From Fear of Democracy to Political Expediency: Lord Salisbury and the Second and Third Reform Acts

BY

Michael PINTO-DUSCHINSKY*

ABSTRACT

FROM FEAR OF DEMOCRACY TO POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY: LORD SALISBURY AND THE SECOND AND THIRD REFORM ACTS

This article first summarizes the bare facts about Salisbury's career and writings. It then analyses the reasons for Salisbury's determined opposition to the second Reform Act of 1867, but acceptance of the third in 1884.

RÉSUMÉ

ENTRE LA CRAINTE DE LA DÉMOCRATIE ET L'OPPORTUNISME POLITIQUE : LORD SALISBURY ET LES DEUXIÈME ET TROISIÈME RÉFORMES ÉLECTORALES

Après avoir brièvement résumé la carrière et les écrits de Salisbury, cet article analyse les raisons de sa farouche opposition à la deuxième réforme électorale de 1867 et, au contraire, de son acceptation de la troisième en 1884.

* 92 Hamilton Road, Oxford OX2 7QA

It is not possible to grasp the reasoning of those who opposed the extension of the franchise in the second half of the nineteenth century without taking account of the stance of Lord Salisbury. This is partly because of his political prominence. Well before his long periods of office as Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, he emerged in the 1860s as the leading figure among Conservative members of Parliament who opposed Benjamin Disraeli's moves to extend the right to vote. Salisbury's importance also stems from the fact that he was one of the most distinguished and prolific of Conservative political theorists.

Salisbury's career and writings

He was born in 1830. As younger son of the second Marquis of Salisbury he had the courtesy title of Lord Robert Cecil. He was a lonely child and a brilliant but neurotic young man whose undergraduate career at Oxford University was ended by a nervous breakdown. He recuperated on a voyage to the Southern Hemisphere, where the brutal treament he witnessed of aboriginal peoples by the British colonists convinced him of the fragility of civilised norms of behaviour and gave him an abiding mistrust of colonialism. By the age of twenty-three he was back in England, and his health was sufficiently recovered to permit him to win a competitive examination for election as Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, as well as election as a member of the House of Commons.

The fact that he was not his father's heir meant that he had social status without wealth. Nor did he marry a rich wife. This led him to earn money, especially in the 1850s and 1860s, by writing anonymous articles in journals such as the *Quarterly Review* and the *Saturday Review* . A list of these anonymous articles was discovered in the family papers. Its publication in 1961 enabled me to use the resulting bibliography of over 600 items as the main source for my book on *The Political Thought of Lord Salisbury 1854-1868* (London: Constable, 1967). This book will, in turn, be the basis for the following pages.

In 1865, the death of his elder brother meant that he assumed the courtesy title of Lord Cranborne. More important, it meant that he became heir to Hatfield House and its estates. This transformed the young MP's finances and his journalistic output declined. In 1868, he moved to the House of Lords following his father's death and changed his title once again to the Marquis of Salisbury.

From the 1850s, fear of moves to widen the franchise was a major theme of his anonymous writings (as well as those he, exceptionally, signed). So strong were his convictions that in 1867 he resigned his place in Lord Derby's third Cabinet when it introduced its Reform Bill.

The earliest of his periodical articles "Theories of Parliamentary Reform" appeared in a volume of *Oxford Essays* in February 1858. Here Salisbury recognises the existing anomalies in the English Constitution, but is of the view that any change will upset the precarious balance of institutions that have in practice worked so well. This leads him to the conclusion that "*We must either change enormously or not at all.*" The unbending resistance to democratic reforms expressed in this first article sets the key for almost all of the long articles that follow. The subject is directly dealt with in three of his long essays in *Bentley's Quarterly Review* and in over half of the thirty-three of his lengthy pieces written between 1860 and 1883 in the *Quarterly Review*. Four other articles are about Church matters and three deal with the Civil War in the United States. In fact, the real subject of all these articles is Reform: the Church because it was one of the main institutions under attack from the Radicals; and America because it was an example of the kind of democratic state that Britain would become if its Constitution were reformed.

Salisbury's style of thought and pessimistic character

Given the strength of his opposition to political change, it is initially surprising that his writings present a critical view of existing institutions whether in Britain or abroad. Certainly, his philosophy contrasts with that of the romantic school of Conservatism. He does not believe that existing structures have been hallowed by history. Nor does he use the organic simile popular with other Conservative thinkers — the argument that it is as dangerous to attempt surgery on the body politic as on a living organism, that to cut one organ or limb will make the whole entity bleed or die.

Salisbury, whose approach is in stark contrast with Disraeli's romanticism, is content to base his arguments on the Utilitarian method popular among the Liberals of his time. He accepts that existing institutions need to be justified according to whether they promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. To such reformers as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, such calculations of "greatest happiness" are likely to show that many existing institutions are worthless and need to be changed. By contrast, Salisbury uses the Utilitarian approach to reach very different conclusions. He is deeply pessimistic about the brutality of human nature and is thus painfully aware that the destruction of admittedly imperfect institutions may produce alternatives that are still worse.

Salisbury's fear of the revolutionary potential of democracy

Time and again his writings and speeches express fear of revolution. In all but exceptional cases, agitation — even if it is in a patently good cause — will lay bare explosive emotions and ambitions, "the revolutionary demon" will be unleashed and extremism will reign supreme. An account of this explosive cycle is given in Salisbury's first article in *Bentley's Quarterly Review*. He describes the typical

revolutionary pattern of events on the Continent. Monarchical tyranny leads to revolt. The reaction of the monarch is to make concessions and so:

> *A troop of unwashed ministers is invested with high-sounding offices and absolute power, and is loaded with the confidence and favour of the court... But the time of popular triumph and monarchical dirt-eating is short. The mob of the ignorant and half-starved to whom the revolution is due, and whom, therefore, its leaders dare not curb, looks upon its emancipation from law as the only solid fruit of victory. They plunge into excesses compared to which the previous tyranny was innocent, and soon bring on the reaction—that dreaded rebound from revolutionary fervour which a revolution rarely survives. On the wave of the reaction the monarch, complacently swallowing his oaths, floats back to absolute power... Thus tyranny begets resistance and resistance begets tyranny. At last the cup is once more full; the camel's back is broken; the rage and scorn of the sufferers have accumulated to that point that they are no longer amenable to the usual restraints of physical fear: and then the whole edifying spectacle of mob excess and court duplicity is played out again for the edification of the world.*[1]

He concludes that concessions to rioters and violent revolutionaries will encourage disrespect for law and order. This will bring unavoidable chaos and disaster. Salisbury illustrates this when he investigates the causes of the French defeat by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War. He attributes the defeat to the debilitating effect of the constant political instability and revolution which had plagued France:

> *It is feebleness of the very principle of Government, caused by chronic revolution, that has mainly brought about these vast disasters... The principle of submission to an established authority has disappeared; and every attempt to restore it has been baffled by the spirit which originally destroyed it.*[2]

On another occasion, he compares revolution to an epidemic and he several times points out that, although many political agitations start out with moderate and reasonable demands, it is "*the professors of extreme opinions who always in the end profit by revolutions*".[3] He warns that "*there must always be Girondins to pave the way for Jacobins*".[4]

Such fears account for his policies on Reform and on Church matters in the 1860s. In his writings he admits the anomalies in the system of Church Rates; he agrees almost completely with the complaints against the Establishment in Ireland; he is even in partial agreement with those who point out the anomalies of the constituency system produced by the 1832 Reform Act. He nevertheless opposes reforms in all these cases, invariably using one argument: reform will not bring contentment; it will produce renewed agitation. As he writes in *The Quarterly Review* article "Democracy on its Trial", "*Once the dyke is breached by small concessions, all will be lost.*"[5]

Apart from the disruption to be expected from a transition to democratic government, Salisbury fears the nature of democracy itself. Putting forward arguments that would later apply to Hitler's ascent to power, he claims that democracy is all too likely to lead right back to despotism. (This same problem is being discussed currently by American scholars of democracy, who refer to it as the "Algeria problem").[6] The mistake of democratic theorists was that their estimate of human nature was unrealistically generous :

> *The first impulse of any good man... is to believe everyone else to be as free from evil passion or blind selfishness as himself; and an over-belief in the goodness and wisdom of mankind is the 'first falsehood' of a sincere democratic reasoner.*[7]

Salisbury admitted that there were exceptional circumstances in which government by the people was workable: when things were going well, democratic government would stimulate commerce. As long as prosperity kept man's rapacious instincts dormant, democracy would survive. But:

> *The great danger of democracy is, that it places supreme power into the hands of those who may be misled by hunger into acts of folly or of wrong. In an old country, no excellence of institutions can ensure that such periods of maddening want shall not occasionally occur. Where the bounty of Nature is wellnigh exhausted, and multitudes exist on no other resources than the prosperity of trade, it must be that sometimes one precarious resource will fail. When such periods of distress do come, it is vain to hope that argument will restrain hungry men from relieving their own and their children's misery by any measures which the institutions of their country give them power to take.*[8]

Salisbury assumed that in all societies, at least in those of the nineteenth century, a preponderant amount of wealth would be in the possession of a minority of the citizens. He also thought that it was impossible to control the trade cycle and to avoid periods of depression. These two assumptions led him to the conclusion that democracy (*i.e.* the rule of the poor majority) led inevitably to the confiscation of the property of the rich — and this was in his mind tantamount to revolution. In times of great need, it would prove impossible for a popular government to resist the rapacious demands of the urban mob and it would thus have to acquiesce in its actions. An example of the kind of thing he feared is given in a leader on "The Rights of Labour at the Antipodes". The European miners were jealous of the Chinese workers, so they gathered together, marched on them, treated them brutally and stripped them of every shred of property :

> *Against this oppression there is no appeal for them. The utter impotence of the law in the face of any mob, which is the mark of all democratic constitutions, has been brought painfully to light.*[9]

Democracies are especially liable to crowd violence:

> *Passion is fostered equally by the two main characteristics of the democratic sovereign—ignorance and numbers.*[10]

The riots will spawn mob leaders, and, once they are in power, these ochlocrats will become despots. He comments that universal suffrage and the ballot "*have been found on the other side of the Channel to be as faithful ministers of one man's will as the sword and halter were in other days*".[11] Indeed, Salisbury claims that there is an "*essential identity between the democracy and the despotism... the same universal equality under one strong, unfettered, unrestricted government*".[12]

Arguing that democracy is "*absolute government of the numerical majority*"[13] he stresses another systematic disadvantage: it gives no guarantee for the rights of minorities. Salisbury quotes at length from Tocqueville on the subject of Majority Tyranny and is fully aware of its excesses in America.[14] He also considers the subject in an article on the "Representation of Minorities" and thinks that ingenious schemes of proportional representation (such as the one proposed by Hare) are bound to be ineffective:

> *It is to little purpose that the minority are protected from the strength of the majority at the hustings, if they are made to feel the full force of it in the division lobby.*[15]

The danger of majority tyranny is also great in countries with racial divisions. (Mill showed in "Representative Government" that he also was aware of this point.) These divisions constituted one of the greatest difficulties that faced Britain when the time came to give a form of popular government to such countries as New Zealand.[16]

Even when there is no danger of mob rule or of democratic despotism, the democratic form of government is a prey to other vices. Salisbury fears that democratic government will put too much power in the hands of the legislature and not enough with the executive. This legislature will be too greatly influenced by capricious shifts in public opinion and will suffer from chronic instability. In conditions such as these, able political leaders will not be prepared to come forward but will prefer to pursue other occupations. Politics will thus be left in the hands of mediocrities. He follows Tocqueville in showing how this process had occurred in America and he also gives examples of the same tendency in England.

He argues that the large urban constituencies with several thousand electors give an indication of the pattern that will become general if the franchise is extended. He gives lurid descriptions of politics in the London constituencies of Finsbury, Tower Hamlets and St. Marylebone (a constant theme of his pieces in the *Saturday Review*) and says that only characterless men will demean themselves by agreeing to come forward as candidates:

> *Marylebone is precisely in the condition to which an unrestricted suffrage has brought America. There is something so filthy in the humiliation that a Marylebone candidate has to undergo that none but mere political adventurers will stand... The refined and educated population who give to Marylebone the wealth of which its demagogues boast, who are the*

> *fountains of all its outward show of luxury and prosperity, hold themselves as much aloof from the filthy turmoil of borough politics as if they lived in New Orleans or New York ... The pewter-pot alone remains supreme.*[17]

Salisbury's distaste for the rituals of democratic electioneering was also personal. He was painfully shy and used the anonymity of the *Saturday Review* to detail the sufferings of "Shy People".[18] His emotional fear of democracy was largely due to his obsessive dislike of appearing before the public and of making political small talk. Fortunately he was rarely forced to do this while he remained the Member of Parliament for Stamford. After the passing of the Second Reform Act he was not compelled to change his ways as the death of his father in 1868 took him to the House of Lords and effectively removed him from the need to appear in public.

Salisbury's advocacy of the "constitutional state"

A passage in the last article which Salisbury wrote for *The Quarterly Review* gives the essence of his thought on institutional matters. Published in 1883, it bore the typically pessimistic title "Disintegration":

> *There is a general disposition among those who in the constituencies are opposing the party now in power to substitute the word Constitutional for the word Conservative in their political language. It is the fruit of a true instinct. The object of our party is not, and ought not to be simply to keep things as they are. In the first place, the enterprise is impossible. In the next place, there is much in our present mode of thought and action which it is highly undesirable to conserve. What we require is the administration of public affairs, whether in the executive or the legislative department, in that spirit of the old constitution which held the nation together as a whole, and levelled its united force at objects of national import, instead of splitting it into a bundle of unfriendly and distrustful fragments.*[19]

The way in which he proposes to hold the nation together is to apportion power between difference groups. His view is that the national interest will emerge when there is a balance between conservative and innovatory forces; between the dangers of stagnation and the dangers of recklessness; and between the vices of weak government and the vices of absolutism. This requires a political system which will ensure the existence of a balance between classes; a balance between the interests of the town and the interests of the country; and between the majority and the minority. And this will only be achieved when there is a balance between central government and municipal government; between the House of Commons and the House of Lords; between the legislature and the executive; and between the government on the one hand and the press on the other. Key words throughout the articles are "balance", "equipoise", "checks" and "equilibrium".

In political terms, Salisbury sees the balance between classes as implying an electoral system in which no single class has sufficient voting power to enable it to make attacks on the property of any other class. This leads him to propose that voting power should be related to wealth :

> *The State is a joint-stock company to all intents and purposes. It is the combination of a vast number of men for well-defined objects—the preservation of life and property. But it has this monstrous and unheard-of peculiarity, that it is a joint-stock company in which the shareholders vote, not by shares, but by heads.*[20]

He proceeds to agree that all lives are equal, but argues that property is not equal and thus suggests the possibility of a graduated franchise.

The piece just quoted comes from his 1858 essay on "Theories of Parliamentary Reform". The argument is repeated in an article on "Parliamentary Reform", in which he maintains that the tendency of Russell's demands of 1865 seems ultimately to be complete democracy and says that this must be rejected outright. But he continues to suggest as an alternative that :

> *They [*the working classes*] may not ask for supremacy... But they may ask for a share of political power proportioned to the share which their labour gives them in the country's wealth. Such a claim, if it be advanced, must be met in a very different tone from that which has justly been used to repel the intolerable claim of supremacy. It is probably in view of some such contingency that the Conservatives have always abstained from meeting any of the bills for the extensions of the suffrage with a direct negative... Their doctrines are not adverse to the claims of any particular class, except when that class is aiming to domineer over the rest. And, therefore, there is nothing inconsistent with their principles in any system of representation, however wide its scope may be, so long as it does not ignore the differences of property which exist in this country, and maintains with an even hand, the balance of power among the various classes of which the nation is made up.*[21]

Salisbury's political tactics

It will be evident that Salisbury's stance of parliamentary reform posed tactical dilemmas. His advocacy of a "balanced" constitutional framework suggested that he was willing to agree to a measure of reform. At the same time, his comparison between limited reform and a dyke which would burst as the result of even the smallest breach suggested a policy of no surrender to even minor expansions of the franchise. How did he resolve the dilemma?

Salisbury's actions in the 1860s differ from those of the 1880s. He was bitterly opposed to the Second Reform Act of 1867 and, as mentioned, resigned his Cabinet

position in protest. By the early 1880s, he was still warning of "Disintegration" and that "*All confidence in fixed principles or a determinate policy is gone.*" Yet he was willing to reach a compromise with the Liberals under William Gladstone's premiership and did not use the Tory majority in the House of Lords to block the Third Reform Bill of 1884.

His greater flexibility in the 1880s may in part have been temperamental. During the early years of his marriage, which coincided with his years in the House of Commons, he was affected by financial uncertainty and by a difficult family situation. By the 1880s, he was not only ensconced as the owner of one of Britain's great houses, he also had advanced to the leadership of the Conservative peers. It is reasonable to suppose that advancing age, money and position had produced a measure of mellowness that made it easier for him to tolerate constitutional compromise. In addition, the fact that the Reform Act of 1867 had not produced a revolutionary situation possibly made the prospect of an extension of the franchise outside the cities, as provided by the Third Reform Act of 1884, less threatening.

Yet, it would be a mistake to ignore the important political differences between 1867 and 1884. For all his distaste for electioneering, Salisbury was an avid and highly skilled back-stairs political manipulator. Though Winston Churchill was later to rate Stanley Baldwin as the Conservatives' greatest party manager, Salisbury is probably even more deserving of this attribution. After all, it was Salisbury who, in the mid 1880s, brought forty years of Liberal dominance to an end by exploiting Liberal divisions over Home Rule for Ireland.

From the late 1850s, Salisbury's fear was that political opportunism would lead to an extension of the franchise which neither the mainstream Conservatives nor the mainstream Liberals desired. At the time, Liberal governments were the norm. Conservatives could hope to win office only as a result of Liberal divisions. Whereas the Whig element of the Liberal party opposed any major extension of the right to vote, the Radicals favoured such an extension. Indeed the fall of Gladstone's Liberal government in 1866 resulted from a rebellion by a group of Whigs, led by Robert Lowe, who opposed the party's plans for parliamentary Reform.

In the short term, there was thus an opportunistic motive for the Conservatives to form an alliance of convenience with the Radicals. They could hope to retain office with Radical support. Salisbury's objection was that such a union-of-opposites was disreputable and unstable. If the Tories were determined to win office with Radical help, they would do so at the price of changing the political system in a way that not only conflicted with Tory principles but (by giving the vote to the urban working classes) would be to the party's permanent disadvantage. A preferable strategy was for the Conservatives to court the Whigs and to engineer their conversion from Liberal to Tory. Salisbury was eventually to achieve this tactical aim by his handling of the issue of Irish Home Rule.

Whereas tactical considerations led Salisbury to oppose the Conservative government's extension of the franchise in 1867, the same considerations led him to

cut a deal with the Liberal government in 1884. Not only did an extension of the rural and suburban vote in 1884 lack the revolutionary potential of the enfranchisement of the urban population in 1867, a deal with the Liberals would bring reliable political dividends. Salisbury agreed that the House of Lords would refrain from blocking the Liberal government's new Reform Act. In return, the Liberals agreed to a redistribution of seats. This was bound to be in the Conservatives' interests since it would give more seats to the, mainly Conservative, suburbs and rural areas.

The verdict of history

In the twentieth century, Salisbury's arguments seem antiquated. Yet, tragedies surpassing even his pessimistic imagination have shown the validity of his warnings. However notorious was the regime of the Tsars, the Russian Revolution produced a people's tyranny that was worse. In most of Africa and in many other parts of the world, the advent of democracy, which followed the end of colonial rule, was short-lived. The despotism and instability that Salisbury so dreaded became a normal state of affairs. Worst of all, it was by an aberration of democracy that Hitler won absolute power and the Nazi Holocaust was implemented.

While Salisbury's nightmares have been realised in much of the world, his alarming predictions for Britain have, paradoxically, proved unfounded. For all the country's problems and shortcomings, the universal franchise has brought neither a destruction of property nor so far the elimination of the Conservative party or the House of Lords. As these pages go to press, Salisbury's descendants still own Hatfield House. The current heir to the Marquisate, Lord Cranborne, is a member of the Conservative Cabinet. As Conservative leader of the House of Lords, he occupies the same room as his illustrious ancestor. He even has the same Christian name.

NOTES

1. "English Politics and Parties", *Bentley's Quarterly Review*, 1, 1859, p. 1.
2. "Political Lessons of the War", *Quarterly Review*, 130, 1871, p. 258.
3. "The Bicentenary", *Quarterly Review*, 112, 1862, p. 253.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
5. "Democracy on Its Trial", *Quarterly Review*, 110, 1861, p. 263.
6. See Gregory H. FOX and George NOLTE, "Intolerant Democracies", *Harvard International Law Review*, 36, Winter 1995.
7. "The New Reformers", *Saturday Review*, 18, 17 September 1864, p. 357.
8. "The Reform Bill", *Quarterly Review*, 119, 1866, p. 541.
9. "The Rights of Labour at the Antipodes", *Saturday Review*, 17, 28 September 1861, p. 318.
10. "Democracy on Its Trial", p. 269.
11. "France and Europe", *Bentley's Quarterly Review*, 2, 1859, p. 21.
12. "Steward's Room and Servants' Hall", *Saturday Review*, 12, 17 September 1863, p. 392.
13. "Democracy on Its Trial", p. 247.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
15. "Representation of Minorities", *Saturday Review*, 18, 10 September 1864, p. 322.
16. "Another New Zealand War", *Saturday Review*, 15, 15 April 1865, p. 463.
17. "Fiat Experimentum in Corpore Vili.", *Saturday Review*, 7, 25 June 1859, p. 776.
18. *Saturday Review*, 15, 28 February1863, p. 272.
19. "Disintegration",*Quarterly Review*, 156, 1883, p. 562.
20. "Theories of Parliamentary Reform", *Oxford Essays*, 4, 1858, p. 63.
21. "Parliamentary Reform", *Quarterly Review*, 117, 1865, p. 572.