

## LORD PALMERSTON AND PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION, 1830-1865<sup>1</sup>

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The “age of Reform” in Britain witnessed the ascendancy of parliamentary government and particularly of an increasingly influential, elected, House of Commons<sup>2</sup>. Yet for many politicians in this period, including many reform-minded Whigs and Liberals, a key concern was to make that parliament an institution genuinely representative of the people, while simultaneously seeking to exclude (or at least minimise) direct, popular participation in the formal political life of the nation. Many Victorian politicians were influenced by ideas expressed by enlightenment philosophers such as Dugald Stewart, a former student of Adam Smith, who held the Chair in Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh from 1785 until 1810, and who had argued that the “happiness of mankind depends, not on the share which the people possess, directly or indirectly, in the enactment of laws, but on the equity and expedience of the laws that are enacted”<sup>3</sup>. One of Stewart’s students at the beginning of the nineteenth century had been Lord Palmerston, a politician who, by mid-century, occupied a pre-eminent place in British public life. Palmerston’s attitudes to issues of political representation offer an opportunity to consider and perhaps revise certain ideas about contemporary (high-political) perceptions of the desirability of “democracy” in nineteenth century Britain.

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<sup>2</sup> For one of the clearest and most celebrated contemporary analyses of this ascendancy of Parliament, see Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (1867; various modern editions). Bagehot revised his work for a second edition published in 1872 to take account of the impact of the Reform Act of 1867, but the first edition remains a more accurate guide to his assessment of the political system between c. 1832 and 1867.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in D. Winch, “The System of the North : Dugald Stewart and his pupils”, in S. Collini, D. Winch and J. Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics : A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History*, Cambridge, 1983, p. 36.

Palmerston has been described as “the defining political personality of his age”<sup>1</sup>, dominating British politics between 1830 and 1865, serving three times as Foreign Secretary between 1830 and 1851, once as Home Secretary (1852-55) and, for the best part of a decade, as Prime Minister between 1855 and 1865<sup>2</sup>. As well as being remembered for his supposedly bellicose foreign policies, domestically he is usually portrayed as a reactionary figure : an anti-democrat of the old school whose alarmist rhetoric has led many biographers to conclude that he represented little more than a throwback to the aristocratic hegemony of the eighteenth century. During the winter of 1853/54, for example, when proposals were made within government for the extension of the franchise, Palmerston made quite clear his fear that reform proposals put forward to lower the property qualification for voters would “overpower Intelligence & Property by Ignorance & Poverty”<sup>3</sup>. Ever suspicious of democratic tendencies, he asked the Prime Minister, Lord Aberdeen : “Can it be expected that men who murder their Children to get nine Pounds to be spent in Drink will not sell their vote for whatever they can get for it<sup>4</sup> ?”. More recently, however, he has been portrayed as something quite different : a progressive democrat who possessed “a genius for adaptation” and who would, particularly as Prime Minister in the late 1850s and early 1860s, lead Britain towards a bright, democratic future<sup>5</sup>.

The question goes to the very heart of ideas about the nature of parliamentary government and representation in early to mid-nineteenth century Britain. Palmerston, who was at the centre of government throughout the period bounded, in British history, by two defining pieces of legislation in the history of parliamentary representation, the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867-68, serves as a useful prism through which to examine questions of political

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<sup>1</sup> J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain*, New Haven and London, 1993, p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> Palmerston held office as Foreign Secretary between November 1830-November 1834, April 1835-August 1841, and July 1846-December 1851 ; as Home Secretary, December 1852-February 1855 ; and as Prime Minister, February 1855-February 1858 and June 1859 to October 1865. He died in office in October 1865.

<sup>3</sup> Palmerston to Lansdowne, 8 Dec. 1853, *Palmerston Papers*, Hartley Library, University of Southampton, GC/LA/110.

<sup>4</sup> Palmerston to Aberdeen, 12 Feb. 1854, *Palmerston Papers*, HA/G/10/1-2.

<sup>5</sup> E.D. Steele, *Palmerston and Liberalism, 1855-1865* (Cambridge, 1991) p. 367 and *passim*.

representation and moves towards a more “democratic” system of government.

What is suggested in this paper is that the familiar narrative of a “rise of democracy” in Britain during this period, in the sense of a supposedly desirable and aimed for extension of the parliamentary franchise, is in many respects misleading. Rather, we should examine the deepening or enriching of “representation” in which ideas of inclusion borrowed from eighteenth century enlightenment thinkers continued to exercise not only a continued draw for mid-nineteenth century politicians but also offered a stable basis on which to manage parliamentary government.

By the early nineteenth century, the growing influence of public opinion was widely recognised. Lord Derby, who would go on to lead the Conservatives at mid-century, observed in 1834, for example, that while it was the “energies of the people” that underpinned politics, the politician who “imagine[d] himself capable of stemming and abruptly resisting its force onwards, ... will be swept along with the torrent<sup>1</sup>.” Palmerston, speaking three years before the 1832 Reform Act, had also recognised this force, telling Parliament that the statesmen who found the means by which to harness public opinion, would exercise a “sway over human affairs, far out of all proportion greater than belong to the power and resources of the state over which they preside<sup>2</sup>”.

This “torrent” of opinion, then, while unstoppable, was at least one that must be contained. As Palmerston observed in 1854 when a proposal was made to lower the franchise to £6 householders (the ones who would apparently murder their children), this would introduce 15,000 new, “comparatively Ignorant” and “poor” voters who would be unable to exercise “a sound judgement” and whose poverty would “make them accessible to Bribes, ... [and] the victims of Intimidation”. “Every body who knows anything about the working classes”, he said, “will tell you that they are not free agents”, pointing in particular to the “absolute despotism over the masses” exercised by trade unions<sup>3</sup>. Palmerston resisted strenuously plans for franchise extension proposed in 1854, for example, on the grounds that while a greater number of electors might in itself pose little or no risk to the security of the constitution, what Palmerston did find “objectionable”

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in A. Hawkins, “Lord Derby”, in R.W. Davis (ed.), *Lords of Parliament : Studies, 1714-1914*, Stanford, CA, 1995, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., xxi, 1668, 1 June 1829.

<sup>3</sup> Palmerston to Aberdeen, 12 Feb. 1854, (copy), *Palmerston Papers*, HA/G/10/1-2.

was, “the admission of a great number of electors of a lower class in regard to intelligence, property and independence”. He feared intimidation, manipulation and corruption would increase with the creation of a larger, and necessarily financially poorer and politically illiterate, electorate ; but more seriously, he worried that the stability of the existing, responsible, system of representation, in which power was delegated to “select councils”, would be jeopardised by the proposed reforms. “A low class of electors may naturally be expected to chuse a low class of representatives ; but even where men of a superior kind are chosen, these men insensibly and unavoidably adapt their language, their tone, and their votes, to the lowest class of electors, if that class is numerous ; just as actors are led to neglect the boxes and the pit, and to play for the shilling gallery<sup>1</sup>”.

Playing directly to the base interests of the working classes, Palmerston believed, would demean Parliament and weaken government. This was the basis of Palmerston’s opposition to any extension of the franchise. Concessions to the “poor” would ultimately undermine rather than strengthen the fabric of the nation. Short parliaments, for example, he had argued during debates on the Reform bill of 1832, “would lead to increased Pledges. Candidates wd bribe by Pledges instead of money ; The most effectual Bribe would be the efforts to procure more political Power for the Electors”. The result, he said, would be : “A purely Republican Form of Govt incompatible with great accumulation of wealth, because the multitude who must be poor wd have the Political Power, and they would try to throw upon the Rich such undue Burthens as would render them poor without rendering the Poor wealthy<sup>2</sup>”. Palmerston maintained that there was no good reason therefore to give a voice to working class opinion, in formal parliamentary terms.

The result of the Reform experiment of 1832 seemed to bear Palmerston out. He told his brother in March 1834 : “this reformed H[ou]s[e] of C[ommo]ns is growing to be wonderfully like all its Predecessors. Impatient of fools, intolerant of black guards, tired with debate, & disposed generally to place confidence in govt upon all matters which the members do not understand, or in which their

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<sup>1</sup> *Palmerston Papers*, CAB/60, Palmerston to Russell, 22 Jan. 1854. In a similar vein, see also *ibid.*, HA/G/9 and HA/G/10, Palmerston to Russell, 29 Jan. 1854, and to Aberdeen, 12 Feb. 1854.

<sup>2</sup> “Memoranda on Duration of Parliaments”, [paper watermarked 1832], in Palmerston’s hand, *Palmerston Papers*, HA/D/11/1.

particular constituents have not a direct interest. Property & land are strong in this House, & it is highly conservative<sup>1</sup>". The Reform Act had not, apparently, ushered in a new age of informed or enlightened politics ; parliamentary government still privileged the interests of property. However, the perception that members were prone to delegate responsibilities to government and ignore matters in which they did not see a constituency interest is important. For Palmerston, this underlined the extent to which Parliament was the arena for national politics and while local concerns might help determine who was chosen to represent different parts of the country, once at Westminster, these local concerns became less important. It reflects in Palmerston an agreement with Edmund Burke that Parliament, as Burke had insisted in 1774, was "not a *congress* of ambassadors from different and hostile interests ; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates ; but parliament is a *deliberative* assembly of *one* nation, with *one* interest, that of the whole ; where, not local purposes, not local prejudices ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole<sup>2</sup>". Thus, while public opinion had to be acknowledged and accommodated, it was not necessarily to be followed.

In 1852, the Liberal journalist W.R. Greg complained that, as a result of the reforms of 1832, Parliament was "no longer the only, nor the chief arena for political debate. Public meetings and the Press are fast encroaching upon and superseding its originally exclusive functions. Every man has become a politician.... The country often takes precedence of the Legislature, both in the discussion and decision of public affairs. Public opinion is formed out of doors ; and is only revised, ratified and embodied within.... The functions of parliament are no longer *initiary* ; or in far less degree than formerly... The independent thinker originates ; the Country listens, disputes, sifts, ripens ; the Parliament revises and enacts". Making MPs, as Greg put it, "mere acoustic tubes, through which their commands are blown to the legislative chamber", meant that the country must be content to be "served by an inferior order of men<sup>3</sup>".

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<sup>1</sup> Palmerston to Sir William Temple, 3 Mar. 1834, *Palmerston Papers*, GC/TE/218/1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Burke, *Speech to the Electors of Bristol at the Conclusion of the Poll* (1774), quoted in C.B. Macpherson, *Burke* (Oxford, 1980), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> W.R. Greg, "The Expected Reform Bill", *Edinburgh Review* (Jan. 1852), p. 214-220.

Palmerston, however, presented the case slightly differently. As he told a meeting in Glasgow in 1853, when receiving the freedom of that city. It was, he said :

The privilege of the people of a free country, thus in public meetings to express their opinion of the conduct of those whose lot it may have been, in any capacity, high or less exalted, to serve their country. In countries where the Governments are unfortunately framed upon a different model, public opinion is gagged, and expresses itself only in ways which do not often conduce to public tranquility [sic] or to the general welfare ; but it is the privilege and the good fortune of constitutional countries that public men are there enabled from time to time to have as their guide the expression of public opinion ; and when they are fortunate enough to obtain, as I have now the honour to obtain the approbation of their countrymen, they receive the greatest reward for their past conduct, and the most ample encouragement to pursue that course which they have thought for the benefit of the country. (Loud cheers)<sup>1</sup>.

Public opinion was listened to, therefore, in order to quell or control it ; it was only acknowledged when it expressed “approbation” of “past conduct” rather than being seen as a genuine “guide” for the future : it was an encouragement, after all, “to pursue that course which they [the public men, or government] have thought for the benefit of the country”.

Palmerston’s scepticism of moves towards a more “democratic” parliament, then, represents the familiar landed, aristocratic, wariness of popular, property-less, uninformed opinion. However while Palmerston in his Glasgow speech had lauded the increasing public role and accommodation of public opinion as a symbol of the political maturity of the British state, there is no real tension between this and his simultaneously expressed fear of the ill-informed nature of that opinion and the danger it threatened of overpowering sound (that is, established) judgement.

Government for Palmerston in the popular interest provided legitimacy for that government. Government by a limited but benevolent and enlightened elite would ensure its efficiency. There is,

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<sup>1</sup> *Palmerston Papers*, SP/B/3/2, newspaper cutting from the *Glasgow Constitutional* reporting a speech of Lord Palmerston in the City Hall, Glasgow, Sept. 1853.

of course, a certain hubris in this, but it should nevertheless serve as a qualification of simplistic assessments of Palmerston as simply a reactionary anti-democrat. By the same token, it checks optimistic judgements that he was an out-and-out progressive reformer. In elucidating Palmerston's position, however, we have an opportunity to examine the mind-set of mid-century Whig-Liberal opinion about the proper relationship between Parliament and the people it represented and governed.

It is necessary to turn to Palmerston's time as a student at Edinburgh University (1800-03) to understand his views on political representation. As has been mentioned, he had been a student of Dugald Stewart from whom he had learned the principles of enlightened, Whig, thought on the subject of the constitution. The stability of modern government, Stewart had told his students, depended "on the coincidence between [government] measures and the tide of public opinion", yet significantly this was a tide and therefore not static ; hence modern government should be prepared for "gradual and prudent accommodation of established institutions to the varying opinions, manners, and circumstances of mankind". This was a period of increased enlightenment, Stewart argued, and his work demonstrated a belief in the "possible attainments of mankind" fulfilling their potential through the "general and infallible progress of human reason"<sup>1</sup>. This was not the prologue to a belief in democracy, however<sup>2</sup>. Stewart advocated a kind of virtual representation : "the most perfect Democracy which can be realized", he maintained, "must admit of certain delegations of power to select councils, or to individual magistrates"<sup>3</sup>. After all, as Stewart pointed out in a lecture on forms of government : "It was one great fault", says Montesquieu, "in most of the ancient Republics, that the people had a right to influence immediately the public resolutions ; – a thing of which they are absolutely incapable. They ought to have no hand in the government but for the choosing of representatives"<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, and importantly, Stewart also spoke of "patriotic exertion" on behalf of the common good<sup>5</sup>. These notions of responsible (paternalist)

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<sup>1</sup> See Winch, *The System of the North : Dugald Stewart and his pupils*, p. 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> K. Bourne, *Palmerston : the Early Years, 1784-1841*, London, 1982, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> D. Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, ed. Sir William Hamilton, 2 vols, Edinburgh, 1855, ii, p. 359.

<sup>4</sup> Stewart, *Lectures on Political Economy*, ii, p. 374.

<sup>5</sup> Winch, *The System of the North : Dugald Stewart and his pupils*, p. 43.

government combined with national or patriotic honour and duty were to inform Palmerston's views of constitutional practice in his later years.

Palmerston took from Stewart's teaching a belief that careful manipulation of public opinion would ensure that it fulfilled the political economists' prescription of advancing society, and that through an abdication of authority in favour of a governing class or elite, responsible government would prevail. More importantly, establishing a control over that opinion and containing its excesses underpinned political stability.

More than this Palmerston had developed a powerful sense of national destiny based on a sort of expansionist nationalist Protestantism, an enthusiasm as the Tory Robert Southey put it, for "making the world English", an enthusiasm founded in no small degree on a belief in a "divine confidence in British religious and commercial values", not least in the aftermath of the seemingly providential British victory in the wars against Napoleon<sup>1</sup>. It is therefore important that Palmerston's career was one focused on foreign affairs, which he used to create for the people a vicarious interest in affairs of a national concern which could, and in many ways did, supersede calls for a more formal system of political participation and representation measured through electoral rights and privileges.

Palmerston used newspapers (to which he contributed articles and offered financial bribes<sup>2</sup>) and public speeches around the country to make contact with the people and to present himself as the guardian of the country's interest effectively and simplistically. He presented his foreign policy as "liberal", "constitutional" "English", even "Protestant" (and providentially ordained) and however much these labels did or did not attach to his domestic politics, they were widely apprehended to define his foreign policy. They possessed a strong emotive capacity at a time when a sense of national identity and a concept of the nation were being constructed very much by reference to other countries, that is, in terms of what Britain was not as much as what Britain was<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, p. 16 and 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> On Palmerston's use of newspapers, see D. Brown, "Compelling but not Controlling ? : Palmerston and the Press, 1846-1855", *History*, 86, 2001, p. 41-61.

<sup>3</sup> On Britishness defined by reference to "Other(s)" (principally a Catholic France), see L. Colley, *Britons : Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*, New Haven and London,



In 1848, as part of a wide-ranging defence of his conduct of foreign policy since 1830, Palmerston insisted “that the real policy of England – apart from questions which involve her own particular interests, political or commercial – is to be the champion of justice and right ; pursuing that course with moderation and prudence, not becoming the Quixote of the world, but giving the weight of her moral sanction and support wherever she thinks that justice is, and wherever she thinks that wrong has been done<sup>1</sup>”. While Palmerston’s external policy during these years had, without doubt, been motivated by more than a high-minded desire to champion just causes, the statement is not without foundation in so far as that policy could at least be presented as having been directed in the interests of liberal and constitutional government.

Having chaired the conference that established an independent Belgium in 1830-1831, for example, and earning in the process the soubriquet “le père de la Belgique”, Palmerston, who had initially been wary of this revision of the 1815 peace settlement, concluded that it was a credit to Britain that Belgium had been granted independence, without which assistance it would “either have been forcibly re-united to Holland or have been reduced to be a province of France<sup>2</sup>”. Likewise Palmerston represented British interest in the succession struggles in the Iberian peninsula in the 1830s and 1840s to have been motivated not simply by a desire to check French expansionist ambitions, but also by a determination to support constitutionalist government and candidates against despotic ones. Speaking on the issue in 1829, shortly before he first entered the Foreign Office, Palmerston had denigrated Dom Miguel as, “this destroyer of constitutional freedom, this breaker of solemn oaths, this faithless usurper, this enslaver of his country, this trampler upon public law, this violator of private rights, this attempter of the life of helpless and defenceless woman<sup>3</sup>” In a similar vein, in dealing with the Eastern question, Palmerston would point to the perceived

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1992 ; but as a counterpoint see also, e.g., L. Brockliss and D. Eastwood (eds.), *A Union of Multiple Identities : The British Isles, c.1750-1850*, Manchester, 1997, and K. Robbins, *Great Britain : Ideas, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness*, Harlow, 1998.

<sup>1</sup> *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., xcvi, 122, 1 Mar. 1848.

<sup>2</sup> Palmerston to Russell, 27 July 1861, quoted in H.C.F. Bell, *Lord Palmerston*, 2 vols, London, 1936, i, p. 116.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted K. Bourne, *Palmerston : The Early Years, 1784-1841*, London, 1982, p. 299.

cultural, economic and political superiority of the West, and specifically that of Britain, as a contrast to the Ottoman Empire, even when strategic considerations drew him to act in support of that empire. And when Britain and France went to war with Russia in the Crimea in 1854, this was regarded not simply as a battle for influence in the near East, but more broadly as a contest between liberal, constitutional British institutions and power against those of autocratic Russia<sup>1</sup>. Elsewhere, in the late 1850s and early 1860s, Italian unification was similarly presented as a successful exercise, as Palmerston put it, in “freeing Italy from foreign domination<sup>2</sup>”. Even Palmerston’s political rival, William Gladstone, would concede in 1879 that the name of Palmerston, “will ever be honoured by those who recollect the erection of the kingdom of Belgium, and the union of the disjointed provinces of Italy<sup>3</sup>”, explicitly tying Palmerston’s reputation to the cause, as Palmerston himself had once put it, of “liberalism all over the world”. There was some measure of representation at work here, but the rhetorical constructions of Britain as a force for good on the international stage, however much that served to obscure hard economic and strategic calculations, was a powerful device in British domestic political life. Palmerston, the “most English”, “People’s minister<sup>4</sup>”, forged a bond of sorts with the people of England (and Britain) not so much as the champion of their individual rights but as the (sometimes “heroic”) guardian of their national interests and honour<sup>5</sup>.

Because Palmerston emphasised that these values applied to all members of the population – as he declared, famously, in 1850, just as in the days of the Roman empire when a citizen could claim protection by virtue of Roman citizenship (“*civis Romanus sum*”), so too could

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<sup>1</sup> See O. Anderson, *A Liberal State at War : English Politics and Economics during the Crimean War*, London, 1967, p. 1 and *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> Palmerston speaking in the House of Commons, 13 March 1860, quoted in E.D. Steele, *Palmerston and Liberalism, 1855-1865*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 267.

<sup>3</sup> Gladstone’s third Midlothian speech, 27 nov. 1879, quoted in K. Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England, 1830-1902*, Oxford, 1970, p. 422.

<sup>4</sup> Lord John Russell famously dubbed Palmerston the “most English minister”. He was referred to as the “People’s Minister” in a letter from the Mayor of Southampton; R. Andrews to Palmerston, 26 Jan. 1852, *Palmerston Papers*, GMC/106.

<sup>5</sup> On this theme, see for example, D. Brown, “The Power of Public Opinion : Palmerston and the Crisis of December 1851”, *Parliamentary History*, 20 : 3 October 2001, p. 333-358.

every citizen of the British empire expect the same support<sup>1</sup> – even the most oppressed inhabitants of a London slum could share in the reflected “glory” of the *pax Britannica*<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, Palmerstonian foreign policy can be seen, to a degree, to have exploited a sense of Protestant, and liberal, Providentialism. Palmerston frequently played upon notions of Britain as a model of constitutional freedom and commercial prosperity able, and in certain cases perhaps obliged, to elevate the condition of less favoured parts of the world, such as, for example, in countering slavery and the slave trade<sup>3</sup>. Thus Palmerston’s foreign policy could appeal to a sense of a higher purpose, transcending domestic difficulties and offering a rallying point for national cohesion. However superficial it might have been, an inclusive rhetoric of national policy abroad could foster a sense of a national mission at home. Whatever the paradoxes of Palmerston’s foreign policy and the inconsistencies of his attempts to present that policy as directed in the interests of liberalism all over the world, these flaws were not always apparent to a population easily swayed by emotive rhetoric.

In this sense, parliamentary reform, extension of the franchise, and moves towards a more democratic system of government were a diversion from “proper” representation. Palmerston’s opposition to franchise extension therefore was not in nineteenth century Britain synonymous with political reactionaryism. It may be argued that Palmerston, by seeking to extend politics beyond the parliamentary arena, and to allow people a vicarious interest in national life as a serious alternative to a crude measure of formal participation in electoral politics, was not necessarily backward-looking but rather, perhaps, progressive in its attempts to represent interests rather than individuals. By infusing his foreign policy with notions of moral worth rather than simply the preservation or promotion of economic self interest, Palmerston gave all members of the population a stake in

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<sup>1</sup> *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, cxii, p. 380-444 [especially p. 444] (25 June 1850).

<sup>2</sup> In Charles Dickens’ fictional account of life in a London slum at mid-century in *Little Dorrit*, for instance, even the most disadvantaged members of society were portrayed as still feeling some sort of national pride. It was regarded in such places and among such people, Dickens wrote, as “a sort of Divine visitation upon a foreigner that he was not an Englishman, and that all kinds of calamities happened to his country because it did things that England did not, and did not do things that England did” (C. Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, 1857, Oxford, 1982 edn., p. 254).

<sup>3</sup> Colley, *Britons*, p. 380 ; Bourne, *Palmerston*, p. 622-4.

British political life (even if, for some, that was only in a virtual sense).

Although the image of Britain as a liberal, tolerant and free country might be contestable, it might nonetheless be argued that this offered in part a means for controlling the perceived excesses of uninformed opinion and allowing Parliament better to represent the interests of the people. As Palmerston pointed out in later life, “The Fact is that a vote is not a *Right* but a *Trust*. All the nation cannot by Possibility be brought together to vote and therefore a selected few are appointed by Law to perform this Function for the Rest and the Publicity attached to the Performance of this Trust is a security that it will be responsibly performed<sup>1</sup>”. By identifying popular interest in a national mission, Palmerston ensured that he had satisfied the need for Parliament to represent the people without at the same time giving them direct access to Parliament and power.

From a political point of view it was expedient to pursue a moderate agenda at mid-century and Palmerston successfully maintained a pre-eminent position and held a balance between radical and conservative opinion. But it was also a reflection of mid-Victorian views of politics as the business of administration and not innovation. This is not to say parliamentary politics were retrograde or even static. As Prime Minister, for example, between 1855 and 1865, Palmerston championed education reforms that would review school curricula and place greater emphasis on science, modern languages and mathematics making the education provided more useful and relevant to the needs of the time. He also began a process of modest reform and opening-up of the civil service through the introduction of competitive entry and the establishment in 1855 of the Civil Service Commission. Through the cultivation of an air of disinterested (even professional) government by way of limited use of patronage – limited at least when compared with his predecessors’ use of such privilege – and through the introduction to government of a body of more modern politicians, professional and skilled rather than simply high-born, he weakened the aristocracy’s hitherto hegemonic grip on power. His was a government “ethos” of efficient administration rather than unchecked legislative innovation ; contrary to popular perception the Palmerston governments were very active, but active in a careful manner : Palmerston guided the ship of state towards moderate change but he

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<sup>1</sup> Memorandum by Palmerston, 15 May 1864, *Palmerston Papers*, HA/N/13.

made sure statutes were lasting and permanent<sup>1</sup>. His 1864 comment that the government “cannot go on adding to the statute book *ad infinitum*”<sup>2</sup>, was less a signal of his reactionary intent, rather a plain statement of his view that good government meant sound administration and not perpetual revolution.

All of this, in Palmerston’s view, would have been compromised by extension of the franchise and the admission of multiple and competing demands on parliamentary time and activity. It was actually in resisting demands for a more democratic franchise, Palmerston argued, that Parliament was better able to represent the interests of the people. However, in accustoming the people to a role in politics, whether real or perceived, by speaking directly to them through the press and on the platform, by undermining the omnipotence of Parliament and broadening the terms within which political life was conducted – no politician could ignore opinion, but Palmerston went further by courting it – Palmerston, without necessarily meaning to, laid the foundations upon which demands for more formal inclusion within the political nation, through “democratic” franchise reform, would become, within a very short period of time, irresistible.

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<sup>1</sup> Parry, *Liberal Government*, p. 180-183.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted K. Bourne, *Palmerston : The Early Years, 1784-1841*, London, 1982, p. 299.