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# PROBLEMS

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Problems Of Communism)

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by Gwydion M Williams

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# Bloody Balfour - Who Bloody Cares?

by Gwydion M. Williams

If we stand on the shoulders of cannibal giants, it is embarrassing. An inconvenient truth that we need to face up to.

We must also ask if there a better way? Except for those way out of tune with modern life, the answer would mostly be 'no'.

We live in a world made by the European Enlightenment. Violently re-made by radical democracy in the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. Remade yet again in the 'disastrous' 20th century by socialist reformers and by the radical violence of Global Leninism.

The Enlightenment ideal was the Enlightened Autocrat, who gave people what they would never be wise enough to choose for themselves. Such democratic

movements as existed were largely Extremist Puritans. A few of these shared Enlightenment ideas such as more equality for women, but most felt the opposite. The merger of these two antagonists in the French Revolution was a surprise, and naturally was a messy process.

Arthur Balfour was a late-blooming version of the original Enlightened Aristocrats. He'd have made a good Enlightened Autocrat, had the times been suitable. As things were, he was called 'Bloody Balfour' for his repression of Irish Nationalism. Much less well-known is his successful curing of the Irish Land Question by buying out the landlords. His clever solution of turning their tenants into small farmers of the sort

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BY THE RIGHT HON.  
ARTHUR J. BALFOUR, M.P.  
LL.D., F.R.S.

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1893

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that had largely vanished in England.

Arthur Balfour was a highly intelligent Tory who was Prime Minister from 1902 to 1905, and then Leader of the Opposition till 1911.<sup>1</sup> He was also Foreign Secretary from 1916 to 1919, and in this role he issued the Balfour Declaration that laid the basis for Jewish colonisation of a British Mandate of Palestine carved out of the defeated Ottoman Empire. But though it bears his name, it was a collective decision by most of Lloyd George's wartime Coalition Cabinet. (Surprisingly, the only Jew in that Cabinet, Edwin Montagu, was anti-Zionist and disapproved of it.<sup>2</sup>) Balfour continued in major roles under later Tory government, holding the major office of 'Lord President of the Council' till 1929 and dying in 1930, aged 81.

He was the most interesting ruling-class intellectual since Edmund Burke

Balfour was born into the inner circles of Toryism, where aristocrats still counted for a lot. More specifically, he was close to his uncle Lord Salisbury, promoted early by him and succeeding him as Prime Minister. This relationship is the likely source of the phrase 'Bob's your uncle':

"The origins are uncertain, but a common theory is that the expression arose after Conservative Prime Minister Robert "Bob" Cecil appointed his nephew Arthur Balfour as Chief Secretary for Ireland in 1887, an act which was apparently both surprising and unpopular."<sup>3</sup>

In office, Balfour proved to be a tough and intelligent politician:

"In early 1887, Sir Michael Hicks Beach, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, resigned because of illness and Salisbury appointed his nephew in his place... The selection took the political world by surprise, and was much criticized. It was received with contemptuous ridicule by the Irish Nationalists, for none suspected Balfour's immense strength of will, his debating power, his ability in attack and his still greater capacity to disregard criticism. Balfour surprised critics by ruthless enforcement of the Crimes Act, earning the nickname 'Bloody Balfour'. His steady administration did much to dispel his reputation as a political lightweight."<sup>4</sup>

Unlike most politicians, Balfour could also write intelligently about matters well away

1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur\\_Balfour](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Balfour). All Wiki quotes are from the text as it stood on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2018.

2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin\\_Montagu#Views\\_on\\_Zionism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_Montagu#Views_on_Zionism)

3 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob%27s\\_your\\_uncle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob%27s_your_uncle)

4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur\\_Balfour#Service\\_in\\_Lord\\_Salisbury's\\_governments](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Balfour#Service_in_Lord_Salisbury's_governments)

from his own experience:

"He became known in the world of letters; the academic subtlety and literary achievement of his *Defence of Philosophic Doubt* (1879) suggested he might make a reputation as a philosopher.

"Balfour divided his time between politics and academic pursuits."<sup>5</sup>

And like many highly intelligent and creative people, he had an unconventional personal life. You find among them disproportionate numbers of gays and lesbians, and also heterosexuals bad at forming stable relationships or with sexual interests that divert from actual sexual reproduction.

Some people are baffled that Natural Selection 'allows' homosexuality. I have never seen anyone expressing the same puzzlement about celibacy, suggesting that Christian traditions have more of a grip on their minds than they realise. In any case, this puzzlement arises from a misunderstanding of what Natural Selection is about: **the survival of an entire species.**

Humans thrive on the basis of forming abnormally large social groups: much larger than any of our ape and monkey relatives. Groups which feed together and take risks for each other, unlike the vast but asocial herds of grazing beasts or flocks of birds. (Flocks of birds, romantically viewed as forming a collective mind, turn out to be fragmented individualists who merely know that there is safety in numbers.<sup>6</sup>) And as humans evolved in small bands, genes that made their recipient more likely to be creative and less likely to reproduce could be favoured by Natural Selection.<sup>7</sup>

If Balfour was born with non-standard personal and sexual desires, that would fit a pattern. But it may also have been due to an early tragedy:

"Balfour was a lifelong bachelor. He met his cousin May Lyttelton in 1870 when she was 19. After her two previous serious suitors had died, Balfour is said to have declared his love for her in December 1874. She died of typhus on Palm Sunday, March 1875; Balfour arranged for an emerald ring to be buried in her coffin...

"Margot Tennant (later Margot Asquith) wished to

5 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur\\_Balfour#Early\\_career](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Balfour#Early_career).

6 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boids>

7 <https://gwydionwilliams.com/20-science/natural-selection-as-survival-of-the-grandkids/>

marry him, but Balfour said: 'No, that is not so. I rather think of having a career of my own.' His household was maintained by his unmarried sister, Alice. In middle age, Balfour had a 40-year friendship with Mary Charteris (née Wyndham), Lady Elcho, later Countess of Wemyss and March. Although one biographer writes that 'it is difficult to say how far the relationship went', her letters suggest they may have become lovers in 1887 and may have engaged in sado-masochism, a claim echoed by A. N. Wilson. Another biographer believes they had 'no direct physical relationship', although he dismisses as unlikely suggestions that Balfour was homosexual, or, in view of a time during the Boer War when he replied to a message while drying himself after his bath, Lord Beaverbrook's claim that he was 'a hermaphrodite' whom no-one saw naked."<sup>8</sup>

The man's detached attitudes suggest to me a man who hadn't got what he wanted out of life, despite his wealth and apparent success. It is also possible he saw the decline of his class and his values and had no wish to father children who'd live in what he'd have seen as a darkening world. Or just wished to avoid the extra social entanglements that having a wife of his own class would have involved.

Unlike the New Right, Balfour knew that society was an organic thing. He was of course concerned mostly with the interests of the rich elite he had been born into. But he also shows deep understanding of what was actually going on. Had the New Right mixed a little Balfour with their Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill, they might not have made such a mess of their brief dominance in the 1990s.

People on the left also need to read, mark and inwardly digest Balfour, to become more effective politically.

There is however no need to view Balfour as anything other than an enemy: in fact more of an enemy than most people realise. He created the *Committee of Imperial Defence*,<sup>9</sup> a confidential body set up by him as Prime Minister in 1902. Its overt role was to create a strategic vision defining the future roles of Britain's armed forces. It set up Security Services that evolved into MI5 and MI6. And covertly, it did a lot to prepare for a war to break the rising power of Germany. Balfour

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur\\_Balfour#Background\\_and\\_early\\_life](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Balfour#Background_and_early_life)

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee\\_of\\_Imperial\\_Defence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committee_of_Imperial_Defence)

was very much bound up with this, and blundered. It was a disaster that hastened the decline of both Balfour's class and the British Empire in general.

But his Old Right tradition once meant something, and its insights have been lost amidst a flood of New Right nonsense and weak liberal-left capitulation to their errors.

It is also useful to remind people how alien the Toryism of the late-19th and early-20th century was. And how little inclined to change it was at the time. Those who claim that Global Leninism failed, seem ignorant of how much all modern Western thinking includes ideas once confined to Marxists. Social values that for many years had been chiefly championed by Communists and their sympathisers.<sup>10</sup>

There are plenty of reason to hate Balfour. But hate is unproductive, mostly hurting you more than the target. Balfour needs to be studied dispassionately, because he accurately sees the flaws in the liberalism of the time.

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The works reproduced in this magazine come from an 1893 collection called *Essays and Addresses*. In his introduction, Balfour says:

"This volume consists of a certain number of Essays and Addresses which have been delivered or written during the last eleven years. None of them have any relation to party politics except perhaps, to a very slight extent, the review of Mr. Morley's Cobden. But even in this case it seems to me that the changes that have come over current political theories since Mr. Cobden's death are so great that an estimate of certain particular aspects of his public career may be attempted without unduly raising controversies in which modern politicians are immediately concerned."

Unless I specify otherwise, all text and quotes from Balfour come from a free version of *Essays and Addresses*. (InternetArchive, <https://archive.org/details/essaysandaddres01balfgoog>.) Additions within his text are indicated by square brackets.

I have excluded almost all of Balfour's notes, which you can find on-line if you want to check anything. Those I found interesting or necessary are incorporated in the text.

<sup>10</sup> <https://gwydionwilliams.com/history-and-philosophy/the-left-redefined-the-normal/>

# Balfour on Cobden and Manchester Liberalism

*Balfour's essay is entitled Cobden and the Manchester School. It is a review of an 1879 biography by John Morley. The book is now almost forgotten, though anyone interested can read it for free at the 'Online Library of Liberty'. I have omitted the very long first paragraph of Balfour's essay, which gives details of Morley's book and other sources on Cobden.*

*Richard Cobden lived from 1804 to 1865. He was an English industrialist who rose from middle-class beginnings to be moderately rich. A Radical and Liberal statesman, he was associated with two major free trade campaigns, the Anti-Corn Law League and a major Free Trade treaty with France. He still has his fans, and Corn Law abolition is still praised.*

*Morley was a major Liberal politician. He opposed imperialism and the Boer War. In 1914, he resigned in protest at Britain's entry into the First World War as an ally of Russia.*

*Balfour on Cobden remains relevant, because Thatcherism revived much of the creed of Radical Liberalism. It had entered the Tory Party when the Liberal Party disintegrated. Disintegrated after losing credibility from the way they fought the First World War.*

Cobden's career, if interesting for no other reason, would be so for this, that it differs in outline — is framed, so to speak, on a different plan — from that of every other man who has risen to eminence in English political life. It was unusual in its commencement, in its course, and in its culmination. Most men desirous of a share in the direction of public affairs regard a Parliamentary seat as the first, and a certain measure of Parliamentary success as the second, requisite for giving practical effect to their political creed; while they look to office as the most effective instrument for turning the power which they may so obtain to the best account.

If this be the normal course of an English statesman, Cobden's course was abnormal in every particular. His political importance depended upon causes among which position in the House of Commons was the smallest. The most triumphant moment of his public life — the day on which the Bill repealing the Corn Laws received the Royal assent — occurred before he had sat through a whole Parliament; and it is doubtful whether it would have occurred a day later, or if he would have had a title to a smaller share in the result, had he never been a member of Parliament at all. Similar observations, though with considerable qualification, might be made respecting his career generally. Throughout his life he was always more concerned in advancing some special object or in enforcing some single idea than in taking a varied part in the complex business of government; and therefore it was that he did not regard either Parliament or office as essential instruments for carrying out his purposes. Office might too easily become

a restraint; Parliament could not be more than a superior "stump" from which the favourite opinion might be advocated.

Cobden therefore must be looked on rather as a political missionary than as a statesman, as an agitator rather than as an administrator. But he was, for the particular objects he had in view, and for the particular audiences he had to address, the most effective of missionaries and the greatest of agitators. Mr. Morley puts him in this respect second to O'Connell, but in truth it is impossible to draw a comparison between them. O'Connell would have been as powerless among the middle class of Lancashire and the West Riding as Cobden would have been among the excitable peasantry of Ireland. All large audiences are moved more through their feelings than their reason. But an English multitude differs from an Irish one in preferring that appeals to its feelings should at least have the external appearance of argument; and in the art of making such appeals - Cobden was a master who has never been surpassed.

The most superficially striking fact about this career of political propagandism is the very different measure of success which it met with in its first and in its second part. It is not too much perhaps to say that the Cobden of 1850-60 owed the greater part of his authority in the national councils to the reputation acquired by the Cobden of 1841-46. Men listened with respect to the untiring advocate of peace and disarmament because he was the same man who had so effectually preached against "monopolies." But they listened without conviction, and he preached without success. In 1845 Sir Louis Malet is able to describe him, not very accurately indeed, but

without any glaring absurdity, as the “tribune of the people.” Ten years had not elapsed before he sank from being the tribune of the people to being the unpopular adherent of a small and powerless sect, wholly unable to influence the course of events, and scarcely able to obtain a hearing except in the House of Commons, an assembly which Cobden ungratefully declared to be “packed” in the interests of that class whom he regarded it as his special mission to oppose.

This striking change, which reached its dramatic climax in 1857, when the so-called Manchester School was for an instant deprived of political existence, deserves explanation. It cannot be said that the general arguments in favour of peace and disarmament were either more difficult to understand or appealed to feebler motives than the arguments in favour of cheap bread. Both the one and the other were primarily (I do not say exclusively) directed to plain and obvious feelings of self-interest — a mode of persuasion of which Cobden always had the highest opinion. Neither is it the fact that the advocates showed less zeal and less courage on the second occasion than on the first; for the zeal of the “Peace Party” was great, and their courage beyond all praise. Nor yet can it be alleged that their criticism on the prevailing policy was right between 1840 and 1850, and wholly wrong between 1850 and 1860, since few will, I suppose, be found prepared to defend in its entirety the foreign policy of the Liberal and Coalition Ministries during those years.

Mr. Bright, in 1857, when his party collapsed, offered an explanation — indeed, two explanations — of the problem. The first he saw in the “ignorance, scurrility, selfishness, ingratitude, and all the unpleasant qualities that every honest politician must meet with” when he “does his duty;” while the second is given in the following sentence, which I extract from a letter to Cobden of that date: “In the sudden break-up of ‘the school’ of which we have been the chief professors, we may learn how far we have been, and are, ahead of the public opinion of our time. We purpose not to make a trade of politics;” and so on.

Some less simple explanation, however, seems to be required than that “the school” was honest and enlightened, while other people were “ignorant, scurrilous, selfish, and ungrateful.” Politicians, following this example, need never find any difficulty in placing their conduct in an interesting light, whatever view the public may happen to take of it. Are they the popular favourites? Then are they the representatives, the tribunes, of the people, and speak almost with the voice of inspiration. Does the people

burn them in effigy? It is a sign and measure of the extent to which they are ahead of the public opinion of their time.

The people’s voice is odd,

It is, and it is not, the voice of God.

With all deference, then, to the high authorities on the other side, it appears to me that the principal causes of the profound divergence between the general feeling and the opinions of Cobden and his colleagues during the last fourteen years of his life, are to be found in the peculiar conditions of the period in which they began their public life — conditions which, themselves transient and exceptional, have yet profoundly and perhaps permanently affected the course of English politics.

In ordinary times and under ordinary circumstances there is no reason why the line of political “cleavage” should in any way coincide with the difference between the manufacturing and the agricultural interest. The fact that one man has his property invested in land and farm-buildings, and another in plant and machinery, does not in the nature of things supply a sufficient reason for their belonging to different political parties. The period, however, when Cobden first took interest in public affairs, was in this respect not ordinary. The very imperfect representation of the great manufacturing centres, which it was the chief and perhaps the only merit of the first Reform Bill to have remedied, left a certain soreness even after it had disappeared. When to the memory of this former grievance was added the consciousness of an existing wrong — when it was shown that in the interests of the class who had too long retained an undue share of political power, laws were in force which favoured their material prosperity at the expense of those very persons who had just been admitted to a full share of Parliamentary influence — it is evident that the conditions existed under which ordinary party warfare might be complicated by a struggle between the manufacturers and agriculturalists, or, as Cobden chose to put it, between the middle classes and the aristocracy. These were facts which the philosophic Radicals (who to a certain extent prepared the way for their more robust brethren of the Manchester School) were perfectly ready to demonstrate. Their politics made them dislike the landlords, their political economy made them dislike the Corn Laws, and they were ready to supply any amount of abstract reasoning in favour of a policy which might impoverish the one by destroying the other. Abstract reasoning, however, though not to be despised as an ally, is by itself the feeblest of political forces. If Protection had embraced the whole circle of our industries, or if it had

been used to keep up the price of anything but the necessaries of life, fragments of it might have survived to this day, in spite of all the demonstrations in the world. But it so happened that the great change in our fiscal system in the direction of Free Trade had already begun in the pre-Reform period under Lord Liverpool, and had not begun with agriculture. It was inevitable, therefore, that the manufacturers should ask why Parliament in dealing with the articles they produced should legislate in favour of the consumer, while in dealing with the articles they consumed it should legislate in favour of the producer; and this question, though not more difficult to answer, became much more difficult to ignore when commerce was declining, poor-rates rising, and wheat cost seventy-seven shillings a quarter.

The interest of all this, so far as Cobden is concerned, lies in the fact that instead of entering into political life merely as a member of one of the two great political parties, he entered it to fight a manufacturer's, or as he called it, a middle-class battle, against "aristocratic monopolists," with arguments drawn from an abstract science. These circumstances modified profoundly, and, as I think, perniciously, the whole course of his public life. They fostered the habit of regarding all political controversies as controversies between classes; so that (among other evil effects) to all the bitternesses which arise from political disagreement was added all the bitternesses which arise from real or imaginary social divisions. They induced him to rate too highly the importance of purely economic considerations in deciding questions of general policy, and to misinterpret or ignore some of the most powerful and by no means the most contemptible, motives by which the history of nations is influenced. They were, perhaps, the real causes of the un-English character attributed to his school of statesmanship by Mr. Disraeli, and which Mr. Bright, while he confessed to it, characteristically claimed as an indication of its superior honesty and public spirit.

Those who are desirous to observe how these causes conspired together to warp Cobden's political speculations, may note his theory of "the aristocracy," a theory almost as important in his political system as is the law of gravitation in astronomy. Mr. Morley appears entirely to share his hero's views on this subject, and his two volumes throughout presuppose a version of the drama of English history, according to which a selfish, unscrupulous, and feudal aristocracy figures sometimes as the villain, and sometimes as the fool of the piece, alternately coercing, robbing, and corrupting a weak but estimable

middle class. "Selfish," "insolent," "corrupt," "depraved," "prejudiced," "stupid," "virulent," "unscrupulous," "hypocritical," "unprincipled," are some of the expressions Mr. Morley is impelled to employ, in order to do justice to his own and his friend's views of landlords and aristocrats, protectionist or otherwise; and though Cobden is more moderate in his language, he is scarcely more reasonable in his opinions. We are not, it must be remembered, dealing now with the rhetorical devices—the "violations of good taste and kind feeling"—which Cobden said he found necessary in order that audiences which declined to come merely to be instructed might be "excited, flattered, and pleased"; nor yet with the outbursts of that irritable intolerance, which, as displayed by one member of the school, so strangely remind Mr. Morley of the "wrath of an ancient prophet." We are concerned with a theory which was gravely held by the leaders of the "Manchester School," which modified all their political judgments and supplied them with a key to all the mysteries of contemporary politics. According to this the population of England might be divided, not only socially but for all political purposes, into three classes—upper, middle, and lower. The interests of the middle and lower classes were identical, and were both opposed to the interests of the upper class. Nevertheless it was the upper class which governed the country. It refused to admit any members of the other classes to a share in the direction of affairs. It liked large armaments, because they supported the younger children of landlords. It liked war, because war justifies large armaments. It liked an active foreign policy, because that always conduces to war. Its very existence was a standing violation of the "principles of political economy."

This singular theory was probably derived in part from the doctrinaire school of political economists, who having divided the produce of agriculture into rent, profit, and wages, and having asserted, truly enough, that rent as defined by them was not earned either by labour or abstinence, were apt to regard its existence as an economic accident, unfortunately taken advantage of by a small and not very useful portion of the community. It is evident, also, that Cobden's views on this subject were largely influenced by his own strong class feeling. He chose to regard the manufacturers as a distinct "order" in the State, and he chose to regard "the aristocracy" as another and rival "order." One of his early aspirations was to see the commercial classes "become the De Medicis, Fuggers, and De Witts of England, instead of glorying in being the toadies of a clodpole aristocracy only

less enlightened than themselves.” And many years later he expressed, in not less polished language, vehement indignation against the manufacturers of Manchester, who declined to be represented by so valiant a defender of their “order” as Mr. John Bright.

The principal cause, however, of Cobden’s “class theory” of English politics is, I believe, to be found in the Corn Law controversy; — and at first sight the circumstances of this struggle might seem to supply not only a sufficient motive, but an adequate justification of it. For while there could be no doubt that the leaders of the Protectionists were landlords, it was also true that their interests were involved in maintaining the protective system, while the interests of the urban portion of the community lay on the whole in its abolition. Here, if anywhere, might seem to exist a state of things which would justify the epithets of which I gave above an imperfect, though sufficient catalogue.

In truth, however, a sober examination of the facts of English politics, between the formation of the League and the abolition of the Corn Laws, is quite sufficient to show that the government of England was not then, any more than at previous periods of our history, aristocratic in any proper sense of that term, and that the class whom Cobden chose to describe as the aristocracy, were not open to the charges of unscrupulous selfishness which it pleased him and his school frequently to bring against them.

It is absurd to ascribe corrupt motives to large bodies of men, merely because the economic theories they adopt are in accordance with their own interests. No one doubts the purity of Cobden’s motives in promoting the Corn Law agitation. Yet Cobden not only believed that the profits of his ordinary business would be greatly augmented by the changes he advocated, but went out of his way to speculate in town land, on the ground that its value must rise as soon as the tax on bread was abolished. It may be said that the motives of the Protectionists were liable to suspicion because their theories were not only favourable to themselves, but were manifestly false. But at this moment the vast majority of the civilised world advocate false economic theories of precisely the same kind; and of that majority, the great majority imagine those theories to be to their own advantage. The civilised world may possibly be foolish: but not, surely, unscrupulous and hypocritical. Why are the English landlords of 1845 to be described in harsher language than the English manufacturers of 1821, or the French, American, German, Russian, Canadian, and Australian manufacturers of 1881. Their error may be a proof of stupidity, but if it be, the

stupidity is too general to excite either surprise or indignation.

In truth, however, it was hardly open to Cobden to charge the Protectionists with stupidity. Though not, so far as appears, a very profound political economist himself, he was of opinion that political economy was more difficult of comprehension than any of the “exact sciences.” Which of the exact sciences he had mastered (unless phrenology be one) Mr. Morley does not, so far as I recollect, inform us. But at all events the majority of mankind cannot be expected to understand the exact sciences, and are not to be described as selfishly foolish when they fail to do so.

But Cobden committed a much more serious error than that of merely misjudging the motives of his political opponents: — he misjudged their political position. When he represented the Corn Laws as examples of the pernicious class legislation, which, together with wars and armaments, we owed to the fact that we have long been governed by a “feudal aristocracy,” he used language admirably suited indeed to further his agitation, but not at all fitted to encourage, either in himself or his hearers, a true perception of the facts.

In the first place it is as certain as anything in hypothetical history can be, that Corn Laws would have existed in England, however property in land had happened to be distributed. If the soil had been owned in small lots, protection would have been demanded, and given, as surely as it was under the actual circumstances; but it would not have been so easily removed. Cobden, as we have seen, shared to the full the dislike of his school to large landed properties. In this he was ungrateful. It was the existence of large landed properties that ensured and accelerated the great triumph of his life. Does any one imagine that any important minority of a peasant proprietary would have been converted to the doctrine of Free Trade? Or that any minority at all would have supported a bill calculated to reduce them by thousands to beggary and ruin? Owing to the existence of a “feudal aristocracy” those most permanently, if not most deeply, interested in the continuance of a tax on bread were few; they were not united; and the question to them was not one of life and death. Had the soil been parcelled out among small owners, all these conditions would have been reversed. The country would have been arrayed against the towns, powerful, perhaps overwhelming in numbers, entirely of one mind, undisturbed by any knowledge of the “exact sciences,” and determined by hard necessity to fight to the last. How, and at what cost, would

such a struggle have ended?

In the second place, it cannot be doubted that the Protectionist landlords, so far from fighting, as Cobden would say, solely for their "order," represented the middle classes of the counties as faithfully as did Cobden and the leaders of the League the middle classes of the towns. That the landlords have ever in English history constituted, in any accurate sense of the term, a political aristocracy, is indeed a pure illusion. An aristocracy is a class which governs independently of, and if need be in opposition to, public opinion. There has never been any such government in this country. It is not of course denied that in England the owners of the soil have been a powerful body; nor should I dispute the fact that the same public opinion from which, in the main, they derived their power may possibly have in some cases permitted it to be used, consciously or unconsciously, for purposes more to their advantage than to that of the community at large. It can hardly be otherwise. The government which does not occasionally sacrifice a general advantage feebly coveted to the wishes of a class powerfully expressed, has yet to be discovered. But this disease is incident to all forms of government by public opinion. Whatever the nominal form of such government may be, whether it be called republican or monarchical, whether it has a less or a more restricted suffrage, there will always be classes in it whose members have greater power than any equal number of its other citizens taken at random. These classes may consist of landowners or millowners, journalists or wirepullers. Their power may be exercised on the whole for good, or on the whole for evil. It may arise from temporary or from enduring causes. It may be obtained by historical accident, by intrigue, by merit, by utility to a faction or by obsequiousness to a mob. But however it be acquired, or however it be used, it is certain to exist. It must be observed, indeed, that this class power is of very different kinds. It may belong to a class in its corporate capacity, acting as a united body. Such is the power of the railway "interest" or of the "Irish vote." It may belong to a class because the individuals composing that class, or many of them, are possessed of special sources of influence, as, for example, editors of newspapers or large employers of labour; for it may belong to a class, because its members, possessing leisure, local position, or some other quality which commends them as fitting candidates to the constituencies, are largely chosen as the exponents of public opinion, or of some important section of public opinion. Cobden too often forgot the extent to

which the class whom he chose to describe as "the aristocracy" obtained their power in this third or derivative manner. He was by this initial mistake constantly led into errors of judgment - regarding the nature of the political forces with which he had to deal. During the continuance of the Corn Law controversy, this was of small moment. It added greatly to the force and point of his rhetoric to represent the hated "monopoly" as imposed by the power, and retained in the interests, of a small, a selfish, and a wealthy minority; and the opinion, though absurd, led to no practical inconveniences. But when this question was disposed of, his theory led him sometimes into strange mistakes. In 1848 he feared a war with France owing to the "natural repugnance on the part of our Government, *composed as it is entirely of the aristocracy*, to go on cordially with a republic." In the next year we find him writing to Mr. Bright, "I wish to abate the power of the aristocracy in their strongholds. Our enemy is subtle and powerful," etc. By 1852, however, *a propos* of the Militia Bill, he began somewhat more clearly to recognise that wickedness and folly were not confined entirely to high places. "All the aristocratic parties," he says, "are in favour of more armaments. Our business is to try and make the people of a different opinion. I am more and more convinced that we have much to do with the public, before we can, with any sense or usefulness, quarrel with this or that aristocratic party." The next year, this not very recondite fact seems to be clearly apprehended. "Before you and I," he writes, "find fault with the Whig chiefs, let us ask ourselves candidly whether the country at large is in favour of any other policy than that which has been pursued by the aristocracy, Whig and Tory, for the last century and a half." Yet when the crash came in 1857, the hardly learnt truth is forgotten. Cobden was unable to believe that the middle classes and "the aristocracy" could honestly agree to differ with him. Some other explanation had to be sought for the total collapse of the Manchester School, and that explanation he found in the degradation of the class in whom he had been accustomed to put his trust. Prompted by the same spirit of enlightened charity which suggested the statement that the wickedness and folly of unnecessary wars could not be avoided, because without the expenditure on "wars and armaments" the "aristocracy could not endure," he suggests a not less wicked but even more contemptible reason for the adherence of the "middle classes" to the policy of the "upper." As the latter are, according to Cobden's theory, influenced by greed of money, so the former are influenced by subservience to rank. The

manufacturers of Manchester who presumed to turn out Mr. Bright are “base snobs,” who “kick away the ladder” by which they have risen to prosperity, and their action is characterised as “a display of snobbishness and ingratitude.” A friend makes a failure in seconding the Address. Upon which Cobden writes: “I have never known a manufacturing representative put into a cocked hat and breeches and ruffles, with a sword by his side, to make a speech for Government, without having his head turned by the feathers and frippery. Generally they give way to a paroxysm of snobbery, and go down on their bellies, and throw dust on their heads, and fling dirt at the prominent men of their own order.”

[This long paragraph also includes the only note in the essay I think worth reproducing:

*[In reference to this favourite accusation of the Manchester School, it may interest the reader to note (1) that Mr. Morley tells us ... that in 1864 “the supreme control of peace and war was finally taken out of the hands of the old territorial oligarchy;” (2) that he is of opinion ... that the “Liberal awakening” which “placed Mr. Gladstone in power, with Mr. Bright himself for the most popular and influential of his colleagues,” put the country in a condition to deal properly with the expenditure on armaments, which could not be done in 1862 owing to “the ignorance and flunkeyism of the middle classes;” (3) that the army and navy estimates are now (1882) bigger than ever. I may confess that I used to believe that the stupid calumny to which I allude in the text was an invention unscrupulously used for party purposes. I must sincerely apologise for this silent injustice, which had its origin in the fact that the theory in question seemed to be too foolish to be credited by men of sense and education. I gladly yield to the conclusive evidence to the contrary which is furnished by the private correspondence of Mr. Cobden.]*

It is some comfort to think that in this dark picture of the meanness of “the only class (as Cobden said) from whose action in his time any beneficial changes were to be expected,” some brighter spots are to be found. Prone as the middle classes are to be “timid and servile” to the “feudal governing class,” yet in one favoured spot more masculine qualities are still to be found among them. In August 1857, shortly after his rejection for Manchester, Mr. Bright was elected for Birmingham. The people of Birmingham, it is reassuring to learn, are “honest and independent,” and “free from aristocratic snobbery.”

We could have, I think, no more striking example than this of the extent to which Cobden’s

judgment of men was perverted by his inveterate habit of looking at every question from the point of view of class divisions. Making all allowance for the irritation caused by a crushing defeat not very philosophically endured, is there not something very foolish, and I had almost said a little vulgar, in thus attributing the catastrophe to the overmastering influence of the meanest and vulgarest of motives? Grant that Lord Palmerston was entirely in the wrong about the China War [the Second Opium War]; grant that the combination of parties which forced him to dissolve was entirely in the right; is the theory credible, is it even plausible, which represents the political forces which sent him back to office after the general election, as being the infamous cupidity of one section of the community and the contemptible meanness of another? Is it impossible that for some, even for most political purposes, social divisions should be neglected? Is it impossible that the general opinion of all classes should be swayed by one set of motives? Is it impossible that those motives should be respectable?

In all this the influence of the fact that Cobden’s early political battles really were class contests is sufficiently apparent. The other circumstance I pointed out, namely, that those battles were fought for commercial objects and on economic grounds, had even more effect on the character and influence of the opinions which he spent the latter portion of his life in advocating.

Some lady, in 1852, remarked that Cobden’s policy never rose beyond a “bagman’s millennium.” This observation, uttered in private, and in the freedom of conversation, was not untrue for an epigram, and was both more just and more charitable than some of the judgments (by no means epigrammatic) which in these volumes Mr. Morley has written down, printed, corrected for the press, and published. His comments on the observation are in these terms

“This was the clever way among the selfish and insolent of saying, that the ideal which Cobden cherished was comfort for the mass, not luxury for the few. He knew much better than they (i.e. the class “whose lives are one long course of indolence, diletantism, and sensuality”) that material comfort is, as little as luxury, the highest satisfaction of man’s highest capacities, but he could well afford to scorn the demand for fine ideals of life on the lips of a class who were starving the workers of the country in order to save their own rents.”

Mr. Morley is angry but confused. The second sentence of his criticism shows that he understands the nature of the complaint urged

by the “insolent and selfish” against Cobden’s views of national policy; so that the first sentence must be regarded as a deliberate perversion of it. As for the last clause, it is as impossible to see why Cobden should scorn a demand which he knew to be just because he objected to the lips which uttered it, as to discover how, in 1852, six years after the abolition of the Corn Laws, it was possible “to save rents by starving the workers of the country.”

What, then, was the policy of which it is so dangerous to hint disapprobation? Cobden’s admirers sometimes talk as if he was the discoverer of the fact that war is expensive, that when it is unnecessary it is not only expensive but wicked, and that the nation which does that which is expensive and wicked is certain to suffer both in purse and morals. His opponents, on the other hand, sometimes represent him as advocating peace under all circumstances and under every provocation; or, as it is called, “peace at any price.” As a matter of fact he did something more important than preach the commonplaces for which the first applaud him, and something less absurd than support the paradox which the second lay to his charge. It is true that these last seem almost justified by the impartial and universal disapproval with which Cobden regarded everything which could by any possibility promote what he called “the military spirit”. He not only thought that every modern war which this country has ever been engaged was wholly indefensible, but he regarded with the darkest suspicion every instrument by which war, whether offensive or defensive, could by any possibility be carried on. He wished to cut down the army and the navy; he objected to the militia; he attacked the volunteers; and he vehemently disapproved of every fortification scheme that was proposed.

But behind all this criticism of war and warlike expenditure there lay a theory of the British Empire which, if accepted, would go far to account for Cobden’s views respecting armaments, but which the English people did not accept in Cobden’s lifetime, and do not accept now. It was this fundamental divergence which rendered it inevitable that his reiterated attacks on the military policy of successive governments should fail of their effect, and made the best-founded objections liable to a natural suspicion that they rested on presuppositions with which his hearers could not agree. Cobden’s view of the external relations of our Empire was purely commercial and economic; in the language of the “selfish and insolent,” the view of a bagman. “He delighted,” says Mr. Morley, “in such businesslike as that the cost of the Mediterranean

Squadron, in proportion to the amount of trade which it was professedly employed to protect, was as though a merchant should find that his traveller’s expenses for escort alone were to amount to 6s. 8d. in the pound on the amount of his sales.” In something of the same spirit he estimated the value of our foreign possessions. In order to be worth keeping they must pay, and pay in a manner as easily demonstrable as the profits of a bank or the yield of a mine. Not only must they pay, but it must be shown that they would not pay as well if they belonged to somebody else; and on this point Cobden was not easy to convince. The author of the Commercial Treaty with France was of opinion that the manufacturers of Manchester exhibited a melancholy ignorance of the principles of Free Trade when they viewed with alarm the possibility of India passing to another, and, as he must have known, a protectionist power. “Now that the trade of Hindostan,” he says, “is thrown open to all the world on equal terms, what exclusive advantage can we derive to compensate for all the trouble, cost, and risk of ruling over such a people?” And again: “Under the *regime* of Free Trade Canada is not a whit more ours than the United States.” Inspired by these opinions, he would have seen India go with pleasure, the colonies without regret. They cost money to defend; and we got nothing for the privilege of defending them but commercial advantages which we should equally possess if they had to defend themselves.

Now I do not mean to discuss the effect which the loss of our Indian and colonial possessions would have on our trade, though I think Cobden underrated and greatly underrated it; nor yet the evil consequences of severance to the dependencies themselves, which Cobden denied or left out of account. The interesting point is to note how apt he was to ignore for himself, and to misinterpret in others, every view of the Empire which was not exclusively commercial. To him our vast and scattered dominions appeared to be an ill-constructed fabric, built at the cost of much innocent blood and much ill-spent treasure, and which, having been originally contrived in obedience to a mistaken theory of trade, was not worth the trouble of keeping in repair now that that theory had been finally exploded. The same deficient sympathy and insight which prevented him seeing any cause for the Napoleonic wars but the selfish ambition of the “ruling class,” or any result of them but continental complications and a crushing debt, made him regard the motives which induce ordinary Englishmen obstinately to cling to the responsibilities of Empire as consisting of an

uninstructed love of gain or a vulgar greed of territory. He may have been right in thinking that the weight of imperial responsibilities will become a burden too heavy to be borne. It may be true that the sceptre of dominion is doomed at no distant date to slide from our failing grasp. We may be destined, from choice or from necessity, to shut ourselves up within the four seas; and it is not absolutely impossible, though in the highest degree improbable, that even under these conditions our Board of Trade Returns may be such as to delight the heart of a Chancellor of the Exchequer. But no man is fit to estimate the consequences of these changes who attempts to estimate them solely and exclusively by figures. The sentiments with which an Englishman regards the English Empire are neither a small nor an ignoble part of the feelings which belong to him as a member of the commonwealth. If therefore that Empire is destined to dissolve, and with it all the associations by which it is surrounded; if we in these islands are henceforth to turn our gaze solely inwards upon ourselves and our local affairs; if we are to have no relations with foreigners, or with men of our own race living on other continents, except those which may be adequately expressed by double entry and exhibited in a ledger; — we may be richer or poorer for the change, but it is folly to suppose that we shall be richer or poorer only. An element will be withdrawn from our national life which, if not wholly free from base alloy, we can yet ill afford to spare; and which none, at all events, can be competent to criticise unless, unlike Mr. Cobden, they first show themselves capable of understanding it. If Cobden's views on questions of foreign and colonial policy were somewhat narrowed by his too strictly economic view of our external relations, it was only natural that his views on all questions connected with land should be somewhat warped by his aversion to the class who owned so much of it. One of the most amusing instances of this is a proposal he makes for settling the Irish land difficulty by applying to it the law of succession as it exists in France. Many strange remedies have been proposed for the agrarian ills of that unhappy country: some strange ones have been adopted; but surely no one before or since has professed to see the salvation of Ireland in the slow but indefinite multiplication of squireens. It was not, however, to large landlords in Ireland only that he objected. He professed to think that a "feudal governing class" (as by a bold misuse of terms he was accustomed to describe them) "exists only in violation of sound principles of political economy." But he left no very clear account of

what he meant by the statement. If, as might be conjectured, he was alluding to the restrictions (for the most part imaginary) on the sale and transfer of land, which are due to settlement and entail, it is sufficient to remark that no class owes its existence or its power to the continuance of these restrictions: if he meant anything else, it is difficult to see what political economy has to do with the matter. The inquiry, however, is not very important. Cobden was not the first, nor will he be the last statesman who imagines that in yielding to his political or social dislikes he does honour to political economy; and the particular form which the process of self-deception took in his case is not now of much interest even from a purely biographical point of view.

Much, then, as there is to admire in his hero, a perusal of the new material Mr. Morley has provided us with does not, I think, dissipate the impression that the eulogies of some of his disciples are excessive and overstrained. Cobden was an honest, an able, and a useful public man, but not, I think, as his admirers claim for him, either a great politician or a great political philosopher. He was prevented from being the first by the mental peculiarity which made him a serviceable ally only when (as he says himself) he was advancing some "defined and simple principle; a limitation which, whatever its compensating advantages may be, is an effectual bar to the highest success in a career which requires in those who pursue it a power of dealing not only with principles, but likewise with an infinity of practical problems which are neither "defined" nor "simple." He was, on the other hand, prevented from being a great political philosopher, if by no other causes, still by the circumstances of his early life. His education, pursued with admirable energy while he was immersed in the business of clerk and commercial traveller, was not, and perhaps could not be, of the kind best suited to counteract the somewhat narrowing influences which, as I have pointed out, surrounded his early political career. His radicalism from the first was the radicalism of a class, and such in all essentials it remained to the end. His lack of the historic sense was not compensated by any great scientific or speculative power. Much as he saw to disapprove of in the existing condition of England, he never framed a large and consistent theory of the methods by which it was to be improved. Outside the narrow bounds of the economics of trade he had political projects, but no coherent political system; so that if he was too theoretical to make a good minister of state, he was too fragmentary and inconsistent to make a really important theorist. For example, there

was no expectation which he more confidently cherished than the amiable one that Free Trade would lead, and lead soon, to general peace. Yet there was no practical reform which, towards the end of his life, he more desired to see carried into effect than an alteration in international law which should free private property from liability to capture at sea. This was (need I say?) resisted, in his opinion, only by a “selfish aristocracy.” Yet had it been adopted, Free Trade would, for this country at least, have lost its most pacific virtues. These obviously consist in the fact that Free Trade enormously increases the indirect cost of hostilities: and it is plain that if the proposed alteration in the laws of maritime warfare is to be recommended at all, it is to be recommended on the ground that, in the case of a maritime power, it destroys the indirect cost altogether. Again, he was shocked to see the English peasant “divorced” as the phrase is, “from the soil,” or, in plain English, tilling the land for weekly wages. But he bore with the greatest composure the not less painful fact that the pitman is divorced from the mine, and the operative from the mill. He had plenty of schemes for getting rid of large landowners, but none, so far as I know,

for abolishing large manufacturers. He seems to have been sensitive — morbidly sensitive — to the more or less imaginary social distinctions which, as he thought, separated the landowner from the capitalist; yet never to have perceived the very real and substantial differences by which the capitalist is divided from the operative. We can hardly regret these theoretical imperfections in a system which probably would not have been better for being more logical. In any case, the only accusation that could be brought against him is that he did not rise superior to the ordinary radicalism of the day. Let those who are inclined to take a severer view of the narrowness, prejudice, and inconsistency which in some degree marred his career as a whole, not only call to mind the great qualities by which these shortcomings were accompanied, but also recollect how happily his defects conspired with his merits to render him a fitting instrument for carrying out the inevitable change in our fiscal policy which was the most important work of his public life, and with which his name will for ever be connected.

## Radicalism Beyond Cobden

Balfour says:

“Corn Laws would have existed in England, however property in land had happened to be distributed. If the soil had been owned in small lots, protection would have been demanded, and given, as surely as it was under the actual circumstances; but it would not have been so easily removed.”

This was almost certainly true. Enclosure in England had replaced the mediaeval Three Fields system<sup>1</sup> with the modern system of fields with fences or hedges. But it was also legalised theft that took land away from families that had a customary right to land in the old system, but no legal documents. It also shifted the burden of making hedges from the rich and onto the ordinary peasants. England’s peasants or yeomen almost vanished, though there was a small recovery with soldiers demobilised after the Napoleonic Wars buying some land.

Balfour naturally would not mention this. But he *does* note that the lack of small farmers had made it easier for the liberals to attack agriculture in general.

As I said in the Introduction, Balfour helped create a mass of small farmers in Ireland, buying out the notoriously-bad absentee landlords. He hoped this might end Home Rule. Had it not been for the extreme strains of a prolonged and costly World War, he might have been right. He’d certainly have known that similar people in France were conservative and often monarchist

Balfour also notes what was obvious by the 1880s – socialist demands by or on behalf of the working class were undermining the radical-liberal politics of Cobden and Morley:

“[Cobden] had plenty of schemes for getting rid of large landowners, but none, so far as I know, for abolishing large manufacturers. He seems to have been sensitive — morbidly sensitive — to the more or less imaginary social distinctions which, as he thought, separated the landowner from the capitalist; yet never to have perceived the very real and substantial differences by which the capitalist is divided from the operative.”

Before the rise of socialism, radicalism in Britain and the USA included a Radical Rich who attacked the privileges of landowners and aristocrats. Who assumed that their own privileges would never be questioned. I noticed this from Barack Obama’s *Team of Rivals*, with rich northerners often the most radical and tried to give Afro-Americans equality.

In the USA, the 1860s and 1870s were the twilight of the Radical Rich. They soon noticed what Balfour observes here – that industrialists and workers had very different interests. They had been radical when thought the new world would be dominated by people like them. They moved to the centre or centre-right when they realised that it might not.

This also applies to Morley, author of the Cobden book. In 1914 he resigned in protest at Britain’s entry into the First World War as an ally

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three-field\\_system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three-field_system)

of Russia. From the little I know of him, he looks like a man stranded by history: stranded because of the weaknesses in 19th century Liberalism that Balfour notes. Among other things, he opposed legal protection for workers, thinking that Market Forces would fix it all. It had been the Tories who had impose limits on the working day, first to twelve hours and then to something closer to modern standards:

“From 1889 onwards, Morley resisted the pressure from labour leaders in Newcastle to support a maximum working day of eight hours enforced by law. Morley objected to this because it would interfere in natural economic processes. It would be ‘thrusting an Act of Parliament like a ramrod into all the delicate and complex machinery of British industry’. For example, an Eight Hours Bill for miners would impose on an industry with great diversity in local and natural conditions a universal regulation. He further argued that it would be wrong to ‘enable the Legislature, which is ignorant of these things, which is biased in these things—to give the Legislature the power of saying how many hours a day a man shall or shall not work’.

“Morley told trade unionists that the only right way to limit working hours was through voluntary action from them. His outspokenness against any eight hours bill, rare among politicians, brought him the hostility of labour leaders. In September 1891, two mass meetings saw labour leaders such as John Burns, Keir Hardie and Robert Blatchford all called for action against Morley. In the election of 1892, Morley did not face a labour candidate but the Eight Hours League and the Social Democratic Federation supported the Unionist candidate. Morley kept his seat but came second to the Unionist candidate. When Morley was appointed to the government and the necessary by-election ensued, Hardie and other socialists advised working men to vote for the Unionist candidate (who supported an Eight Hours Bill for miners), but the Irish vote in Newcastle rallied to Morley and he comfortably kept his seat.”<sup>2</sup>

The ‘Unionist’ would have been a Liberal Unionist. This was a break-away from the main Liberals that was led by Joseph Chamberlain. It was against Irish Home Rule, but also for social reform, and had formed a coalition with the Conservatives. Newcastle was a two-member constituency. But the Wiki entry calls the 1892 candidate a Conservative, with a different and Liberal Unionist candidate for 1893.<sup>3</sup>

Morely came third and lost his seat in the general election of 1895, which was a big success for the Conservative / Liberal Unionist alliance. Morley got back into parliament in 1896 in the safe Scottish seat of Montrose Burghs, whose sitting MP resigned in his favour. Held it till 1898, when he got a peerage.

The Eight-Hour Day might seem very basic, but you still have people against it. Morley’s heirs ended up as part of the Conservative Party, which also in time absorbed the Liberal Unionists. But before Thatcher, dogmatic belief in Market Forces never dominated Toryism:

2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Morley#Opposition\\_to\\_eight\\_hours\\_working\\_day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Morley#Opposition_to_eight_hours_working_day)  
3 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newcastle-upon-Tyne\\_\(UK\\_Parliament\\_constituency\)#Elections\\_in\\_the\\_1890s](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newcastle-upon-Tyne_(UK_Parliament_constituency)#Elections_in_the_1890s).

“Robert Owen had raised the demand for a ten-hour day in 1810, and instituted it in his socialist enterprise at New Lanark. By 1817 he had formulated the goal of the eight-hour day and coined the slogan: ‘Eight hours’ labour, Eight hours’ recreation, Eight hours’ rest’. Women and children in England were granted the ten-hour day in 1847. French workers won the 12-hour day after the February Revolution of 1848. A shorter working day and improved working conditions were part of the general protests and agitation for Chartist reforms and the early organisation of trade unions.”<sup>4</sup>

Owen had begun as a Tory, before becoming too radical for most of them.<sup>5</sup> This was part of the general emergence of socialism. Tories saw state-enforced social controls as a necessary part of life, while non-socialist radicals were generally against them. But socialists were also determined enemies of hierarchy and inherited inequality. This helped the process whereby they were attached to British Liberalism before founding the Labour Party.

British politics has always been vastly more complex than the Tory / Liberal and then Tory / Labour divisions that most people know about. Bright and Cobden led a free-trade and anti-Imperialist faction within Liberalism. Balfour notes how this was damaged by Bright’s unpopular opposition to the Crimean War:

“Mr. Bright, in 1857, when his party collapsed, offered an explanation... ‘In the sudden break-up of ‘the school’ of which we have been the chief professors, we may learn how far we have been, and are, ahead of the public opinion of our time.’

Misleading: Bright lost his seat in Manchester, but got re-elected for Birmingham. Rejecting imperialism took another hundred years, but dropping it sooner might have avoided much grief for many, including hundreds of thousands of ordinary Britons who died in the two World Wars.

While Morley stuck with the Liberal Party, Bright opposed Irish Home Rule and became a Liberals Unionist in his final years, dying in 1889.<sup>6</sup> Morley lingered on to be one of the few Liberals to flatly opposed World War One. I found myself being reminded of *Marley* from Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*. He became the *Ghost of Liberalism Past*, while the more Scrooge-like characters took over.

Bright, Cobden and Morley represented a blind alley within British politics. Free Trade was always unrealistic without a powerful state to support business people. Britain had not tried it until British industry was strong enough to win open competition. It remained a general view among Britons that **‘trade follows the flag**.

Some of the elite, including Balfour, began rethinking when it became clear that United Germany was overtaking Britain as an industrial power. Joseph Chamberlain in his final years favoured Imperial Preference:

“The idea was associated particularly with Joseph Chamberlain, who resigned from the government of Arthur

4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight-hour\\_day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eight-hour_day)  
5 <http://spartacus-educational.com/IRowen.htm>  
6 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Bright](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Bright)

Balfour in September 1903 in order to be free to campaign for Tariff Reform. Among those opposing Chamberlain was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Charles Thomson Ritchie, who, guided by the free-trade ideas of the leading economists of the time, such as Sir William Ashley, was vigorously opposed to any scheme of Imperial Preference. This ultimately resulted in a damaging rift within Balfour's Conservative-Unionist coalition government, contributing to its defeat in the 1906 elections.<sup>7</sup>

Imperial Preference has been surprisingly neglected by British historians, as has the whole Liberal Unionist development. It was a *Road Not Taken*, and one which might well have avoided World War One, which without Britain would have been won easily by Germany if it had even happened.<sup>8</sup>

It is embarrassing now to admit that a section of the British ruling class penly said that a preventative war against the rising power of Germany would be a good idea. No less embarrassing that the cause of the war was the Serbian claim to what was then Bosnia and Herzegovina. That there was a very reasonable suspicion that the Serbian intelligence services were behind the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. He was heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, and wanted to raise the status of Slavs. He could be expected to undermine Bosnian-Serb desires to join the Serbian Kingdom when the elderly Emperor died. (This actually happened in 1916, when all had changed utterly.)

Serbia's monarchy had been installed in 1903 by a coup that murdered a King from a rival Serbian dynasty.<sup>9</sup> The men behind that were running Serbian intelligence within a government that wanted Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of Serbia. Austria-Hungary blaming Serbia for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was very reasonable. Serbia held out against the key demand for outside investigation of the role of Serbian intelligence. Austria-Hungary threatened war, but Tsarist Russia was ready to go

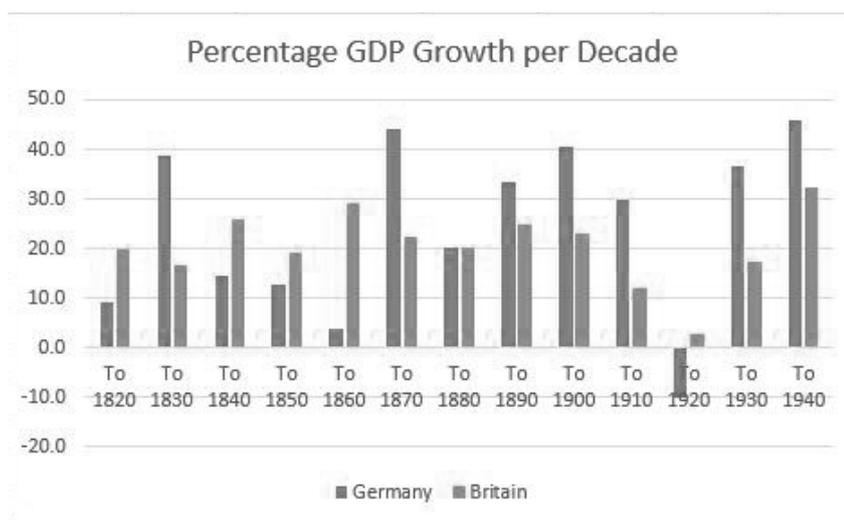
7 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial\\_Preference](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_Preference)  
 8 For details, see *Britain's Great War on Turkey, from an Irish Perspective*, by Pat Walsh  
 9 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May\\_Coup\\_\(Serbia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_Coup_(Serbia))

to war to defend Serbia. France was committed to backing Russia, and anyway wanted Alsace-Lorraine even though it had a pro-German majority.

Germany had a long-standing plan to win a quick and fairly bloodless victory by attacking France via neutral Belgium before Russia could mobilise its massive manpower. They would have avoided this if it had seemed likely to bring Britain into the war, and in fact they held off and defeated Tsarist Russia despite Britain being against them. But consultations during the prolonged crisis before the war led them to believe that the British Empire would not be bothered so long as Germany did not try to hold onto Belgium. Only when it was actually happening did it suddenly become the official line that this was an outrage that required Britain to join a war that might *just coincidentally* destroy Germany's threatening trade rivalry.

No one has ever found an innocent explanation: the standard line is that it was a baffling error by Sir Edward Grey, one of the longest-serving Foreign Secretaries in British history. This matters, because the march through Belgium is now the only usable excuse. British histories once talked of 'gallant little Serbia', but this was dropped when Britain found it convenient to demonise Serbia in the break-up of Former Yugoslavia.

During World War One, the foolishness of repealing the Corn Laws was shown. Britain could not feed itself and depended on imported food. So did Germany, having copied many of Britain's errors. A British blockade tried to starve Germany into submission and did indeed succeed in 1918, with a hungry population rebelling and accepting an armistice which left Germany open to the grossly unfair Treaty of Versailles. Balfour was very much part of this historic error: but at least understood the basics of politics. He had a long-term strategy that might have worked. Cobden and similar did not, though much of their foolishness has been inherited by the New Right.



Figures from 'The World Economy: Historical Statistics' by Angus Maddison.

# Balfour on Political Economy

*The essay 'Politics and Political Economy' was a public lecture given in 1885. Balfour refuses to see economic doctrines as established facts. The supposed benefits of Free Trade have no clear proof.*

*I've no idea whether Balfour knew of Karl Marx. Probably not: Marxist influence in British politics was only then beginning. But 'Ricardian Socialism' had been popular even before Marx. Many similar systems existed. His failure to mention socialist economics as a third alternative is suspicious. Balfour is maybe like the war-propaganda of Julius Caesar, amazingly biased while sounding very detached and abstract.*

Political economy is somewhat at a discount. Those who preach its doctrines scarcely speak with their old assurance, neither do they who listen, listen with the old respect. Ancient heresies, long thought to have been dead and buried, are beginning to revive. New heresies are daily springing into life. Every sign seems to portend that at a time when, of all others, problems are pressing for solution, in dealing with which we must be largely guided by economic science, the guide itself is in public estimation becoming seriously discredited. Some of you may have read the not very agreeable memoirs which that not very agreeable woman, Miss Martineau,<sup>1</sup> has left of herself. If so, you will probably recollect the fame and profit which her series of political economy tales brought her some fifty years ago. You will recollect how she became a literary lion of the first magnitude, how edition after edition of the tales were sold off, how high officials furnished her with information and Cabinet Ministers besought her aid. Great is the difference between 1885 and 1833. Let no aspirant for such noisy honours seek them any more by this road. Much work may, indeed, be done in the field of political economy; work in the accumulation of facts; work in their reduction to law; work in popularising the results attained. But the most successful labourers in these departments need no longer expect to dictate terms to their publishers or be asked to dine by the President of the Board of Trade. He may consider himself fortunate if the world will consent to accept the results of his labour for nothing, and if he does not hear his science relegated to Saturn by a responsible Minister of the Crown.

What are the causes which have produced this change in the public mind, how far is it justified, and what attitude ought we ourselves to take up towards it? Such is the problem which I should wish to consider with you to-day, and no more important problem, believe me, confronts the statesman who desires to face the larger issues of contemporary politics.

I pass lightly over the superficial causes which have aided in producing this economic eclipse. Such, for example, is the unpopularity which in society the third-rate exponent of economic orthodoxy has always aroused, and which you may see exemplified in more than one character in the fiction which was contemporary with the most flourishing days of that science. The professed political economist, who had a cut-and-dried formula for every occasion, who solved all

social questions by a frigid calculation, who habitually talked as if everything good in the world was produced by the accumulation of wealth and everything bad by the multiplication of children, appeared to our fathers, as, did he still flourish with all his pristine vigour, he would doubtless appear to us, to be something of a prig and a great deal of a bore. No dexterity of treatment, no literary skill, will make political economy amusing; nor will the average of mankind ever take delight in studies which require abstract thought or concentrated attention. When, therefore, a set of persons appeared, neither very original nor very learned, who would not permit a new tax or an amendment of the poor laws to be discussed in the lobby of the House of Commons or round a dinner-table without reproducing, with all the arrogance of conscious orthodoxy, some abstract train of reasoning borrowed from greater men than themselves, they and their science were naturally looked upon as socially intolerable.

This by itself was a comparatively small misfortune. A far greater one — one of which we have not yet felt the full effects — is the hostility which the claims of political economy have aroused in the breasts of the working-classes on the Continent. To many of them it appears, not as a political science, but as a political device; not as a reasoned body of truth, but as a plausible tissue of sophistries, invented in the interests of capital to justify the robbery of labour. It is true that no such prejudice, though it exists sporadically, is prevalent in this island; but we may, I think, detect a faint echo of it in the suspicion with which it is regarded by some, and the indifference with which it is regarded by others among those who profess more especially to be the guardians of the interests of the working-classes. And it is this suspicion and indifference, too largely shared by leading politicians on both sides, of which I desire to investigate the causes.

Of course, it may be maintained that the principal and all-sufficient cause of which we are in search is to be found in the shortcomings of political economy itself. It may be alleged that its premises are arbitrary, its conclusions unproved, its teachings of too remote and abstract a character to be any sufficient guide in the conduct of public affairs. This contention I do not mean here to dispute. To dispute it effectively would require a survey of the whole field of political economy — a restatement and justification of all its principal doctrines. Such a task I need not say that I have no intention of undertaking. I shall here assume, for the sake of argument, that political economy is

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<sup>1</sup> Harriet Martineau, a feminist and sometimes called the first female sociologist.

to be accepted as true in the same sense that other sciences are accepted as true — that is, not blindly and irrevocably, but subject to revision and development; and that it is to be regarded as a guide in the same way that other sciences are regarded as guides, that is, with a due recognition of the fact that the complexity of nature never quite corresponds with the artificial simplicity of our premises, and that in proportion as the correspondence is imperfect, the result of our reasoning must in practice be applied with caution. The first cause, then, which I take note of, for the undue depreciation under which political economy is at this moment suffering, is the undue appreciation in which it was held in the last generation. That generation—the one preceding 1860 — was emphatically the generation of economic reform. It saw the new Poor Law established, the whole system of national taxation remodelled, and the Corn Laws abolished. Coincidentally with this it saw an immense increase in the wealth and prosperity of the country, partly due to these changes, still more due to the development of railways and the opening up of new countries rich in agricultural and mineral resources. What wonder that the science, under whose auspices so much of this had been done, was estimated at its full, nay, at more than its full value; that the habitual distrust of theory was for a moment lulled to rest in the Anglo-Saxon mind, and that others besides Mr. Cobden prophesied the rapid and triumphant spread of Free Trade doctrines throughout the civilised world. The most stolidly practical were reconciled to abstract principles which, as they supposed, gave them an elastic revenue and an unshackled trade: the least educated could understand the meaning and merits of cheap bread.

But no science can become popular with impunity. The mere fact that it is quoted on hustings, that its doctrines, more or less misunderstood, are used as political weapons; and that its conclusions, more or less garbled, are valued not so much because they are true as because they suit the momentary necessities of party warfare, refracts in countless ways the dry light in which it should be viewed. The side against whom it makes will decry it; their opponents will laud it to the skies; and the praise which is shouted from one set of platforms will probably be not less unintelligent than the blame shouted back from another.

Not less unintelligent, and even more injurious to the cause of truth. For as soon as any body of doctrine becomes the watchword of a party or a sect, it is certain to be used with the most confident assurance by multitudes who have the most imperfect apprehension of the true grounds of the opinions they are expressing. In default of reasons they quote authorities. A dictum of Smith, Ricardo, or Mill is supposed to supply a rule of faith against which there is no appeal. A standard of orthodoxy is set up, to deviate from which is heresy, and political economy ceases to be a living science, and petrifies into an unchanging creed. From these causes has proceeded the reaction against economic teaching, which has been slowly gaining ground since 1860.

Some have been repelled by the ignorant dogmatism and the narrow formalism which so often usurped the name of science. Others have been shaken in their faith by the rejection both of the theory and the practice of Free Trade by foreign countries; a still larger number have felt themselves injured by the operation of Free Trade in our own. While its friends have thus been cooled in their allegiance, its enemies have multiplied in number and increased in courage; and all those who saw in the accepted truths of political economy an obstacle to some project of their own, have been encouraged to attack it openly or by implication.

It is the first of these evils which it most behoves those of us who hold that the study of economic facts is a necessary preliminary to any judicious treatment of some of the most important problems of the day to remedy as far as in us lies. The true, if obvious, antidote to the disgust excited by the extravagant claims put forward on behalf of political economy, is to reduce those claims within strictly reasonable limits. Now what are those limits? Two there are, constantly violated, and sometimes by the greatest economic authorities, to which I would specially draw your attention. The first depends on the fact that political economy is a science, and as such deals in strictness only with laws of nature, and not with the rules of conduct or policy which may be founded on those laws. The second depends on a fact (too often forgotten) that the science of political economy, dealing as it does with only a few of the complex facts of life, cannot on most questions supply the politician with adequate grounds for framing his policy. Take an example. We constantly hear it said that the doctrine of *laissez-faire* — the doctrine which forbids State interference, and which asserts that all social questions should be solved by the unrestricted play of free competition, is a truth of political economy. Now I hold, first, that this is not a truth of political economy; and, secondly, that political economy by itself cannot furnish grounds for deciding whether it is a truth at all. **It is not a truth of political economy, for it is not a scientific truth, but a maxim, sound or unsound, belonging to the art of politics.**<sup>2</sup> No doubt the grounds for accepting or rejecting it must be, and are, largely drawn from a consideration of economic laws, but in itself it is not an economic law, but a practical precept. It has no more claim to be regarded as a part of political economy than the recommendation not to throw yourself out of a second-floor window is a part of the science of mutually gravitating bodies. Do not think that the distinction here drawn is a mere subtlety. I am convinced that the neglect of it by many of the masters of the science, and by almost all their disciples, has done much to prejudice men's minds against economic reasoning. A political economist, as such, has no business to be a politician. However strong his convictions may be, however much his own inclinations may tempt him to the advocacy of any particular mode of social organisation, he should rigidly abstain, in his investigation of the laws of wealth, from

2 Emphasis added

loading his pages with any practical propaganda. Science is of no party. It seeks no object, selfish or unselfish, good or bad. It is unmoved by any emotion: it feels no pity, nor is it stirred by any wrong. Its sole aim is the investigation of truth and the discovery of law, wholly indifferent to the use to which those investigations and those discoveries may afterwards be put.

But this is not the only reason, nor even the chief reason, why I object to the fusion, or rather the confusion, of the art of politics with the science of political economy. Another and a more cogent one is to be found in the fact that, as I have said, many of the most important considerations which should determine a political decision lie altogether outside the field with which an economist is at liberty to deal. The economist investigates only the laws regulating the production, exchange, and distribution of wealth; and in order to get this problem within a manageable compass, in order to avoid being confronted with calculations of hopeless complexity, he usually assumes that the human beings who produce, exchange, and consume, are actuated by no other motive than that of securing, under a regime of free competition, as large a share as possible of this wealth for themselves. The politician, on the other hand, who has to decide what course should be pursued, not in the abstract world of science but in the concrete world of fact, cannot so limit his views. He has to provide, in so far as in him lies, for the spiritual and material well-being of the real human being, not of the imaginary wealth producer and wealth consumer which science is obliged to assume; and knowing this, knowing that man does not live by bread alone, but is a creature of infinite variety living in a most complicated world, he can seldom decide any practical problem on purely economic grounds.

So far I have been occupied in conveying a not unneeded warning to those who, like myself, accept (speaking generally) the teaching of political economy: let me, in conclusion, make an even more earnest appeal to those who repudiate its lessons. They are to be found, not merely among those who are repelled by the difficulties and technicalities of the study; not merely among those who — confident in what they call their practical knowledge — that is, their knowledge of the details necessary for the conduct of their own particular business — are contemptuous of all speculation; not merely among those who dislike the theory because, on purely selfish grounds, they first dislike the conclusions which rightly or wrongly are based upon it; but among those who are most zealous and most disinterested in their efforts for the general welfare. Burning with a desire to remedy the ills they see on every side, these philanthropists are impatient of a science which is apt to beget a wise if chilling scepticism as to the efficacy of short cuts to universal happiness. Eager to employ in the redress of wrongs the most powerful machinery at their disposal, viz. that of State interference, they resent the criticism to which political economy has subjected the grounds on which plan after plan of State interference has been recommended to the public.

Glowing themselves with a generous enthusiasm, they are repelled, partly by the hypothesis of universal selfishness on which political economy for reasons to which I have already adverted appears to proceed, partly by the cold and unfeeling manner in which science dissects and analyses facts, warm and palpitating with the hopes, fears, and sufferings of a whole civilisation. That these prejudices, though partly justified by errors of treatment on the part of political economists, rest in the main upon a mere confusion of thought whose nature I have already indicated, I need not stop to prove. It is only necessary to say a word on the evils they are likely to produce. I am not here to advocate any particular system of economic doctrine. There is no question concerning either the method or the results of political economy which I for one am not prepared to consider open, provided the critic can show that he really understands the doctrine he is attacking, and is not, as commonly happens, merely laying hold of some incautious expression of Ricardo, or Mill, or whoever it may be, and laboriously refuting what never was, or has long ceased to be, a received opinion. I plead not for any special scientific doctrine, but for the application to social phenomena of scientific methods. Nor has there ever been a time when, in my judgment, this was more required than it is now. Society is becoming more and more sensitive to the evils which exist in its midst; more and more impatient of their continued existence. In itself this is wholly good; but, in order that good may come of it, it behoves us to walk warily. It is, no doubt, better for us to apply appropriate remedies to our diseases than to put our whole trust in the healing powers of nature. But it is better to put our trust in the healing powers of nature than to poison ourselves straight off by swallowing the contents of the first phial presented to us by any self-constituted physician. And such self-constituted physicians are about and in large numbers — gentlemen who think that they pay Providence a compliment by assuming that for every social ill there is a speedy and effectual specific lying to hand; who regard it as impious to believe that there may be chronic diseases of the body politic as well as of any other body, or that Heaven will not hasten to bless the first heroic remedy which it pleases them in their ignorance to apply. It is true that without enthusiasm nothing will be done. But it is also true that without knowledge nothing will be done well. Philanthropic zeal supplies admirable motive power, but makes a very indifferent compass; and of two evils it is better, perhaps, that our ship shall go nowhere than that it shall go wrong, that it should stand still than that it should run upon the rocks. As, therefore, nature knows nothing of good intentions, rewarding and punishing not motives but actions; as things are what they are, describe them as we may, and their consequences will be what they will be, prophesy of them as we choose; it behoves us at this time of all others to approach the consideration of impending social questions in the spirit of scientific inquiry, and to be impartial investigators of social facts before we become zealous reformers of social wrongs.

# Balfour's 'Fragment On Progress'

*The essay 'A Fragment On Progress' was a public lecture given in 1891. I have moved the names of Spencer and Galton from notes to the main text. Other notes are omitted.*

There is no more interesting characteristic of ordinary social and political speculation than the settled belief that there exists a natural law or tendency governing human affairs by which, on the whole, and in the long run, the general progress of our race is ensured. I do not know that any very precise view is entertained as to the nature of this law or tendency, its mode of operation, or its probable limits; but it is understood to be established, or at least indicated, by the general course of History, and to be in harmony with modern developments of the doctrine of Evolution.

The argument from History usually presents itself somewhat in this form. Man, it is said, has been working out his destiny through countless generations, and from the first epoch of which any record has survived, down to our own day, his course, though subject to many mutations, has, in the main, been one of steady and enormous improvement. Fix your eyes, indeed, upon one race, or one age, and you may have to admit that there have been long periods during which there has been no movement, or a movement only of retrogression. But the torpor that has paralysed one branch of the human family has been balanced by the youthful vigour of another; now one nation, and now another, may have led the van, but the van itself has been ever pressing forward; and though there have been periods in the world's history when it may well have seemed to the most sanguine observers that the powers that make for progress were exhausted, that culture was giving place to barbarism, and civil order to unlettered anarchy, time and the event have shown that such prophets were wrong, and out of the wreck of the old order a new order has always arisen more perfect and more full of promise than that which it replaced. The argument seems seductive; yet in the

absence of any established law underlying this empirical generalisation, it has after all but little value. For the same facts can without difficulty be stated so as to suggest precisely the opposite conclusion. A survey of the world, it may be replied, shows us a vast number of savage communities, apparently at a stage of culture not profoundly different from that which prevailed among prehistoric man during geological epochs which, estimated by any historical standard, are immensely remote. History, again, tells us of successive civilisations which have been born, have for a space thriven exceedingly, and have then miserably perished. And as it shows us samples of death and decay, so it shows us samples of growth arrested, and, as far as we can tell, permanently arrested, at some particular stage of development. What is there in all this to indicate that a nation or group of nations, which happens to be under observation during its period of energetic growth, is either itself to be an exception to this common law, or is of necessity to find in some other race an heir fitted for the task of carrying on its work? Progressive civilisation is no form of indestructible energy which, if repressed here must needs break out there, if refused embodiment in one shape must needs show itself in another. It is a plant of tender habit, difficult to propagate, not difficult to destroy, that refuses to flourish except in a soil which is not to be found everywhere, nor at all times, nor even, so far as we can see, necessarily to be found at all.

I conceive, therefore, that those who look forward to a period of continuous and, so to speak, inevitable progress, are bound to assign some more solid reason for their convictions than a merely empirical survey of the surface lessons of history. They must find some tendencies deep-rooted in the nature of things which may be trusted gradually to work out the desired result.

And this, to do them justice, they have not been slow to attempt. Two such causes, or groups of causes, have been assigned which deserve special consideration, the one eminently characteristic of the second half of the nineteenth century, the other not less characteristic of the latter half of the eighteenth. The former, or biological, relies on the gradual improvement both of the human and of the social organism through the continued operation of those laws by which evolution in general has been effected. The latter relies on the spread of enlightenment, the dissipation of prejudice, the conscious application to social problems of unfettered criticism, the deliberate reconstruction of the whole social fabric upon rational principles. These two theories are not, of course, mutually exclusive; since, for example, no evolutionist would deny that the intentional adaptation of institutions to foreseen results must play a part — possibly a large part — in the development of a social and rational animal. Nevertheless, the two ways of estimating the history of the past and attacking the problem of the future, differ profoundly both in the letter and in the spirit, and they require, therefore, separate treatment at our hands.

Now, no one, I conceive, will be found to-day anxious to dispute the proposition that the same laws which have operated in the organic world of animals and plants may have had much, and must have had something, to do with moulding the destiny of man. In dealing with the causes which ages before the dawn of history produced the various physical and mental qualities of the different races of the world, we are no doubt necessarily reduced to dim conjecture. But we can hardly be wrong in supposing that, during the vast period in which a blind struggle with the forces of nature and with each other, was the main occupation of men, and when defeat in either contest meant death, the weeding out of unfit individuals and unfit institutions was an active agency in shaping the characteristics of humanity, as it still is in shaping those of the lower animals. We may conceive without difficulty, indeed we can hardly refuse to believe that the “natural man” — man (that is) as he is born into the world as distinguished from man as he afterwards makes himself and

is made by his surroundings, might thus by elimination and selection undergo a process of profound modification; that in dexterity of muscle and, still more, in power of brain an enormous improvement might easily take place; and even that special aptitudes for social life, involving, of course, an innate predisposition to accept a morality without which social life is impossible, might be bred into the physical organisation of the most successful races. But this particular cause of progress has, we can scarcely doubt, lost most of its strength. Nay, if certain theorists are right and it requires the unsparing slaughter of all the inferior members of a species to maintain its effectiveness at its normal level, — to preserve the speed of the antelope undiminished and the sight of the eagle undimmed, — then we can hardly refuse our support to the view that the general improvement of the race may in some respects lead to a deterioration in the natural constitution of the individual. Humanity, civilisation, progress itself, must have a tendency to mitigate the harsh methods by which Nature has wrought out the variety and the perfection of organic life. And however much man as he is ultimately moulded by the social forces surrounding him may gain, man as he is born into the world must somewhat lose; the loss in the quality of the raw material being thus a deduction, it may be even a large deduction, to be set off against the advantages obtained by better processes of manufacture.

It has, however, been thought by many that there are biological causes at work which may compensate, and more than compensate, the kind of loss produced by the greatly diminished efficiency of elimination and selection. The majority of naturalists have held, and I suppose still hold, that modifications in the physical structure of animals produced during life may be transmitted to their offspring, and that by the cumulative effect of such changes, profound alterations may gradually be made in the characteristics of a species. And there is one systematic philosopher of our own day [Herbert Spencer] who has applied this principle so persistently in every department of his theory of Man, that were it to be upset, it is scarcely too much to say that his Ethics, his Psychology, and his Anthropology would

all tumble to the ground with it. Yet this doctrine has for many years been questioned by a great English authority, [Galton] and, as many of you are aware, it has been directly controverted by one of the most eminent living German biologists. This is not the occasion, and assuredly I am not the person, to attempt to sum up the argument or to pronounce upon the merits of this interesting controversy. For my present purpose it will be enough if I remind you that Weisman's conclusions are largely based on the extreme difficulty of conceiving any possible theory of heredity by which the transmission of acquired qualities could be accounted for; on the relative simplicity and plausibility of his own theory of heredity, according to which the transmission would be impossible; and on the absence of any conclusive proof that the transmission has ever taken place. It may no doubt be objected (I do not say rightly objected) to such a line of argument, that even the simplest explanations of heredity are so mysterious, and involve so large an element of unverifiable hypothesis, that it is rash to lay too much stress on the difference in these respects which may exist between one speculation and another; that evidence from experience cannot at most be said to prove more than that many qualities patiently acquired by generation after generation do not seem, as a matter of fact, to have become hereditary; while as a matter of theory, qualities which are undoubtedly hereditary can seldom if ever be shown to have been originally acquired.

I cannot but think, however, that even in this qualified form the lessons to be learned from the discussion are full of interest from our present point of view. We have got into the habit of thinking that the efforts at progress made by each generation may not only bear fruit for succeeding ones, in the growth of knowledge, the bettering of habits and institutions, and the increase of wealth, but that there may also be a process, so to speak, of physiological accumulation, by which the dexterities painfully learned by the fathers shall descend as inherited aptitudes to the sons, and not merely the manufactured man — man as he makes himself and is made by his surroundings, — but the natural man also, may thus go through a course of steady and continuous improvement. It now

seems, I think, probable, that not in this more than in other cases is biology necessarily optimistic. For as it has long been known that the causes by which species have been modified are not inconsistent with an immobility of type lasting through geological epochs; as it is also known that these causes may lead to what we call deterioration as well as to what we call improvement; as it is impossible to believe that selection and elimination can play any very important part in the further development of civilised man; so now the gravest doubts have been raised as to whether there are any other physiological causes in operation by which that development is likely to be secured.

If this be so we must regard the raw material, as I have called it, of civilisation as being now, in all probability, at its best, and henceforth for the amelioration of mankind we must look to the perfection of manufacture. But do not let any one suppose that the possible results of manufacture are insignificant. Doubtless they are strictly conditioned by the quality of the stuff that has to be worked on. Doubtless this quality differs essentially in each of the great families of mankind. They have emerged from the dim workshop where the rough machinery of nature has, in remotest ages, wrought into each its inalienable heritage of natural gifts and aptitudes; — and by these must the character and limits of their development in part be determined. But let us not found more upon this truth than it will bear. In our social and political speculations we are surely apt to think too much of ethnology, and too little of history. Sometimes from a kind of idleness, sometimes from a kind of pride, sometimes because the "principles of heredity" is now always on our lips, we frequently attribute to differences of blood effects which are really due to differences of surroundings. We note, and note correctly, the varying shades of national character; and proceed to put them down, often most incorrectly, to variations in national descent. The population of one district is Teutonic, and therefore it does this; the population of the other district is Celtic, and therefore it does that. A Jewish strain explains one peculiarity; a Greek strain explains another; and so on. Conjectures like these appear to be of the most dubious value. We know by

experience that a nation may suddenly blaze out into a splendour of productive genius, of which its previous history gave but faint promise, and of which its subsequent history shows but little trace; some great crisis in its fate may stamp upon a race marks which neither lapse of time nor change of circumstance seem able wholly to efface; and empires may rise from barbarism to civilisation and sink again from civilisation into barbarism, within periods so brief that we may take it as certain, whatever be our opinion as to the transmission of acquired faculties, that no hereditary influence has had time to operate. Now, if the differences between the same nation at different times are thus obviously not due to differences in inherited qualities, is it not somewhat rash to drag in hypothetical differences in inherited qualities to account for the often slighter peculiarities of temperament by which communities of different descent may be distinguished? Are we not often attributing to heredity what is properly due to education, and crediting Nature with what really is the work of Man?

So far, then, we have arrived at the double conclusion that, while there is, to say the least, no sufficient ground for expecting that our descendants will be provided by Nature with better "organisms" than our own, it is nevertheless not impossible to suppose that they may be able to provide themselves with a much more commodious "environment." And this is not on the face of it wholly unsatisfactory; for if, on the one hand, it seems to forbid us to indulge in visions of a millennium in which there shall not only be a new heaven and a new earth, but also a new variety of the human race to enjoy them; on the other hand it permits us to hope that the efforts of successive generations may so improve the surroundings into which men are born that the community of the far future may be as much superior to us as we are to our barbarian ancestors.

Our expectations, however, that any such hope will be realised must depend largely on the efficiency which we are justified in attributing to the "efforts of successive generations" — must depend, in other words, on the value we are disposed to attach to the *second* or "rational" theory of progress which I mentioned earlier in this paper. This theory assumes that every community, at least every self-governing community, holds its fate in its hands, and is itself the intelligent arbiter of its own destiny. Its efforts may be as immediately and as effectively directed to the work of promoting progress as the efforts of a navy to the work of raising a weight. What is to be done is clear; how to do it may

easily be discovered: nothing more, therefore, is required to attain success but strenuous and single-minded endeavour. Unfortunately the world is not made on so simple a plan, nor is the problem to be dealt with one in elementary mechanics: so complex is it indeed that I could not attempt on such an occasion even roughly to formulate it in its entirety. But the most cursory observation will show that in many cases endeavour is not enough, even when endeavour is made. Consider, for instance, the case of Art. Mr. Spencer cherishes the belief that his "fully evolved" man will spend much more time in aesthetic enjoyment than our toil-worn generation is permitted to do. I hope he may. But what art is he going to enjoy? Leisure and fashion will produce audiences and spectators. We know of nothing that will produce musicians or painters: and I sometimes fear that if Mr. Spencer's "fully evolved man" ever comes into being, he will not only find perfect "harmony with his environment" intolerably tedious, but will be in the humiliating position of having to depend for his higher pleasures on the Poetry and Painting of his "imperfectly evolved" forefathers, whose harmony with their environment was, perhaps, fortunately for the cause of Art, not quite so perfect as his own.

Consider, again, the case of Knowledge. Growth in Knowledge, like productiveness in Art, can hardly, so far as its direct consequences are concerned, do otherwise than subserve the cause of progress. But, unlike productiveness in Art, it would seem to be under some kind of control. It is true, no doubt, that the greatest achievements in discovery, like the greatest creations of the imagination, depend largely upon individual genius; — depend, that is, upon something which is, and which will probably remain, wholly accidental and incalculable. Nevertheless a community which, individually or collectively, was sufficiently interested in the matter, might apparently be as certain of having an annual output of scientific research and industrial invention, as a farmer is of growing an annual crop of wheat or barley; and, within limits, this is probably the fact. I would only note that the presupposed appetite for scientific knowledge and the demand for industrial invention, have been rare in the history of the world; that advanced civilisations have existed without them, and that we certainly do not know enough of the causes by which they have been produced to enable us to say with any assurance that they will persist in places where they are now to be found, or arise in places from which they are now absent. But granting their existence, may we assume that knowledge will grow without limit? In an age

distinguished for its scientific progress, and in the presence of some by whom that progress has been largely promoted, I scarcely dare suggest a doubt on such a question. Indeed, with regard to one aspect of it, I feel no doubt. Unquestionably mankind will be able to cultivate the field of scientific discovery to all time without exhausting it. But is it so certain that they will be able indefinitely to extend it? Industrial invention need never cease. But will our general theory of the material Universe again undergo any revolution comparable to that which it has undergone in the last four hundred years? It is at least uncertain. We seem indeed even at this moment to stand on the verge of some great co-ordination of the energies of nature, and to be perhaps within a measurable distance of comprehending the cause of gravitation and the character of that ethereal medium which is the vehicle of Light, Magnetism, and Electricity. Yet though this be true, it is also true that in whatever direction we drive our explorations we come upon limits we cannot, as it seems to me, hope to overpass. Consider, for example, the case of Astronomy — the region of investigation in which the results already obtained are, perhaps, in some respects the most unexpected and the most impressive. Far-reaching as they seem, the theories dealing with the constitution, movements, and evolution of the heavenly bodies, are all, without exception, ultimately based upon terrestrial analogies and upon laws of which in some of their manifestations we have terrestrial experience. If these fail us, we are, and must remain, perfectly helpless. Supposing it to be true, for instance, that the proper motion of the stars cannot in many cases be reasonably attributed to gravitation. Does it not seem almost certain that we are here in presence of a force on which we can never experiment, and whose laws we shall never be able to determine? Again, in Physics, the admirable results which have been attained, blind us sometimes to the fact that where we have been successful has been in the case of phenomena which, though in their reality they can never be directly perceived, are nevertheless analogous to objects of sensible experience, which can therefore be readily if not adequately imagined, and about which hypotheses can be made simple enough to be treated mathematically. No man will ever see what goes on in a gas, or know by direct vision how ether behaves. But we can all of us think of a collision or a vibration, and a few of us can deal with them by calculation. But observe how rapidly the difficulty of comprehension increases as soon as sensible analogies begin to fail, as they do in the case of many electric and magnetic

phenomena; and how quickly the difficulty becomes an impossibility when, as in the case of the most important organic processes, the operations to be observed are too minute ever to be seen and too complex ever to be calculated. It is no imperfection in our instruments which here foils us. It is an incurable imperfection in ourselves. Our senses are very few and very imperfect. They were not, unfortunately, evolved for purposes of research. And though we may well stand amazed at the immense scientific structure which Mankind have been able to raise on the meagre foundations afforded by their feeble sense-perceptions, we can hardly hope to see it added to without limit. Nor is the time necessarily as far distant as we sometimes think, when we may be reduced either to elaborating the details of that which in outline is known already, or to framing dim conjectures about that which cannot scientifically be known at all.

These passing doubts, however, as to the future triumphs of Art and Science, be they well or ill founded, need not, it may be said, affect our estimate of the results which in other departments of human activity may be expected to flow from the "efforts of successive generations," made through the machinery by which alone in its collective capacity the community can make a deliberate attempt at progress — I mean the State. It is unnecessary to remind you what immense expectations have been, and are, based upon State action. We are all familiar with that numerous class who see in political changes the main interest of the Past, and their main hopes for the Future; who, if asked what they mean by Progress, will tell you Reform; and if asked what they mean by Reform, will tell you, "An alteration of the State Constitution," and if asked why they desire an alteration of the State Constitution, will tell you, "In order to carry on more rapidly and effectively the work of Progress." For this view ordinary History is, no doubt, partly responsible. Such history is largely employed in giving an account of the mode in which political institutions have from time to time been modified to suit the changing wishes or the changing needs of the community, or of some portion of it. It is full of accounts of violent and often sanguinary disputes, in the decision of which the two sides held at the time, and the historian has held after them, that the most important interests of the community were involved. Yet, if this proposition is true at all, it is certainly not true in the sense in which it is commonly accepted. Consider, for instance, how different has been the political history, and yet how similar is the social condition, of

Great Britain, France, Germany, Holland, and Belgium. Though these five nations do not for the most part speak the same language, nor profess the same religion, nor claim the same ancestry; though the events by which they have been moulded, and the institutions by which they have been governed, are apparently widely dissimilar; yet their culture is at this moment practically identical; their ideas form a common stock; the social questions they have to face are the same; and such differences as exist in the material condition and wellbeing of their populations are unquestionably due more to the economic differences in their position, climate, and natural advantages, than to the decisions at which they may have from time to time arrived on the various political controversies by which their peoples have been so bitterly divided. We cannot, of course, conclude from this that political action or inaction has no effect upon the broad stream of human progress; still less that it may not largely determine for good or for evil the course of its smaller eddies and subsidiary currents. All that we are warranted in saying is that, as a matter of fact, the differences in the political history of these five communities, however interesting to the historian, nay, however important at the moment to the happiness of the populations concerned, are, if estimated by the scale we are at this moment applying to human affairs, almost negligible; and that it must be in connection with the points wherein their political systems agree that the importance of those systems is principally to be found.

Nor need this conclusion seem strange or paradoxical. For great as are the recent changes which have taken place in Western civilisation, they have been almost entirely due to scientific discoveries, to industrial inventions, to commercial enterprise, to the occupation by Europeans of new Continents, to the slow and in the main consequential modification of our beliefs, ideas, and governing conceptions. But to these great causes of movement the State, in the cases to which I have referred, has contributed little but the external conditions under which individual effort has been able to operate unhindered— conditions consisting for the most part in a tolerable degree of security, and a tolerable degree of freedom; and the great political movements with which the historian chiefly concerns himself must be regarded as symptoms, rather than as causes, of the vital changes which have taken place.

I hold, then, that the actual uses to which political action within the community has been, and is being, put are in the main rather negative than positive. Such action does not to any great

extent supply the causes which advance the world, it only provides the conditions under which the world may be advanced. Even those, however, who agree with this estimate of what in fact has commonly happened in the recent past, might hold, and in many cases do hold, that much more than this may be made to happen in the future. It is admitted, they might say, that the destiny of each generation is, to an almost incalculable degree, determined by the social conditions in the midst of which it is born. It is admitted that these conditions are principally the handiwork of man himself. It is admitted that no instrument at our command is more powerful than the collective action of the community. Why not, then, employ it to create the environment by which the progress we desire may be hastened and ensured?

Now to answer this question we must know both whether the community whose intervention is invoked has the requisite knowledge, and whether, if so, it has also the power to turn this knowledge to account.

It is curious that the first of these problems hardly seems to have presented itself to whole schools of political thinkers who flourished at the end of the last century, and the beginning of this. According to their view, an acquaintance with the "Law of Nature" was enough, and the "Law of Nature" could be understood by all who brought to its study an unprejudiced mind. This remarkable doctrine even now survives to an astonishing extent; and there are still plenty of excellent gentlemen who appear to be exclusively preoccupied with the task of making the opinion of the community, or what passes for such, act rapidly and effectively on the administrative machine; never supposing, apparently, that if it could be made to act rapidly and effectively there could be any doubts as to what it ought to do. And yet there is no sign that sociology, or even the limited department of it concerned with politics, exists or ever will exist except in the shape of a certain number of valuable empirical maxims, and a few very wide and not very trustworthy generalisations. The science has been planned out by some very able philosophers, much as a prospective watering-place is planned out by a speculative builder. But the streets, the squares, the theatres, and the piers of this scientific city have so far no existence except in imagination— nor are they likely soon to be constructed. Much indeed of what commonly figures as the theory of Politics has nothing, properly speaking, to do with Sociology at all. The whole tribe of Utopias; the innumerable theories deduced from the abstract rights or moral obligations of individuals

or communities; all speculations which concern themselves, not with explaining what is, but with telling us what ought to be, are, however admirable and useful, wholly alien to Science in the sense in which that word is here used. Such speculations have had, and are having, for good and for evil, important political effects; they are therefore among the phenomena which political science must coordinate and explain: but they are no more contributions to that science than an earthquake is a contribution to Geology.

Other investigations, commonly and not incorrectly considered as contributions to Political Knowledge, such as those which deal with Constitutional History and Constitutional Law, stand in a different category. Their business is to discover and classify political facts of great significance and interest. They ought, therefore, it would seem, to be valuable preliminaries to the construction of a Science of Politics. Yet, as they are usually conducted, it may be doubted whether they do not obscure rather than illustrate its problems. They bring into undue prominence certain kinds of fact; they wholly ignore other kinds of fact at least as material to a true understanding of the real play of social laws. For them the legal and theoretical attributes of each organ in the body politic, the forms and fictions of exoteric politics, are the main subjects of interest, and supply the only principles of classification; while the ever-varying social forces which successively work through the same constitutional mechanism, and which give to the latter its chief significance, are comparatively neglected. That this should be so is perhaps inevitable. For while it is easy, with the lawyers, to analyse the documents, or the precedents on which are based the legal and constitutional powers of every governing element in a State; while it is not difficult, with the historians, to trace the formal growth and gradual transformation of these various elements through successive generations, the difficulty of any systematic inquiry into the essential sequences of social phenomena are great, and perhaps on any large scale insuperable. We are apt to be misled in this matter by a false scientific analogy. We often talk, and sometimes think, as if its political constitution was to the State what its anatomical conformation is to the living animal: and as if therefore we might argue from "structure" to "function" with the same degree of assurance in the one case as we habitually do in the other. But there is little analogy between the two. The trite comparison between a community and an organism is doubtless suggestive, and may be useful. But it can only be employed in security by those who remember that among

the organs through which the vital energies of society act, and by which they are conditioned, those whose character is described in constitutional text-books, and whose growth is traced in constitutional histories, are among the least interesting, and the least important.

If I desired to illustrate the consequences which follow upon forgetfulness of these truths, I might remind you of the absurd controversies, dear to the debating societies of two generations ago, and not perhaps quite forgotten in some political clubs even now, on the relative merits of various abstract forms of government — Monarchical, Republican, Aristocratic, Democratic, and so forth. But let me take a less crude form of the same kind of error. We are all of us prone to regard a political institution, for instance, a representative chamber, as a machine whose character can be adequately expressed by defining its legal constitution. When we have mastered this, when we know the qualification of its electors, its legislative powers, its relation to other bodies in the State, and so forth, we conceive ourselves to have mastered its theory, and to be qualified to pronounce an opinion on the way it will work in practice. But, in truth, we have only mastered a certain modicum of constitutional law; and Constitutional law may (as I have said), be in some respects, an obstacle rather than an aid, to the construction of Political Science. The second is concerned with the reality of things, the first with their form. The subject-matter of one is Natural law, of the other Statute law. The assumed line between the theory of the political machine and its practical working, either cannot be drawn at all, or cannot be drawn at the place where legal definition and enactment end. No statute, for example, provides or could provide that a popular assembly shall work through a few large and well-disciplined parties, rather than through a number of small and independent groups. Yet its habits in this respect are incomparably more important than anything in its formal constitution. No statute provides or could provide that the representatives composing it shall, on the whole, be elected from among those who do not regard politics as a means of making money. Yet the habits of the electorate in this respect are incomparably more important than any mere question of the franchise. On the other hand, the constitution of most representative assemblies does assume that the units who elect and the units who are elected shall, as among themselves, possess equal fractions of political power: and, accordingly, the law is careful to draw no distinction between them. But here, again, Law is no guide to fact. Legal equality

has no necessary connection with political equivalence, and the most cursory observations, not of constitutional forms, but of the realities of life, show that organisation is the inevitable accompaniment of electoral institutions, and that organisation, from the very nature of the case, is absolutely incompatible with uniformity.

All this goes to show that we are not yet in possession of anything deserving the name of political science; that the intrinsic difficulties of creating one are almost insurmountable; and that in most cases those who attempt the task employ methods essentially arbitrary, and predestined from the beginning to be unfruitful. But though it may well seem doubtful whether a complete science of politics (and a fortiori of sociology) will ever exist, it is quite certain that if it ever does exist it must be confined to a small body of experts. Is there the slightest probability that in their hands it could ever produce the practical results which many persons hope for? It may be doubted. An acquaintance with the laws of nature does not always, nor even commonly, carry with it the means of controlling them. Knowledge is seldom power. And a sociologist so coldly independent of the social forces among which he lived as thoroughly to understand them, would, in all probability, be as impotent to guide the evolution of a community as an astronomer to modify the orbit of a comet.

It might indeed at first sight appear that while the astronomer has no means of intervening in the affairs of the star, it is always open to the sociologist to appeal to the reason of the community of which he is a member. But this view depends, I think, on an erroneous view of the influence which reasoning has or can have on the course of human affairs. To hear some people talk, one would suppose that the successful working of social institutions depended as much upon cool calculation as the management of a Joint Stock Bank: that from top to bottom, and side to side, it was a mere question of political arithmetic; and that the beliefs, the affections, the passions and the prejudices of Mankind were to be considered in no other light than as obstacles in the path of progress, which it was the business of the politician to destroy or to elude. This is a natural and, perhaps in some respects, a beneficial illusion. Movement, whether of progress or of retrogression, can commonly be brought about only when the sentiments opposing it have been designedly weakened or have suffered a natural decay. In this destructive process, and in any constructive process by which it may be followed, reasoning, often very bad reasoning, bears, at least in Western communities, a large share as

cause, a still larger share as symptom; so that the clatter of contending argumentation is often the most striking accompaniment of interesting social changes. Its position, therefore, and its functions in the social organism, are frequently misunderstood. People fall instinctively into the habit of supposing that, as it plays a conspicuous part in the improvement or deterioration of human institutions, it therefore supplies the very basis on which they may be made to rest, the very mould to which they ought to conform; and they naturally conclude that we have only got to reason more and to reason better, in order speedily to perfect the whole machinery by which human felicity is to be secured. Surely this is a great delusion. A community founded upon argument would soon be a community no longer. It would dissolve into its constituent elements. Think of the thousand ties most subtly woven out of common sentiments, common tastes, common beliefs, nay, common prejudices, by which from our very earliest childhood we are all bound unconsciously but indissolubly together into a compacted whole. Imagine these to be suddenly loosed and their places taken by some judicious piece of reasoning on the balance of advantage, which, after making all proper deductions, still remains to the credit of social life. Imagine nicely adjusting our loyalty and our patriotism to the standard of a calculated utility. Imagine us severally suspending our adhesion to the Ten Commandments until we have leisure and opportunity to decide between the rival and inconsistent philosophies which contend for the honour of establishing them! These things we may indeed imagine if we please. Fortunately, we shall never see them. Society is founded — and from the nature of the human beings which constitute it, must, in the main, be always founded — not upon criticism but upon feelings and beliefs, and upon the customs and codes by which feelings and beliefs are, as it were, fixed and rendered stable. And even where these harmonise so far as we can judge with sound reason, they are in many cases not consciously based on reasoning; nor is their fate necessarily bound up with that of the extremely indifferent arguments by which, from time to time, philosophers, politicians, and I will add divines, have thought fit to support them.

This view may, perhaps, be readily accepted in reference, for instance, to Oriental civilisation; but to some it may seem paradoxical when applied to the free constitutions of the West. Yet, after all, it supplies the only possible justification, I will not say for Democratic Government only, but for any Government whatever based on public opinion. If the business of such a Government

was to deal with the essential framework of society as an engineer deals with the wood and iron out of which he constructs a bridge, it would be as idiotic to govern by household suffrage as to design the Forth Bridge by household suffrage. Indeed, it would be much more idiotic, because, as we have seen, sociology is far more difficult than engineering. But, in truth, there is no resemblance between the two cases. We habitually talk as if a self-governing or free community was one which managed its own affairs. In strictness, no community manages its own affairs, or by any possibility could manage them. It manages but a narrow fringe of its affairs, and that in the main by deputy. It is only the thinnest surface layer of law and custom, belief and sentiment, which can either be successfully subjected to destructive treatment, or become the nucleus of any new growth — a fact which explains the apparent paradox that so many of our most famous advances in political wisdom are nothing more than the formal recognition of our political impotence. Examples of this paradox from the history of economic legislation will at once suggest themselves to all. But consider an illustration which in this connection may not seem so familiar, drawn from the theory of toleration.

As we are all aware, this theory was never accepted, unless now and then by the persecuted minority, until quite recent times. It is doubtless one of the most valuable empirical maxims of modern politics. Yet the reasons given for it are usually bad. Some will tell you, oblivious of the most patent facts of history, that persecution is always unsuccessful. Others appear to assume that there is an inherent and inalienable right possessed by every human being to hold and to propagate what opinions he pleases — a doctrine which cannot be held practically in an absolute form, or logically in a limited one. Others again, with more reason, point out that the persecutor never can be quite sure he is right; that new truths have constantly been unpopular in their first beginnings; and that if every modification of received beliefs or customs is to be destroyed as soon as it is born, progress becomes impossible.

This is all very true. But it is far from going to the root of the matter. Persecution is only an attempt to do that overtly and with violence, which the community is, in self-defence, perpetually doing unconsciously and in silence. In many societies variation of belief is practically impossible. In other societies it is permitted only along certain definite lines. In no society that has ever existed, or could be conceived as existing, are opinions equally free (in the scientific sense of the term,

not the legal) to develop themselves indifferently in all directions. The constant pressure of custom; the effects of imitation, of education, and of habit; the incalculable influence of man on man, produce a working uniformity of conviction more effectually than the gallows and the stake, though without the cruelty, and with far more than the wisdom that have usually been vouchsafed to official persecutors. Though the production of such a community of ideas as is necessary to make possible community of life, the encouragement of useful novelties, the destruction of dangerous eccentricities, are thus among the undertakings which, according to modern notions, the State dare scarcely touch, or touches not at all, this is not because these things are unimportant, but because, though among the most important of our affairs, we no longer think we can manage them.

It would seem, then, that in all States, and not least in those which are loosely described as self-governing, the governmental action which can ever be truly described as the conscious application of appropriate means to the attainment of fully-comprehended ends, must, in comparison with the totality of causes affecting the development of the community, be extremely insignificant in amount. As a matter of fact, it has, in the recent past, been in the main confined to questions of administration and finance, or to the removal, sometimes, no doubt, by revolutionary means, of antiquated and vexatious restrictions. Far more than this may, of course, be attempted. It is quite possible to conceive an absolute government with a taste for social experiments. It is quite possible, though not so easy, to conceive a popular government in which the strength of custom and tradition shall have been seriously weakened by criticism or other causes, and where the sentiments which usually support what is, being [sic], by a kind of inverted conservatism, to nourish and give strength to some ideal of what ought to be. Communities so situated are in a condition of unstable equilibrium. They are in danger of far-reaching changes. It is not asserted that the result of such changes must be unsuccessful, only that it is beyond our powers of calculation. The new condition of things would be a political parallel to what breeders and biologists call in natural history a "sport." Such "sports" do not often survive; still less often do they flourish and multiply. It can only be by a rare and happy accident that either in the social or the physical world they constitute a stable and permanent variety.

We are therefore driven to the conclusion that, as our expectations of limitless progress

for the race cannot depend upon the blind operation of the laws of heredity, so neither can they depend upon the deliberate action of national governments. Such examination as we can make of the changes which have taken place during the relatively minute fraction of history with respect to which we have fairly full information, shows that they have been caused by a multitude of variations, often extremely small, made in their surroundings by individuals whose objects, though not necessarily selfish, have often had no intentional reference to the advancement of the community at large. But we have no scientific ground for suspecting that the stimulus to these individual efforts must necessarily continue; we know of no law by which, if they do continue, they must needs be co-ordinated for a common purpose or pressed into the service of the common good. We cannot estimate their remoter consequences; neither can we tell how they will act and re-act upon one another, nor how they will in the long run affect morality, religion, and other fundamental elements of human society. The future of the race is thus encompassed with darkness: no faculty of calculation that we possess, no instrument that we are likely to invent, will enable us to map out its course, or penetrate the secret of its destiny. It is easy, no doubt, to find in the clouds which obscure our path what shapes we please: to see in them the promise of some millennial paradise, or the threat of endless and unmeaning travel through waste and perilous places. But in such visions the wise man will put but little confidence: content, in a sober and cautious spirit, with a full consciousness of his feeble powers of foresight, and the narrow limits of his activity, to deal as they arise with the problems of his own generation.

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In thinking over the criticisms which this hasty survey of an immense subject might possibly provoke, two in particular seem to require some special notice on my part. To the first I plead guilty at once. It will be objected that of many statements the proof is not given at all, or is but barely indicated; that no notice has been taken of many obvious objections, and that the treatment of the most important topics has been so meagre that what I have said rather resembles the syllabus of a course of lectures than a lecture complete in itself. All this is perfectly true; and I can only urge in palliation that, as I could not deliver a series of Rectorial Addresses,<sup>1</sup> what I had to say must either have been compressed,

<sup>1</sup> Balfour gave the talk as Rector of the University of Glasgow. This was mostly an honorary position given to some public figure who was not expected to have much input into the actual running of the university.

as I have endeavoured to compress it, or not be said at all; and further, that I had the good fortune to speak to an audience who might be trusted to fill up the lacuna which I had been compelled to leave.

The second criticism is of a different kind, and to this I do not plead guilty. I shall be told, indeed I have already been told, that the treatment of the subject was unsuited to the occasion, and to the age of many among my audience; that it was calculated to chill youthful enthusiasm, and to check youthful enterprise. Now I quite agree that it would be a melancholy result of 'our meeting if any single member of this assembly left it with a lower view of the intrinsic worth of human endeavour. But I do not believe this is likely to be the case. It is true that, as I think, there is nothing in what we know of the earthly prospects of humanity fitted fully to satisfy human aspirations. It is true that, as I think, much optimistic speculation about the future is quite unworthy the consideration of serious men. It is true that, as I think, the light-hearted manner in which many persons sketch out their ideas of a reconstructed society exhibits an almost comic ignorance of our limited powers of political calculation.

But I do not believe that these opinions are likely, either in reason or in fact, to weaken the springs of human effort. The best efforts of mankind have not never been founded upon the belief in an assured progress towards a terrestrial millennium: if for no other reason because the belief itself is quite modern. Patriotism and public zeal have not in the past, and do not now, require any such aliment. True we do not know, as our fathers before us have not known, the hidden laws by which in any State the private virtues of its citizens, their love of knowledge, the energy and disinterestedness of their civic life, their reverence for the past, their caution, their capacity for safely working free institutions, may be maintained and fostered. But we do know that no State where these qualities have flourished has ever perished from internal decay; and we also know that it is within our power, each of us in his own sphere, to practise them ourselves, and to encourage them in others. As men of action, we want no more than this. Of this no speculation can deprive us. And I doubt whether any of us will be less fitted to face with a wise and cheerful courage the problems of our age and country, if reflection should induce us to rate somewhat lower than is at present fashionable, either the splendours of our future destiny, or the facility with which these splendours may be attained.

# Progress To What?

Balfour's criticisms are clever, but often wrong. He says

"A survey of the world ... shows us a vast number of savage communities, apparently at a stage of culture not profoundly different from that which prevailed among pre-historic man during geological epochs which, estimated by any historical standard, are immensely remote."

By his day, only small numbers of hunter-gatherers still lived as humans lived before the invention of agriculture. This happened in West Asia maybe 12,000 years ago, and spread to the rest of the world. It led on to towns and cities, whenever the agriculture was rich enough to support them.

Progress occurred even without cities. The Polynesians settled islands where no human had been before, reaching their limits at Hawaii, Easter Island and New Zealand. The Inuit (Eskimos) used stone-age technology, but used it much more efficiently than previous dwellers in the High Arctic.

He does not acknowledge progress towards democracy. Nor the gigantic improvements in travel and communication. Nor the rise of socialism.

On biology, Balfour accepts the standard White-Racist view that humans were split into several different races with different biological potential. This never had much sound science in it – humans vary, but there are not the clear lines that you'd get if humans had ever had long periods of separate evolution as subspecies.

The notion that "modifications in the physical structure of animals produced during life may be transmitted to their offspring" was, as he said, the view of the majority at the time. Darwin himself had held it. He also correctly says that the challenge had come from August Weismann, though the book spells his name with just one 'n'. Only later did you get the polarisation into factions called Neo-Darwinism and Neo-Lamarckism, later and incorrectly simplified to Darwinism and Lamarckism. Weismann got shoved aside in the standard histories, most unfairly.

Balfour casts doubt on racial explanations for differences within European peoples, though not the notion of a Superior White Race:

"Sometimes from a kind of idleness, sometimes from a kind of pride, sometimes because the 'principles of heredity' is now always on our lips, we frequently attribute to differences of blood effects which are really due to differences of surroundings... empires may rise from

barbarism to civilisation and sink again from civilisation into barbarism, within periods so brief that we may take it as certain, whatever be our opinion as to the transmission of acquired faculties, that no hereditary influence has had time to operate. Now, if the differences between the same nation at different times are thus obviously not due to differences in inherited qualities, is it not somewhat rash to drag in hypothetical differences in inherited qualities to account for the often slighter peculiarities of temperament by which communities of different descent may be distinguished? Are we not often attributing to heredity what is properly due to education, and crediting Nature with what really is the work of Man?"

This makes him mildly progressive for his era. The entire British Empire was built on the notion of a Superior White Race. The Soviet Union was the first government to reject it and try to treat all races equally. The Japanese sought a declaration of Racial Equality from the Versailles Conference, and were refused. They might have settled for something similar to Hitler's later view of them as the 'Aryans of the East'. But most Europeans at the time would have resisted the notion of racial equality with any 'Yellow Race'. Only after 1945 did it become one of the guiding principles of the new United Nations. The challenge of an increasingly powerful Soviet Union and general colonial restlessness forced this change, which happened slowly in practice. (And sadly, anti-racism among ordinary Russians declined, and racism became much stronger after the Soviet collapse.)

During the Cold War, there were real fears in the West of a mass defection by non-whites to the Leninist cause. This greatly strengthened the position of timid liberals and genuine anti-racists. In the end the West overtook the Soviet Union on both anti-racism and women's rights. But it is naïve to believe that the same changes would have happened without those nasty Soviets being there as a serious alternative.

Politicians and business people mostly listen most to whoever shouts loudest. This also applied to tolerance for gays and lesbians from the 1960s, now coming close to social equality. Tolerating gays was never a Soviet policy, though a soft line was taken in the 1920s. But the acceptance of women as fellow-humans was followed through and had a strong influence on the West. It undermined the whole body of Latin-Christian ideology, and it made other changes much easier.

Balfour might have been homosexual or

bisexual, and was definitely not conventional. He would also have been a typical member of the elite in being well aware that some of the elite were gay or lesbian. And been typical in never mentioning the matter, as far as I know. Male homosexuality was decriminalised by a quiet ruling-class fix - lesbianism had never been illegal. But social acceptance needed social radicalism of the sort Balfour disapproved of in his own era.

Balfour also represents a strain of anti-progressive thinking that has since been marginalised:

“The presupposed appetite for scientific knowledge and the demand for industrial invention, have been rare in the history of the world; that advanced civilisations have existed without them.”

The world in the 1890s was vastly more advanced than previous high civilisations. Rail transport had connected the world as never before, as had telegraphs. Manufactures had multiplied astonishingly, while far more people than ever before lived in cities.

For my part, I'd sooner speak of improvement than progress. Saying 'progress' implies *there is no alternative*. Saying 'improvement' forces you to ask if a proposed change is a good idea. Imagine someone saying the following:

*“We will improve our fine old city with a series of vast and dull buildings that could have been built almost anywhere in the world. It will soon have a skyline almost identical to other big cities.”*

No one would put it like that, obviously. But you can get away with changes like that by saying 'progress' and muddling many separate issues.

The dullification of most of the world's cities has of course improved the wealth of the rich men (or very occasionally women) who own, control and manage such developments.

To get back to Balfour, he also said:

“But will our general theory of the material Universe again undergo any revolution comparable to that which it has undergone in the last four hundred years?”

This was the majority view among scientists, and of course quite wrong. Quantum Mechanics and Relativity were about to upset everything. He was also wrong to say:

“No man will ever see what goes on in a gas, or know by direct vision how ether behaves.”

Gas molecules *can* now be seen, under special circumstances. Ether was in 1891 the established and mistaken notion for how electromagnetic waves could travel in the vacuum of space. The actual processes are increasingly well understood.

I can however make no sense of the following:

“Supposing it to be true, for instance, that the proper motion of the stars cannot in many cases be reasonably attributed to gravitation. Does it not seem almost certain that we are here in presence of a force on which we can never experiment, and whose laws we shall never be able to determine?”

'Proper motion' is where a star changes its position amidst the apparently fixed pattern of stars as seen from Earth. A result of the actual motions of stars, including our own. These would have been inherited from the star's origins, plus later close encounters.

Gravity is the presumed cause and controlling factor of the actual motion of stars, and the proper motion we observe. But we can only presume it and mostly not test it, apart from stars discovered in the last few decades in orbit around the Black Hole at the core of our galaxy. What Balfour thought there was cause to worry about is unclear. And since the topic intrigues me, I have done an appendix on the topic.

Balfour was much clearer when understanding how politics worked:

“These passing doubts, however, as to the future triumphs of Art and Science, be they well or ill founded, need not, it may be said, affect our estimate of the results which in other departments of human activity may be expected to flow from the “efforts of successive generations,” made through the machinery by which alone in its collective capacity the community can make a deliberate attempt at progress — I mean the State.”

All through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Tory had assumed that the state was the proper body to make things happen, or prevent them happening. They tried to hang onto the Corn Laws, which did protect British agriculture and might have avoided the risk of running out of food that Britain faced in both World Wars. And the 19<sup>th</sup> century Tories imposed Factory Legislation, limiting the exploitation of workers.

Things changed in the 1920s, with the traditional Liberal Party declining and being pulled into either the Tories or the newly powerful Labour Party. The fantasy of a self-regulating economy was held by some Tories. It became dominant among the Tories with Thatcher's leadership. The sort of shrewd right-wing insights that Balfour had are now extinct.

Insight need not mean sympathy:

“It is unnecessary to remind you what immense expectations have been, and are, based upon State action. We are all familiar with that numerous class who see in political changes the main interest of the Past, and their main hopes for the Future; who, if asked what they mean by Progress, will tell you Reform; and if asked what they mean by Reform, will tell you, ‘An alteration of the State

Constitution,' and if asked why they desire an alteration of the State Constitution, will tell you, 'In order to carry on more rapidly and effectively the work of Progress.'"

He was defending the declining power of the Landed Aristocracy – yet he also has a point. That's why I'd prefer to talk of *improvement*, rather than 'progress'. Societies can and do change in the wrong direction. Racism strengthened across the decades in both the USA and British India. Economic thinking in the West regressed to 19<sup>th</sup> century values from the 1980s.

Balfour chooses to ignore the continuing progress to more democratic forms of government that was happening globally. He does however clearly see the difference between this and multi-party government, which he does not mistake for the Natural Order:

"We are all of us prone to regard a political institution, for instance, a representative chamber, as a machine whose character can be adequately expressed by defining its legal constitution. When we have mastered this, when we know the qualification of its electors, its legislative powers, its relation to other bodies in the State, and so forth, we conceive ourselves to have mastered its theory, and to be qualified to pronounce an opinion on the way it will work in practice..."

"No statute, for example, provides or could provide that a popular assembly shall work through a few large and well-disciplined parties, rather than through a number of small and independent groups. Yet its habits in this respect are incomparably more important than anything in its formal constitution..."

"We habitually talk as if a self-governing or free community was one which managed its own affairs. In strictness, no community manages its own affairs, or by any possibility could manage them. It manages but a narrow fringe of its affairs, and that in the main by deputy. It is only the thinnest surface layer of law and custom, belief and sentiment, which can either be successfully subjected to destructive treatment, or become the nucleus of any new growth — a fact which explains the apparent paradox that so many of our most famous advances in political wisdom are nothing more than the formal recognition of our political impotence..."

"Some will tell you, oblivious of the most patent facts of history, that persecution is always unsuccessful. Others appear to assume that there is an inherent and inalienable right possessed by every human being to hold and to propagate what opinions he pleases — a doctrine which cannot be held practically in an absolute form, or logically in a limited one..."

"Persecution is only an attempt to do that overtly and with violence, which the community is, in self-defence, perpetually doing unconsciously and in silence. In many societies variation of belief is practically impossible. In other societies it is permitted only along certain definite lines. In

no society that has ever existed, or could be conceived as existing, are opinions equally free (in the scientific sense of the term, not the legal) to develop themselves indifferently in all directions."

He also notes the problems a radical government would face:

"It is quite possible to conceive an absolute government with a taste for social experiments. It is quite possible, though not so easy, to conceive a popular government in which the strength of custom and tradition shall have been seriously weakened by criticism or other causes, and where the sentiments which usually support ... a kind of inverted conservatism, to nourish and give strength to some ideal of what ought to be. Communities so situated are in a condition of unstable equilibrium. They are in danger of far-reaching changes. It is not asserted that the result of such changes must be unsuccessful, only that it is beyond our powers of calculation. The new condition of things would be a political parallel to what breeders and biologists call in natural history a 'sport.' Such 'sports' do not often survive; still less often do they flourish and multiply. It can only be by a rare and happy accident that either in the social or the physical world they constitute a stable and permanent variety."

It had been tried already. The Commonwealth and the French Revolution had tried to create new institutions from scratch, running through several variations and in the end collapsing. But they also left the world utterly changed. In the long run, their values became normalised. The aristocratic values of Balfour perished.

The American Revolution produced a stable government, in part because it was mostly run by the same people who had been running the Thirteen Colonies for the British. At the time, very little radical happened. Republicanism was accepted, but the notion of votes for all white men was not firmly established till the 1830s. Slavery was an issue requiring a Civil War to cure, and racial equality was not formally established until the 1960s. Still remains uncertain in practice.

The Russian Revolution survived against the odds, and after 1945 the entire world changed in line with what had once been extremist Bolshevik demands. It might have changed again in the 1960s and regenerated European socialism, but sadly the pointless conservatism of Brezhnev crushed the hopes of the Prague Spring. In China, the post-Mao reforms were modest, careful, and successful. Socialist continuity was kept. Liberal enthusiasts for the 'end of history' claimed for years that it was capitalist. Recently I've seen a scattering of articles in mainstream journals admitting that this was nonsense.<sup>1</sup> But that's a topic for a future issue of this magazine.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2018/08/13/us-china-relations-who-lost-them/>, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/china-hasnt-won-yet>.

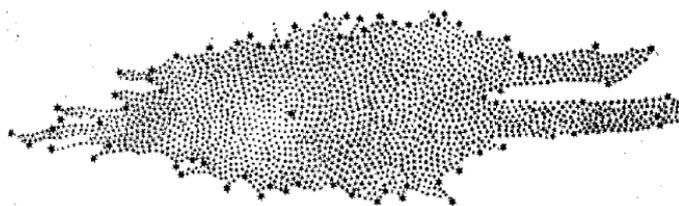
## Appendix – False Visions of Stars

“Proper motion was suspected by early astronomers (according to Macrobius, AD 400) but a proof was not provided until 1718 by Edmund Halley, who noticed that Sirius, Arcturus and Aldebaran were over half a degree away from the positions charted by the ancient Greek astronomer Hipparchus roughly 1850 years earlier.

“The term ‘proper motion’ derives from the historical use of ‘proper’ to mean ‘belonging to’ (cf, *propre* in French and the common English word property).”

Stars near to each other in the galaxy often have differences in speed and direction of tens of kilometres per second: occasionally much more. But given their immense distances from us, it takes time for these to be noticed without using a telescope.

Stars almost all share a common motion around the centre of the galaxy. In modern times, an anomaly has been found with stars in the outer portion of galaxies rotating much too fast for the amount of matter that the galaxy should contain. This plus some anomalies in the movement of galaxies within clusters led to a belief in ‘Dark Matter’, though there are alternatives like *Modified Newtonian Dynamics*. But that is based on discoveries made long after Balfour’s time.



I asked about Balfour’s remarks on the question forum *Quora*, and was reminded that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, people still believed a version of Herschel’s model of the galaxy – a flat irregular blob with our solar system close to the centre. But the movements of the stars did not match that:

“Based on this model, one would expect the motions of stars to behave like that of planets, getting progressively slower as one moves away from the Sun. The first spectrographs in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century did not confirm this, which either meant Newton’s gravity was wrong or that the Sun was not the center of the Universe.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.quora.com/>

It was also known that the sun was apparently moving towards the constellation Hercules. But there was nothing there that would explain this motion.

Then someone took a systematic look at Globular Clusters – vast blobs of hundreds of thousands of stars. Weirdly, many of them were found in the direction of the constellation Sagittarius. And if you mapped them on the simplifying assumption that they were all about equally bright, you found them centring on a point tens of thousands of light-years from Earth. This was later confirmed to be the real centre of the galaxy, and it contains a giant Black Hole known as Sagittarius A\*.

The stars mapped by Herschel turned out to be a nearby portion of the disk of our galaxy. Almost all stars have a similar orbit around the core of the galaxy (though the central Black Hole is only a tiny fraction of that mass). The differences observed in Balfour’s time were random variations in those orbits, caused by interactions with other bodies during the galaxy’s long history, including vast clouds of gas and dust.

The cloud that our own solar system formed from has long since dispersed, and our sun’s original ‘sisters’ are assumed to be far away from us. Only one candidate has so far been found: an obscure star called HD 162826. Weirdly, it is a star in the constellation Hercules, the direction in which our sun was originally presumed to be travelling. (This is in fact the Solar Apex: our solar system’s motion relative to the nearby stars, the Local Standard of Rest.)

The stars currently close to us would not have been close tens of millions of years ago, and will not be tens of millions of years in the future. Nor do most of them have much in common with each other – the ‘twins’ Castor and Pollux are at different distances, have different ages, and Castor is actually a group of six suns. Constellations are not real entities: they are merely the view from Earth of a random line-up of stars.<sup>3</sup>

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[Did-astronomers-in-the-1890s-find-anything-odd-in-the-proper-motion-of-the-stars-I-found-this-claim-in-Balfours-Fragment-on-Progress-and-he-was-well-informed-about-science/answer/Romeel-Dav%C3%A9?filter=6&nsrc=1&snid3=2833814790](https://www.quora.com/Did-astronomers-in-the-1890s-find-anything-odd-in-the-proper-motion-of-the-stars-I-found-this-claim-in-Balfours-Fragment-on-Progress-and-he-was-well-informed-about-science/answer/Romeel-Dav%C3%A9?filter=6&nsrc=1&snid3=2833814790)  
<sup>3</sup> See <https://gwydionmadawc.com/75-other-science/constellations-a-human-invention/> for details

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