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**Disraeli Goes to Manchester: Lancashire
Conservatism and Conservative Party Leadership in
1872**

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Disraeli Goes to Manchester: Lancashire Conservatism and Conservative Party Leadership in 1872

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Abstract

Disraeli's visit to Manchester in 1872, and the speech he delivered there in the Free Trade Hall, are justly regarded as defining moments in his leadership of the Conservative Party. The speech is famous for its attacks on Gladstone's premiership and for its enunciation of a programme of Conservative social reform. However, our understanding of Disraeli's visit has been distorted by a propensity to view it in the light of subsequent events, notably Disraeli's electoral victory of 1874. This paper contends that the Manchester visit is more correctly understood in terms of the developments that proceeded it. By early 1872, Disraeli's hold over the Conservative party was tenuous and there was open talk of replacing him as leader. A large-scale public oration by Disraeli was a means of reasserting his position within the party, and Manchester was an attractive venue for such a speech since it was the one major urban centre where the Conservatives were strong. Yet Lancashire was complex political terrain, with tensions between Borough and County interests and the presence of the Derby family estate – when Derby was many Conservatives preferred choice of leader. The impetus to visit Manchester came not from Disraeli, but from John Gorst, the Conservative Party organiser, who spent two years overcoming local resistance to the plan. It is argued that this complex background is crucial to understanding Disraeli's speech, an analysis of which shows that it was not a bold bid for the working class vote (references to social reform were brief and

uncontroversial), but rather a cautious speech designed to reassure influential Conservatives that Disraeli could be trusted with the leadership. The speech was more about shoring up Disraeli's leadership and affirming the endorsement of Lord Derby, than it was about projecting a new populist Tory Democracy. In this it was successful. Disraeli's visit to Manchester was more important in the politics of the Conservative party than it was in the politics of the nation.

In 1868 Benjamin Disraeli became Prime Minister, announcing that he had climbed to the top of the greasy pole. The ascent had taken over twenty years; the descent began almost immediately. Soon he had been turfed out by the electorate and found himself back in his accustomed seat at the head of Her Majesty's opposition. Yet even this vantage place proved less than secure.

Disraeli's hold upon the Conservative party had always been tenuous. Entering politics as a Radical, then dallying with the Whigs, he had done little to disguise the fact that he viewed the Conservatives primarily as a vehicle for his ambition. Even then, he had assumed a leading place only after encouraging the backbenchers to commit regicide against their chief, Sir Robert Peel, in 1846. With the old leadership gone, Disraeli became a regrettable necessity, rendered bearable by the reassuring presence in Peel's place of Lord Derby. But when, in 1868, Derby finally quit the scene to nurse his gout, Disraeli's claim to the leadership rested upon his success. The Conservatives love winners and Disraeli's passing of the 1867 Reform Act, and the humiliation he dealt the hated Gladstone along the way, ensured that he became Prime Minister and Conservative leader.

Unfortunately, the prospect soon darkened. The Tories suffered a drubbing in the 1868 election - the first under Disraeli's expanded franchise. Their total of 276 seats was their lowest since 1832. Gladstone's Liberals were triumphant and Disraeli, disillusioned, despondent, and in fragile health, retreated to his country house. 'I think on our part,' he remarked, 'there should be, at the present, the utmost reserve and

quietness.¹ He took little part in politics, spoke rarely in the Commons, and reverted to his first love, literature, publishing, in 1870, *Lothair* - his first novel since 1847.

Disraeli, when he had not been successful, had at least made himself indispensable. Now he was neither. And when Conservatives met in clubrooms and country houses the conversation invariably turned to the question of whether the party might not be better off with a new leader - one more sympathetic to the party's core supporters, more appealing to the middle class aspiring to the kind of respectability Disraeli could never represent. A leader, perhaps, like Derby's son, the Fifteenth Earl. Wealthy, respectable, predictably moderate: surely he could attract the middle class and Whig support the party needed? Or, perhaps, like Lord Salisbury - aristocrat, intellectual, and apparently vindicated opponent of the Reform Act. Might not the time have arrived for the 65-year-old Disraeli to make way, if not for his enemy Salisbury, then his friend, Derby?

Such speculation is endemic in politics. But in the early 1870s it was more than speculation. Leadership reposes upon power, and power was showing every sign of slipping from Disraeli's grasp. In 1869 the leadership of the Conservatives in the House of Lords fell vacant. Disraeli's preferred replacement was Lord Cairns. The Conservative peers had other ideas, favouring Lord Salisbury. Now Salisbury's view of Disraeli was about as low as it could be, describing him as a 'mere political gamester', an 'adventurer without principles and honesty.' It was remarkable enough that Conservative peers would want such a man as their leader; still more remarkable was the fact that Cairns himself favoured the idea! Disraeli realised he had to assert his authority, making clear to Cairns that he could not countenance the scheme:

The leader in the Lords must be one who shares my entire confidence, and must act in complete concert with myself. I do not know that Lord Salisbury and myself are even on speaking terms. You contemplate making a man leader of a party of which he is not even a member.²

¹ Quoted in W.F. Monypenny and G.E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli* (John Murray, London, 1929 edn.), Vol. II., p. 443.

² *Ibid.*, p. 451.

Fortunately, Salisbury withdrew from the running and, writes Edgar Feuchtwanger, Disraeli 'narrowly succeeded in averting a course of events which would in all probability have ended his leadership of the Conservative party.'¹

Yet pressure on Disraeli did not abate. There was general disquiet at his apparent willingness to await events rather than take the initiative in attacking the government. The appearance of *Lothair*, with its Preface in which Disraeli sought to trace the pedigree of his ideas since the Young England days of the 1840s, did him few favours. Was 'a Jewish literary man, so dowered with imagination and so unconventional in his outlook ... the proper person to lead a Conservative party to victory?'² Again the name of Lord Derby intruded. Why couldn't Disraeli serve under Derby as he had done his father, leading the party in the Commons while Derby sat in the Lords?³

The highpoint of the anti-Disraeli movement occurred in February 1872 at a meeting of leading Conservatives at Burghley House. Cairns asked whether it might not be preferable to request Disraeli to make way for Derby. Gerard Noel, the Chief Whip, estimated that such a move would gain the Conservatives 40 or 50 seats at the next election. Gathorne Hardy, though expressing loyalty to Disraeli, admitted that he 'has not the position in House and country to enable him to do what the other might.' Only Northcote and Lord John Manners were unequivocal in their support for their chief.⁴

Disraeli was aware of the current running in Derby's favour and realised that if his leadership were to survive he needed to bestir himself and actually provide some leadership. And this is what he did during 1872. As early as January of that year Derby found him 'well, eager, animated, altogether different from what he was twelve months ago.'⁵ He spoke more vigorously in the Commons, castigating the government for a series of mistakes and policy-reversals. He flirted with ideas for social reform.

¹ E.J. Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli, Democracy and the Tory Party* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968), p. 8.

² Monypenny and Buckle, *Benjamin Disraeli*, Vol. II. p. 512.

³ C.f. T.A. Jenkins, *Disraeli and Victorian Conservatism* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1996) pp. 86-7.

⁴ Monypenny and Buckle, *Benjamin Disraeli*, Vol II. p. 513.

⁵ J. Vincent (ed.), *The Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley, 15th Earl of Derby* (Royal Historical Society, London, 1994), Vol. IV. p. 97.

He led his party to understand that, if they preferred Derby as leader, he would retire to the backbenches. And, most notable of all, he betook himself to Manchester.

Manchester

Why Manchester? Manchester was the second city of the kingdom, the centre of the cotton trade, a symbol of the present and future. ‘The age of ruins is passed,’ commented a character in Disraeli’s 1843 novel *Coningsby*, ‘Have you seen Manchester?’ Yet Manchester had a peculiar importance for Conservatives. Lancashire was urban and industrial; it was also, uncharacteristically, Tory. The Conservatives had done badly in the 1868 election – but they had done especially badly in urban constituencies. Though winning 74 per cent of the English County seats, they secured only 32 per cent of the Boroughs. If the Conservatives were to have any chance of a majority they had to close this gap. And this was where Lancashire was important. Lancashire had eight County seats and the Conservatives won them all in 1868. More importantly, of its 36 Borough seats, the Conservatives took 24. In Manchester three of the five seats went to the Conservatives.

For Conservatives to do so well in Lancashire, the centre of the Industrial Revolution, was of some portent if the party were to stake a serious claim to power in an increasingly urban and commercial society. Here, at least, ‘the Tory working man was ... a reality’¹ and Lancashire seemed to provide an example of what the Tory party could achieve if it reached beyond its traditional County heartlands to the rising middle and working classes. This was Disraelian Conservatism in action and how better to recognise the fact, and consolidate Disraeli’s leadership, than with a visit to the Lancashire by the Conservative chief?

Unfortunately, upon closer inspection Lancashire presented, less a vision of a bright path to Conservative renewal, and more a mare’s nest threatening only to add to Disraeli’s problems. To begin with, the factors behind the Conservative’s success were distinctive. An important element was the tradition of anti-Irish and anti-Catholic feeling in a county which had seen significant immigration from Ireland. Another was

¹ Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli, Democracy and the Tory Party*, p. 8.

the electoral influence of the major mill-owners, many of whom were Tories. But a third crucial factor was a personal one: namely, the powerful electoral presence of Disraeli's friend and potential rival, Lord Derby.

The Derbys were the most powerful family in Lancashire. Their country seat of Knowsley was located just outside the city of Liverpool, and they possessed thousands of acres in the county. Property brought patronage and influence: the Derby family, comments John Vincent, occupied a 'semi-royal' position. Derby's father, who had led the Conservative party since 1846, was a towering local presence and Derby the Younger sought to maintain the family influence, speaking to large audiences, supporting local charities, sitting on committees, chairing the bench of magistrates. Like his father, he contributed to the electoral expenses of local Tory candidates such as Richard Cross, and his brother Frederick was MP for North Lancashire. Despite his natural reticence and aristocratic reserve, Derby was popular with the working and middle classes of the area. In visiting Lancashire there would be no doubt that Disraeli was entering the territory of the man most favoured as his replacement.

Yet the Derby question was part of a wider issue surrounding the symbolism of a Disraeli visit: namely, class. Central to Conservative moves to displace Disraeli as leader was the fact that, however superior his talents as a parliamentarian, where Disraeli was of indeterminate social origin, Derby was an Earl and the successor to one of the proudest names in English history. This class division was equally important in Lancashire. Lancashire Conservatism was not just a Borough phenomenon, it was a County affair too. And the gentry class of Lancashire, the class of which Derby was the head and with which he socialised, were jealous of the popular Conservatism of the towns and far from convinced of the wisdom of Disraeli's extension of the franchise to the urban worker. They were, in other words, sceptical not merely of Disraeli's performance as leader, but of the entire project of seeking for Conservative strength amidst the loyal working class. A visit by Disraeli threatened to expose the divisions within Lancashire Conservatism – and hence within the Conservative party as a whole. No political leader struggling to retain his ascendancy could lightly venture upon such a hazardous enterprise.

Preparations

The idea of a Lancashire visit by Disraeli had first been raised in 1868. In 1870 John Gorst, head of the new Conservative Central Office and himself a Lancastrian, was anxious to promote a visit as means of reviving Tory fortunes. In a letter to the Conservative Chief Whip in September 1870 he set out his case.

We are generally strong in counties and weak in boroughs, and we shall never attain stable political power till the boroughs are conquered. The only boroughs where we are really the stronger party are the Lancashire boroughs.

The Lancashire operatives were '*bona fide* Conservatives,' and the great reception Disraeli would receive would help strengthen the Tory vote in the North more generally.¹ Of course, Gorst had his own personal motives for pushing for a visit. It would demonstrate the importance of Conservative party organisation within the large towns, which was his special interest. More fundamentally, Gorst was a convinced advocate of the strategy of Tory Democracy, under which the Conservatives would secure their electoral future through an alliance with the working class. This he held to be Disraeli's belief also, but there is no doubt that he formulated the idea in more explicit terms than his leader.

Gorst wrote to Disraeli in November 1870 saying that the operatives in Manchester were enthusiastic for a visit and that Algernon Egerton, a Lancashire MP, had put himself at the head of the movement. Unfortunately, the divisions between the Conservative working men of the towns and the county Tories outside soon reasserted themselves. Writing from Manchester on 22 December Gorst acknowledged that there was a tepid response in rural South West Lancashire, where Derby had much property. Egerton's assessment, communicated to Disraeli on Christmas Day 1870, was rather more pessimistic. Though, he wrote:

¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

the Conservatives of the middle and lower classes are, generally speaking, warmly in favour of asking you to come here, and this is also the feeling of the gentry in N.E., and S.E. Lancashire, on the other hand in N. and S.W. Lancashire the gentry are not in favour of holding any political demonstration at present; they consider the Conservative cause needs no strengthening in their districts, and there is a section of them who have not forgiven your Reform Bill...I am also informed that Lord Derby would decline any large political meeting under present circumstances, and I am convinced that his presence would be indispensable at any meeting purporting to represent the Conservatives of the county. I therefore am of the opinion that we cannot invite you to a 'county' meeting.¹

'In these circumstances,' Feuchtwanger remarks, 'Disraeli could not possibly have contemplated accepting the invitation and exposing himself to the risk of failure' and the idea was shelved.

It re-surfaced in the late summer of 1871 when Samuel Graves, the MP for Liverpool, suggested that local resistance to Disraeli could be overcome by organising a visit by the entire Conservative leadership. Members of Disraeli's entourage remained enthusiastic, his personal secretary, Montagu Corry, writing from a German spa town to stiffen his leader's resolve:

I anxiously, and in vain, look daily in the Papers for some notice of a visit on your part to the North. I sincerely hope it has not fallen through. Gladstone's cant about 'the people' will be nowhere so well refuted as in Lancashire. It is a matter very constantly in my thoughts, now, and I feel more than ever that the opportunity is made for you, and you for the opportunity.²

Yet leading Lancashire Tories remained sceptical. Sandon feared that a gathering of the members of the old Cabinet would only remind the country of their deficiencies, while Cross, a close ally of Derby's, thought there was little point in asking the leaders to come down if they had no definite policy to put before the country. Disraeli, still reluctant to assert his leadership and with none of Gladstone's relish for addressing

¹ Quoted in Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli, Democracy and the Tory Party*, p. 8.

² Quoted in R. Shannon, *Age of Disraeli 1868-1881: The Rise of Tory Democracy* (Longman, London, 1992), p. 106.

large public meetings, declared himself 'still very doubtful, whether affairs are yet ripe enough for the move...'¹

Gorst, however, continued to prepare the way for a visit, travelling to Manchester for further consultations in December 1871. By now a Disraeli Reception Committee seems to have been created for, on 24 January 1872, the local press covered its announcement that the Conservative leader would visit Manchester at Easter and deliver addresses at Manchester, Liverpool, and Preston.² This was too much for Disraeli, who insisted that there be only one major speech and despatched Gorst to arrange this. Although the largest available venue was the Preston Corn Exchange, which could accommodate 8,000, its position in the north of the county meant that it was not acceptable to the bulk of Lancashire opinion. A compromise was accordingly arrived at. Disraeli was to speak on 3 April to an audience of 7,000 at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester. But to offer something to the many Lancashire Tories who would not secure a place that day, arrangements were made for a Conservative gathering in Pamona Gardens, Manchester, at which deputations from across Lancashire could present illuminated addresses.

This, then, was how it came about that Disraeli arrived in Manchester in early April 1872 to deliver one of only two mass public speeches in a career of 45 years. From its timing it is natural to regard it as a conspicuous moment in the process by which Disraeli re-established his leadership of the Conservative party. This it certainly did – though the timing was more fortuitous than planned. As we have seen, the visit had been talked about since 1868 and, though Feuchtwanger writes that it was a rejuvenated Disraeli who gave the signal to proceed in January 1872, the fact that Gorst had been in Manchester in December 1871 and that a Reception Committee was already in existence, suggests that the announcement of the visit owed more to working out of organisational processes.³

Yet one further element in the equation had to be put in place if the visit was to succeed. That was Lord Derby. Derby was only too sensitive to the meaning of the visit in the context of the question marks surrounding Disraeli's leadership and the talk of himself as a successor. Disraeli, he noted in his diary on 13 March, was coming to

¹ *Ibid.*

² Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli, Democracy and the Tory Party*, pp. 117-18.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

deliver a ‘manifesto.’ Should he attend the meeting? He was tempted to stay away – but realised that this would be perceived as jealousy of Disraeli. But if he attended, he must speak. This, however, would shift the limelight away from Disraeli and, if their words did not wholly coincide, create grounds for talk of disagreements. ‘The question,’ he continued, ‘is complicated by the existence of a section of the party who would follow me, but who will not follow D. What their number may be I have no means of knowing.’¹ After further consultations with the Lancashire MPs Richard Cross and John Patten, Derby concluded that absence from the meeting would ‘cause more disappointment than the thing is worth.’ However he insisted on Disraeli – not himself – being the focus of the visit and that he would deliver at most a short complimentary speech.²

Disraeli’s Speech

From the foregoing it is apparent that anyone turning to the speech in expectation of finding a bold enunciation of Disraelian Conservatism is bound to be disappointed. What is remarkable about the speech is that it was made at all – whether viewed from the perspective of Lancashire Toryism or the politics of the Conservative leadership. The content of the speech was conditioned by these circumstances: Disraeli’s position as leader was in question; he was entering the strategic centre of British Conservatism and one which exemplified tensions over the future direction of the party; and he was a stranger at the court of Lord Derby. In these circumstances a provocative or forceful speech setting forth some Disraelian political programme was never going to emerge – even had he possessed one. Historians who have gone to the speech looking for more and (sometimes) finding it have approached it from the wrong direction. They have seen it as the speech of a future Prime Minister, a social reformer, a Tory Democrat pointing the way to a populist Conservative future. Disraeli may have become some of those things in the future; but that was not the man who addressed the Free Trade Hall on 3 April 1872.

¹ Vincent, *Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley*, p. 101.

² *Ibid.*

So what did Disraeli say? Well, he said a lot - rather much in fact. He apologised for testing his audience's patience after speaking for an hour-and-a-half, and then tested it for a further two hours. It was not the audience alone who felt the strain: despite consuming two bottles of brandy, by the end his oration was barely audible. But what was it all about? The following table breaks down the speech by subject in the order in which they were delivered and the share of the speech devoted to each.

Subject	Share of Speech (%)
Defence of the Monarchy	20
Defence of House of Lords	15
Justification of 1867 Reform Act	2
Defence of Establishment of Church of England	9
Criticism of Gladstone's Radicalism	2
Improved condition of the people	14
Social Reform	4
Ireland	4
Criticism of Gladstone's Army and Navy reforms	4
Criticism of Gladstone's restless domestic policy	1.7
Foreign Policy	16

Here was a speech that took few risks. Derby's remark that 'the first two hours were occupied by a kind of essay on the British constitution' is shown to be accurate: together monarchy, House of Lords, the Church, and the Reform Act accounted for 46% of the whole. After a middle section on the improving condition of the people and how it might be further improved (18%), the remainder was given over to attacking aspects of Gladstonian policy. There was little here to provoke – or especially inspire

– any of the various factions of the Conservative party. Look, Disraeli was saying, forget my unconventional past, my recent novel, my resurrection of Young England dreams, my miss-firing gamble on a residency suffrage: I stand before you as a reliably mainstream Conservative who believes in the *status quo* and wants to defend it against the destabilising radicalism of Gladstone. Mine are a safe pair of hands and Gladstone's indubitably are not; let us unite to defeat the Liberals on that basis.

Monarchy

Disraeli devoted more time to defending the constitutional position of the monarchy than to any other topic. There was a pretext for this: the public was impatient with the Queen's long seclusion following the death of Albert and questions had been raised by Radicals and Liberals concerning the cost of the institution. Now this was far from a common sentiment on the Liberal benches - but it was too obvious a target for Disraeli miss, providing him, in the process, with an uncontentious subject with which to begin his address. The monarch, he said, was the focus of national life, an institution capable of appealing to the heart as well as the head and providing a point around which all could rally whatever their political allegiance. As such the monarchy had helped to secure to Britain 200 years of domestic peace. Monarchs tended, too, to have unrivalled experience of the practicalities of statesmanship and the 'minister who would treat such information and such experience with indifference would not be a constitutional minister, but an arrogant idiot.'¹ Walter Bagehot had, five years before, emphasised in his study of the *English Constitution* the domestic aspect of the Royal Family and its role in setting the tone of polite society, and Disraeli elaborated upon this theme:

England is a domestic country. It is a country where home is revered, and the hearth is sacred. Such a country is properly represented by a family – the Royal Family. If the members of that family have been educated with a sense of their duty to their people and their responsibility, it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the position which they occupy in our social system.

¹ B. Disraeli, *Speech at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester* (1872), p. 6.

The cost of the monarchy he justified by means of a comparison with the cost of republican government in America. It was, as Derby commented in his diary, all rather tendentious: 'most of his argument would not have been difficult to answer had anybody cared to take the republican side.'¹ But Disraeli was addressing an audience of provincial Tories and for them it was reassuringly commonplace.

The House of Lords

Disraeli's first major foray into political controversy had been a defence of the Lords against criticisms of its prerogatives in the 1830s.² Similar criticisms were being voiced during Gladstone's Liberal government – which dominated the Commons but was in a minority amongst the hereditary Lords. One reflection of this had been the government's use of the Royal Warrant to push Army reform past a hostile Upper House. Here, again, Disraeli was on home territory and took full advantage of the opportunity. How, he asked, do you create an effective and independent Second Chamber? The difficulties he rehearsed are familiar to any debating society today. A chamber of nominees attracts general disrespect. If they are to be elected - will they be chosen by the same constituency as the popular body? In that case, what right do they have to control and criticise that body? If elected by a more restrictive franchise, by what right can the minority govern the majority? No country had successfully resolved these problems. Fortunately, the House of Lords already fulfilled both necessary criteria. Its members, possessing ample property in land, were independent. They were effective too – and this was guaranteed by the very hereditary principle that was attacked:

I am inclined to believe that an English gentleman - born to business, managing his own estate, administering the affairs of his county, mixing with all classes of his fellow men, now in the hunting field, now in the railway direction, unaffected, unostentatious, proud of his ancestors, if they have contributed to the greatness of our common country – is, on the whole, more likely to form a senator agreeable to English opinion and English taste than any substitute that has yet been produced.³

¹ Vincent, *Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley*, p. 103.

² C.f. B. Disraeli, *A Vindication of the English Constitution* (1834)

³ Disraeli, *Speech at the Free Trade Hall*, p. 12.

Few people could defend the ‘aristocratic settlement’ more persuasively than Disraeli, the literary London Jew, and Manchester was a chance for him to remind the Conservative party of this fact.

The Church of England

Disraeli had been courting the Church of England vote since the 1850s. It was a natural constituency to win - though Disraeli was hardly naturally suited to doing so. In some ways this didn’t matter: events was steadily pushing Anglicans towards the Conservative party. Ironically, it was Gladstone – the most self-conscious of political churchman – who provided the greatest impetus, with such measures as the dis-establishment of the Anglican Church in Ireland and the Education Act of 1870, with its acceptance of non-denominational religious instruction. Disraeli was again only too happy to push at this open door, knowing that a Lancashire audience characterised by its dislike of all things Catholic and Irish, would be especially receptive.

Where, in other countries, Church and State had been competing powers in the realm, England had successfully combined the two entities in a union that has ‘contributed for centuries to the civilisation of this country.’¹ Yet there was ‘the same assault against the Church of England and the union between the State and the Church as there is against the Monarchy and against the House of Lords.’ The first breach in the system had been made in Ireland. In England the position of the Church as a national educator had been called into question – with the result that the Non-conformist Churches had actually helped to forward the cause of secular education in England, with results that would be disastrous for the country. There was talk of abolishing the union between Church and State, an action that would probably strengthen the Church but weaken the State.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

I therefore trust that when the occasion offers for the country to speak out, it will speak out in an unmistakable manner on this subject; and, recognising the inestimable services of the Church, that it will call upon the Government to maintain its union with the State.¹

As with the monarchy, Disraeli was here seizing upon a trend within Liberal politics to raise fears of an imminent threat to the Church establishment. This fitted well with his general theme of a constitutional settlement in danger and had the specific advantage of resonating with the powerful Anglican interest within the country.

The 1867 Reform Act

Thus far Disraeli had trodden a safe, if well-worn, path. His next subject raised rather more difficulties. The 1867 Reform Act was his greatest achievement as a Minister and it might have been thought that a speech in Manchester, the home of the Tory working man, would see him expound upon its virtues. Yet it presented two problems: first, in a speech praising the British constitutional system and deprecating radical change, the Reform Act stood out as one of the major constitutional innovations of the past fifty years; and second, the jury was still out on whether the Act was of any benefit to the Conservative party. Viewed from the larger urban centres of Lancashire it was undoubtedly a boon, but in the traditional County constituencies and smaller boroughs the issue was more doubtful. Conscious, no doubt, of these pressures Disraeli said as little on the matter of Reform as he decently could.

The radical issue was squared by arguing that, though the Whig Reform Act of 1832 had given the vote to the middle class, it had disenfranchised the working man by abolishing those franchises he had enjoyed since time immemorial. Disraeli's Act only restored the balance to the constitution. This was an argument Disraeli had been making since the 1830s. As a description of the impact of the 1832 Act it was less than convincing; and what happened in 1867 hardly restored some lost equilibrium: it redrew the rules of Victorian politics, as its critics and supporters well knew. In justification of his measure, Disraeli compared the years 1848 with 1870. In the former a revolution in France provoked such fears that 'no woman was allowed to quit her

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

house in London ...' In 1870 a more radical revolution occurred in France and 'yet not more than five men were found to meet together in Manchester and grumble. And why? Because the people had got what they wanted ... They were content, and were grateful.'¹ This was classic Whig-Peelite reasoning: moderate reforms to satisfy justified grievances were the means to social peace. There was no Disraelian speculation on the innate conservatism of the working man to alarm aristocratic horses.

Social Reform and the Condition of the People

We approach now the most famous part of Disraeli's speech: his unveiling of a programme of Conservative social reform. Now, his supporters were to argue, Disraeli reverted to the concerns of his Young England youth and highlighted the social conscience of Conservative government. He *could* have advanced such a theme and Manchester, the greatest city of the Industrial Revolution, was assuredly the place to do it. But, again, Disraeli did all he could to eschew such an interpretation. Rather than draw a link between his concerns of the 1840s and his programme of the 1870s, he was more concerned to disassociate the two. His technique was simple. Yes, he did devote four per cent of his speech to the theme of sanitary reform. But prior to this he spent 14 per cent of his time celebrating the improved condition of the working man since the 1840s:

It is a long time since I first found myself in your district and so far as the condition of the great body of this important district of England is concerned, I can speak with personal experience. I take the period 1832-72 and ask what the working classes have realised in this time? Immense results. Their progress has not in any way been inferior to that of any other class ... their wages have been raised, and their hours of daily toil have been diminished – the means of leisure, which is the great source of civilisation, have been increased.²

The condition of the Lancashire working class in 1870 was worlds apart from that in 1840. The debates over the 'condition of England question' that had formed the

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

backdrop to the Young England movement were a mere memory. And receding into the past with them, Disraeli implied, were the remedies of Young England. Sanitary reform was a response, not to a social system in crisis, but to issues arising from the supply of public goods in an expanding urban environment – itself a testimony to the success of the economy. While some state intervention in the market system would be required, the problems motivating this intervention, its extent, and the results intended, were radically different from those of the ‘Hungry Forties.’ The caution of Disraeli’s approach is apparent in the following passage:

In attempting to legislate upon social matters the great object is to be practical – to have before us some distinct aims and some distinct means by which they can be accomplished. Gentlemen, I think public attention as regards these matters ought to be concentrated upon sanitary legislation. That is a wide subject, and, if properly treated, comprises almost every consideration which has a just claim upon legislative interference. Pure air, pure water, the inspection of unhealthy habitations, the adulteration of food, these and many kindred matters may be legitimately dealt with by the Legislature ... Gentlemen, it is impossible to overrate the importance of the subject. After all, the first consideration of a Minister should be the health of the people.¹

This was as far as Disraeli went in setting down the programme of a Conservative government. Like most 19th century politicians, he had neither the inclination nor the bureaucratic resources to develop a detailed programme in opposition, and even if he had been so inclined, to have done so in a speech to a mass audience so soon after emergence from political passivity would have been, as Derby reflected, ‘inopportune.’ That social reform was the one area of future legislation he canvassed gives it some significance – though this was to become more apparent later than it was at the time. Certainly, Derby makes no specific mention of the topic in his reflections upon the speech.²

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

² Vincent, *Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley Derby Diaries*, pp. 103-104.

Attacking the Liberals

Thus far Disraeli's speech had been chiefly concerned with defending the British constitutional system. The remaining third was mainly given over to criticisms of the domestic and foreign policies of Gladstone's government. Here he drew a contrast between violence at home and passivity abroad.

Domestically, the state of affairs revealed a paradox: notwithstanding the prosperity and contentment of the people, the fundamental principles of the nation's institutions were being impugned by persons in authority. This startling inconsistency was due, he suggested, to the fact that the government was 'avowedly formed on a principle of violence.'¹ Disraeli was referring here to the Irish legislation proposed by Gladstone as a prelude to his electoral victory of 1868 – legislation provoked by a series of terrorist outrages by Irish nationalists. But far from pacifying Ireland, as Gladstone intended, his policies had merely made the situation worse:

Their specific was to despoil Churches and plunder landlords, and what has been the result? Sedition rampant, treason thinly veiled, and whenever a vacancy occurs in the representation a candidate is returned pledged to the disruption of the realm. Her Majesty's new Ministers proceeded in their career like a body of men under the influence of some delirious drug. Not satiated with the spoliation and anarchy of Ireland, they began to attack every institution and every interest, every class and every calling in the country.²

Strong words – but ones well attuned to a Lancashire audience noted for its allegiance to the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland.

The image of a restless government, continually harassing the established interests of a settled and happy nation, served Disraeli throughout the speech. Besides Ireland, he gave special attention to the government's military reforms before summing up in the best-remembered portion of his oration:

¹ Disraeli, *Free Trade Hall Speech*, pp. 22-23.

² *Ibid.*

But, gentlemen, as time advanced it was not difficult to perceive that extravagance was being substituted for energy by the government. The unnatural stimulus was subsiding. Their paroxysm ended in prostration. Some took refuge in melancholy, and their eminent chief alternated between a menace and a sigh. As I sat opposite the Treasury Bench, the Ministers reminded me of one of those marine landscapes not very unusual on the coasts of South America. You behold a range of exhausted volcanoes. Not a flame flickers on a single pallid crest. But the situation is still dangerous. There are occasional earthquakes, and ever and anon the deep rumbling of the sea.¹

The message here was clear - and not without irony. It was Gladstone, the Etonian and Oxford Churchman, the sometime hope of those 'stern unbending Tories,' whose de-stabilising and erratic energy cast doubt upon the established parameters of English propertied society. And it was Disraeli, the adventurer, the opportunist, the man described by Prince Albert as potentially one of the most dangerous men in Europe, who promised statesmanship and stability, and offered a refuge for all seeking shelter from Gladstone earthquakes.

Turning to Gladstone's foreign policy, the main thrust of his remarks was that the government had failed to assert Britain's European and global interests with sufficient firmness. This, he implied, was a constitutional weakness of Liberal regimes. The Crimean War, he asserted, only happened because the Russian Tsar believed a Liberal-Peelite government would not resist Russian aggression in the East. The Russians had recently renounced the neutralisation of the Black Sea negotiated in the wake of that war and again a Liberal government had done nothing. What would be the consequences of this weakness was difficult to foresee. One possibility, that was to haunt the greater part of Disraeli's premiership, was already forming in his mind:

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

The time may not be distant when we may hear of the Russian power in the Persian Gulf, and the effect that may have upon the dominions of England and upon those possessions on the production of which you every year more and more depend, are questions upon which it will be well for you on proper occasions to meditate.¹

The government's attempt to settle through arbitration the United States' claims for compensation arising from the Alabama incident was sympathetically handled by Disraeli – partly because Lord Derby himself, when Foreign Secretary, had accepted the principle of arbitration. Even so, Gladstone's conduct of the negotiations had been 'a combination of negligence and blundering.'

Yet Disraeli, though seeking, says Shannon, to comfort those 'bewildered and resentful at the eclipse of Britain as a European power,' was at pains to emphasise that a Conservative government would initiate no foreign policy adventures.² 'Gentlemen, don't suppose, because I counsel firmness and decision at the right moment, that I am of the school of statesmen who are favourable to turbulent and aggressive diplomacy.' The relations of Britain to Europe have undergone a vast change during the previous one hundred years. 'The Queen of England has become the Sovereign of the most powerful of Oriental States. On the other side of the globe there are now establishments belonging to her, teeming with wealth and population, which will, in due time, exercise their influence over the distribution of power.'³ In this context England's policy with respect to Europe should be one of proud reserve. And in answer to those statesmen who had intimated the decay of the power of England:

I express here my confident conviction that there was never a moment in our history when the power of England was so great and her resources so vast and inexhaustible. And yet, gentlemen, it is not merely our fleets and armies, our powerful artillery, our accumulated capital, and our unlimited credit on which I so much depend, as upon that unbroken spirit of her people, which I believe was never prouder of the Imperial country to which they belong.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

² Shannon, *The Age of Disraeli*, p. 140.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

The Impact of Disraeli's Visit

The immediate effect of Disraeli's speech upon his audience was exhaustion. The 'building was full,' remarked Derby, and 'the heat was oppressive.' By the time he reached the celebrated section of social reform the audience was 'already exhausted.' 'On the whole,' Derby concluded, 'the oration, though a remarkable intellectual feat, being admirable in point of style, and delivered without reference to a note, fell flat, being much too long...'¹ While it must be admitted that Derby was not a person likely to be moved by popular oratory, had been sceptical about the value of the whole visit, and was not a little put out at missing the last train and not getting to bed till 3am, it seems hard to demure from this judgement. Disraeli had no experience in addressing such a large crowd; his health was not robust; three-and-a-half hours was a long time for an audience upwards of 5,000 to sustain concentration; and the content itself was rather pedestrian.

But the importance of the Manchester visit reached well beyond the reactions of the audience. Disraeli had shown he could go into the centre of a major urban centre and deliver a speech on a scale that could match the orations that Gladstone had begun to make his trademark. No other leading Tory could have done this. He had taken up the challenge and come through with his reputation enhanced. Second, Disraeli's words exactly suited the political atmosphere of the time. He deployed the staple technique of his political career since the 1830s: namely, demonise the opposition as posing some deep and subversive threat to an ideal and successful existing order. For Gladstone's Liberals of the 1860s read the Whigs and Utilitarians of the 1830s. The propertied class might benefit from the *status quo* – but they needed a Disraeli to sing its praises in ways that seemed to appeal to all classes of society. This he did, offering an end to destabilising legislation for those with something to lose, moderate social reform for the urban working man, and a proud and resolute foreign policy for all those concerned with Britain's international prestige. Fellow Conservatives were impressed – including Lord Cairns, perhaps feeling guilty now for the support he had expressed for a Derby leadership at Burghley House. He wrote to

¹ Vincent, *Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley*, p. 103.

Disraeli that 'As regards the present crisis there was everything in it that ought to have been in it, & nothing that ought not ... it will live & be read not only for its sparkling vigour, but also for the deep strata of constitutional thought & reasoning wh pervade it.'¹

Yet what occurred outside the Free Trade Hall was equally significant. Opponents and supporters alike acknowledged that he took Manchester by storm. Large crowds met him at the station and for a time he found himself hemmed in. The horses were taken from his carriage and he was pulled by the enthusiastic crowd. The following day he received deputations from between two and three hundred of Lancashire's Conservative Associations, the vast dancing hall of the Pomona Gardens being filled with his supporters. Lord Derby reflected at the end of the visit that 'The enthusiasm shown by those who come to receive and to see him has surprised all parties – Conservatives not less than Liberals. There has been nothing like it in my recollection.' The *Liberal Times* admitted the same – though in a rather more barbed form:

If he were the most potent of ministers instead of the chief of the weakest Opposition which Parliament has known for many years, he could not have met with a more hearty welcome.²

¹ Shannon, *Age of Disraeli*, p. 138.

² Cited in Feuchtwanger, *Disraeli, Democracy and the Tory party*, p. 11.



A Cartoon depiction of Disraeli's speech from April 1872. All classes find something to celebrate in Disraeli's words.

The Significance of Manchester

If it is impossible to understand Disraeli's Manchester visit without an appreciation of the tensions and sensitivities that preceded it, it is equally difficult to write about it without recognising what succeeded it. In narratives of Disraeli's career, 1872 stands out as a year of recovery, carrying the Conservative leader out of the doldrums of 1868-71 and into the brisk winds that carried him to electoral victory in 1874. The Manchester speech is thus a pivotal episode in the story. Disraeli had ventured into

the heart of borough-Toryism and emerged triumphant – a portent of the swing to the Conservatives the urban constituencies were to deliver in 1874. The driving force behind the visit had been J. E. Gorst, the apostle of Tory Democracy whose galvanisation of Conservative party organisation was credited with helping to deliver the 1874 victory. Encouraged by his reception, Disraeli followed up his Manchester speech with an equally important oration at the Crystal Palace. Where Manchester set an agenda for social reform, Crystal Palace saw Disraeli unfold the standard of imperialism. Together these two speeches supplied the text for late-Disraelian Conservatism: defence of the Constitution, reform of social conditions, celebration of Empire.

Viewed thus, the meaning of Manchester is fixed by its location within the story. It stands at the end of a phase of doubt and the beginning of a phase of renewed confidence and vigour. By definition, this meaning is a subsequent construct; it is possible only from the viewpoint of some later date - 1874, 1876, or even later. Now Manchester was a moment in a broader process and it is not inappropriate to contextualise it in this light. Yet we must remember that if the process had had a different outcome, the significance of Manchester would be different also. We must remember, too, that the narrative of slump and recovery is itself a simplification: the journey was not from black to white but through varying shades of grey, and not a uniform one either.

Approaching Disraeli's visit with these qualifications in mind, what, then, can we make of its significance?

1. Though marking the beginning of a period of more confident and active leadership by Disraeli, it was never *intended* as such. A Manchester visit had been off and on since 1868. The actual groundwork for 1872 was laid in 1871 – before the Burghley House meeting, which is usually depicted as the high-point of anti-Disraeli sentiment.
2. The final impetus for the visit was supplied by Gorst. It was he who journeyed to Manchester, focused discussions, and planned the itinerary. The visit was as much Gorst's as Disraeli's and reflected his own vision of a working class Tory Democracy, which again was as much his own creation as Disraeli's.

3. The visit was not a simple celebration of Borough-Toryism. Yes, Lancashire was a beacon of hope for Conservatism in terms of its ability to win urban constituencies. Yet it was also a stronghold of County-Conservatism, and this was a very different species. It was this division *within* Lancashire Toryism that made the visit such a difficult one to arrange and reproduced, at a local level, tensions within the party nationally. Disraeli was more sensitive to the nuances than Gorst and repeatedly emphasised that, though entering Manchester, he was there to meet with Lancashire as a whole.
4. Disraeli's speech was uncontroversial and said little that was new. Two considerations dictated this. First, his uncertain position as leader meant that he could hardly risk rocking the Tory boat. It was a time to reaffirm his belief in monarchy, Lords, Church, and the landed interest. It was no time to take risks. Second, a defence of the *status quo* exactly suited the wider political climate. Gladstone's Liberals were busy unsettling the propertied classes and challenging a range of vested interests. There was every reason to offer the safety of a Conservative haven to those hankering after stability and certainty.
5. Social reform was not a major part of the speech. This does not follow simply because it represented only about four per cent of the total. More significant was the extended section that proceeded it, praising the social advances made by the working class over the previous 30 or so years. The capitalist free-market had had proven that it could generate material well-being for working class – which had been in doubt in the 1840s. What it struggled to deliver were public goods like sanitation and clean air. There was thus a case for government intervention that would complement, not challenge, the free market. Governments were already legislating to this end. Future governments would do more. This was not controversial and hardly constituted a defining programme for government. The view that this was what it *did* reflect is really a reading back from the reforms of the 1874-80 government.
6. Disraeli's confidence *was* enhanced as a result of the visit. From his point of view, remarks Shannon, 'the Manchester triumph vindicated and ratified his leadership of the party.'¹ He had registered a signal success, been feted and

¹ Shannon, *Age of Disraeli*, p. 140.

cheered, and had shown he could approach Gladstone as a popular orator. As such, the Manchester visit played its part in revitalising Disraeli's leadership during 1872.

7. The Manchester success did disarm potential critics of Disraeli. Lord Carnarvon, who had resigned from the Tory Cabinet in 1867 over the issue of electoral reform, expressed to Derby on 16 April his 'satisfaction at the political condition of affairs, saying it was very different from what he and others had expected: and praises Disraeli's late speech in very high terms. So that quarrel is ended.'¹ Salisbury, who had not published a civil word about Disraeli since 1867, wrote a survey on the 'position of parties' in October 1872. 'It was not that Salisbury was now civil to Disraeli,' comments Shannon. 'That would have been too much to hope for. Disraeli was simply not mentioned. That was the tremendous thing.'²

Doubts concerning Disraeli's leadership did not evaporate. Some dissent re-surfaced in 1873 when Disraeli declined an invitation to form a government and forced Gladstone to resume office. But events were, overall, moving in Disraeli's direction. During 1872 the Conservatives won seven by-elections and lost none. Even so, Disraeli's survival and recovery as Conservative leader owed relatively little to his own actions and rather more to two external circumstances.

Within the Tory party itself plans to substitute Derby for Disraeli always faced an insurmountable obstacle: Lord Derby himself. Besides being one of Disraeli's closest political friends, he was also reticent, prone to self-doubt, and, most important, was far from clear whether he was a Tory at all. He was not even sure that he would join a future Conservative Cabinet. There is no evidence that he was tempted to challenge for the leadership and no mechanism by which such a challenge might have been made. Subsequent events were to confirm Derby's doubts concerning his capacity for leadership and his commitment to the Conservative party.

But Derby wasn't Disraeli's greatest asset - that, says Vincent, was Gladstone. Gladstone's position in 1868 seemed unassailable: he was leading a talented Liberal administration that combined the best traditions of Whig-Liberal reformism and Peelite

¹ Vincent, *Diaries of Edward Henry Stanley*, p. 104.

² Shannon, *Age of Disraeli*, p. 145.

efficiency and was committed to a programme of much needed modernising reform. But just as his mentor Peel had broken up the Tory majority in the 1840s by pushing ahead of his party with his reform agenda, so did Gladstone's reforms gradually reveal the fissures that underlay his apparently imposing majority. The Liberal party showed itself to be the coalition of Whigs, Radicals, Anglicans, Non-Conformists, Liberals, and Irish MPs that it was and Gladstone was unable to keep his party together. Tempers frayed, legislation was lost, majorities fell. This was the situation Disraeli revelled in and he played his part in exacerbating Liberal divisions – though all the while careful not to provide Gladstone with a pretext for uniting his party in opposition to a Conservative threat.

Manchester showed that Disraeli understood the developing weakness of Gladstone and the best means to exploit it: namely, by steadying his own supporters, uniting his own party, and presenting to voters an acceptable face of constitutional moderation at home and upholding Britain's reputation overseas. The visit to Manchester was a balancing act: between Borough and County Conservatism, between Tory Democracy and the defence of the propertied interest, and between Disraeli and Derby as party leaders. It was Disraeli's real achievement that he successfully negotiated the obstacles in his path and he was rewarded with firmer ground upon reaching the other side.