4
Social Tension and Party Politics in 1819

The year 1819 marked an important point in the halting process by which the Whigs recovered their vitality. The political scene that year also highlighted the symbiotic relationship between the parliamentary contest at Westminster and public opinion in the country. With support from a better organized and more enthusiastic Whig cohort in the Commons, Tierney mounted a systematic effort to translate popular discontent into a stronger position for his followers. The struggle between government and opposition led ministers in turn to seek a decisive expression of confidence from Parliament, but neither side gained a clear advantage. Social tensions heightened by faltering economic growth from June 1819 came to a head in the Peterloo riot on 16 August. Although threats of unrest strengthened the government’s hand as they had done in 1817, Whigs responded with more confidence than before and appealed to respectable opinion through a series of county meetings. They abandoned earlier inhibitions to work with local interests and reform groups in a move that contributed to a gradual shift in popular sentiment to their favour over the next decade.

Brougham set out the stakes for the next parliamentary session with an *Edinburgh Review* article in June 1818 that argued Liverpool’s government had lost public confidence and should be replaced by the Whigs. ‘Can anything’, Brougham insisted, ‘be more absurd than to oppose a ministry, and seek its downfall, for the mere sake of destroying it, without putting any other in its place?’ The only legitimate object of constitutional opposition could be to establish a ministry on purer principles, composed of more trustworthy men.¹ Despite the Grenvillite secession, Brougham argued that the Whigs embodied the strongest force for civil and religious liberty, not to mention a generally enlightened and liberal policy, ever seen in English history. Only

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the delusions practised by radical agitators kept in office a ministry that embarrassed its firmest supporters. The Whigs’ past failure to contest ‘the faction of the Cobbets and Hunts’ had helped ministers by dividing the opposition and raising public suspicion about Whig motives.\textsuperscript{2} Whig electoral successes in 1818 had dispelled such fears, and public alienation from both radicals and the government gave the party a chance to lead.

Talk of Whig gains in the 1818 election had raised hopes while impressing on the party’s leaders the need to follow up with a strong showing in Parliament. Tierney warned Holland that a failure to make a good display after all the discussion of future prospects would have a very prejudicial effect.\textsuperscript{3} By January, he expressed a confidence in the party’s prospects at odds with his usual hesitancy. Sir Robert Wilson remarked that with good ‘attendance [Tierney] flatters himself victory is certain’.\textsuperscript{4} Grey’s son-in-law, John Lambton, reported Tierney’s doubt ‘that so strong a party as ours could exist & not turn ministers out unless it fell to pieces of itself’. Lambton himself spoke warmly of additions to the Whig cohort in the Commons, and, with Holland’s encouragement, he planned a weekly party dinner to maintain morale and coordinate tactics.\textsuperscript{5}

Although his wife’s illness kept him away from London, Grey presented the Whig’s case against the administration on 31 December at the Fox Dinner in Newcastle. After discussing the country’s economic malaise and the weight of taxation, Grey asked what solution the present government offered. Only a rigid and unsparing system of retrenchment and economy could end distress, and Grey urged the public to support the Whigs in promoting those changes. He spoke particularly of the need for reducing the military establishment to avoid financial difficulties or high taxes as well as to protect the constitution against military despotism. Such retrenchments ‘cannot be denied with safety and must not be omitted in this interval of peace’. After the public’s rejection of Lord Liverpool’s ministry in the recent election, Grey looked to Parliament’s opening with sanguine hopes for cooperation between Whigs and responsible men outside Parliament.\textsuperscript{6} The speech presented a Whig agenda familiar from earlier attempts to engage popular opinion in the 1790s, and it gave further proof that Whigs abandoned the defensiveness that Brougham had lamented so bitterly during the 1812 election. The party now demonstrated its willingness to look beyond metropolitan preoccupation and work with respectable opinion in the country. Appealing to provincial liberals as Grey had done in Newcastle distanced the Whigs from ministers and