Tony Little examines the part played by the renegade Conservatives – the Peelites – in the creation of the Liberal Party.

'His Friends Sat on the Benches Opposite'

In the *Journal's* special issue on defectors (*Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 25, winter 1999–2000), one group significant to the development of the modern Liberal Party was omitted – the Peelites. Here, by way of a review of Professor Angus Hawkins' book, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics in Britain, 1855–59* (Macmillan, 1987), I aim to show the part played by these renegade Conservatives in the creation of the modern Liberal Party.

The formation of the Liberal Party is often dated to the meeting in Willis's Rooms on 6 June 1859. This meeting brought together Whigs, Liberals, Radicals and Peelites to defeat Lord Derby. It ushered in a Liberal government under Lord Palmerston which served until Palmerston's death in 1865 and paved the way for Gladstone's great reforming government of 1868–74. In retrospect the outcome was obvious but Professor Hawkins' book shows just how difficult the obvious was to achieve.

In 1846, the first modern Conservative government, under Sir Robert Peel, split asunder over agricultural protection. Peel and the bulk of the ministerial talent of the party reformed the Corn Laws but were then forced to resign. Peel and his associates kept a minority Whig government in power but Peel's death in a horse-riding accident did not lead to a reconciliation between his followers, the Peelites, and the bulk of the Tory party. Following the general election of 1852, Lord Derby headed a short-lived minority Tory administration until driven from office by the onslaught on Disraeli's budget led by Gladstone. The Queen had tried the Whigs, she had tried the Tories – what was left? Lord Aberdeen, leader of the Peelites, put together a coalition with the Whigs. In essence, this combination prefigured 1859, but could not withstand the strains of the 1854 Crimean War with an administrative system which had not been modernised since Waterloo.

Although Lord Palmerston had been a part of the Aberdeen coalition, his semi-detached position and pugnacious character made him the inevitable war leader and he was the prime beneficiary of the petering out of the war shortly after he had acceded to the premiership. However, Palmerston had only been able to form his government by treading on the toes of oversensitive Peelites such as Gladstone, and without resolving a long-running quarrel with Lord John Russell.

It is at this point that Hawkins takes up the story. The problem he poses is that, while, in Kitson's words, it is not 'very easy to say what specific opinions were uniquely organised in the middle of the century by the Conservative Party'[1], the forces that came together to oppose Derby suffered from a superfluity of leadership. For an idea of the complexity of the position it is important to recognise that there were four former or current prime ministers still in active politics in 1855, and among those of the next generation fighting for position were two who became the greatest Victorian premiers, Disraeli and Gladstone. Of these six significant politicians, only one, Lord John Russell, was clearly identified with a single party – the Whigs – and he was often thought to be more of a Radical. Palmerston had been a member of Lord Liverpool's Tory government and had switched sides at the end of the 1820s. Derby, now leader of the Conservatives, had started life as a Whig. Disraeli had originally thought of himself as a radical and was still treated with suspicion, and as too clever by half, by the more Tory members of the Conservative Party. Aberdeen and Gladstone had broken with the Conservatives over the Corn Laws and, while Gladstone was still searching for a way back, Aberdeen was probably more associated with Lord John than with the more conservative Palmerston. In December 1851, Russell had forced

Palmerston was Russell's foreign secretary until sacked in 1851. Shortly afterwards Palmerston was instrumental in bringing down Lord John's government – his Tit for Tat. The *Punch* caption read: 'I'm very sorry, Palmerston, that you can't agree with your fellow servants, but as I don't feel inclined to part with John – you must go of course.'

Palmerston from the Foreign Office and, in the following February, Palmerston's 'Tit for Tat' had brought down Russell's government. Aberdeen and Palmerston had opposed each other's foreign policies from 1841 onwards.

'The House of Commons is as unstable as water'[2]

Although the term 'Liberal' was being more widely applied to those opposed to the Conservatives, this grouping covered not just Whigs and a distinct group of Radicals, who tended to be as suspicious of the Whigs as they were of the Tories, but also the Irish brigade. Nominally Whigs or Liberals, the Irish brigade had their own distinctive agenda relating to Irish land problems and the religious disadvantages of Catholics. The remaining Peelites were little admired by any of the other groups: 'they are a sect – entre nous, *Prigs*. There is a snobbism that runs from their deceased head all down thro' his tail'[3].

The cessation of international hostilities in the Crimea in 1855 brought about a return to normal political warfare in Britain. Hawkins' book is a work of *haut politque* focusing on the strategies of the various contestants for the premiership. Events and policies are considered as to how they furthered the ambitions of the rivals rather than for their intrinsic interest. Consequently a degree of knowledge is required and the frame of reference is not much wider than the Palace of Westminster, the clubs of St James and the various great houses. Within this focus, this is a detailed work with wonderfully well-chosen quotations to substantiate its case.

Palmerston's strategy after 1855 was to keep foreign affairs to the forefront as a means of doing nothing about electoral reform. This may have reflected a deep-felt belief – Palmerston always acted to defer reform when in power – but it also had distinct political advantages. Foreign policy was his strength, not Lord John's, and it brought him at least tacit support from the Tories, his friends on the benches opposite. Reform, always associated with Lord John, divided his own supporters – as Lord John and Gladstone were to prove after Palmerston's death.

Lord John Russell had the harder task. He had lost support from his own party in his premiership (1846–52) and needed an issue on which to rebuild it. He offered the best link to the Radicals but each step towards them further alienated the type of Whig most likely to support Palmerston. Although 'Johnnie' knew that reform would buy him Radical support he also knew its cost.

The Peelites, who as much as anyone held the balance of power, were themselves divided. Some were willing to join Lord John; others, including Gladstone, were unwilling to relinquish their Conservative roots but were even more unwilling to make themselves subservient to Disraeli, not only the Tory's leading spokesman in the Commons but Peel's sarcastic tormentor in 1846. The Peelites, and Gladstone especially, had an antipathy to 'Pam' that derived from the old rivalry between Palmerston and Aberdeen but was intensified by Pam's acceptance of Roebuck's inquiry into the conduct of the Crimean War, with its implied criticism of the Peelite War Office minister the Duke of Newcastle. The Peelites were disliked for their unwillingness to fit the mould of two-party politics and because it was necessary to attract them to support a government – a backhanded compliment to their ministerial talents. The Peelites had charged a high tariff in terms of ministerial posts for coalition in 1852 – posts that could only be awarded at the expense of loyal Whig supporters. Who would pay in any future ministry?

'We have slung the stone which brought him down'

Palmerston's bluff worked for two years, and ironically it was the foreign issue of British arrogance in China which brought him down, as the Radicals and Peelites united with the Conservatives to teach him a lesson. Ostensibly, the ensuing 1857 general election was a triumph for Palmerston – popular backing for his John Bull style of politics. The leading Radicals such as Bright and Cobden were defeated, the Peelites suffered and the Conservatives made only four gains. In reality the new Liberal members were more in favour of reform and other domestic activity than the old House had been. But again foreign affairs betrayed Palmerston.

Then as now, Britain was a haven for political asylum seekers, some of whom plotted assassination against the French government. Palmerston, weakened by the Indian Mutiny and misled by half-hearted Conservative support, gave way to French demands for legislative action, only to be met with defeat for his kow-towing to Napoleon III. Some eighty-nine of his nominal supporters, led by Lord John and Radicals such as Milner Gibson and Roebuck, joined the majority against the government. Palmerston resigned but was in no position to call a fresh election only months after his last 'victory'. As John Bright observed, 'Palmerston has been our greatest enemy and we have slung the stone which has brought him down'[4].

Once more the Queen faced a dilemma. Palmerston would not advise Victoria but his explanation of the state of the parties – 'Derby at the head of [a] large party in both Houses', 'Russell with scarcely any'[5] – was both accurate and self-serving. A spell under Derby might serve to reunite his followers.

Derby was well aware of the trap and was very cautious in accepting the Queen's commission.

If Hawkins' book has a hero amongst the plotters, it is the Conservative leader, Lord Derby. In contrast to his flashy, romantic lieutenant, Disraeli, Derby is almost forgotten, but Hawkins argues that it was Derby rather than Disraeli who made the survival and ultimate success of the Conservative Party possible. Derby provided aristocratic solidity and respectability after the debacle of 1846 in a manner to which the younger Disraeli could not hope to aspire. In 1852, Derby made it possible for the party to throw off the albatross of Protection. In 1855–59 he helped built the foundations for future recovery. In spite of Disraeli's activist tendencies, Derby's strategy during Palmerston's government was to lie low and encourage its conservatism. Comfortable with the thrust of Palmerstonian policy, Derby's quiescent opposition created the vacuum into which the fractious factions of Liberalism were to be sucked.

His policy, when asked to form a government in 1858, was an extension of his strategy in opposition. A moderate, even slightly progressive, approach offered the best hope of drawing peripheral Peelites back to their old allegiance and winning over the more worried Whigs. Indeed, Derby unsuccessfully offered posts to Newcastle and Gladstone and to the dissident Whig, Lord Grey. Gladstone's refusal was made only with hesitation on his side but was greeted with some relief among the less subtle Conservatives.

'On the sunny side of the House'[6]

To Russell's frustration, Derby succeeded in constructing a purely Conservative administration. When the House met in March 1858, the Tories were joined on the sunny side by Peelites Graham, Gladstone and Herbert and a rump of the Irish brigade, sitting below the gangway. Palmerston assumed the seat of the Leader of the Opposition while Russell, after some hesitation, took a seat on the opposition front bench, below the gangway, with the Radicals and 'independent Liberals'[7].

If Palmerston assumed that Derby's minority administration was doomed to a short life he was mistaken. At first it was thought that Conservative efforts to reform the government of India would provide an early opportunity to turn out the Tories. Whatever the underlying merits of the bill, opposition to it served only to illustrate the Liberal quandary. The Peelites would not put Derby out merely to bring back Palmerston, and Russell could not act while the late Liberal cabinet remained united behind Palmerston. Indian administration proved similarly barren ground, when facts did not support the motion of censure which the Whigs had tabled. Conscious of his vulnerability, Derby again reached out to the central ground. In reorganising his cabinet in May 1858 he once more approached Gladstone, who again failed to grasp the opportunity.

Over the autumn, Lord John sought to revive Reform as the means of Derby's overthrow and his own resurrection. Derby had promised to grasp this nettle but Lord John needed the result to rebuild his credit rather than Derby's. Bright's efforts to assist, calmly moderate by today's standards, were deemed so outré by the ruling elites that many moderate Whigs began to see the attraction of leaving the Tories in office. It is hard, in a short review, to convey the complexities of the mid-Victorian Reform debate to today's democrats. The problems were two-fold. Firstly, apart from a few Radicals, no-one was advocating universal manhood (let alone female) suffrage but there were almost as many views about the stopping point as there were MPs. A controlled change would give advantage to the party writing the Bill. The consequences of a large bill were beyond the statistical resources of the time, but MPs feared the temptations that could be placed in the way of a poor, uneducated electorate at a time when electoral bribery was commonplace (to say nothing of the implications for campaign expenses, largely met by the candidates themselves). Secondly, any significant reform implied a redistribution of seats, a matter in which MPs always took a keen

Palmerston sells some slightly used policies to Disraeli, following his defeat in 1857. Note that one of the garments is marked India.

self-interest. Derby was as alive to the opportunities of 'dishing the Whigs' in 1858 as he was in 1867, when he and Disraeli carried the Second Reform Act, but he was even more sharply aware of the potential for a Reform bill to split his own party. He avoided the problem largely by avoiding a cabinet discussion of the details of his proposed bill, presenting his colleagues with a fait accompli – a model imitated by Mrs Thatcher and Mr Blair.

Gossip reaching the Conservatives suggested that 'Pam and his friends… *hope* to support the government reform bill *if* it comes to a second reading; but Pam and his friends look to the F.O. as the means of an overthrow *before* the reform bill can be brought on'[8]. Palmerston's hope lay with the developing crisis in Italy, where the desire of Italians to throw off Austrian suzerainty was exploited by Napoleon in the hope of enlarging French territory. At this stage, the government's slightly pro-Austrian neutrality did not provide the leverage required.

Pam's disappointment was Johnnie's opportunity. A suitable motion was tabled to head off a potential Tory success in the second reading debate of the Reform Bill but when this was carried Derby responded by calling a general election. Derby gambled that his moderate stance on Reform would play well with the unreformed electorate. His ploy was spoiled by developments in Italy where Austria's mistaken ag-

gression gave Peelites and Liberals of all persuasions the opportunity to castigate the government for its incompetence. Nevertheless Derby gained the modest reward of an advance of around thirty seats – still not enough to give him a majority but enough to soldier on. Apparently, nothing had been resolved.

'A rope of sand'?[9]

Hawkins gives no evidence that the Liberals realised that a golden opportunity had opened up or that they accepted that their agreements were greater than their differences or even that their sense of frustration was sufficient to overcome these differences. But something extraordinary happened. Inspired by a letter from the Peelite Sidney Herbert on 18 May 1859, Russell wrote to Palmerston. Two days later, Palmerston visited Russell at Pembroke Lodge. Bridges were being built but would they prove to be 'patching the quarrels of years' with a rope of sand[10]? Certainly the manoeuvres did not cease – both leaders expected the situation to work to their advantage – but enough progress was made to justify the famous party meeting on 6 June. Two hundred and eighty attended, from all sections of the Liberals. Symbolically, Palmerston helped Lord John up on to the platform. Each pledged to serve in a government formed by the other. Representatives of the different factions, Herbert, Ellice, Milner Gibson and Bright, promised co-operation.

A motion was tabled in the Commons under the name of new MP Lord Hartington and, after three days of debate and three days of worry by the whips, carried. But even at this stage there was a complication. The Queen, anxious to avoid the 'two terrible old men', sent for Lord Granville to form a government. Palmerston agreed to serve under Granville but Russell made impossible conditions. In the light of this, Granville returned his commission and Pam got his chance. Russell was accommodated with his choice of office and the presence of Milner Gibson in the cabinet.

Extraordinarily, Gladstone was also offered his choice of office and chose the Exchequer. He had not voted to bring down Derby but, recognising the undertow, had made his peace with the Liberal leadership over Italy. His frustration at missing office over his prime years was finally assuaged; he had scrambled back from isolation just in time.

With the benefit of hindsight we know that this fragile first modern Liberal government survived until Palmerston's death. It left a strong record, particularly in the financial and commercial sphere led by Gladstone – the free trade agreement with France, the budgets and the abolition of the paper tax – but true to form, Palmerston never did resolve the Reform issue. However, as Hawkins makes abundantly clear, this outcome was not preordained. At the beginning of its life Derby thought that 'it would be easy to get a majority against the present government'[11], while Stanley of Alderley wrote, 'if the session had lasted three months the government might have been in trouble'[12]. The inclusion of all the major Liberal factions diminished the risk of internal dissension while the (mistaken) expectation that Palmerston, in his mid-seventies, would not remain active for long, left open the hope of succession to both Russell and Derby.

Hawkins is a master of his sources but contents himself with the overwhelming demonstration that the outcome was not pre-ordained. In also demonstrating how close Russell came to achieving his ambition he reminds us that circumstance, as much as conspiracy or destiny, dictates history. The events of 1852–59 were the confusing climax of a political world in transition. The Great Reform Act of 1832 was coming to be seen as an interim, not a final, settlement. The aristocratic control of the Commons had deteriorated but had not been swept away. Politicians were elected in response to local conditions but were free, by and large, to arrange parties and governments to suit themselves. Indeed one of the surprises of Hawkins' book is how little electoral considerations played in the strategies of any of the leaders. After the Second Reform Act of 1867, it became necessary to create majorities by appealing to a mass electorate. Gladstone and Disraeli had the skills to exploit the new environment, although both were products of the old. The expectation of the most experienced politicians in the period 1855–59 was that either Derby or Palmerston would create a centrist party combining the largest elements of the Whig, Peelite and Conservative parties. That natural majority would have forced the extreme wings of both sides – the more agricultural Tories, and the urban Radicals – to form separate parties. Instead Westminster had built a broadly two-party system, Liberal and Conservative, which needed to compete for the central ground of the electorate to achieve power.

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Further reading

- John Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party 1857–68* (Pelican). What was happening back in the constituencies, the sociological grounding of the party and the role of leadership.
- B. Conacher, *The Peelites and the Party System 1846–52* (David & Charles).
- W. White, *The Inner Life of the House of Commons* (reprinted by the Richmond Pub. Co.). Parliamentary sketches by a well informed source between 1856 and 1871.

1 K Clark *The Making of Victorian England* 1965
2 Russell to Minto 22 July 1855. Cited in Hawkins
3 Parkes to Ellice, 30 December 1852. Cited in Hawkins
4 Bright to his wife 20 February 1858. Cited in Hawkins
5 Palmerston Diary 20 February 1858. Cited in Hawkins
6 W. White *The Inner Life of the House of Commons* 1897
7 Hawkins p117
8 Lennox to Disraeli February 1859 Hughenden Mss. Cited in Hawkins
9 Lytton 22 March 1859, House of Commons. Cited in Hawkins
10 ibid.
11 Broughton Diary 21 June 1869. Cited in Hawkins
12 Stanley of Alderly to Panmure 30 July, Dalhousie Mss. Cited in Hawkins