CHAPTER 1

What were Conservatism and Liberalism?

INTRODUCTION

The words Conservative and Liberal are used in a number of ways today. When they are used with capital letters in their political sense, their precise definition may change a little and vary according to time and circumstance. Nevertheless, in this political context, their meaning is likely to bear some resemblance to the more general explanation outlined in the margin.

Today in the early twenty-first century we are familiar with the words Conservative and Liberal with a large ‘C’ and a large ‘L’ to describe two of our major political parties. The Conservatives remain one of the major players in the political game; the Liberals, however (who have changed their name to Liberal Democrats), have long been displaced as the second of two major parties by the Labour Party. This was a twentieth-century development. In the second half of the nineteenth century the Conservative and Liberal parties were the two dominant parties in the British parliamentary system. Yet at the start of the century in 1800 the words were only being used with a small ‘c’ and a small ‘l’ and the two main parties were known as the Tories and the Whigs.

WHAT WERE WHIG AND TORY?

The terms Whig and Tory had been in use ever since the second half of the seventeenth century and stood largely unchallenged until the 1830s as describing the two major political groupings of the day. Parties and groupings emerged gradually after 1660 when it was clear that the role of the king after the restoration of the monarchy was not going to be all-dominant and there were different views on how he ought to be advised and how far his powers should be restricted.

KEY ISSUES

This first chapter provides important background information which will help gain an understanding of all Key Issues (see page 4).

KEY TERMS

Conservative
The word conservative can be used with a small ‘c’ to describe a particular attitude to a problem, question or situation. This attitude:
• is cautious, careful and apprehensive of too much change all at once;
• has regard for past traditions and ideas;
• believes that rapid upheaval may produce instability and uncertainty;
• feels that, at national level, this kind of alteration could result in the loss of valuable ideas or institutions.

Liberal
Likewise, the word liberal with a small ‘l’ suggests:
• an open-minded and flexible approach to a problem;
• plenty of scope for free interpretation of the question in hand;
• that tradition, though respected, should not be adhered to over-rigidly;
• that change may be seen as desirable to prevent frustration and anger from building up.

Whig and Tory
Like many names that stick they were not intended at first to be complimentary: a Tory was an Irish robber and a Whig his Scottish equivalent.
Parties began as informal groupings rather than being founded as an organisation in a formal manner with rules and regulations and a balance sheet. These parties were very different from today:

- Only a small number of Members of Parliament would have identified with being Whig or Tory.
- Many MPs would regard themselves as independent country gentlemen who were above party and would vote as they chose.
- Those who did think about it frequently regarded themselves as Whig or Tory rather than members of the Whig or Tory parties. There was no mass membership of the parties in the country as a whole and little formal organisation.
- The proportion of adult males who were entitled to vote for MPs was quite small under the old electoral system before 1832. Moreover, many candidates who stood for Parliament were elected unopposed because of the property or land they owned and/or influence they possessed in a particular area. They did not have to win voters over to the policies they supported by the politics of persuasion.

When a dispute emerged as to whether Parliament should be reformed in 1831–2, the differences between Whig and Tory were clearly demonstrated. Tories opposed what they saw as an unwarranted, sudden and drastic interference with the stable and well-established British constitution and Whigs supported what they felt was a moderate, prudent and necessary change to include the respectable middle class among those privileged to vote for their choice of elected Member of Parliament. In passing the Great Reform Bill of 1832 the Whigs seemed to have won an important struggle and taken advantage of the growing demand for reform, especially from the industrial middle classes.

**THE CHANGE TO ‘CONSERVATIVE’**

In the 1830s the use of the terms ‘Conservative’ and ‘Liberal’ began to challenge the terms ‘Whig’ and ‘Tory’.
This challenge came at slightly different times, in different ways and with different results. The historian of the Conservative Party, Robert Blake, records that the first use of the word Conservative to describe the Tory party was in an article in January 1830. This was at the start of the Reform Bill crisis and related to the idea of ‘conserving’, or preserving, the old electoral system. However, it came into common use soon afterwards in the mid-1830s when the dust was beginning to settle on the Reform Bill crisis.

In 1834 the Duke of Wellington, who had been Tory Prime Minister up to 1830, was replaced as leader by Sir Robert Peel. Peel, in seeking re-election to Parliament, wrote an address (known as the Tamworth Manifesto) to his constituents in the Staffordshire borough of Tamworth in which he outlined his proposals. Peel made it clear that he accepted the 1832 Reform Act as an established fact and something that could not be reversed. He established the idea that the Tories would now accept change where it could be proved to be beneficial to the country. However, although he did not use the word, he indicated that conservation of what was worthwhile from the old system...
would have a high priority. He promised that the Tories (or Conservatives) would now undertake ‘a careful review of all institutions civil and ecclesiastical ... in a friendly temper for the maintenance of established rights’ (author’s italics).

The word ‘Tory’ never disappeared and still appears today as meaning essentially the same as Conservative, but it is clear that by 1846 the Conservative Party was now the most common term and it was already in frequent use when Peel succeeded in regaining real power for the Party in 1841, defeating the Whigs at a general election in that year. Peel had managed to modify the image of the Tories so that, while they could still be seen as a party primarily representing the landowning interest, they could also claim to govern for the interests of the country as a whole.

BELIEFS OF THE CONSERVATIVES

Parties at this time stood for broad principles rather than specific policies. At the start of Peel’s Conservative ministry of the early 1840s it appeared clear what these were.

1. Conservatives greatly revered the position of the monarchy in the British political system. The monarch was entitled to exert real power and should do so when appropriate. Then there could be no dispute about the ultimate authority in the country. Queen Victoria was entitled to select her own ministers and the government was Her Majesty’s Government.

2. Conservatives had a high regard for the British constitution and the workings of the traditional political system. Many Conservatives regretted the passing of the 1832 Great Reform Bill but they were prepared to accept its changes. They believed further adjustments were unlikely to be necessary. The place of the House of Lords was seen as equally significant as that of the House of Commons and democracy was associated with the USA and mob rule, which were both seen as powerful disincentives to adopt it or anything remotely resembling it.

3. The landowning aristocracy were the given rulers of the country. Their background, education and wealth all entitled them to this status. The stability of the country

KEY PEOPLE

Duke of Wellington 1759–1852. He defeated Bonaparte at Waterloo 1815 but his subsequent political career as a Tory politician was less successful. Prime Minister 1828–30; refusal of even the smallest degree of reform when faced with evidence of corrupt nature of electoral system brought his downfall. 1835–52 a senior yet background figure in the Conservative Party. He was a member of Peel’s cabinet 1841–6 without holding office.

Sir Robert Peel 1788–1850 From a wealthy Lancashire manufacturing family. His father was in Parliament before 1832. After brilliant academic success at Oxford, Peel was Irish Secretary 1813–20 and a reforming Home Secretary in the 1820s, but opposed parliamentary reform. Prime Minister 1834–5 and 1841–6. In the political wilderness for the last few years of his life.

KEY TERMS

Constituents All the people who live in the constituency (area) represented by an MP.

Borough A town or village granted a Royal Charter giving it the privilege of electing its own two MPs.
depended upon a landowning class who had sufficient stake in the system to act in its best interests. The main desires of landowners would always take precedence over the manufacturing or commercial interest. The landed aristocracy and the House of Lords both depended on the hereditary system whereby titles and land were inherited in their entirety by the eldest sons.

4. The **Established Church of England** as a central plank in the social system was to be strongly maintained. The monarch was the earthly head of the Church and from the Church’s Christian beliefs flowed the basis of society’s organisation and principles. The senior bishops were members of the House of Lords. Since appointment of bishops tended to be political and the Tories had been in office for most of the period 1784–1830, the majority of the bishops were of that political persuasion for at least the first part of the nineteenth century and often beyond. Not for nothing was the Church of England described as ‘the Conservative Party at prayer’.

All in all there was an admiration for the British constitution, a British Protestant monarch as head of a national Church and an English-based landowning aristocracy with numerous estates in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, all very much seen as part of one United Kingdom.

Some of these beliefs were not quite as rigid as they might sound. With a young Queen on the throne since 1837, it was expected that her ministers (the Ministers of the Crown) would now take more initiative. After the extension of the vote in 1832 the greater authority of the House of Commons was coming to be accepted. In contrast to the French aristocracy before the Revolution, the British landed classes were not totally opposed to some political role for the wealthy merchant middle class: indeed Peel himself was one of them. **Free trade** measures favouring the commercial middle classes had been passed by the Tories in the mid-1820s.

Whilst the privileges of the Church of England were to be stoutly maintained, there was to be religious toleration for other churches, although suspicion of Roman Catholics as
foreign agents still lurked among the darker corridors of some of the great aristocratic houses. Nonetheless it had been a Tory government under Wellington and Peel that had passed Catholic Emancipation in 1829, albeit under threat of revolt in Ireland.

THE BEGINNING OF THE LIBERALS

The displacement of Whigs by Liberals took a slightly different course and was longer in establishing its full effect. However, later in the century it was clear that the change had been complete and permanent. The label ‘Whig’, unlike the word ‘Tory’, was eventually to disappear completely from use but the word remained to describe particular political characteristics.

‘Liberal’ was a word used in the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789; it was used to describe a political attitude in general rather than one party in particular. The term ‘Whig’ was always a fairly exclusive one that could be applied to a particular set of aristocratic families who, in the early nineteenth century, took a more ‘liberal’ view of the workings of the British political system than did the Tories. Whigs such as Earl Grey for instance, while not condoning the violent element in the French Revolution, admired its removal of absolute monarchy and regretted that it had not been able to maintain the constitutional monarchy of its early days. When Grey was invited to form a ministry to govern the country in 1830 he was seen as the Whig most able to put through a reform of Parliament. This he achieved (though not without difficulty) and one of his principal arguments was that a liberal rather than rigid approach to the British political system was the one most likely to preserve its essentials. Liberals were not revolutionaries.

Although the use of the word remained vague and a little inconsistent ‘Liberals’ (now sometimes with a capital ‘L’) were increasingly to be found on the Whig rather than Tory or Conservative side in the 1830s and the word was sometimes used interchangeably with Radical. By the time of the Corn Law Crisis in 1846 ‘liberal’ was increasingly
used to describe those who supported the move to free trade and their economic philosophy of **laissez-faire**.

**Beliefs of the Liberals**
Whig-Liberal beliefs were not always as clear-cut as Conservative ones. However, there were some discernible trends.

1. A greater acceptance of reform and amendment of the political system than the Conservatives, as seen in 1832. Earl Grey, the Prime Minister of the time, argued

**KEY TERMS**

**Laissez-faire** A French term meaning 'leave it alone'. In this book it refers to the idea that governments should not intervene with the natural workings of the economy or with society but leave things to natural (or market) forces.
that the Reform Act was ‘the most aristocratic measure ever put before Parliament’. Whilst this was clearly a remark designed to win over waverers to the cause of parliamentary reform, it reflected his belief that change was necessary in order to preserve the essentials of the political system.

2. A greater suspicion of the monarch’s use of power and a high regard for the ‘liberties’ of the ordinary Englishman. The restrictions on the powers of the monarch dating from the Bill of Rights of 1689 (see page 00) were seen as central to the political system. The British system was seen by Whigs such as Lord John Russell as superior both to the despotisms (dictatorships) of continental Europe and the democratic ‘excesses’ of the United States. The system upheld the right of Parliament to be consulted on all major issues of policy including taxation. The rule of law was to be upheld in normal circumstances as was the right of free speech and a free press.

3. A more open attitude to allowing the middle classes into the heart of the political framework. The £10 household (see page 00) to whom the Whigs gave the vote in 1832 was essentially the middle-class merchant and manufacturer as well as the small trader/shopkeeper who, henceforth, were all seen as natural political allies of the Liberals. This resulted in economic polices that were more inclined to free trade by removing tariff barriers and a general suspicion of unnecessary expense in government.

4. Less emphasis on the privileges of the Church of England and more attention to religious liberty. The Liberals showed greater sympathy towards Nonconformist denominations and sometimes the Roman Catholics: they were beginning to believe in what today is called equality of opportunity for all, regardless of which Christian denomination a person belonged to. This was coupled with a concern to use the propertied wealth of the Church for the wider good, in such areas as education. The greater acceptance of the commercial industrial and urban changes through which Britain was going led to a concern with such issues.

5. Less emphasis on the role of government. Pre-1832 Tories were seen as having prosecuted an expensive war against France before 1815 and Liberals remained keen
on low taxation and cheap government throughout the nineteenth century. In this respect they are more reminiscent of the late-twentieth-century Conservative Party than modern Liberal Democrats.

### Prime Ministers and their parties 1830–95

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Dates</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grey</td>
<td>Whig</td>
<td>1830–34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peel</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>1834–35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne</td>
<td>Whig</td>
<td>1835–41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peel</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>1841–46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell</td>
<td>Whig</td>
<td>1846–52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>1852 (Feb. to Dec.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aberdeen</td>
<td>Whig-Peelite Coalition</td>
<td>1852–55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmerston</td>
<td>Whig</td>
<td>1855–58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>1858–59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palmerston</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>1859–65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>1865–66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>1866–68</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disraeli</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>1868</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gladstone</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>1868–74</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disraeli</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>1874–80</td>
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<td>Gladstone</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>1880–85</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salisbury</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>1885–86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gladstone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salisbury</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gladstone</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>1892–94</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rosebery</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>1894–95</td>
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By 1846 the organisation of the parties was developing and the words ‘Tory’ and ‘Whig’ were being increasingly used in political circles: the events of 1846–66 were to produce changes that eventually brought them to the forefront of political talk.

### Activity

1. How were the names ‘Tory’ and ‘Whig’ replaced by the terms ‘Conservative’ and ‘Liberal’?
2. What were the essential differences between the beliefs of the Conservatives and Liberals in the first half of the nineteenth century?

### Key Terms

**Organisation of the parties** The 1832 Reform Act was to encourage Whig-Liberals and Tory-Conservatives to employ Party Agents to try to maximise support. F.R. Bonham (Tory) and Joseph Parkes (Whig) became significant political figures. London clubs: the Carlton (Tory) and the Reform (Whig) were used as places for meetings and discussions and attempts were made in Parliament to get party supporters out for controversial votes. However, party organisation remained much less significant than after the Second Reform Act of 1867. (See Chapter four)