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The Formation of the British Liberal Party, 1857-1868

and

Peel

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According to J.R. Vincent, his book, The Formation of the British Liberal Party, 1847-1868, "breaks new ground in its description of what kind of people the liberals were, what they did and why they did it, and in relating leadership and policy to the nature of the party" (page xxv). Who were the liberals? Vincent shows that a substantial number of Liberal M.P.s were large landowners, lawyers and businessmen (pages 3, 26) and writes that a great number of lawyers and big businessmen had acquired an aristocratic education and tone and belonged as much to the aristocracy as if they were landed not really proprietors (page 4). Thus, the picture presented of a Liberal is that of a person who owned property and was wealthy. Vincent further writes that "the ideal of the Liberal Party '[consisted] in a view of things undisturbed and undistorted by the promptings of interest or prejudice, in a complete independence of all class interests'" (page 12). Yet despite their professed independence from class interests, Liberals were uncertain over ✓ whether any other class besides the wealthy could govern. Vincent writes that the Liberal Party insisted that aristocratic rule could not go on forever but felt that the question of what to do when the landowners could no longer govern themselves was not to replace the old ascendancy by a new one (see pages xxvi and xxvii). Vincent also writes that the Liberal Party had misgivings over the extent to which the political process should be democratized. Although, according to Vincent, "a large part of the party was genuinely anxious to enfranchise the upper part of the working class" (page 250), "many Liberal

sections strongly objected to 'democracy' and even the professedly democratic sections of the party ... made extensive reservations" (page 240). Vincent also shows how the Liberals felt that they were best qualified to govern the country. Vincent writes that "their quarrel with the Tories arose from their sense of responsibility, not their Liberalism; they simply could not believe that the Tories were competent to guide the destinies of a great empire, and maintain a high standard of departmental administration" (page 13).

In conclusion, Vincent presents a picture of the Liberal Party as being a group of wealthy politicians who were members of a political association which held to the "aristocratic ideal of 'civil and religious liberty,'" (page 13) and, despite being members of the wealthy class, based their actions not on party considerations but on "loyalty to a political ideal" based upon "purity" and "justice" (page 12). This desire to act in accordance with a higher political creed which put service to the nation ahead of party is what made the Liberal Party so special and unique.

*The gist of the Vincent thesis does not appear to be summarized*

In Peel, Norman Gash portrays Sir Robert Peel as being a great man who put the needs of his country ahead of party considerations, incurring in the process the wrath and scorn of the aristocracy, but the respect and adulation of the nation. Peel's positions on Catholic emancipation and repeal of the Corn Laws was clearly heroic in view of his affiliation with the Conservative Party. Peel clearly was a man who transcended class and party considerations to become the champion of the people. On the question of Catholic emancipation Peel demonstrated an amazing turnabout of attitude on this issue. Gash writes that during his tenure as Chief Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant ~~Governor~~ of Ireland, Peel, speaking for the Protestant side in Parliament (page 40), made a speech expressing his opposition to Catholic emancipation, offering several reasons why emancipation would not be in the best interest of the Irish people, who were overwhelmingly Catholic (pages 40, 41). Then, as Gash writes, during his tenure as Home Secretary, Peel made another speech in Parliament on the question of Catholic emancipation, in which, "yielding to a 'moral necessity,'" he spoke out in favor of Catholic emancipation, which meant "admission of Catholics to Parliament and to all but a handful of public offices, [a] new oath of loyalty [and] the deliberate omission of any form of control over Roman Catholic ecclesiastical appointments" (page 119). Peel, "the great Protestant champion," triumphed in Parliament but at a price, which, according to Gash, "he went on paying for the rest of his life" (page 120.) The "anger and resentment" of the Protestant party "was

concentrated almost entirely on Peel" who, to the Protestant party, "was now its betrayer" (page 121). For changing his mind on the question of Catholic emancipation, Peel became the target for recriminations which eventually they did never stopped. Gash writes that "months passed before his change of opinion ceased to be a topic of conversation; and even when other matters drove it from men's minds, they never forgot" (page 121). Long afterwards Greville wrote: "I do not see how he [Peel] can be acquitted of insincerity" (page 121).

But it was during his tenure as Prime Minister that Peel rose to an even higher level of greatness in response to the crisis brought on by Irish famine, which was, Gash writes, "the greatest social disaster experienced by any European state in the nineteenth century" (page 281). This was an act of extreme political courage which provoked bitter opposition from farmers and landlords who now saw Peel as being their enemy (page 274). According to Gash, Peel knew that his decision in 1845 to repeal the Corn Laws would mean the end of his government. Gash writes that Peel was notified "that to repeal the Corn Laws would be to break up the cabinet" and that "to some in the cabinet it was wrong for a Conservative ministry to tamper any further with the Corn Laws" (page 267). Yet, despite this prospect of losing support for his ministry, Peel put the needs of the nation ahead of party loyalty and acted in "absolute and uncompromising terms" (page 267). Peel became the target of bitter attacks by the protectionist faction, which included a "violent personal attack" which almost led to a duel (pages

*he continues in the 1830s to make shifts*

278, 279) between Peel and one of his more vitriolic critics. Disraeli was particularly harsh in his attacks on Peel. Gash writes that "in a speech of sustained and studied invective," Disraeli described Peel as being "the burglar of others' intellects" and said of Peel that "no statesman had committed larceny on so great a scale" (pages 276,277). Yet Peel remained firm in his belief "that it was in the national interest to make a final settlement of the Corn Laws" (page 277).

In conclusion, Gash's book is a compelling and moving account of the the history a great statesman who put the needs of the nation ahead of party and special interest groups in the face of extreme political pressure and personal vilification which came from the most powerful and influential groups in the country who were adamantly opposed to change.

*Gash is, of course, very favorable to Peel  
but you have summarized the book crisply and  
intelligently.*

