

9. The Rise and Progress of Tory Democracy

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THIS paper is concerned with what must be regarded as the central paradox of British politics: the continuing electoral success of the Tory party in an age of political democracy. Chronologically the centre of gravity lies in the last third of the nineteenth century. The two reform bills of 1867 and 1884 substantially established the structure of political democracy, although it was well into the twentieth century before the principle of one-man-one-vote prevailed with reasonable efficiency. Universal manhood suffrage, however, the basic prerequisite of political democracy, had more or less arrived in 1884, even if it was not yet fully effective, and it was a general expectation at the time that it would usher in a period of prolonged dominance by the political Left. Yet exactly the opposite happened. In the general elections beginning in 1885 and ending in 1966, some 14,000 seats have been at issue. The Tories obtained 51 per cent, the Liberals 20 per cent, and Labour 24 per cent. Such figures might be held to give a distorted picture, for during this period Labour replaced the Liberals as the principal party of the Left. If these eighty-two years are divided into two spans, 1885 to 1918 (during which the Liberals were the main opponents of the Tories) and 1922 to 1966 (when Labour was the chief antagonist), the conclusion is, however, no different. During the first period the Conservatives obtained 47 per cent of the seats, the Liberals 37 per cent, and Labour 3 per cent; during the second, the figures were 53, 6, and 40 per cent respectively.¹ Thus the predominance of the Tories has, if anything, been reinforced in the latter period, and this belongs to the realm of fact, not myth.

That it should have happened in this way was certainly contrary to the expectations of those who thought about the coming of political democracy in the Victorian age, no matter what their political stand-

¹ Robert McKenzie and Allan Silver, *Angels in Marble. Working Class Conservatives in Urban England* (London, 1968), p. 11.

point. In 1853, when universal suffrage was still an aspiration which the Chartists had only a little earlier failed to bring any nearer to realization, Marx had written:

Universal Suffrage is the equivalent of political power for the working classes of England, where the proletariat forms the large majority of the population, where, in a long, though underground civil war, it has gained a clear consciousness of its position as a class. . . . The carrying of Universal Suffrage in England would, therefore, be a far more socialistic measure than anything which has been honoured with that name on the Continent. Its inevitable result, here, is the political supremacy of the working class.²

Forty years later Friedrich Engels, commenting on the outcome of the British general election of 1892 to August Bebel, the German Social-Democratic leader, wrote:

Beautiful irony of history: both the old political parties have to appeal to the workers, make concessions to the workers, in order to retain or obtain power and both of them are thereby made to feel that they are helping to raise up those who will supersede them. But they cannot help it! What are our little paltry jokes compared with the gigantic joke implicit in the course of history!³

At the opposite end of the political spectrum Robert Lowe, most articulate of those parliamentary leaders who in the middle-1860s fought against a further instalment of reform, reached essentially similar conclusions. Speaking on the Reform Bill in the House of Commons in May 1867 he said:

I am not at all astonished that the fertile genius of the right hon. Gentleman who directs the party opposite should have devised this scheme. There is nothing new in it. These are the old tactics of an oligarchy allying itself with the lower section of the democracy. There is nothing to astonish us in that. It was so in the French Revolution, and it has been so over and over again in the annals of Greece. What I am surprised at even with fresh proofs of it accumulating daily before my eyes is, that you, the gentlemen of England – you with your ancestors behind you and your posterity before you – with your great estates, with your titles, with your honours, with your heavy stake in the well-being of this land, with an amount of material prosperity, happiness, dignity, and honour which you have enjoyed for the last 200 years, such as never before fell to the lot of any class in the world – that you wildly fling all these away without, as far as I can see, the shadow of an equivalent.⁴

² 'The Chartists', *New York Daily Tribune*, 25 Aug. 1852.

³ *Marx Engels Werke*, XXXVIII (Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1967), 394. 7 July 1892.

⁴ Hansard, *Parl. Deb.*, 3rd ser., 187, col. 799 (20 May 1867).