

CELEBRAT PARTY, PATRIOTISM A

The remarkable year 1859 saw the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help*. This *annus mirabilis* is rich ground for commemoration. It also saw the formal foundation of the parliamentary Liberal Party. On 6 June 1859, 280 Whig, Liberal, former Peelite and radical MPs met at Willis's Rooms in King Street, St. James's. They gathered to agree on a strategy to oust Lord Derby's Conservative government from office. **Angus Hawkins** analyses the significance of this key event in Liberal history.



FOUR DAYS later, 323 opposition MPs voted for a motion of 'no confidence' in the Conservative ministry. Derby promptly resigned. On 12 June, Lord Palmerston became Prime Minister of a Liberal government. Lord John Russell was

appointed Foreign Secretary, and the former Peelite, William Gladstone, became Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Conceived in 1859, the gestation of the parliamentary Liberal Party followed under the care of the elderly Palmerston. The death of Palmerston in October 1865,

TING 1859

AND LIBERAL VALUES

Russell's eight-month premiership and the dramatic Reform debates of 1866–67 were then followed by the birth of wide-ranging meritocratic Liberal reform under Gladstone's first ministry of 1868–74. The legislative achievement of Gladstone's government affirmed the Liberal Party's embodiment of a broad and varied community of progressive sentiment and moral aspiration. As a dominant force in British politics it carried hopes of greater social equality, more virtuous citizenship, enlightened government and stable progress, bringing liberty to British subjects and providing a moral beacon of freedom for other nations of the world.

The origins of Liberalism as a doctrine lay in the political economy of the 1820s, the Whig cry of civil and religious liberty, Nonconformist pressure for humanitarian reform, the radical demand for retrenchment in government expenditure, and the belief in efficient, disinterested administration serving the needs of society as a whole. During the 1830s and 1840s, this potent amalgam of values began to coalesce. In 1835, in meetings dubbed the 'Lichfield House Compact',

Whigs, Reformers, radicals and Irish Repealers found a temporary unity over particular issues. Some spoke of this fragile alignment as constituting a Liberal party. But the tenuous alliance fractured in the immediate years which followed. After Corn Law repeal in 1846 and the establishment of free trade as economic orthodoxy, an increasing number of MPs, a third of the Commons in 1852, adopted the designation Liberal, earlier labels such as Whig and Reformer gradually dropping out of use. By 1859 Liberal was the common label adopted by the great majority of non-Conservative MPs. Liberalism as a political mentality became aligned with Liberal as a party designation. The shifting political association of Whigs, Liberals, Peelites and radicals of the 1850s gave way to a cohesive parliamentary alignment, heralding the adversarial contest between Liberals and Conservatives after 1868 in Westminster and the country, as personified by the figures of Gladstone and Disraeli. If the Conservative Party was the champion of the landed interest and the Established Church, with its electoral strength in English county constituencies,

the Liberal Party proved itself a British movement drawing on manufacturing, commercial, Nonconformist and urban loyalty in English and Welsh constituencies, enjoying electoral dominance in Scotland and broad support in Ireland.

The progeny of 1859 is, indeed, remarkable. Its political significance can be appreciated at two levels: by examining the dynamics of party connection on the one hand, and delineating the nature of political doctrine on the other. What were the events leading up to the formation of the Liberal Party in Westminster? Here we see the failure of Russell to secure the Liberal leadership and the success of Palmerston in heading the Liberal ministry of 1859. Russell's hope of a triumphant apotheosis was ultimately dashed by Conservative moderation, radical reticence and Palmerston's patience. What was the nature of those Liberal beliefs which gave the parliamentary party that came together in 1859 its purposes and ideals? Liberal belief in the rule of law as the safeguard of liberties, low taxation, economic government and free trade, policies for the benefit of society as a whole, rather than

Left: Willis' Rooms, King Street, St. James's, London, in the mid-nineteenth century

special 'interests', and the encouragement of self-improvement, social reform and moral propriety together comprised a powerful vision of progressive aspiration. In 1859, tensions between elements of mid-Victorian Liberal belief found resolution in a patriotic affirmation of Britain's role as a champion of progress and reform in Europe.

Six months before the Willis's Rooms meeting, in January 1859, the MP Sidney Herbert complained that there was no prospect 'of the formation of an efficient party, let alone government, out of the chaos on the opposition benches'.¹ Whigs, Liberals and radicals appeared divided and scattered. This was the legacy of the politics of the 1850s. As Prime Minister between 1846 and 1852, Russell's standing had been seriously damaged by the tribulations of Whig policy. His substantial Liberal credentials and genuine progressive instincts were compromised by difficulties over the famine in Ireland, a banking crisis, fiscal policy, government expenditure, Chartist campaigning, and the 'Papal Aggression' episode. Russell's reclusive temperament, the alleged intrigues of his ambitious wife and her numerous relatives, his purported impulsiveness, and criticisms of the ministerial nepotism of the Whig cousinhood as 'a Venetian oligarchy' further damaged his reputation. An impression prevailed that 'if he were not conceited, ignorant of human nature, [and] a wee selfish, [Russell] had all the characteristics and experiences of a very superior man of his age'.²

By 1852, Russell's authority faced serious challenges, notably from the tough and resourceful Palmerston, who had served as Foreign Secretary under Lords Grey, Melbourne and Russell. The rivalry between Russell and Palmerston disrupted Whig, Liberal and radical parliamentary relations throughout the 1850s. Palmerston's pre-eminence stood on his personification of patriotic sentiment – his robust foreign policy championing liberal interests abroad. A genial affability, diplomatic expertise, subtle cultivation of press support, and his celebration of Britain's liberal political values, giving the country a moral

sway in the world, proved a potent message. It secured broad political support within Westminster and the acclaim of popular audiences in Manchester, Salford and Liverpool. The success of Lady Palmerston's glittering entertainments at Cambridge House further bolstered his influence, highlighting Russell's seclusion at Pembroke Lodge. While serving as Home Secretary in Lord Aberdeen's coalition of 1852–55, Palmerston had distanced himself from the premier's hesitant diplomacy, implying that his more forthright views would have avoided the dithering that had characterised Britain's slide into the Crimean War. In the midst of a mismanaged Crimean campaign, in February 1855, these perceptions delivered the premiership. The seventy-one-year-old Palmerston was the only politician, *The Times* declared, who could inject a purposeful vigour into the nation's affairs. This was a triumph of diligence, style, longevity and luck.

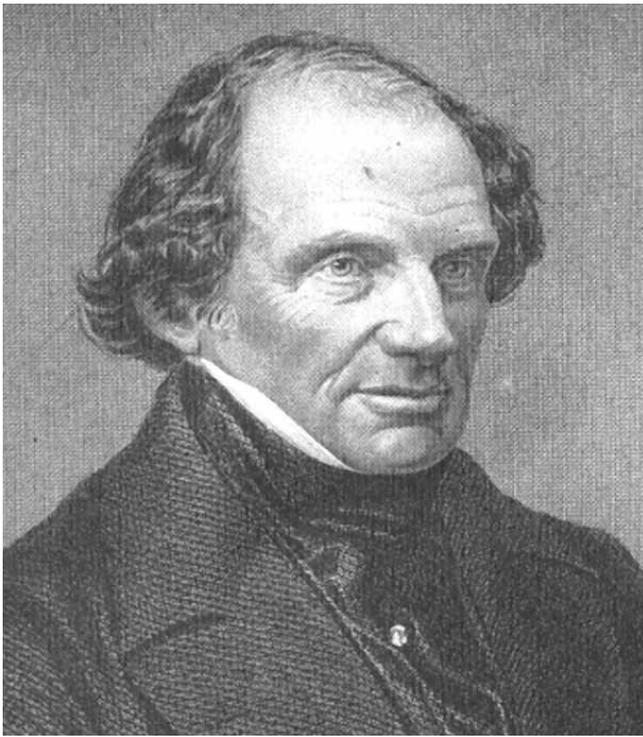
In reaction to Palmerston's putative conservatism on domestic reform, during the 1850s Russell burnished his Liberal credentials. He undertook a biography of his Whig hero Charles James Fox, presented as the lineal inspiration for his own progressive principles. Sharing Palmerston's belief in Britain's international role as a champion of liberal and humanitarian values, Russell took to himself the cause of progressive domestic reform, carrying forward the Foxite flame of liberty. As a member of Aberdeen's Cabinet in 1853, Russell pressed for a parliamentary Reform bill. In response, Palmerston declared his refusal 'to be dragged through the dirt by John Russell'.³ This reflected the wariness of many Whigs and moderate Liberals towards an extensive broadening of the suffrage, placing power in the votes of an uneducated populace susceptible to demagogues, and a redistribution of parliamentary seats, depriving them of their control in smaller boroughs. Following the outbreak of the Crimean War, an emotional Russell was forced, in April 1854, to withdraw his Reform bill from the Commons. Upon the collapse of the Aberdeen coalition in early 1855 Russell's attempt to

form a government proved still-born. After accepting Cabinet office under Palmerston in February 1855, he was forced to resign five months later, finding himself caught in the political cross-currents of negotiating a Crimean peace settlement. Embittered and hostile, he nursed a lingering resentment against his former colleagues. When Palmerston gagged his education reform proposals in April 1856, Russell became, one Whig observed, 'a concentrated essence of lemon'.⁴

In 1857 Russell raised the banner of progressive Liberal reform at home as an alternative to Palmerston's patriotic rhetoric. In February, Russell led 165 Whig, Liberal, radical and Peelite MPs into the division lobby against Palmerston's Cabinet on a motion to equalise parliamentary suffrage in counties and boroughs. At a stroke he revived parliamentary Reform as a live party issue and demonstrated the force of Liberal rectitude as the solvent of Palmerstonian support. The following month he voted with the opposition majority denouncing Palmerston's policy in China, prompting the premier to call a general election. In his election speeches in the City of London, Russell called for further parliamentary Reform as necessary to the promotion of progress. Numerous successful Liberal candidates subsequently pledged themselves to reform. Palmerston saw this 'bit of treachery' as proof that some Liberals were looking to 'a radical parliament with John Russell as its head'.⁵ A dangerous Russellite undercurrent lay just beneath the surface of Palmerston's seeming electoral success. There must eventually emerge, Russell predicted, two distinct parties, a party of Reform and a Conservative opposition. So would Palmerston's 'sham' Liberalism be unmasked and his own natural claim to the leadership of Liberal aspiration affirmed. Although events had 'staved [Reform] off for a while', the veteran Reformer Joseph Parkes noted, 'Lord John is a pointer dog – a setter at the game'.⁶

By February 1858, a host of difficulties had descended on Palmerston's government. The reform of Indian administration in the wake

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of the Mutiny in the subcontinent, the scandal of Lord Clanricarde's appointment as Lord Privy Seal, the commitment to further parliamentary Reform, and a crisis in Anglo-French relations caused by the involvement of Italian political refugees residing in England in an attempted assassination of Napoleon III confronted the Cabinet, ministers succumbing to the terminal political contagion of chronic self-doubt. In response to French diplomatic pressure, Palmerston put before the Commons a conspiracy to murder bill, increasing the penalties for those proved guilty of planning political violence abroad. Amendment of British asylum laws in answer to what was portrayed as Gallic threats galvanised the opposition to Palmerston. British liberal values and liberty, opponents declared, were being sacrificed to the demands of a foreign regime, whose press had characterised Britain as a den of assassins. On a motion proposed by the radical Thomas Milner Gibson, on 19 February, Russell joined eighty-nine Whig, Liberal and radical MPs in the anti-government lobby, voting alongside the Conservative opposition. Milner Gibson's motion was carried by nineteen votes. The following day Palmerston's Cabinet resigned. On 21 February, Derby formed his second minority Conservative ministry.

Colleagues and rivals: Russell (left) and Palmerston (right).

Whigs and Liberals retreated to the opposition benches divided and demoralised. The Whig Lord Clarendon thought they were 'split into factions more bent on cutting each other's throats than disposed to unite against the Tories'.⁷ The 'Whig leaders, after 20 years service', Russell privately complained, 'discarded me ... I can never serve or act with them until I am returned to my proper position. There is *my* point of honour'.⁸ While Palmerston, with his authority haemorrhaging, sat on the opposition front-bench across from Conservative ministers, Russell took a seat on the opposition benches below the gangway among the radicals and 'independent' Liberals. The Peelite Sir James Graham aligned himself with Russell, while Gladstone gave journalistic expression to his strong anti-Palmerstonian views, flirted with joining Derby's Cabinet, and felt a growing isolation. By 1857, a majority of Peelite MPs, sixty-nine in all, had rejoined the Conservative Party, leaving a rump of just thirty-five Peelite MPs inclining to the Liberals. In April, Russell eased the Conservative government's difficulties over their India bill, liaising with radicals and indirectly with members of Derby's Cabinet. In May, the spectacular collapse of an opposition Commons motion over the Conservatives' criticism

of the Governor-General's policy in India gave renewed life to Derby's ministry and advertised the divisions ravaging Whig, Liberal and radical ranks. The Whigs, the diarist Charles Greville observed, 'are in the condition of a defeated army, who require to be completely reorganised and reformed before they can take the field again. The general resentment and mortification is extreme'.⁹

Derby's government were committed to bringing forward a parliamentary Reform bill in 1859, a pledge inherited from Palmerston's ministry. Anticipation of Reform provided the touchstone of political calculation. Russell prepared to step forward as the guardian of historic Whig principles, bringing Whigs, Liberals and radicals together behind the cry for genuine Reform. Ministerial legislation, he predicted, would prove inadequate and partisan. As the unnatural product of Conservative authorship, a government Reform bill would inevitably be flawed. Palmerston's political sway, meanwhile, continued to wane. The impossibility of Palmerston again becoming Prime Minister became a commonplace topic of opposition dinner table conversation. When he visited Napoleon III at Compiègne in November 1858, anti-French feeling in Britain was aroused and harsh

criticism expressed. Returning to London, Palmerston adopted a prudent passivity, declining to endorse a Russellite call for substantial Reform and choosing to await the details of a Conservative measure. Having declined a second invitation to join Derby's Cabinet in May 1858, a restless Gladstone accepted charge of a diplomatic mission in September to negotiate a constitutional settlement for the Ionian Islands. He did not return to London until March 1859. Peelite colleagues such as Graham and Cardwell saw Gladstone's agreement to head the mission as a preliminary to his joining the Conservatives. Russell thought it provided Gladstone with a convenient excuse for travelling abroad and absenting himself from awkward discussion of parliamentary Reform.

In late 1858 John Bright gave tangible form to radical hopes of Reform, speaking to large popular audiences at Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow. Having suffered a nervous breakdown in 1856, he returned to the platform a giant refreshed. Yet the division in radical ranks that had emerged over the Crimean War remained. This reflected that confluence of varied populist traditions which flowed into radical activism, Benthamite 'Philosophic Radicalism', Chartism, militant Non-conformity and the Cobdenite advocacy of free trade. Bright had denounced the Crimean conflict. But other 'patriotic' radicals, such as John Roebuck, supported the war in language which rejected the moral internationalism, based upon unrestricted trade and commerce, advocated by the Manchester School. Bright's mentor from the Anti-Corn Law League, Richard Cobden, remained in rural seclusion, living the life of a gentleman farmer in Sussex. During Bright's illness Milner Gibson had emerged as a rival leading parliamentary radical, spearheading the ejection of Palmerston from office in February 1858. As a consequence, radicals enjoyed no greater unanimity than Whigs and Liberals.

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attacked the House of Lords as an assembly of hereditary legislators unsuited to a free constitution. He portrayed the Commons as an organ of the great territorial interests of the country. The law of primogeniture ensured the preservation of vast estates in individual ownership through successive generations. British foreign policy was a gigantic system of outdoor relief for the aristocracy. Parliamentary Reform, he declared, was the necessary cure for a political system afflicted by stifling landed influence, smothering the freedoms of the people. As announced at Bradford in January 1859 Bright's recommendations, a borough franchise for all males who paid poor rates, a £10 lodger franchise, and a £10 rental franchise in the counties, protected by the ballot, fell short of a democratic suffrage, restricting the vote to those he deemed respectable male citizens. The redistribution of seats in relation to population he emphasised as key to genuine Reform. But his language aroused extensive fear of class warfare. Bright privately insisted that his proposals were moderate, that he was opposed to unnecessary change. But Whigs and moderate Liberals seized on Bright's rhetoric as revealing the true extent of radical intention, signalling the subversive dangers which responsible politicians must resist.

That Bright broke ground over Reform in late 1858, expressing radical demands in language exciting fear of class conflict, encouraged Whigs such as Lord Grey, Lord Clarendon and Sir George Cornewall Lewis to believe that moderate Reform would satisfy the nation's wishes, as long as Russell was not lured into advocating an extreme measure. Derby's Conservative Cabinet also took comfort from the reaction to Bright's speeches. During the recess Derby chaired a Cabinet committee drawing up a government Reform bill. The main features of the measure drew on indications of what moderate Whigs and Liberals would accept. In June 1858 the great majority of the Commons opposition had supported a proposal to equalise the borough and county franchise at the £10 level. They had split over the introduction of the

ballot. Russell's Reform bill of 1854, meanwhile, had hedged the lowering of the suffrage with 'merit franchises', giving the vote to professional groups and holders of university degrees, whose education and status might offset additional votes granted to working men. Derby's bill incorporated these principles in an attempt to ensure that Conservative Reform was seen as safe and substantial, eliciting moderate opposition support. It proposed a uniform £10 suffrage in boroughs and counties, and the vote for those with at least £60 in savings, graduates, ministers of religion, barristers, attorneys and registered medical men. It did not propose the introduction of the ballot. It did, however, attend to Derby's concern over urban freehold votes swamping rural county constituencies by restricting freehold votes to the boroughs. To reassure moderate opinion, redistribution was limited. It was proposed to transfer just fifteen seats. Two Cabinet ministers resigned over the bill drawn up by the government prior to the 1859 session: Joseph Henley and Spencer Walpole. The rest of the Cabinet consented to the measure as a substantial extension of voting privileges, refuting accusations of reactionary ministerial sentiment.

A developing crisis over the Italian states during the 1858 recess saved politicians from an exclusive preoccupation with parliamentary Reform. But while the complexities of Reform exposed differences between Conservatives, Whigs, Liberals and radicals, the issue of Italy affirmed a consensus of view, notwithstanding the long-standing hostility of Liberals and radicals towards the autocratic empires of Austria and Russia. Within British political circles, there was broad support for liberal Italian nationalism, the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia being seen as the best hope for an acceptable form of unification. Italian nationalists wished to drive Austria out of Lombardy and Venetia, overthrowing the Vienna Settlement of 1815. But British politicians, while disliking Austrian repression, harboured a deeper loathing for the brutal corruption endemic in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and contempt for

the temporal power exercised by Pope Pius IX. Distrust of French ambitions in the Italian peninsula and anxiety that disruption of the status quo would forge a hostile Franco-Russian alliance exploiting Austrian weakness, moreover, tempered enthusiasm for Italian unification. Napoleonic aggrandisement, destabilising Austrian humiliation and the incitement of Piedmont to acts of aggression as a pawn of French ambition, leaving untouched the worst repression in the region existing in the Papal States and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, would, British politicians agreed, be too high a price to pay for Italian liberty. Derby's Foreign Secretary, Lord Malmesbury, shaped British policy to this domestic consensus, adopting a vigilant non-intervention. Palmerston agreed that, in the event of war, neutrality was Britain's only course. He had no wish to see Austria crippled as a European power. Suspicions grew during early 1859 that Napoleon III was cynically encouraging Piedmont-Sardinia to open hostilities against Austria, giving France an opportunity to push troops into the region under the pretext of rushing to Piedmont's aid. The Italian peninsula was in danger of becoming a second Mexico, Malmesbury feared, with Piedmont-Sardinia the tool of Napoleonic intrigue.

Russell looked to the 1859 parliamentary session as his opportunity to recover the leadership of progressive opinion in Westminster. The political agenda seemed ideal. Parliamentary Reform was the main item of business and hopes for liberal reform in the Italian peninsula a supplementary issue. He came close to success. The dramatic theme in the parliamentary politics of January to June 1859 is the frustration of Russell's ambitions. Conservative moderation, radical reticence, Peelite ambivalence and Palmerston's patience denied Russell the personal vindication he sought. The Reform bill introduced by the Conservative government in late February, as its authors intended, was not the sham measure Russell anticipated. *The Times* praised it for dealing with the question on honest and intelligible principles, it being as strong as any

government could hope to carry, given the temper of the Commons and the public mind. The Conservatives also brought forward proposals for law reform and legislation presented as a reasonable settlement of the church rates question. When Palmerston, with Russell's support, challenged the government's Italian policy, suggesting Malmesbury was failing to prevent a threatened war, while appearing indifferent to reform in the Papal States, Disraeli dramatically announced on 25 February that Lord Cowley was being despatched on a diplomatic mission to negotiate a settlement securing peace and desirable reforms. Disraeli's declaration swiftly preempted Palmerston and Russell's hostile initiative and restored the parliamentary consensus over foreign affairs.

When, on 28 February, Russell and Bright criticised the Conservative Reform bill for not enfranchising a larger portion of the working classes, Palmerston remained silent. Whigs and moderate Liberals nervously noted that Russell was adopting the radical language of Bright. Russell was dissuaded during March from calling a general meeting of the Liberal opposition, which would prove 'a Tower of Babel'.¹⁰ Instead, he decided to proceed against the government Reform bill by way of a resolution moved on the measure's second reading. Graham and Herbert persuaded Russell to temper the wording of his motion, reference to the 'industrial classes' being removed. What remained was an objection to the bill's failure to lower the borough franchise and the denial of the ancient right of urban forty-shilling freeholders to vote in county elections. *The Times* observed that the second reading of legislation was conventionally the opportunity to discuss the general principles of a measure. Russell's motion immediately focused debate on specific clauses more properly left to the committee stage. This was the tactical requirement of Russell's position in opposition to a bill that was more moderate than he had predicted. Concentrating debate on the particular inadequacies of the bill, forestalling a broader discussion of the measure's merits,

offered the best prospect of unifying opposition feeling. Nonetheless, Lord Grey thought Russell's resolution objectionable. Clarendon deemed it factious. Palmerston indicated that the success of Russell's motion need not be fatal to the bill if it led to desirable amendments. This milked Russell's motion of its venom.

In the Commons during March Palmerston declared his support for Russell's resolution on the understanding that it would prompt changes to the Reform bill in committee. Bright dubbed the proposed merit franchises contained in the measure 'fancy franchises'. Roebuck urged the government to accept amendments to their bill so that the opportunity to settle the question should not be lost. Gladstone's convoluted statement that he intended to vote against Russell's motion, but did not want this to be interpreted as support for the government, was received with puzzled amusement. Early in the morning of 1 April Russell's motion was passed by 330 to 291 votes. Ambiguity about the intended effect of the vote, whether or not it should be regarded as a wholesale rejection of the bill, secured an opposition majority. It was a victory of sorts for Russell – but not the unqualified personal endorsement for which he hoped. The Queen commented with irritation that the motion showed that Russell was 'ever ready to *make mischief* and do his country harm'.¹¹ Faced with a choice between amending their measure, deferring further consideration of Reform, resigning or dissolving parliament, Derby's Cabinet decided to call an election. The Conservative electoral text was the scuttling of their moderate Reform bill by a factious and motley opposition preferring party interest to the interest of the country.

Reform proved the main subject of candidates' hustings speeches over the following weeks. In London, on 15 April, Russell dismissed the Conservative measure as a sham, devoid of any honest intent to secure genuine Reform. But dramatic international events between 19 and 21 April allowed some, notably Russell, to take up the cry

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of Italian liberty. Contrary to expectation Austria, provoked by Piedmont's refusal to disarm prior to participating in a Congress, issued an ultimatum demanding Piedmont's disarmament or else hostilities would ensue. Advised by France to give a defiant reply, Piedmont portrayed the ultimatum as an insult. Preparations for war promptly followed. The ultimatum, a disastrous miscalculation, immediately cast Austria as the aggressor and dramatically wrong-footed Derby's policy. The diplomatic tables appeared abruptly turned. France, suspected of preparing for war without a pretext, assumed the role of an injured innocent. This gave free rein to Liberal dislike of Austrian autocracy. In election speeches on 23 and 25 April, Russell gave scant attention to Reform, but elaborated on the falseness of Derby's policy of 'armed neutrality', based upon misplaced suspicions of France and concealing an illiberal pro-Austrian bias. In a hastily revised election address at Tiverton, Palmerston denounced the government's foreign policy as proof of the ministry's inadequacies. The outbreak of war, triggered by Austria's ultimatum, transformed the Italian question into an issue of party controversy.

The general election returned 306 Conservative MPs and 349 MPs identified as members of the opposition. Despite gaining thirty-one seats, the Conservative ministry remained in a Commons minority. The critical question became the possibility of the opposition majority, made up of various Liberal groupings, approximately fifty radicals and a handful of prominent former Peelites, finding a common purpose. Palmerston rejected an overture from Disraeli inviting him to join the Conservative Cabinet; the preferable alternative, Disraeli suggested, to Palmerston finding himself a minister in a Russell government. Palmerston now looked to resuming power on his own terms. Having failed to assert his authority over the Reform question in March, Russell's plight brought the engaging subplot of Palmerston's intentions back into centre stage. Moreover, the longer Russell's difficulties persisted the better

Palmerston's prospects became. During late May intense consultation among the opposition ensued. Russell entered discussion insistent upon two points: first, that a prospective Liberal Cabinet must include Peelites and radicals – it could not be a restoration of Palmerston's former frontbench; and second, that there must be agreement on a Reform bill. These conditions he saw as the protection of his position. Palmerston responded that any motion brought against the government could not contain a commitment to introducing a Reform bill or a condemnation of Conservative foreign policy. He would only support a general motion of 'no confidence'. Radical prevarication further weakened Russell's position. Bright held back from pressing for Russell's return to the Liberal leadership, and other radicals, such as Roebuck and Milner Gibson, indicated that a substantial measure of Reform might yet be secured from the Conservative ministry. In late May Gladstone made it known that Palmerston's electoral statements about Italy would justify his joining a Palmerston Cabinet. On 30 May Palmerston was advised that, in the event of Derby resigning, there was now far less chance of Russell being sent for by the Queen. Palmerston immediately wrote to Russell offering to serve under him, if Russell would do the same by him. Two days later Palmerston and leading Whigs determined to call a general meeting of the opposition, which Palmerston would invite Russell to attend. On 2 June, Palmerston and Russell agreed jointly to address a party meeting declaring their readiness to serve under the other, although nothing was said about the future arrangement of ministerial places.

So it was that, on Monday 6 June 1859, Whig, Liberal, radical and a handful of prominent former Peelite MPs (though not Gladstone) met at Willis's Rooms to affirm their support for a motion of 'no confidence' in Derby's government. Held on neutral ground, rather than in the residence of a leading politician, the gathering was publicly advertised in *The Times* two days before. When Palmerston ascended the

platform at the beginning of proceedings he noticed the step was too high for the diminutive Russell. To roars of droll laughter around the room Palmerston assisted Russell on to the stage. The act held a poignant symbolism. Palmerston spoke of his readiness to cooperate with Russell in moving a general motion against the government and was received with great cheering. Russell followed, expressing his willingness to serve under Palmerston if asked to form a ministry. Palmerston whispered to Russell. Russell then added that Palmerston agreed to the same if Russell was sent for by the Queen. Bright promised cooperation and Herbert preached union. Just a few of those present expressed hesitation. The meeting appeared a success. Palmerston judged the outcome as 'highly satisfactory'¹² A united Liberal opposition had been formed. It was noted that it would be difficult for Russell not to concur in any arrangement after what he had said.

On Tuesday 7 June the opposition Commons motion of 'no confidence' was moved by the young Whig Lord Hartington. Disraeli attempted to catch the opposition unawares by calling for an immediate division, but after frantic scouring of the Commons tea rooms the Liberal whips managed to keep the debate open and eventually secured an adjournment. The defeat of Austria by French and Piedmontese forces at the battle of Magenta on 4 June brought opposition accusations of Conservative incompetence in foreign policy to the fore of debate. Palmerston charged the government with alarming ignorance as to the real state of European affairs. The moderate Liberal MP Edward Horsman censured the Conservatives for a lack of foresight, capacity and impartiality in their diplomacy. Bright described the government's protestations of neutrality as a pretence disguising a pro-Austrian bias. Milner Gibson also accused the Conservatives of harbouring Austrian sympathies. Russell, while condemning the Conservative Reform bill, declared the ministry incapable of maintaining neutrality in continental affairs and guilty of diminishing

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Britain's influence in the councils of Europe.

On Friday 10 June Hartington's 'no confidence' motion was passed by 323 to 310 votes. The following day Derby's Cabinet resigned. The Queen sent for Lord Granville, but Russell indicated difficulties in serving under him. Victoria complained of the prickliness of 'selfish, peevish Johnny'.¹³ On 12 June the Queen asked Palmerston to form a government. A fortnight of intense ministerial negotiation followed. Russell insisted on the Foreign Office, Italy being the issue on which Whigs, Liberals, Peelites and radicals were most closely agreed. He 'might not at another time have wished for it', he told Palmerston who was pressing Clarendon's claims to being Foreign Secretary, 'but that taking such interest in foreign affairs at present he wished for that place'.¹⁴ The former Peelite Gladstone (despite having voted against Hartington's motion) accepted the Chancellorship of the Exchequer, the Duke of Newcastle took the Colonial Office, and Herbert the War Office. The radicals Milner Gibson and Charles Villiers were appointed to the Board of Trade and the Poor Law Board. Whigs were appointed to just eight out of sixteen Cabinet posts.

The events leading up to the conception of the Liberal Party in 1859, revealing those antipathies which found resolution at Willis's Rooms, explain how Palmerston, rather than Russell, emerged as Liberal leader. The broader context of Liberal belief, framing the complex dynamics of political manoeuvre, points to the basis upon which party unity was achieved. By the late 1850s a set of shared assumptions defined Liberal values. Effective and fair government must rest upon liberties protected by the rule of law – government being in the interest of the nation as a whole, rather than a particular section of society. Free trade, government economy and low taxation should encourage individual liberty, self-improvement and moral responsibility. These beliefs affirmed Britain's standing as a nation of lawful tolerance and moral decency, a bulwark against intolerance and dogmatism. The historic constitution,

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civil liberty, fiscal accountability, free trade and Christian humanitarianism grounded the Liberal commitment to stable and ordered progress. This was a moral political creed supporting a patriotic belief in Britain's status as a civilised and enlightened polity, superior to corrupt and repressive regimes abroad.

Palmerston played to patriotic faith in Liberal values as a celebration of Britain's moral pre-eminence in the world. Russell looked to personify enlightened reform as the key to Britain's political stability and material prosperity, safeguarding the nation's progress. Their rivalry during the 1850s turned on this difference of emphasis in the nature of Liberal belief. Significantly, it was the cry of Italian liberty that provided Liberals with common cause in 1859. Italian unification brought Liberals together.

Foreign affairs occasioned major domestic political crises throughout the 1850s. It was a mismanaged Crimean campaign that propelled Palmerston to the premiership in 1855. It was accusations of toadying to French intimidation that ejected Palmerston from office in 1858. In 1859 the patriotic perception of Britain as the champion of liberal progress in Europe gave Liberals a unity of purpose over Italy denied by their differences on domestic issues, particularly parliamentary Reform. Palmerston's return to the premiership affirmed the power of Liberal patriotism as the basis of party unity. In 1861, following the failure of his Reform bill in 1860 and the dénouement of the Italian crisis, Russell retreated to the House of Lords with a peerage.

Russell's near-success in 1859, however, ensured that the Liberal government was not a narrow restoration of Palmerston's former Cabinet. As Palmerston acknowledged, he was forced 'to reconstruct the government upon a different principle and ... out of a larger range of political parties'; what Gladstone referred to as 'our strangely constructed Cabinet'.¹⁵ When, in late March 1859, Palmerston drew up a list of possible Cabinet appointments it contained no radicals or advanced Reformers. The Cabinet he was actually required to form in June

was far broader. This was Russell's achievement. Palmerston's ministry was a rich blend of those parliamentary ingredients comprising Victorian Liberalism: Whig legislative reform and disinterested governance, Peelite morality and administrative expertise, and radical notions of economic and efficient government.

Palmerston offered Cabinet office to Cobden, but he refused. Prior to 1859, Whigs had shared a hostile disparagement of radicalism, radicals had found common purpose in decrying the oligarchic assumptions of Whiggism, and Peelites had assumed a self-adoratory sense of superiority enshrined in the cult of their dead leader. After 1859, as Whigs, former Peelites and radicals shared office, such antipathies were displaced by a Liberal vision of administrative efficiency, free trade, national prestige abroad and civil and religious liberty at home. Cobden's role in negotiating a free trade Anglo-French commercial treaty in 1860 symbolised the ascendancy of these Liberal values. During the 1860s, the Liberal government drew to itself the popular forces of militant Nonconformity, organised labour and an expanding press, fulfilling the Russellite vision of a progressive alliance. This prepared the way for Gladstone's transformation from Peelite to 'the People's William' as he reaped the harvest of Russell's near-success.

During the 1850s, Gladstone had been an isolated, restless and tormented figure, many assuming his future lay with the Conservative Party. In 1859 he voted against Russell's motion on the Conservative Reform bill and against Hartington's 'no confidence' motion. Yet he hungered for executive employment and feared languishing in barren political exile. The issue of Italy offered him a bridge to Palmerston's Cabinet over which he crossed in June. After 1859 he metamorphosed into a Liberal tribune, his religious conviction and his praise for diligent self-reliant working men striking deep chords of popular moral affinity. His speeches conveyed a powerful sense of consecration to which his popular audiences responded with adulation. As Chancellor of the

Exchequer his lowering of taxation sought to liberate 'the people' economically, encouraging diligence and self-reliance, raising civic maturity and stimulating political responsibility.

In 1868 Gladstone aligned his charismatic Liberal leadership with the transcendent cry of Irish Church disestablishment. This united popular Liberalism with a parliamentary party articulating the aspirations of those dynamic forces transforming mid-Victorian society. It gathered a broad community of progressive moral sentiment around the party shibboleths of 'civil and religious liberty', 'peace, retrenchment and reform', free trade, economy and improvement. Between 1868 and 1874 Gladstone's government disestablished the Irish Church, passed an Irish Land Act, introduced competitive examinations for entry to most areas of the civil service, abolished the purchase of military commissions, reformed education for children, abolished religious tests for Oxford and Cambridge universities, reformed local government, and introduced the ballot for parliamentary elections. The ties between the state and the established Church were loosened, the patronage system reformed, and greater efficiency and professionalism established within the framework of economic government.

The circumstances in which the parliamentary Liberal Party was conceived in 1859 reveal the strengths and stresses within mid-Victorian Liberalism. The force of Liberal patriotic faith in Britain as a moral champion of enlightened values in Europe secured for Palmerston both the party leadership and the premiership. The belief that Liberal government must embrace a broad alliance of progressive sentiment within the country was testimony to Russell's near-success. Gladstone's subsequent emergence as a popular tribune affirmed the Liberal Party's identification with the emotive moral vision of a meritocratic society fostering self-discipline, individual reliance and free association. Reason enough, apart from commemoration of Darwin, Mill and Smiles, to mark the remarkable year 1859.

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Liberal Democrat History Group plaque appeal successful

As Dr Hawkins recounts in this article, the meeting of 6 June 1859 at Willis's Rooms in King Street, St James, London, marks the foundation of the Liberal Party.

To mark the 150th anniversary of this event, over the last three months, the Liberal Democrat History Group has run a campaign to raise funds to pay for the erection of a Westminster Council 'heritage plaque' on the current-day site, Almack House in King Street, to commemorate the Willis' Rooms meeting permanently

We are pleased to be able to report that thanks to the generosity of many History Group members and supporters, sufficient funds have now been raised to meet the cost of the plaque and its installation (about £1,000).

We are now just waiting for the council to confirm a suitable date for the unveiling of the plaque; we will let all History Group members know the arrangements via our email mailing list and website.