One of the most important ways in which Liberals thought of their role in extending the bounds of freedom and liberty was in the context of expanding the right of people to participate in legislation and government. When Gladstone’s second administration produced the Reform and Redistribution Acts of 1884–5, and extended the householder franchise that already existed in the boroughs to the counties, it was widely assumed that this work was complete. As a system had been set up under which the great majority of adult males could expect to qualify to vote at some stage of their life, Britain had witnessed ‘the success of democracy’.¹ Many politicians spoke and acted as if this was a commonplace of British life. The electorate was over five million strong after 1885 and political parties spent much of their energies marshalling their votes for the general elections required every seven years. Whichever party achieved a majority of seats in the House of Commons elected by the voters formed the country’s government and enacted its policies in the name of the electorate who had placed it in power. However, many Liberals rapidly became convinced that democracy had not been produced by the reforms of 1884–5. In particular, two features of the British system still stood in the way of full representative government and the sovereignty of the people: the ability of the hereditary House of Lords to veto legislation approved by the elected Commons; and the fact that householder suffrage did not automatically enfranchise all adults – indeed it specifically excluded all women from voting. Tackling these issues proved two of the party’s most difficult and controversial tasks in the Edwardian era.
The House of Lords

Once nineteenth-century Liberalism moved away from the previous century’s idea of a balanced constitution of Monarchy, Peers and Commons and embraced the sovereignty of the people, it was bound to look on the role of the House of Lords in the legislative process with disfavour. It was difficult to see how the existence of a body that was made up of hereditary Peers, with a leavening of judges and Anglican bishops, could be justified in Liberal terms, unless it was willing to accept the supremacy of the Commons and confine itself to ancillary and ceremonial functions, like the Monarchy, which had not dared to veto an act of parliament since 1707. Until the mid-1880s this had seemed at least feasible as a constitutional development. The Peers had accepted all the major political and religious reforms of the nineteenth century, including the reform acts of 1832, 1867 and 1885. The last instance seemed to show that they would not hold out against a Liberal policy that was backed by a great popular campaign. Liberals continued to make up over 40 per cent of the Lords and to wield considerable influence there. Many leading Liberals, like the Marquess of Hartington, heir to the Duke of Devonshire, were closely connected to the peerage and showed that the Lords were not devoid of popular sympathies.

However, this hope that the Lords might co-operate in their own demise was dashed in 1886 by the home rule crisis and the split in the Liberal party. The Liberal peerage overwhelmingly opposed Gladstone and refused to acquiesce in a policy that meant abandoning the Irish members of their order to Nationalist rule from Dublin. As a result, while there were 203 Liberal members of the Lords in 1880, there were only 38 in 1887. Thereafter, Liberals remained a small minority in the House of Lords and had to face the prospect of continuous Unionist opposition to measures produced by a Liberal government. It was no surprise that the 1887 NLF conference called for the removal of the Lords’ power to veto legislation. The issue became critical during the 1892–5 Liberal governments, when the Lords rejected the second Irish home rule bill in 1893. In his last speech to the Commons, Gladstone insisted the issue of the Lords had to be tackled and the Liberal MPs were so incensed that they carried an amendment to the address, against the wishes of the cabinet, to demand an end to the Peers’ veto. Rosebery, Gladstone’s successor, took up the issue of Lords reform in a number of speeches and the matter was second only to Irish home rule in Liberal election addresses in 1895.