ROUTLEDGE

POLITICS AND ELECTIONS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LIVERPOOL

Neil Collins

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Politics and Elections in Nineteenth-Century Liverpool

Neil Collins

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Figure A
Liverpool's Ward Boundaries - 1835

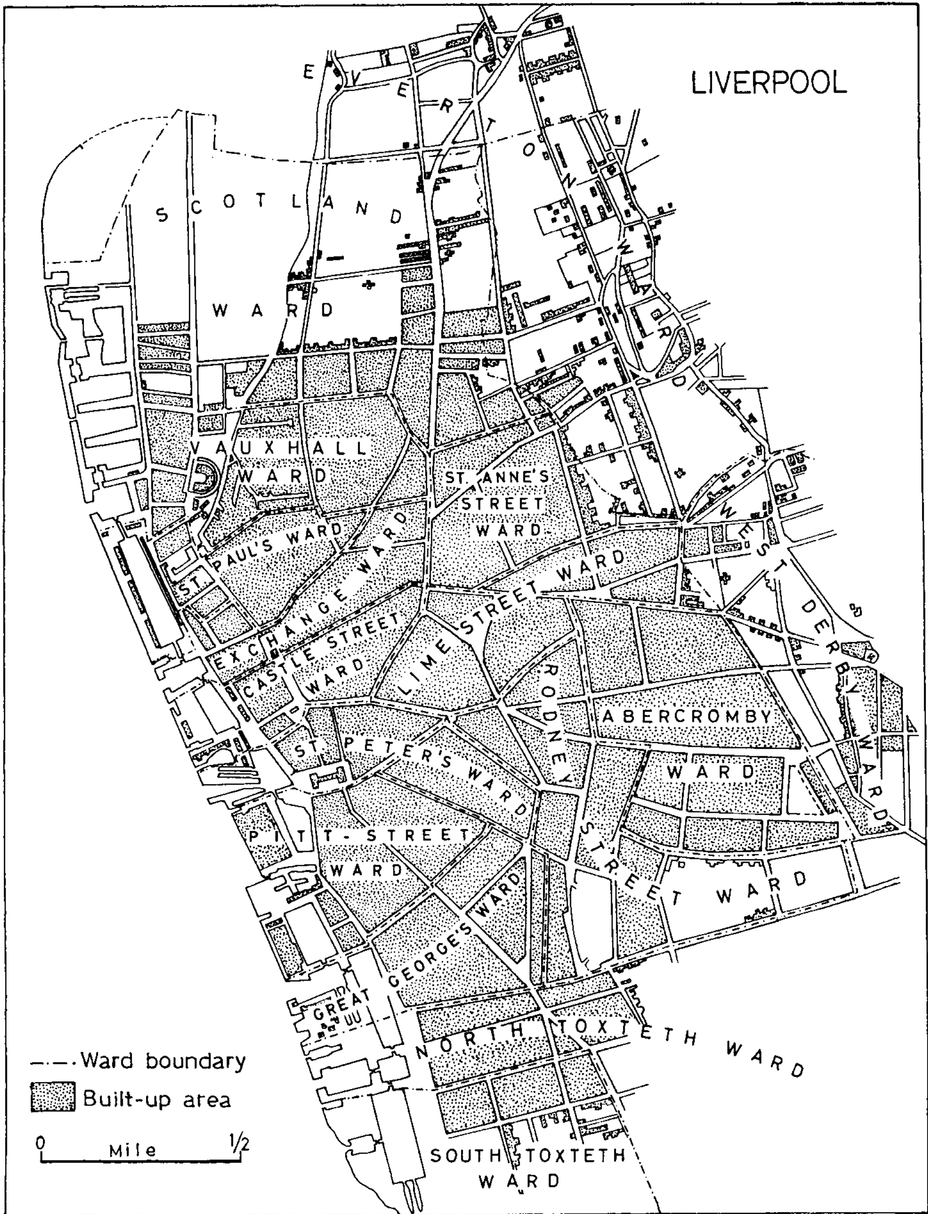
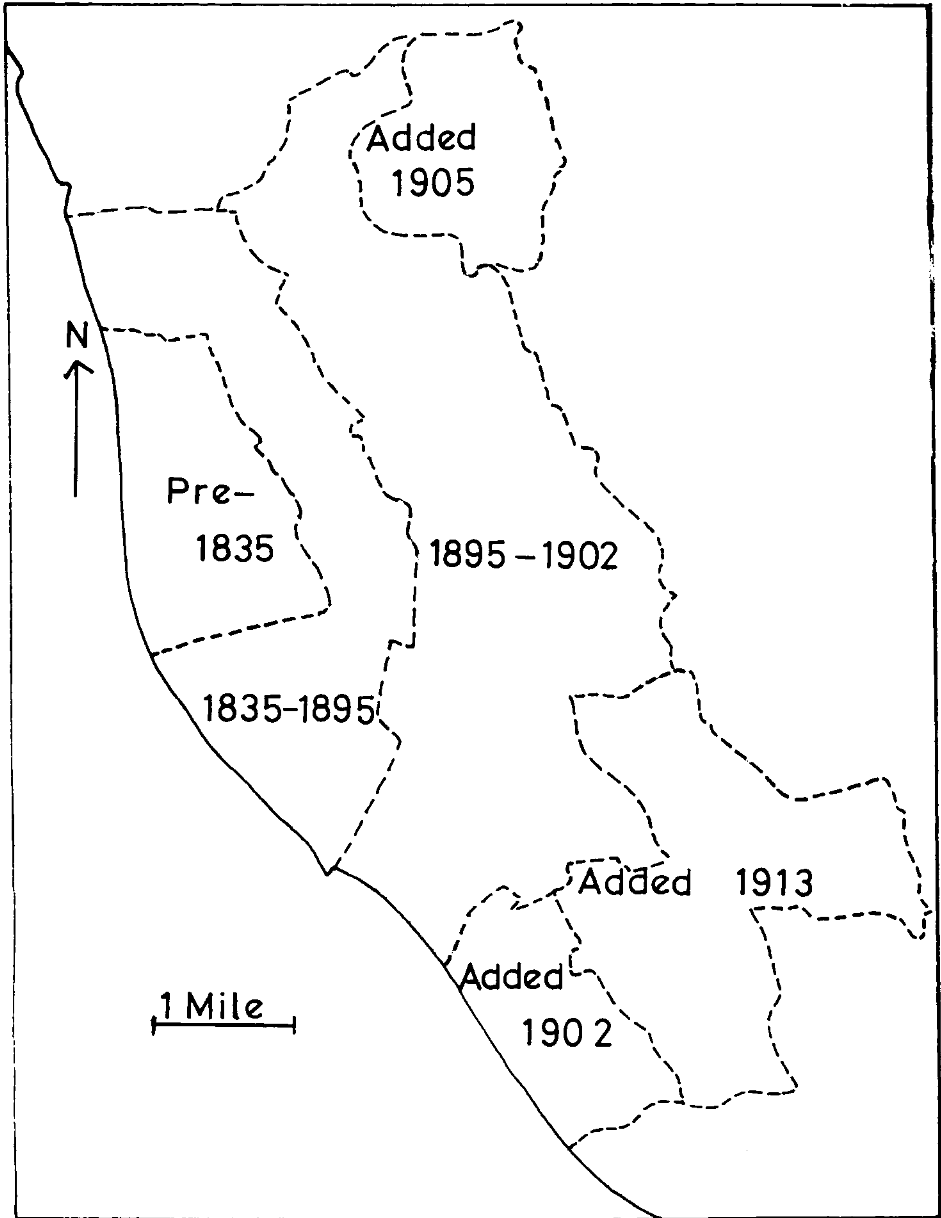


Figure B
Liverpool's Boundary Extensions



Introduction

> Few historical settings offer a more jarring prospect of change than the industrial cities of the early nineteenth-century England. Rapidly growing urban regions... underwent a series of massive transformations... the middle class elites, distant from the metropolis and largely divorced from traditional centres of power, began to claim stewardship over a new society.[1]

Liverpool was at the forefront of the changes in the social, economic and demographic relations that marked England at the turn of the eighteenth century. Immigrants from all over Britain and Ireland poured into the city. Though some made fortunes, the majority struggled to secure stable employment. The city's economy was based almost exclusively on the activities of the port which employed intermittently armies of poor, unskilled labourers, ill-paid, economically and socially vulnerable clerks, and a small class of very wealthy merchants and ship-owners.

> In the years after 1780 changes in commercial and industrial organisation brought an increase in the size and complexity of British cities. The speed and fundamental nature of these changes upset many established social relationships and cast doubt upon the appropriateness of established values and identities... the economic conflict of labour and capital was central to many urban relationships but by no means had an exclusive hold upon the attention and loyalties of urban dwellers.[2]

In Liverpool, the different classes and nationalities tended to live segregated lives divided not only by varying wealth but by antagonistic religious allegiances. Given this social and economic mixture, Liverpool politics in the nineteenth century were predictably strident and abrasive. Mob violence was often a feature of political rivalry.

The primary group loyalties in Liverpool's political combat, was assured without reference to the participants' places on the economic ladder. The workers of Liverpool did form informal societies to protect particular interests

but, as Waller observes:

> The conflict between capital and labour was as guerilla warfare rather than regular manoeuvres, and the conflict within labour itself was as tribal or clan combat.[3]

One social division was more important than all others in the political conflict of Liverpool. This was reflected in attitudes to the position and claims of the Church of England. Catholics and Dissenters, of all classes, were united in opposition to the hegemony of the Church of England. For different reasons, these religions felt their political position to be both precarious and marginal. They were, of course, joined by others who subscribed to the idea of equality between religious beliefs. At the same time, for many Protestants, the authority of the state and its church were the kernel of all social values: 'The Church, throne, peerage, and property great and small provided a natural framework'.[4] Those who did not subscribe to the tenants of Anglicanism, at least publicly, remained in some sense peripheral even when the civil restrictions on them were removed.

Though it varies in the intensity of its influence, the religious cleavage is evident throughout the period 1835 to 1895. Only occasionally did the shared values of a Protestant world view bring Anglicans and Nonconformists together for political, and particularly electoral, purposes. Indeed, their mutual interest in denominational education threw the Established Church and the Catholics into a brief electoral pact in the 1870s. On the whole, however, 'Liverpool's politics were', in Waller's terms, 'impregnated with religious-cum-national stereotypes'.[5] As most commentators on Liverpool have observed, religion was inextricably linked to ethnicity.

> It was natural that politicians should seek to utilize these active and persistent divisions for party purposes, but it was often distracting when constitutional issues, or problems of public health, education, and employment, were viewed through ethnic and sectarian spectacles.[6]

The population of Liverpool was estimated to be 77,653 by 1800. The city had experienced unprecedented growth in a short time and living conditions for most of its inhabitants were very severe. By 1811, Liverpool, with its suburbs and seamen, had a total population in excess of 116,000. Though large, the rate of population increase had declined because of the depressed state of trade caused by the war. Nevertheless, the tensions of social life were mirrored in the fear of political agitation and the occasional riot over price increases or food shortages. For political activists, the early nineteenth century in England was a period of repression with no guarantee of reform. The establishment and large sections of the middle classes feared that chaos, revolution and rebellion from France, Ireland and elsewhere would infect Britain itself. The century opened

with Britain in a war that only finally ended with Wellington's victory at Waterloo in 1815. But for the Government in London, internal dissension may well have appeared more threatening than foreign wars.

While modernity, invention and industry seemed unstoppable and there was much cause for commercial optimism, the immediate post war years were marked by stern political action on the part of the state.

> Repression - the gallows and transportation - was sharp, savage and effective, but in the long term it strengthened constitutional resistance and steadily discredited the government.[7]

Added to these political problems, Britain by the mid 1820s was severely effected by financial, banking and commercial crises and several seasons of the most harsh weather. Nevertheless, the impulse for democracy, or at least the representation of a wider range of interests, was relentless.

> Out of a complex political struggle in the 1820s and 1830s came a weakening on the part of the state in its attempts to control belief. This was related to the fading of the idea that there could be a kind of unity between the state and an established church.[8]

The Nonconformists wanted the removal of their 'disabilities' and the Catholics sought 'emancipation'. Both demands were largely met by 1829 and, for the Dissenters in particular, their impotence in municipal matters became a powerful rallying call.

> Municipal institutions were politicised because of real and important disputes over the use of their power...and because they were a means by which social groups like the Liberal Dissenters, excluded from the major institutions before 1832-5, could claim constitutional power.[9]

The Municipal Corporations Act, 1835, marks the beginning of popular local elections. In the one hundred and seventy-eight chartered boroughs, including Liverpool, to which it was applied in the first instance, the 1835 Act represented an even more radical change than any of the other reforms of Grey's ministry. The Act ended the oligarchical government of urban England and provided for the election of town councillors by the male rate-paying householders. The changes resulting from 1835 were in many ways more far-reaching than those from the 1832 Reform Act. The municipal reform was more democratic than the parliamentary in that it introduced annual elections and a potentially wider franchise. The changes of personnel, among both the ranks of officials and elected representatives, were much more pronounced locally than nationally. Further, for Catholics and Dissenters, the Municipal Corporations Act 1835 gave real meaning to the legislation of 1828 and 1829 which brought them officially within the pale of the Constitution.

By the time the Municipal Corporations Bill was introduced by Lord Grey's reforming administration, its passage appeared to its opponents as an inevitable extension of that urgency for change that had in the previous seven years confronted each of the other elements of the Constitution in turn. The Catholic Emancipation Act 1829, though carried against popular English sentiment, led the way to reform because it broke up the Tory Party at Westminster, which had previously set its face against such relief and, in doing so, cleared the way for Grey's return to lead a 'Reform Ministry'.

The Tory Government of the 1820s had been able to consolidate its position by the administrative innovations of Peel, Huskisson and Robertson, but ultimately those appeared as mere tinkering reforms. On the major question of the twenties, Catholic Emancipation, the Tories were split from top to bottom. Any hope of reconciliation that might have occurred to save Wellington's Government after the Act was quenched with Huskisson's death. Though Wellington resumed office after the inconclusive General Election of 1830, his position was weak. If he had brought in a very moderate scheme for parliamentary reform, Wellington might well have won the Canningites back. The result of his refusal was to drive moderate opinion (and particularly the Canningites) into opposition. The Duke was out of tune not so much with proletarian opinion as with the unmistakable ground swell of opinion among the influential 'respectable' classes in favour of reform. When Grey offered Parliamentary reform to the 'nation', he did not include the mobs moved to political violence in its support. He sought to secure the better representation for property and 'intelligence', that is, for that class which helped return his Government with a massive majority in 1831.

The 1832 Act occasioned popular rejoicing and engendered unwarranted hopes among all classes. In its course, the Reform Bill had weakened the position both of King and Lords. To some, the Act was like a peaceful revolution. The change in the balance of power in favour of the middle class had not, however, been as drastic as contemporaries imagined.

The new voters certainly did not prove to be incorruptible and independent. The Reform Act did, however, strengthen further the Common's dominance of constitutional power by increasing the base of its support, and it did, in conjunction with 1828 and 1829, satisfy the widespread demand of the influential disenfranchised for inclusion in the Constitution.

The crisis of Reform had been for many, especially among Dissenters, a crisis of recognition and status rather than a demand for radical administrative change. After 1832, despite important innovations such as the abolition of slavery, the Factory Act and the Poor Law Amendment Act, the Grey administration ran into considerable difficulties. Only for the reform of urban local government was there widespread popular demand.

> The corporations had ceased to represent the wants and feelings of the citizens, and, therefore, had ceased to be trusted by them. They had become a self-elected clique, with interests in many cases opposed to those of the community, instead of being a popular body trusted and looked up to by their fellow citizens.[10]

The municipal reform was greeted by its supporters in Liverpool as a recognition of the rights of the respectable citizen and as another acknowledgement of the equality of religious belief. The growth of local government responsibilities in the nineteenth century seems remarkable in retrospect. To the local victors, of 1835, however, the triumph over the narrowly-based corrupt existing corporation seemed achievement enough.

Notes

1 H.M. Wach, *A 'Still, Small Voice' from the Pulpit*, Journal of Modern History, Vol. 63, 1991, No 3 p.425.

2 R.J. Morris (ed): *Class, Power and Social Structure in British Nineteenth-century Towns*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986, p.2.

3 P.J. Waller, Democracy and Sectarianism: *A Political and Social History of Liverpool*, 1868-1939, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1981, p.xvi.

4 Waller, op.cit., p.17.

5 Waller op.cit., p.18.

6 Waller, op.cit., p. xvi

7 C. Harvie, *Revolution and the Rule of Law*, in Kenneth O. Morgan (ed), The 18th and Early 19th Centuries, Vol. IV, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 95.

8 Sydney Checkland *British Public Policy 1776-1939*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.104.

9 Morris, op.cit., p.9.

10 Viscount Ebrington quoted addressing the *Health of Towns Association* by W.C. Lubenow: *The Politics of Government Growth*, Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971, p. 17.

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1 Politics in Liverpool Before 1835

The period from 1750 to 1850 is seen by many as a crucial turning point in modern economic and political development of Britain. J.C.D. Clark's 'revisionist' thesis that English society became more deferential and hierarchical in the course of the eighteenth century and that the defence of the Church was ideologically central to regime stability, is a cornerstone of current debate. In Clark's account, religious belief is the core explanatory variable determining political change in England which was until 1832 a 'confessional state'. Religious discord destabilized the *ancien regime* which, with the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and Catholic emancipation in 1829, collapsed precipitately. Though Clark's view is a useful corrective to the economic determinism of some earlier accounts, its polemical style inevitably overstates the case. Nevertheless, for a study which centres on elections such as this, the autonomy of political discourse and the centrality of religious belief make Clark's general approach on important touchstone. Where this study of Liverpool most obviously diverges from Clark's model is in its assumption that 1832 represents a sea change. As Jupp contends, the years 1780-1830 saw a transformation in the framework of political authority but the elite demonstrated great powers of adaptation before and after that period.[1] Neal argues persuasively, in his study of the Orange Order, that the success of Conservatism in Liverpool in wake of the 'break-up' of the *ancien regime* is largely explained by its ability to harness working class support in defence of the Church and constitution in the previous half century. In this respect at least, the history of the Liverpool is more congruent with that of England as a whole than that of other northern cities. In the Liverpool experience, the local 'revolution' following the Municipal Corporations Act, 1835, seems in retrospect more noteworthy for the elements of continuity than change.

Politics in Liverpool Before 1835

Neal provides a further counter balance to the revisionist view, with its emphasis on the role of ideas, by reviewing the influence of crowds and their behaviour. It is important in an account focusing on elections to note the 'persuasive' power of the unenfranchised. This is particularly so where popular political

agitation and violence provided an outlet for the latent tensions of an economic structure which encouraged sectarian, ethnic and class rivalry. Unlike that of many other towns in the north of England, Liverpool's economy did not give rise to social stability based on a sense of community.

> Deference... was not a feature of the Liverpool working class; the almost total absence of the culture of the factory town left a gap which was filled by popular Protestantism reflecting the anti-Irish/Catholic resentment arising from Liverpool's peculiar position as the centre of Irish immigration.[2]

For the pre-reform electorate itself, elections were not just a peculiar drill to be gone through at irregular intervals but part of the wide apparatus of social control which the local elite exercised. As O'Gorman's study of voters, patrons and parties shows, it is necessary to reintegrate the electorate and its activities back into the whole life of the community from which they have too long been isolated by historians.[3]

The Borough of Liverpool

The Borough of Liverpool was created by a charter authorized by King John in 1207. This charter meant that, for many centuries before other great cities of the Industrial Revolution. It had a municipal corporation with a mayor, aldermen, and councillors. The electoral history of the pre-1835 municipality would catalogue such an array of corrupt practices that nineteenth century elections would seem as innocuous as today's. As Clarke observes, in a comment on the US presidential and British general elections of 1992,

> Modern Englishmen are given to prim disapproval at the sight of American democracy in action: the dominance of trivial local issues over important national ones, the swamping of idealism by self interest, razzmatazz, the horse trading, the enormous sums of money openly changing hands. Yet all these things mirror the practices of 18th century England, the United States' parent culture.[4]

By the end of the eighteenth century the Corporation of Liverpool was virtually self-elected.

The old Corporation members drew a social and political line in the admission of select recruits into their body and strictly kept to it. All tradesmen, shopkeepers and women were carefully excluded. With the exception of the occasional token Whig, the old corporators were decidedly Tory. (See Table 1.1) Of forty-one members in 1833, thirty-six were Tories and thirty-four were related to other council members or officers. Nine had gained their freedom by gift, thus exempting themselves from town dues of several hundred pounds

each. Though nine vacancies had arisen since the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts of 1828, none were dissenters.

Table 1.1
Occupational Structure of Liverpool Corporation Members[3]

	Merchants	Others*	Unknown
Aldermen	14	1	2
Councillors	13	7	3

* Mostly lawyers and barristers.

The Corporation controlled large estates and members of the Council defined their duties narrowly as the management of the corporate property. But the Corporation had another duty, namely to send two representatives to Parliament after an election based on a freeman franchise. The discharging of their electoral duty could be very remunerative for the freemen, who numbered only 4,400 by the 1830s. 'Old Stager', writing less than thirty years after the Reform Bill, looks back nostalgically to these elections:

> An election was an election, indeed, in those days. It was not merely a rush to the hustings for a few short hours, and then all over. There was no getting the lead by 10 o' clock in the morning and winning at once by making a good start... The curiosity, and excitement, and suspense, and anxiety were kept up, day after day, until there was a grand smash at last on one side or the other - in other words until 'no tally' forthcoming in its turn betrayed weakness, and proclaimed that it was UP with somebody. An election, then, in those times, was a great and solemn affair with our jolly old freemen, who had the vote-market all to themselves, no intrusive ten-pounders having yet been thrust upon the constituency.[5]

Sir Charles Petrie quotes two accounts of the 1812 election, one from a Whig and one from a Tory, both strangers to Liverpool:

> You can have no idea of the nature of a Liverpool election. It is quite peculiar to the place. You have every right to go to the different clubs, benefit societies, etc., which meet and speechify. This is from half-past six to one in the morning at least; and you have to speak to each man who pools at the bar, from ten to five. It lasts eight days. I began my canvass three whole days before, and had nine nights of the clubs, besides a regular speech each day at close of poll. I delivered in that time 160 speeches and odd.

> On reaching Liverpool we found the town in an uproar. Party strife ran high; bitter speeches were exchanged on the hustings, and mobs were violent in the streets. Windows were broken, candidates pelted, and for more effective missiles resort was made without ceremony to the pavement and the area rails. Fortune finally declared in favour of Mr Canning, who was cheered, chaired and feasted to the top of his bent.
>
> I cannot venture to say how many dinners were given to him and his friends by the Tory capitalists of Liverpool. I know that they were enough, with the help of turtle and punch, to imperil health far more than any riotous assault in the street. It was uninterrupted jubilee of two or three weeks.[6]

Freeman Franchise

The 'freeman borough' status of Liverpool had originally amounted to household suffrage. As the population of the town grew however, from the Restoration days onwards, the gap between the number of male householders and the number of freeman-voters widened rapidly. The 1734 electorate was about twenty per cent of the total population but by 1761 this was down to eight per cent, by 1812 hardly three per cent. Despite a big increase in the number of freemen, it only totalled two per cent in 1830. As the number of non-freeman merchants rose and the 'guild merchant' became an anachronism, only the franchise remained to distinguish freemen from other citizens. The majority of freemen were labourers and tradesmen. For example, in the 1806 parliamentary election, 83 per cent were described as workingmen. The remainder were wealthy members of old established merchant and shipping families.

Early in the eighteenth century, the Corporation had established its ascendancy in nominating parliamentary candidates, but after 1761 rich citizens began to exert their influence and patronage in opposition to the two candidates nominated by the mayor and aldermen. The Corporation exercised control through charity, pensions and minor appointments in the customs service and on the docks; non-freeman employers had influence on those freemen directly or indirectly dependent upon their goodwill. Because the elections were open, such influence was powerful. Up to 1835, the Corporation and 'independents' divided the honours. The 'independents', at first united in opposition to Town Hall influence, split into two opposing factions as a result of the political and local issues raised by the French Revolution, outbreaks between 1795 and 1815, the wars and the prohibition of the slave trade. The more conservative and authoritarian elements gained the ascendancy.

Death of Huskisson

Huskisson's death, in 1830, threw Liverpool politics into confusion. Earlier in the year, he had been elected almost unopposed at the General Election caused by the death of George III. Huskisson had been in opposition for some time, having quarrelled with Wellington. On his death, there was a split among those who,has supported him in opposition with the Whigs and those who, as staunch Canningites, supported the Tories. The Huskissonites brought forward William Ewart to fill the vacancy, while the others were championed by John Denison. Neither candidate was a strong party man and both were in favour of parliamentary reform. The formation of Lord Grey's administration had established reform as the major issue of the day. The political situation in Liverpool was, therefore, in a state of flux and the election between Ewart and Denison became virtually a personal struggle. Broadly, however, the Whigs supported Ewart and Denison was backed by the Tories.

The election itself was an extravaganza of corruption: both sides wined, dined and bribed the freemen for six days. On the seventh day Denison was obliged to concede defeat. The whole contest cost over £84,000 and was 'the most profligate and demoralizing contest we ever witnessed'.[7] The conduct of the election prompted wide agitation for parliamentary reform and an enquiry into Liverpool's election procedures. The latter demand was soon agreed to, and, as a result of a House of Commons Select Committee enquiry, Ewart was unseated. No action was taken against the corrupt freemen.

Parliamentary Reform

The issue of parliamentary reform was brought before the Liverpool electorate after the Government's defeat on a motion moved by Liverpool's second M.P., General Gascoyne. The local Reformers seized on the opportunity to demonstrate the widespread feeling in favour of reform. When it looked as if Ewart and Gascoyne might be re-elected unopposed, they decided to bring Denison forward again. Both Ewart and Denison, as has been noted above, were in favour of reform, though, as before they differed in their main sources of support. Both pro-reform men were elected with a majority of more than a thousand over Gascoyne. The election was over in one day, as the Reformers were able to out-manoeuvre those freemen who were used to waiting for several days' polling to take place. George Holt entered in his diary:

> Thus concludes the most glorious election in the annals of Liverpool. The people, finding the cause or principle of reform neglected alike by the leaders both of Mr Denison's and Mr Ewart's committees, took the cause into their own hands and threw out Gascoyne, the opponent of reform, most triumphantly.[8]

The Tories were apparently very much out of sympathy with the current pressure for reform and ceased to play a very active part in local politics; the Reformers had so much of an upper hand that the Council, which was simply a Tory body, took no part in the celebration of the coronation of William IV. The Reformers were allowed to turn it into a party occasion.

The Reformers and the Freemen

The Reformers actively supported a parliamentary bill to disenfranchise the freemen of Liverpool. This Bill was doing well when the dissolution of 1831, following the Lords' rejection of the Reform Bill, caused it to fail.

The 1831 general election was crucial in cementing the freemen to the Tory Party. At a by-election later that year, caused by Denison's resignation[9], the freemen returned the Tory, Lord Sandon with sixty-eight per cent of the vote. The freeman's defiant gesture came on the very day that parliament was prorogued. Despite Liverpool, the new parliament carried the Reform Bill. The new Act had three main effects on elections in Britain generally: a mass of uniform qualifications for the borough franchise was introduced, the most important of these was the occupation of a house worth £10 per year; more efficient registers and the procedures were instituted; and seats were redistributed in closer harmony with the population patterns of 1832. For Liverpool, which was already represented in the commons, the widening of the franchise had the most immediate relevance.

A second attempt to disenfranchise the Liverpool freemen was defeated by the dissolution of October 1832. At the ensuing election, the freemen again proved their loyalty to the Tories. Though the new household electors voted for two Reformers by a majority of 1000, the freemen's vote secured the second Liverpool seat for the Tory Sandon.

The Reformers were convinced that bribery had secured Sandon's return, and called again for an enquiry and the disenfranchisement of the freemen. Lord Sandon defended the freemen against all base charges, but a Select Committee of the Commons reported that bribery had been evident. Another Select Committee looking into all Liverpool elections (municipal, mayoral and parliamentary) since 1823 called for reform, and a bill was announced to disenfranchise the freemen. In 1834 the bill passed the Commons, despite Sandon's efforts on the freemen's behalf, but was delayed so much by the Lords, that once again it lapsed when parliament was prorogued.