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THE POST-WAR CRISIS

INTRODUCTION

The general discontent of the people in the last few years of the French Wars had found very little organised expression, partly because of a confident hope that peace would bring prosperity. Instead a crisis of appalling severity came upon nearly all sections of industry, trade, and agriculture. A bewildered country laid much of the blame on the Tories, since they had been in office for an almost uninterrupted spell of thirty years; it seemed likely that the strength of the anti-ministerial feeling would combine the middle and working classes under Whig leadership in a movement against the Government and for some moderate measure of reform.

But before any such alliance could be developed, the Corn Law of 1815 caused bread riots and angry demonstrations in different parts of the country. In May 1816 agricultural Luddism broke out in the Eastern Counties and spread rapidly. Some attempt was made to rally the disorganised clamour behind a movement for political reform. The Hampden Club (founded in 1812) democratised its constitution and at last found an audience: Thomas Cleary, its secretary, and Major Cartwright went out on missionary tours and helped to organise the petition presented to the House of Commons in April and May of 1816. From London a call was issued for a nation-wide campaign of petitions, which delegates were to bring to a Convention in January, 1817.

Meanwhile in the middle classes sympathy for the Reform movement had ebbed away. The repeal of the Income Tax in March 1816 had removed one of their most deep-felt grievances, and at the same time the riots had frightened them. Robert Waithman, an influential, and very typical, spokesman of the middle-class reformers, declared at the end of November 1816 that 'There were three classes, who were in fact the decided enemies of Reform — those who lived on the national purse — the timid, whose fears had been excited as to the consequences which might arise from Reform — and the inflammatory and riotous who were its bitterest foes', and
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then in December 1816 the Spencean Riots in the Spa Fields, London (an absurd attempt to seize power), finally shattered the hopes of a class alliance among the reformers. When the Hampden Club Convention met in January 1817 it could represent only a section of a divided and weakening movement.

Cobbett had tried to turn the movement into peaceful channels when, in November 1816, with the special twopenny edition of his Register, he appealed directly to the working class; he had urged them to abandon violence and to find the cause of their distress not in individual employers or the employing class, but in the political system and those who profited by it. But, before his work could have effect, the Government had initiated a policy of repression. A Committee of Secrecy, appointed after an attempt had been made on the Regent’s life, issued in February a report full of vague premonitions of possible insurrections. The Government, acting on the report, passed a series of ‘Gagging Bills’ (in March 1817),—Habeas Corpus was suspended, the regulations of the Mutiny Acts of 1797 were revived, an Act was passed for the safety and preservation of the royal family and the Government, and severe restrictions were placed on public meetings, especially where delegates were elected to a conference (this being a method of evading the Corresponding Societies Act of 1799).

The Reform movement collapsed: Cobbett, partly for private reasons, fled to America, and in 1817, instead of the optimistic clubs and meetings of 1816, came the abortive march of the Blanketeers in March and the Derbyshire Insurrection in June. The Government’s policy of repression was checked by the revelation that the insurrection had been the work of one of their own paid spies: juries began to acquit prisoners, and in London Wooler and Hone struck successful blows for the freedom of the press. In January 1818 the suspension of Habeas Corpus was not renewed and peace reigned for a while in the political world.

But later in the same year a recurrence of economic difficulties brought a fresh crop of societies, usually called ‘Political Protestants’ or ‘Union Societies’. Mass drilling became a common feature of their activities, to prepare for revolution (according to the authorities) or (according to the reformers) to ensure that their demonstrations should be orderly and well organised. The climax of this period was the huge rally at St. Peter’s Fields, Manchester, in 1819, where the massacre of ‘Peterloo’ was staged. The country was horrified, but not the Government or Parliament, which promptly passed