commercial financial	22.3	30.9	50.4

The electoral reform acts of 1884-1885 resulted in much greater changes in the social composition of the House. At least half of both the Liberal and Conservative parties showed commerce and industry in their backgrounds by 1885 but it must be emphasized that the successful business world of the 1880's was very different from that of the 1850's: it tended to be the world of the City and merchant banking, shipping and chemical manufacturing. By 1895 the *Liberal Manchester Guardian* regretted that between the London and Lancashire could put 100 Tory MPs in the House with no trouble. Lawyers and other professional men retained their significance in the Commons: they accounted for 23% of Liberal MPs in 1910. In the period just before 1914, it is possible to see a distinction between the back benchers where the increase of business interests seems to have been more obvious than that of lawyers after 1906 and the ministerial office holders. In higher offices, the majority of Liberal ministers were linked to land, the aristocracy or the higher professions. Even on the Tory benches, where business interest had noticeably strengthened with the emergence of tariff politics, nearly 30% of Conservative MPs could claim some link with the aristocracy in the period 1900-1910. Only with the slow appearance of Labour members, did the social pattern begin to expand<sup>19</sup>.

Not only did the social composition of the Commons change only gradually, but also Parliament was to maintain its primacy in British politics, despite the gradual growth of mass political parties. In the late nineteenth century, the parliamentary leadership of both the Conservative and Liberal parties was able to distance itself with great deftness from such extraparlimentary organizations as the National Liberal Federation and the National Union of Conservative Associations, however high their public profile. The emergence of the Labour party created a profoundly new force in British politics: unlike its predecessors, it sprang from local external initiatives to assert a parliamentary role. Yet, even as this new style, apparently democratically based party cut its parliamentary teeth, its parliamentary leadership was to find subtle ways of asserting its authority over the annual party conference and the trades unions.

Despite the steady shift towards government domination of parliamentary business, it remained the case, as it had been long before the emergence of mass parties, that, once it had won an election, a party

<sup>19</sup> W. L. Guttsman, *The British Political Elite* (1965).

could only remain in office for as long as its ministerial leaders could marshal adequate reliable support to get their business, especially supply business, through both houses of Parliament. The crucial test of that support was that of the votes in parliamentary divisions. In assessing the strength and cohesiveness of British political parties, it is as important to consider the extent to which party supporters in the Commons could be coaxed, led or dragooned into the division lobbies as it is to judge the capacity of party central and constituency organizations to get their supporters to the polls. In the field of what is known in the USA as roll call analysis, the availability of fast computers has, as in studies of electoral behaviour, offered the opportunity to overcome the problem of analysing large-scale data. Commons' Division List analysis began without the aid of computers when, in 1901, A. L. Lowell used it to show the tightening of party organization in Parliament. The next significant work came in the 1960's, led by W. O. Aydelotte with his application of well-tested statistical methods to Commons divisions of the 1840's<sup>20</sup>. The last twenty years have seen much more extensive research on Commons's divisions.

The methodology used has varied enormously, but each study has added significantly to the moving picture of the British political world as demonstrated by the changing pattern of Commons' voting. To vote in one of the division lobbies was and is a very public political act. However strategic and procedural that vote might be in intent, it provides a very 'hard' type of evidence to use in political analysis. Votes can only be taken at their face value and even then difficulties abound. The limits on interpretation are well known and must always be borne in mind. Nevertheless, the votes remain a public record of political sympathy, a personal tie, a local loyalty, a desire to please a party leader, or an indication of obedience to the party whip to maintain the party's backing at the next election — or, as some might see it, a payment for services rendered or an investment in a political future. My research project aims to find methods which would permit the analysis of all divisions in a parliamentary session in ways which could distinguish similar and dissimilar patterns of individual voting behaviour. My research is financed by the Economic and Social Research Council<sup>21</sup>. Computer

<sup>20</sup> William O. Aydelotte, *Voting Patterns in the British House of Commons in the 1840's*, in „Comparative Studies in Society and History”, 5 (1963), pp. 134 - 163; *Parties and Issues in Early Victorian England*, in „Journal of British Studies”, 5 (1966), pp. 95 - 114; *The Disintegration of the Conservative Party in the 1840's: a Study of Political Attitudes*, in „The Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History” edited by W. O. Aydelotte, A. G. Bogue and R. W. Fogel, Oxford, 1972, pp. 319 - 346; „Constituency Influence in the British House of Commons. 1841 - 1847”, in „The History of Parliamentary Behaviour”, edited by W. O. Aydelotte, Princeton, 1977, pp. 225 - 246.

<sup>21</sup> Research Grant E00230051. A pilot project to test statistical methods for

methods of multidimensional scaling and other techniques of multivariate data analysis are to be applied to all Commons' divisions in parliamentary sessions, at five-year intervals, 1861-1926, in order to analyse the voting behaviour of all MPs in such a way that as full and as unbiased a picture of that voting behaviour as possible can be drawn. The value of significant individual divisions is obvious at moments of high political tension and at times of large or hairsbreadth majorities, but, by looking at all divisions, it is hoped to create an indicator of discrimination and resource. The techniques are designed to sense similarity and dissimilarity of behaviour: the five-year interval was chosen as close enough to assess the changing individual voting behaviour over time and distant enough to distinguish changed group behaviour over time, thereby creating the need for new techniques to handle longitudinal aspects of the analysis.

The table gives an idea of the scale of the research project and the pattern of voting participation. The last two columns carry the most significant information. As might have been expected, over the period gradually many more MPs were voting. Table A shows the effect of using 50% of a session's divisions as a benchmark. By 1911, a high-voting year, just over half of the MPs voting still voted in less than half the total number of divisions. Only by 1926 had the figure dropped under a half. In 1861, in 187 divisions, only 58 MPs voted more than 100 times: in 1871, in 270 divisions, 127 MPs voted over 135 times: in 1911, in 451 divisions, 335 MPs voted over 225 times: in 1926, in 563 divisions, 363 MPs voted over 282 times. What had changed was that in 1911 only 42 MPs voted less than 50 times, 11% of the total number of divisions in that year: in 1871, 133 MPs voted less than 50 times, 19% of the total in that year. There are, of course, great fluctuations in the pattern e.g. in 1891, the highest voter voted in virtually all the divisions, 415 of 416, but in that year only 23 MPs voted more than 350 times. It is therefore clear that the steady increase in voting participation must be seen as very gradual from a very low base — whatever the level of party cohesion in the votes.

Against this steady, gradual increase in voting, the pattern of voting by leading politicians must be matched. In 1861 Disraeli's low voting record as leader of the opposition in the Commons (56 votes in a possible 187) clearly indicated his desire to maintain a low profile while struggling

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the analysis of all Commons' divisions in one parliamentary session (1861) was also funded by the ESRC (Research Grant HR6801). Detailed descriptions of the methods and results of the pilot project are to be found in Valerie Cromwell, End-of-Grant Report HR6801 *Computer Analysis by Multidimensional Scaling of House of Commons' Division Lists (1861)* available at the British Library in London and *Mapping the political world of 1861: a multidimensional analysis of House of Commons' Division List*, „Legislative Studies Quarterly” VII (1982), pp. 281-297.

Table of voting participation by M. P. s in individual sessions  
(Total given in brackets includes M. P. s eligible to vote, who did not vote)

Session	Total no. divisions	Highest no. of votes by an M.P.	Total no. of individual M.P.s voting	M.P.s voting over 50% of total no. of divisions	% of M.P.s voting who vote in 50% or less than 50% of total no. of divisions
1861	187	182	654(662)	71	89.14
1871	270	269	648(655)	127	80.40
1876	242	241	652(660)	125	80.82
1881	411	408	647(649)	153	76.35
1886	143	139	676(677)	166	75.44
1891	416	415	675(685)	136	79.85
1896	419	418	670(675)	205	69.40
1901	482	481	671(673)	246	63.34
1906	501(2)*	500	680(683)	421	38.09
1911	451	443	688(692)	335	51.31
1916	67	65	609(678)	121	80.13
1921	370	356	641(650)	180	71.92
1926	563	560	615(620)	363	40.98

Table derived from research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Research Grant E 00 23 0051.

\* One unnumbered division included.

to hold his party together. Yet, when Prime Minister, in 1876, he still only voted 106 times in a total of 241 divisions. To set this apparently poor voting record into perspective, it is useful to look at other party leaders' voting profiles. In 1886, a difficult parliamentary year ending with a split in the Liberal party Gladstone voted in only 28 of a total of 143 divisions: Harcourt, his Chancellor of the Exchequer, in 60 and Childers, his Home Secretary, in 71. In 1911, a highvoting and tense year, Asquith, the Prime Minister, voted only 150 times in a total of 451, Lloyd George, his Chancellor of the Exchequer, 190 times, while the leaders of the opposition, Balfour and Bonar Law, voted 132 and 165 times respectively. The situation was not very different in 1926: Baldwin voted in 312 divisions out of a total of 563, Lloyd George only 81 times and Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour leader, 348 times. Thus, although the Commons in general were voting more, their party leaders show a very different pattern of behaviour.

At this stage it has been possible to pick up something of dissident voting behaviour, though only in a crude and preliminary way. Even without subdividing the divisions into subject categories, some cumulative results have been produced. Figures are based on how many times, in his total of votes, a member voted against his assumed party of allegiance, assuming the division to be on party lines — a large and cleary

unreliable assumption. In 1861, A. H. Layard, a well-known radical, who, despite royal resistance eventually achieved office late in the session, voted against the Liberal leadership in 25% of his votes; James White, another radical, in 65%. 1876 saw a high level of Liberal 'dissidence' on both wings of the party, now in opposition: many radicals and future Liberal unionists voted in at least 10% of their votes against their leadership: in the same year 18 Conservatives voted against their leadership (the government) in over 10% of their votes. By 1911 that figure had dropped to 10, but on the other hand 62 Liberals (now the governing party) seem to have voted in over 10% of their votes against the leadership. These figures are of course very questionable, but are borne out by work done by John Fair in his calculations of party cohesion<sup>22</sup>. The analysis and computer mappings produced by multidimensional scaling distinguish similarity and dissimilarity of behaviour in different categories of divisions: it is crucial to see such mapping against the individual MP's cumulative voting performance. For example, 1876, Mitchell Henry, a Liberal, voted in nearly 43% of his votes against his party. However, he only voted 59 times in total. Of his 25 dissident votes, 16 were on the issue of slavery. This voting pattern will therefore affect his map position for all divisions whilst, among the category maps, significantly only that for slavery. It will therefore be crucial in the final analysis to take careful account of both low and skewed voting performance.

The creation of this large machine-readable source offers unlimited opportunities for the application of new and 'as yet undiscovered' computer and statistical methodology. It is hoped, by the application of tools currently available, to be able to answer whatever question is asked of the Commons's votes with some certainty.



With considerable difficulty, the procedures and practices of Parliament were adapted to the needs and pressures of an industrialised society. Gladstone's 1866 Exchequer and Audit Act completed the circle of Parliament's control of government spending. That control was to remain a retrospective one until well into the twentieth century, but was more than adequate to neutralise intense radical pressure for financial retrenchment. The emergence of tighter party discipline in the Commons eased the strengthening of the government's position in the Commons. The assimilation by the Liberal party of radical groups and Liberal

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<sup>22</sup> John D. Fair, *Party voting behaviour in the British House of Commons, 1886 - 1918*, „Parliamentary History" 5 (1986), pp. 65 - 82.

electoral agreement with the new Labour party in the early years of the twentieth century ensured the stability of parliamentary socialism. It was, ironically, to be the Conservative party which precipitated the major constitutional crisis which ensured the pre-eminence of the Commons over the House of Lords, a pre-eminence assured by two general elections.