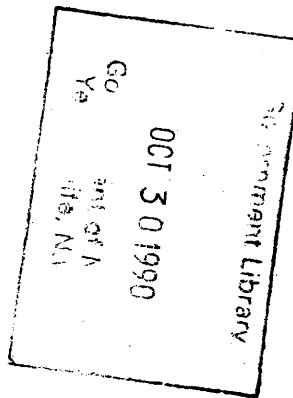




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Excerpt from "The Queen's Government"
by Sir Ivor Jennings, Pelican Books, p20-23.

for the tyranny of the aristocrat. The demagogues were suppressed by Napoleon, who was even more dangerous than the threatened invasion. The result might have been a landed oligarchy by the perturbed landed interest. Nevertheless, the liberal ideas of Chatham and the younger Pitt were kept alive by Charles James Fox and his handful of followers; and a new power developed in the land, the power of Nonconformity, enriched by the secession of the Methodists from the Church. There was an easy transition, which lasted a hundred years, from a landed oligarchy to a popular democracy. Most of the development was presided over - though she did not always approve and regarded 'democrat' as a term of abuse - by the second of England's great queens, Victoria, who ascended the throne in 1837 when the development had just begun, saw an Empire of free peoples parade before her in 1897, and died three years later as Britain and what we should now call the Commonwealth entered the twentieth century.

DEMOGRACY

After the accession of William and Mary in 1688 there was no doubt that Parliament was supreme. The monarchs still had great influence, but they depended upon Parliament for the funds which they employed and the laws which they administered. Indeed, they depended on Parliament for their thrones. William III had only a remote hereditary title, and Mary's claim was only a little better. After the death of Queen Anne, the Hanoverian line could justify itself only by the Act of Settlement. Even now, probably, one could find a more direct descendant of James I than Elizabeth II* - even forgetting the Duke of Windsor, who abdicated by Act of Parliament.

The medieval parliaments had contained the great lords

* On strict hereditary principles, the line of Charles I takes precedence over the line of James I. The line of Henrietta, Duchess of Orleans, daughter of Charles I, being Roman Catholic, was passed over in favour of the line of Elizabeth, Electress of Hanover, daughter of James I, from whom Elizabeth II traces descent.

and the representatives of the 'commons' - the knights of the shires and the burgesses of the boroughs. The great lords had been succeeded by great landowners, ennobled by successive monarchs because of their wealth and political influence. The knights of the shires had been superseded by landowners elected by freeholders. Many of the boroughs were dominated, for purposes of elections, by neighbouring landowners. The landed interest therefore dominated the eighteenth-century Parliament. Even the wealthy merchants and manufacturers of the towns were not all enfranchised, sometimes because the urban electors were self-elected 'freemen', and sometimes because the town itself, being a product of the Industrial Revolution, had no separate representation.

By 1832, though, the balance of economic power had changed. The landed interest was still important, but the manufacturers were wealthy and influential. Sir Robert Peel, who first became Prime Minister in 1834, was the son of a manufacturer. Generally, the manufacturers were Whigs and Nonconformists, and it was not until a section of moderate Tories joined the Whigs in 1830 that reform could be effected. Even then William IV had to threaten to create fifty Whig peers in order to get the Bill through the House of Lords.

The Reform Act of 1832 enfranchised the middle class of the towns and effected a balance between town and country more closely reflecting the balance of economic power. Immediately its consequences were barely noticeable and the landed interest continued to dominate politics until the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 - which had helped British agriculture by keeping up the price of wheat but necessarily kept up the price of bread also, and therefore the wages paid by the manufacturers. The fusion of the Whigs and the Peelites, who had repealed the Corn Laws, led to the creation of the Liberal Party, based primarily on the manufacturing interest and 'the Nonconformist Conscience'. The rump of the Tory Party, ably led by Disraeli, was based essentially on the support of the 'country gentlemen' or landed interest: but the distinction between land and other

of property was fast disappearing as urban rents made up for the losses caused by the repeal of the Corn Laws. Disraeli gradually weaned the Conservative Party, as it now called itself, from insistence on 'protection' for agriculture so that it could appeal to the growing volume of urban voters. In 1867 Disraeli went further by enfranchising the householders of the urban working class. Though the Liberals thought that the urban workers would vote Liberal, Disraeli thought that many of them would vote Conservative, especially if he gave them the vote. Disraeli was right, but not right enough. The Liberals were in office from 1868 to 1874 and again from 1880 to 1885. In that second period they enfranchised the householders of the counties, and so gave representation to the rural working class. This almost coincided with a split in the Liberal Party and, except for a short interval, the Conservatives were in office from 1874 to 1905. They were no longer based on the landed aristocracy, whose influence had almost entirely disappeared. In 1885 what was called 'Society', the wealthy, educated minority, was almost solidly Conservative and the Conservative Party also had a large volume of working-class support. Meanwhile, though, the trade unions were developing, and in 1899 they (with a few Socialist groups) founded the Labour Representation Committee from which the Labour Party sprang. For the time being this Labour influence came down on the side of the Liberals and helped to give them the enormous majority of 1906.

There was no change in the franchise until 1918. By that time the Liberal Party had split, one section, led by Lloyd George, joining with the Conservatives (and with Labour support) to form the Coalition Government of 1916. The Act of 1918 based the franchise not on householding but on residence, and therefore gave the vote to all persons resident in the constituency on a fixed date, the minimum age for men being 21 and that for women (who were given the vote for the first time) being 30. In 1928 the Conservative Government reduced the age for women voters to 21, and in 1948 the Labour Government removed certain cases of double voting.

The franchise is now based on the principle of 'one person, one vote, one value'. Every person of full age, not subject to a legal disqualification, resident in a constituency for a short period, has the right to vote in that constituency, and in that constituency only. The voting is no longer done in 'communities', the counties and the boroughs, because the counties and the boroughs are divided into constituencies of approximately equal size, though in the sparsely-populated fringes in Wales and Scotland some attention is paid to area as well as the population; also the distribution in 1948 was not quite exact. In principle, though, a vote cast in Acton has the same weight as a vote cast in Midlothian.

It must not be thought that democracy depends on universal and equal franchise. It depends on the machinery of government by which the ballot box is used. The beginning of her reign, thought that the stability of the Government depended on her support. After the marriage of the Prince Consort in 1840 she began to realize that the stability of the Government depended not on her but on the majority in the House of Commons. This did not help her to gain using her influence to give the Conservatives a majority in her reign, but even when she died and disapproved Gladstone she had to take him as her minister because he led the Liberals and the Liberals had a majority. It must be remembered, too, that the House of Lords was and still is part of Parliament. Balfour's Government's reign it lost the power to change the Government, and now it cannot even obstruct legislation for more than one year. The result is that when a Government has the majority in the House of Commons it gets its way, as Mr. Chamberlain did in 1915 and Mr. Churchill's did in 1940.

Even these characteristics are not enough to make Britain a true democracy. What is necessary is a more fully sensed than explained, but it is the basis of the idea of liberty. There are certain things which must be done. The whole procedure is human in person. Every person who is to be a voter will find his name on the register of voters.