




The Experience of ‘Reform’ in English Local Governance in the Era of the ‘Reform Ministry’ (1830–1841)

Joanna Innes 

In the age of revolutions, Britain did not undergo a revolution. But it did undergo a ‘reform’.

If reform implies change within the framework of the constitution, and revolution, change by extra-constitutional means, then there is a difference in principle, and Britain underwent non-revolutionary change. Still, the antithesis between reform and revolution should not be overdrawn.

I would like to thank my current doctoral students Myungsu Kang and Mary O’Connor, and my colleagues Joel Barnes, Liz Hurren, Steve King, Peter Mandler, Jon Parry and Roey Sweet for inspiration and suggestions—in several cases, at a level of helpfulness far exceeding the ordinary expectations of collegiality.

J. Innes (✉)
Oxford University, Oxford, UK
e-mail: joanna.innes@history.ox.ac.uk

'Reform' at the time had epic resonance, which has since been eroded. Within the space of a few years, a succession of acts of Parliament prescribed the remodelling of an extraordinary number and variety of institutions: from Parliament to the parish, from Scottish burgh police to Irish elementary schools, from the East India Company's trading monopoly to Caribbean slavery.¹ All of these changes were contested, and a series of bitter struggles took place around them, both inside and outside Parliament. The government made deliberate efforts to involve a wider public in debating some of these changes. The fact that the elective principle was established in many of the new institutions of local government meant that significant numbers of people were also given a voice in their implementation. Some people used these opportunities to contest or obstruct change; they also devised other, variably effective ways of doing that. The changes ordered were inherently disruptive, and processes of change provided opportunities for further contention and disruption.

Still, over varying lengths of time, within a few years or a few decades, all these changes bedded down, if not always precisely as originally envisaged. They came to constitute the institutional landscape, and as such became the subject of a new generation's reforming attention.

Britain's 'age of reform' has been the subject of a very substantial historiography, though the accent has usually been on the questions what changed and why? Experiences of change have received attention primarily inasmuch as they helped to shape change. Here I shift focus towards experience, especially in relation to reform in English local government.² I explore forms of contention around these reforms, and public engagement with the process of change. Experience was in the first

¹ For an account that I helped to coordinate, Joanna Innes and Arthur Burns, eds., *Rethinking the Age of Reform, Britain 1780–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

² For an introductory survey, Michael Turner, *The Age of Unease: Government and Reform in Britain, 1782–1832* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000). Other accounts focussing on the reformers include Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830–1852* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Ian Newbould, *Whiggery and Reform, 1830–41: The Politics of Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Joseph Coohill, *Ideas of the Liberal Party: Perceptions, Agendas and Liberal Politics in the House of Commons 1832–52* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

instance experience of a *process*: it took some time before outcomes crystallized, ensuring that people had to exercise agency in highly confusing contexts. I then shift forwards in time, to consider how reforms were viewed in a longer perspective.

If we ask, how did institutions and practices change, it is possible in principle to provide reasonably clear answers. If instead we ask how people experienced change—how it presented itself to them, how they responded to it, and how and over what period their perceptions changed—then answers become more elusive. Still, it seems worth opening up these topics.

THE 'AGE OF REFORM'

Several things came together to give Britain's 'age of reform' a particularly momentous character. First, for almost a century and a half after the dynastic and constitutional revolution of 1688, British governments operated, in relation to England especially, under a form of self-denying ordinance which entailed not attempting systematically to remodel any institutions of government, or to do anything more than tinker with the relationship between Church and State. This was initially because political stability was argued to hinge on respecting the 'Revolution settlement': the set of decisions about what to change and what to leave in place that had concluded the 1688 revolution. As time passed, and the British political scene remained relatively stable, and national wealth and power grew, a different argument came to the fore, namely that, ramshackle though they might be in some respects, national institutions had established their worth in practice; it would be foolish to mend something that was not broken. No one denied the merits of 'improvement', but this connoted adjustment at the margins, or local change springing from local initiative.³

'Reform' emerged as a political slogan in the 1780s, then being employed especially by opposition Whigs in Parliament and by radicals

³ Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689–1798* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) for a good account of prevailing values. For my reader's guide to this, 'Polite and Commercial's Twin. Public Life and the Propertied Englishman 1689–1798', in Elaine Chalus and Perry Gauci eds., *Revisiting the Polite and Commercial People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

in the public sphere.⁴ The word had powerful resonances, more powerful than it usually has now. It connoted the rooting out of corruption and abuse, and willingness to tear things down in order to make a fresh start. The favourite object of reform was Parliament: that is the electoral system. It was argued that if constituency sizes were enlarged and more people were given the vote, such that more MPs had to answer to large electorates, then the House of Commons would do a better job of holding ministers to account—and would be able to avoid precipitating further such catastrophes as the (then still escalating) American war of independence. Other objects targeted for ‘reform’ in that decade included public finance, the Church, the East India Company and criminal justice. When the French Revolution erupted, that was argued to demonstrate the dangers of reform: after all, it had been touched off by well-meaning attempts to remodel national and local institutions. Although the Whig Edmund Burke, a vigorous critic of the Revolution, tried to salvage the case for ‘reform’, which he argued denoted pragmatic and targeted change, his arguments were not widely accepted at this juncture; instead, ‘reform’ came to connote headstrong blundering, and only those whose appetite for controversy was undimmed by revolution and war persisted in championing it. Although the term began to creep back into self-consciously ‘moderate’ use in the 1810s, many remained wary, both of the word itself and of what they thought it stood for.

The uneven recovery of ‘reform’ as a political slogan overlapped with wider changes in British political culture, entailing the broadening and intensification of public involvement with politics; the development of new forms of political engagement (such as public petitioning campaigns) and the emergence of more-and-less formally structured supra-local political organizations.⁵ The term ‘movement’ began to take on its modern

⁴ Joanna Innes, ‘Reform in English Public Life: The Fortunes of a Word’, in Joanna Innes and Arthur Burns eds., *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 71–97; and Susan Richter, Thomas Maissen, and Manuela Albertone, eds., *Languages of Reform in the Eighteenth Century: When Europe Lost Its Fear of Change* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

⁵ The introduction to Innes and Burns, eds., *Rethinking*, 22–25, 33–34, 38, makes some attempt to characterize these changes. Mary O’Connor’s Oxford D.Phil., in progress should shed more light; thanks to her in relation to ‘orators’ especially. For ‘non-electors’, Jon Lawrence, *Electing our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 15, 16, 21, 30.

meaning. In the early nineteenth century, elections to Parliament, notoriously often rowdy affairs, were more frequently called, and those who did not qualify to vote, so-called non-electors, increasingly attracted notice. A set of radical leaders achieved national prominence. Because one way in which they championed their cause was by travelling around the country speaking at public meetings, they were sometimes termed 'orators'. A series of sites that had long intermittently staged contention became more routinely politicized, including urban parish vestries, meetings of members of municipal corporations (chartered bodies responsible for town government) and county meetings, which were occasionally called to debate and make resolutions on public issues. Other kinds of public meetings proliferated, including meetings of subscribers to philanthropic bodies, and ad hoc meetings convened to discuss—and perhaps endorse petitions addressing—one or another local or national issue. The governing classes talked about the growing power of public opinion, and while they may have exaggerated its novelty, its manifestations were growing and changing, as more people lower down the social scale gained confidence in their right to speak and be heard on the public stage. In this context, it was easy for the fearful to worry that any call for 'reform' would be echoed and multiplied across many settings, and that it would be taken up by ignorant and impulsive people.

Around 1830, the genie was loosed from the bottle.⁶ Testifying to a widespread sense that pressure for change was becoming irresistible on some fronts, Tory ministers took the first steps towards remodelling the revolution settlement. These ministers identified with a political grouping that had been so long in power that they thought of themselves not as a party but rather as 'the administration'. Now they agreed to support a cross-party initiative to remove restrictions on the political rights of the growing number of Protestant Dissenters. Much more controversially and divisively, though again with cross-party support, in the following year they removed restrictions on Catholic political rights, with a view especially to quieting agitation around this issue in Ireland. Some clergy and laity who identified strongly with the established Church of England felt betrayed by this move, which they saw as fundamentally changing the constitution. The *quid pro quo* for 'Catholic Emancipation' was a

⁶ Unless otherwise specified, works cited nn. 1–2 can be assumed to be good places to turn for more information about the developments very briefly sketched below.

narrowing of voting rights in Ireland: a raising of the minimum qualifying threshold. But the same ministers refused to consider any change to the English electoral system: not least because in that case, all the pressure was towards broadening participation. At that point the death of the king made it necessary to hold a new general election. In the new Parliament, the old ministers proved unable to put together a governing majority, so the new king appointed a ministry made up of long-term opposition Whigs, afforced by a few reform-minded members of the previous regime.

Thus a long-term outsider party came to power, a party whose members had for many decades constructed their identity around criticism of the status quo, and who relished the chance now afforded to prove their worth by righting wrongs. Parliamentary reform was at the top of their agenda: they were keen to eliminate tiny urban constituencies under the thumb of local landed gentry, or any monied man who could buy electoral support. As they saw it, these ‘closed boroughs’ were bastions of bad government. They also saw merit in calls to rationalize the franchise, to increase numbers of voters of moderate means. In fact, reforming Parliament proved even more contentious and radicalizing than might have been expected.⁷ This was first because the plan that the ministry decided to bring forward called for more sweeping changes than had been anticipated, and secondly because opponents of this plan did all they could to block it, forcing a ministry that was only prepared to back-track up to a certain point into ever more confrontational mode. Two general elections in quick succession revealed impressive levels of support for reform in the more populous constituencies, including many of traditionally Tory bent; nonetheless, MPs for smaller constituencies and the House of Lords fought back doggedly. In a context in which the place of the Church in the constitution was already in debate, opposition by the bishops in the House of Lords provoked fury, expressed most dramatically in Bristol where the bishop’s palace was burnt down. Ultimately, in the face of pressure from the king, the House of Lords stopped trying to block the bill, and ‘Reform’ was agreed.

Recent analyses suggest that the effect of the act was to reinforce trends stemming from demographic and social change inasmuch as it increased

⁷ Michael Brock, *The Great Reform Act* (London: Hutchinson, 1973) remains the best scholarly study of the whole episode, though his account has been superseded in some respects, for example in relation to political unions, and the character of the electorate before and after reform (for which see the note following).

numbers of voters, and trends of change in political culture inasmuch as it promoted public engagement and brought more active and opinionated MPs into Parliament.⁸ Not all change was in the same direction: some classes of voters, deemed susceptible to influence, lost the right to vote, and as a result some constituencies ended up with smaller electorates than before. But overall the act furthered existing trends of change, while the circumstances in which it passed heightened tensions, by, on the one hand, increasing the fears of would-be defenders of the existing order, and, on the other hand, confirming critics in their view that reforms were not only necessary but achievable.

Emboldened by what they had achieved so far, and by the solid base of support that they obtained in the first House of Commons elected under new rules, ministers pioneered a new governing style by bringing forward an ambitious series of bills. Their reading of the demands of the moment was that what was needed was not administration but legislation. Much of what they attempted was on the 'reform' model: they sought to abolish misconceived or corrupt institutions and to replace them with better arrangements.⁹ Their programme was global, imperial and also spanned the whole of the United Kingdom, though past history as well as legislative convention dictated that rarely did they legislate for the whole UK at once: rather they promoted sometimes parallel, sometimes distinct measures for the different kingdoms, reflecting their reading of their different circumstances and needs. Whereas previous ministries had sometimes felt able to be a little bolder in legislating for Scotland and Ireland (intermittently troubled places), the Reform ministry promoted a bold programme of change in relation to previously sacrosanct English

⁸ Philip Salmon, 'The English Reform Legislation', in David R. Fisher ed., *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1820–1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 374–412; also on the History of Parliament website at <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/survey/ix-english-reform-legislation>; Philip Salmon, *Electoral Reform at Work: Local Politics and National Parties, 1832–41* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002); and Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: Habits of Heart and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 99–153.

⁹ Sir John Seeley, 'The English Revolution of the Nineteenth Century', *Macmillan's Magazine* 22: 130 (1870), xxii, 241–251. For an interesting attempt to characterize what was distinctive about visions of political change in this era. To similar effect, Innes and Burns eds., *Rethinking*.

institutions too; nor were ministers—who had the exclusive right to introduce only financial legislation—the only ones to bring forward further reforming measures.

With hindsight, it became clear, as it is now clear to us, what would simply be mooted, what would pass more-or-less unamended, what would have to be rethought, and what would never get off the ground. But, of course, this was not clear in advance. Some expected more aggressive action against the Church than was ever attempted. That was why, when the in-some-ways reform-minded Tory Robert Peel enjoyed a brief spell of power (when the king thought it right to try an alternative to the Reform ministry), he established a Royal Commission on the Church, aiming to keep initiative in safe hands. Radicals flew a variety of kites. John Roebuck proposed a national network of parish schools, at which attendance would be compulsory. Though the Reform ministry was interested in expanding educational provision, they were not persuaded by this approach, and asked him to desist.¹⁰ Joseph Hume floated a multitude of schemes and motions, including a proposal to replace centrally appointed county magistrates with elective boards.¹¹ Most such initiatives failed, but they helped to create a disquieting sense that everything was up for grabs.

Meanwhile, other things were changing, not immediately connected with reform, but adding to the sense that the world was being remade—such as the first railway boom, reflected in the appearance in Parliament of a slew of private railway bills, whose promoters and opponents had to testify before committees. (When the Grand Junction line opened in 1837, just after the death of the king who had seen through reform, the engine of the train that ceremonially opened the route bore a flag celebrating him as ‘A True Reformer’.)¹²

By no means everything that the Reform ministry attempted pleased even those who had brought it into power. Insofar as the ministry’s own

¹⁰ Denis Paz, *The Politics of Working-Class Education in Britain 1830–50* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 1–16. For the ministry’s tentative efforts in the late 1830s, Mandler, *Aristocratic Government*, 182–193.

¹¹ Ronald Huch and Paul Ziegler, *Joseph Hume: The People’s MP* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1985).

¹² Contemporary histories (for those consulted see n. 60 below) often highlighted the railway as a new feature of this era, esp. prominently in children’s and more popular histories. Norman Webster, *Britain’s First Trunk Line: The Grand Junction Railway* (Bath: Adams & Dart, 1972), 92–95.

efforts had made an open and contentious political culture still more open, there were lots of opportunities for the discontented to fight back. Both Tories and radicals seized these. These years brought into the lime-light a new kind of Tory, termed by the Whig Macaulay a 'disloyal Tory', someone so incensed by some of the ministry's reforms—seen as undermining an older and in some ways more inclusive and humane way of life—as to be prepared to make common cause even with radicals.¹³

By 1841, opinion had swung far enough to bring the Tories back to power in the longer term—though under one of their number, the aforementioned Robert Peel, who was more inclined than many of his fellows to see some case for reform.¹⁴ Rebranding his party 'Conservative', Peel tried to go with the flow while tempering it, so as to preserve those things that were good about the old order. Both through his longer-term record of temperate conduct, and by his manner of leadership as prime minister, Peel helped to give reform the aura of something more than a partisan crusade. According to the contemporary Tory historian Archibald Alison, Peel's short ministry of 1835 had already turned the tide of revolution, by bringing the legislature into alignment with a great shift that had taken place in public opinion. In Alison's words, the effect of Peel's lead was to bring to speedier fruition the 'natural result of reflection and experience upon an intelligent though overheated generation'.¹⁵

A few years into his second ministry, Peel nonetheless pushed his luck too far by eliminating tariff protection for agriculture, and split his party. That split opened the way to twenty years of Whig, or—as it was now increasingly termed—'Liberal' hegemony, in turn shaping retrospective

¹³ Macaulay had in mind those who combined 'the worst parts of the Cavalier and the worst parts of the Roundhead': speech delivered in the House of Commons 29 Jan 1840. [Harriet Martineau], *Knight's Popular History of England AD 1816–67*, vol. VIII (London: Bradbury, Evans & Co., 1862), 421–423, citing Macaulay, blames such men for stirring up 'physical-force' Chartism. Jörg Neuheiser, *Crown, Church and Constitution: Popular Conservatism in England, 1815–67* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2016), focusses essentially on conservative discourse. Whether Tory populism entailed a junction with radicalism is questioned in Felix Driver, 'Tory Radicalism? Ideology, Strategy and Locality in Popular Politics During the Eighteen-Thirties', *Northern History* 27: 1 (1991), 120–138.

¹⁴ A recent assessment is Richard Gaunt, *Sir Robert Peel: The Life and Legacy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

¹⁵ Archibald Alison, *History of Europe from the Fall of Napoleon...to the Rise of Louis Napoleon...*, 8 vols. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1852–1859), vi, 153, and see also 243–245.

constructions of the reform push. Still, even those who endorsed the view which, in this context, became orthodoxy—that Reformers had acted essentially as midwives for inevitable change—never forgot the *sturm and drang* which had raged around its birth. Chapter subheadings in Alison’s *History* of the era communicate this: ‘Astonishment in the House’; ‘Agitation in the country’; ‘Violent scene in the House of Commons’; ‘Violence at the election’; ‘Dreadful riots in Scotland’; ‘Preparations for insurrection’; ‘Universal delusions’; ‘Disorders...’; ‘Riots...’; ‘Frightful disorders...’¹⁶ It became common to see in these tumults a modern echo of the mid-seventeenth-century Cavalier vs. Roundhead civil wars (themselves romanticized in retrospect by the comparison).¹⁷

REFORMING ENGLISH LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Reforms to English local government arrangements were several. The 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, commonly termed ‘the New Poor Law’, opened the way for a radical overhaul of what was at this point retrospectively christened the ‘Old Poor Law’ of 1601. That had placed responsibility for relieving the poor in the hands of parish officers, local people serving by rotation, who were empowered to tax their neighbours for this purpose. The new law appointed royal commissioners who were authorized, if they saw fit, to amalgamate parishes into larger units, governed by elected boards (a model voluntarily adopted in some places during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries); the commissioners were also empowered to determine how local administrators should deal with the able-bodied poor (who were believed to loom excessively large among relief claimants). This measure thus established a new central authority, and seemed set on reducing the powers of parishes (if to an initially indeterminate extent).¹⁸ The powers of small units of government—parishes and manors—were further challenged by a measure of 1839, which I will not discuss in detail here: that allowed counties to take over policing responsibilities hitherto discharged by local people taking

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, iv, table of contents.

¹⁷ Timothy Lang, *Victorians and the Stuart Heritage: Interpretations of a Discordant Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ For a broad-brush account of the act and its administrative implications, Felix Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System 1834–84* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Works cited in nn. 32, 36, 42, below give more detail.

their turn as 'constable'. It transferred these to salaried county forces, under the direction of a county 'Chief Constable'. The 1839 County Police Act was permissive (it was made compulsory only two decades later) but it grew out of discussions in which many counties had participated, in which alternative schemes, sticking more closely to traditional practice, had also been canvassed, so its passage in this form was a victory for innovation.¹⁹

The Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 changed governance arrangements in larger corporate towns.²⁰ It applied to all chartered boroughs of significant size (except the city of London): some 178, scattered across England. Their diverse existing arrangements were superseded by new ones on a uniform template. New bodies comprised an elective chamber, whose members chose a longer-serving upper chamber and, annually, a mayor. These bodies were required to publish both their minutes and their accounts. Charity monies administered by old corporations were to be put into the hands of new trustees, but other forms of corporate property were transferred to the new bodies, who also gained power to tax. They had to assume the burden of existing debts, but were constrained in running up new ones. The new bodies were given only limited responsibilities (chiefly for keeping order). They could assume certain powers from existing 'improvement commissions' (or gain more if they applied for new local acts), but not all rushed to do this.²¹ Distinct

¹⁹ David Philips and Robert Storch, *Policing Provincial England, 1829–56: The Politics of Reform* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999).

²⁰ Much less has been written about this act than about the New Poor Law, perhaps partly because its positive provisions were so minimal and were left to be fleshed out locally. It is set against the pre-history in Rosemary Sweet, *The English Town 1680–1840: Government, Society and Culture* (Harlow: Longman, 1999); Joanna Innes and Nicholas Rogers, 'Politics and Government 1700–1840', in Peter Clark ed., *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. 2, part III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chapter 16, 529–574; Geoffrey B.A.M. Finlayson's studies building on his dissertation: 'The Municipal Corporations Act, 1835' (Unpublished Master Literature dissertation, University of Oxford, 1959) have now largely been superseded by Frédéric Moret, *End of the Urban Ancient Regime in England* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015) which follows a richer account of the operations of the commission with systematic exposition of its findings, and reception in and out of Parliament. I cite some local studies in nn. 47, 49, 54 below.

²¹ Sweet, *English Town*, 159; John Prest, *Liberty and Locality: Parliament, Permissive Legislation and Ratepayers' Democracies in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 17–19.

poor-law authorities provided one among several alternative focuses for local power.²² The new template promised enough for numerous large, previously unincorporated towns, including Manchester and Birmingham, to apply for incorporation on the new model following the act's passage.²³

One common feature of the New Poor Law and new municipal arrangements was the principle that local authorities should be elected by those who contributed to local taxes (with votes weighted according to their contributions, in the first case; equally, in the second).²⁴

Under older models, though local government had been conducted by local people, there had been no such consistent principle of giving choice to voters, and quite often authority had lain in the hands of a self-appointing oligarchy. However, from the 1810s a new trend developed, as, on the one hand, acts offering opt-in templates for the establishment of new local authorities and, on the other hand, new ad hoc local acts started to mandate election. In effect, there emerged a new philosophy as to how 'local government' should be conducted. (That very name came into use only at this time, as people started to talk generically about institutions they had previously considered in more discrete ways.)²⁵ In the context of municipal corporation reform, the principle of giving equal votes to ratepaying residents occasioned debate in Parliament, proponents maintaining both that governing bodies needed to be made accountable, and that the diffusion of political powers and duties was good in itself, providing an education in self-government, while conversely opponents

²² Derek Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1976), 55–90.

²³ Derek Fraser ed., *Municipal Reform and the Industrial City* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982).

²⁴ E. T. Stokes, 'Bureaucracy and Ideology: Britain and India in the Nineteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 30 (1980), 131–156 is more alert to this issue than most. I have made it a key theme in my 'Government Without Prefects: Did the UK Offer an Alternative Model?' in Pierre Karila-Cohen ed., *Prefects and Governors in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (forthcoming, 2022) Thanks to Andy Eggers for making me think again about this. For reform themes in London, Benjamin Weinstein, *Liberalism and Local Government in Early Victorian London* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), 116–144.

²⁵ For the novelty of the category of 'local government', 'Central Government Interference. Changing Conceptions, Practices and Concerns 1688–1840', in José Harris ed., *Civil Society in British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 50.

claimed that what was being endorsed were republican principles.²⁶ The strong case for accountability was that it was needed to check abuse. Abuses included, in the case of the poor laws, (supposedly) profligate spending on the poor, with the additional bad effect of undermining their self-respect, and, in the case of municipal bodies, squandering of resources on feasting, ceremonial and vanity projects, alongside the fostering of divisive political partisanship (bolstered by selective distribution of charity money to political supporters).

The New Poor Law and Municipal Corporations Act (on which—because they were the most far-reaching measures—I shall focus for the remainder of this section) took shape through different processes, and for this reason, as well as because they had different kinds of impact, they occasioned different kinds of contention.

The New Poor Law was enacted against a background of concern, especially but not only in the south of England, about the high cost of poor relief, and its supposed demoralizing effects—concern sharpened by the 'Swing Riots' of 1830: that is, by protests on the part of agricultural labourers against underemployment and low wages, featuring machine-breaking and coercive negotiation.²⁷ Efforts to prepare the ground for legislation included the appointment of a royal commission of enquiry (a relative novelty, though an increasingly favoured tool of Reform ministers) which canvassed opinion from localities via urban and rural 'queries' (questionnaires). In the view of the secretary to the commission, this exercise in consultation had the implicit function of educating the public about the need for change.²⁸ This exercise revealed widespread concern about ways in which existing laws were supposedly failing, as well as showing that there had already been much local experimentation with remedies. As already noted in passing, though the act identified a problem and some possible ways forward, it delegated to a further body of

²⁶ Sweet, *English Town*, 152; and Anthony Brundage, *The Making of the New Poor Law: The Politics of Inquiry, Enactment, and Implementation, 1832–1839* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), 91–92, 159.

²⁷ The latest account is Carl Griffin, *Rural War: Captain Swing and the Politics of Protest* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012). For context see also Robert Lee, *Rural Society and the Anglican Clergy 1815–1914: Encountering and Managing the Poor* (Woodbridge: Suffolk Boydell & Brewer, 2006); and Roger Wells, 'Poor-Law Reform in the Rural South-East: The Impact of the 'Sturges Bourne Acts' During the Agricultural Depression, 1815–1835', *Southern History* 23 (2001), 52–115.

²⁸ Chadwick cited by Philips and Storch, *Policing*, 113.

commissioners responsibility for translating options into practice. In this context it was not immediately clear to anyone how far existing structures and practices would in fact change, nor to what extent localities would have a role in shaping local outcomes.²⁹

The new overseeing commissioners were quickly appointed, beginning work in the summer of 1834 by, among other things, appointing assistant commissioners to represent them in the field; nine of these were in post by the end of the year, and during the autumn, the first appointees set to work.³⁰ The first task they addressed was to explore circumstances in supposedly highly affected regions—often regions where local elites begged them to engage. On the basis of their reports, the commissioners concluded that some of the options that they had been empowered to recommend were impractical, notably options that involved incorporating some but not all parishes into unions, and allowing the employment of unemployed poor on public works. They concluded that there was only one promising way forward.³¹ All parishes should be incorporated into unions, run by boards bringing elected representatives of parishes together with magistrates and clergy. These boards should make final decisions about the relief to be accorded to every applicant, subject to the rule that all able-bodied paupers must be consigned to a union workhouse, where they should be set to laborious but unproductive tasks (if they could work productively, it was argued, they should be out on the labour market). The impotent poor could be relieved at home, to which end, board-appointed relieving officers were tasked with routinely visiting parishes to hand out money. If unable to manage on that basis (because too young, sick or otherwise afflicted), the impotent too might be maintained in the union workhouse.

The commissioners arrived at these conclusions relatively quickly, in the first half of 1835. Their prescription in turn provided the basic agenda

²⁹ 4 & 5 Will. 4 c. 76. In Hampshire, for example, two pamphlets chart different stages in learning what the act would entail: Thomas Garnier, *Plain Remarks Upon the New Poor Law Amendment Act* (Winchester: Jacob and Johnson, 1835); and [William Lutley Sclater], *A Letter to the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales on the Working of the New System, by a Chairman of the Board of Guardians* (Basingstoke: R. Cottle [1836]).

³⁰ Brundage, *Making New Poor Law*, 75–86.

³¹ *Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales* (London, 1835) PP XXXV (1835), 107–375.

for assistant commissioners' field tours, which now unfolded county by county.³² Such tours lasted weeks or months, and were succeeded by follow-up visits, after commissioners had in principle moved on to neighbouring counties. Even given that those charged with implementing the law proceeded in a much more directive way than many contemporaries had anticipated, still there was much that had to be sorted out on the ground, and details of implementation were always decided in consultation with local communities, even if the intention was, whenever possible, to persuade or bully them into line with the commissioners' preferences. Still, it was necessary to obtain some measure of agreement on which parishes should be allocated to which union; whether an existing workhouse could be adapted or a new one must be built, how costs should be allocated; how representation apportioned, and who should qualify to vote or serve. These issues were aired and resolved in part through more-or-less open meetings, which, even insofar as they remained focussed on such practical matters, were usually to some extent contentious. In urban settings, where there commonly already existed an open, contentious political culture, discussions tended to be especially wide-ranging and challenging. They were often reported in local newspapers, encouraging participants, who might already have or might form in this context political ambitions, to strike attitudes with a larger public in view; in these settings, assistant commissioners sometimes moderated and sometimes tried to conceal some of their plans.³³ Elections of guardians likewise were especially likely in towns to take on a party-political colouring.³⁴ Commissioners' prescriptiveness was itself contested. Opposition in the metropolis was especially robust, generating among other things litigation which concluded early in 1837 with a ruling to the effect that districts

³² Brundage, *Making New Poor Law*, 87–99 for a general overview of the work of the assistant commissioners, followed by case studies. See also now Karen Rothery, 'Establishing the Poor Law Unions Under the New Poor Law', in James Gregory and Daniel Grey eds., *Union and Disunion in the Nineteenth Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), chapter 13.

³³ I'm grateful to Myungsu Kang, whose work on the implementation of the law in Hampshire has helped to bring this process to life for me; see also Roger Wells, 'Andover Antecedents? Hampshire New Poor-Law Scandals, 1834–1842', *Southern History* 24 (2002), 91–189 and for a press report of a meeting in the Portsea Island Union, *Hampshire Telegraph* (August 13, 1838). Brundage tends to emphasize the gentry over other interlocutors, but see *Making New Poor Law*, 95, 151.

³⁴ Fraser, *Urban Politics*, 55–90.

which had obtained local acts to regulate their proceedings (as many urban districts had) might continue on that basis if they chose (though this did not stop central agents from trying to persuade such districts to adopt at least parts of their new approach).³⁵

Challenges multiplied as the assistant commissioners, who had started work in the predominantly rural South, moved towards the more industrial Midlands and North.³⁶ Industrial areas usually comprehended a mix of urban and quasi-urban communities, in which features characteristic of urban political cultures co-existed with more distinctly industrial patterns of activism, such as trade-unionism or support for an on-going campaign to set a ten-hour limit to the working day. In this region, opportunities to participate were seized upon to obstruct. In some unions, elections of Guardians were blocked; in others, anti-new-poor-law Guardians were returned; the town of Huddersfield refused to elect a clerk—a notably awkward form of non-compliance because clerks had been given the further duty of registering births, marriages and deaths under the new Civil Registration Act. In the face of this determined resistance, government and the commissioners engaged in some strategic back-peddling, following which they managed at least to get the basic machinery in place, though arguments about how it was to operate continued.³⁷ Especially in the North and Midlands, but also elsewhere, conflicts around the implementation of this law helped to catalyse, at the end of the decade, the broader popular protest-movement that came to be known as Chartism. This challenged many features of the Reform project, on the grounds that some parts of it (notably Parliamentary reform) did not go far enough, while other parts (New Poor Law, new police, Irish policies) were misconceived and oppressive.³⁸ The multiplication of opportunities to stand for

³⁵ Brundage, *Making New Poor Law*, 155–156. Also David Green, *Pauper Capital: London and the Poor Law, 1790–1870* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 115–157. For maps showing affected districts, Driver, *Power and Pauperism*, 43–46.

³⁶ Nicholas Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement, 1834–44* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971). A recent local study is John Beckett, ‘Politics and the Implementation of the New Poor Law: The Nottingham Workhouse Controversy, 1834–43’, *Midland History* 41: 2 (2016), 201–223. A ‘history’ from the time, compiling comment, is George Robert Wythen Baxter, *The Book of the Bastilles: A History of the New Poor Law* (London: John Stephens, 1841).

³⁷ Edsall, *Anti-Poor Law*, 79–115.

³⁸ Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) is the best modern account. Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists: Popular Politics*

election gave Chartists access to a variety of official platforms on which to air their views.³⁹

Critics of what the New Poor Law became as it took on flesh were also vocal in Parliament, where they publicized what they saw as its most malign effects through select committees of enquiry. Though the government did its best to pack these committees with supporters of the law, they could not prevent witnesses from using them as a stage on which to rehearse criticisms. Newspaper accounts and ultimately the publication of reports from these committees boosted critics in and out of Parliament, and led some to hope and others to fear that the law might be revoked or at a minimum substantially reworked. In fact, though the combination of parliamentary and local opposition did persuade government and the commissioners slightly to temper their ambitions, they stuck by them wherever local circumstances allowed.⁴⁰ In 1847, after the completion of the implementation phase (insofar as that had proved achievable), in a sop to critics (who had mobilized over a particular local scandal), the commission was abolished, and replaced by a Poor Law Board, whose style was to preside over locally directed operations.⁴¹ The new order of things had in any case become familiar by this point, and its practice had become routine. Though occasional scandals continued to blow up, the larger storm had subsided. The official position was that the occasional scandal was a good sign: it showed that the public was sufficiently informed and alert to detect abuse if and when it happened.⁴²

in the Industrial Revolution (London: Temple Smith, 1984) remains helpful on reactions against Whig reform. The New Poor Law and new police were often linked as specimens of a new tyranny.

³⁹ Fraser, *Urban Politics*, 35–36, 93–94, 101, 257–261 on Chartists in Leeds and Salford; for Manchester, Paul Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 73–85.

⁴⁰ Brundage, *Making New Poor Law*, 160–163, 168–175.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴² Ian Anstruther, *The Scandal of the Andover Workhouse* (London: Bles, 1973), 109; for scandals as healthy. Steve King is now doing interesting work on the transition from old to new poor laws: e.g. Steven King, 'Rights, Duties and Practice in the Transition Between Old and New Poor Laws', in Peter Jones and Steven King eds., *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute Under the English Poor Laws* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2015), 263–291; and Steven King, 'Thinking and Rethinking the New Poor Law', *Local Population Studies* 99: 1 (2017), 5–19. For continuity in out-relief Keith Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 207–365.

In the case of the Municipal Corporation Act, vigorous conflict raged at an earlier point in the process. During the early nineteenth century, endemic strife between supporters of corporations and ‘independents’ in some towns had ramified into something like a general corporation-reform movement.⁴³ One source of concern was mounting corporate debt, as corporations borrowed to finance ambitious ‘improvement’ projects. Changing values exposed corporations to the charge that they were oligarchic, un-transparent and insufficiently accountable. Moreover, the case *for* Parliamentary reform was in part a case *against* corporations, because many corporations claimed an exclusive right to elect their town’s MPs: sometimes this right lay in the freemen, sometimes only in the handful of men who sat on self-electing governing bodies. Even when governing bodies did not monopolize the vote, corporations often strove to exercise political influence, mainly on the Tory side. Some journalists emerged as energetic, even sometimes as mobile anti-corporation campaigners.⁴⁴ Lawyers and antiquarians of reformist bent worked together to construct a narrative about the usurpation of the people’s historic rights, and to imagine forms of legal remedy. There was a rising tide of anti-corporation litigation, and a few charters were overturned and remodelled.

Parliamentary reform in 1832 stripped corporations of their exclusive voting rights and left such local-governmental functions as they performed starkly exposed to critical scrutiny. Royal commissioners appointed to enquire into their history and current state laid the ground-work on paper, then visited all the larger corporate towns: all those they deemed appropriate objects of a first reforming probe (a larger total than the number ultimately remodelled by the act). The public meetings they convened gave critics a wonderful opportunity to rehearse their

⁴³ Innes and Rogers, ‘Politics and Government 1700–1840’, 565–568; Sweet, *English Town*, 150–161; and Philip Salmon, ‘“Reform Should Begin at Home”: English Municipal and Parliamentary Reform, 1818–32’, in Clyve Jones, Philip Salmon, and Richard Whitelock Davis eds., *Partisan Politics, Principle and Reform in Parliament and the Constituencies, 1689–1880: Essays in Memory of John A. Phillips* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005; supplement to *Parliamentary History*, 24), 93–113.

⁴⁴ For James Acland, the most notable of these, Janette Martin, ‘Oratory, Itinerant Lecturing and Victorian Popular Politics (1779–1876)’, *Historical Research* 86: 231 (2013), 30–52.

grievances, not only to commissioners and local audiences but also to the press.⁴⁵

The reform legislation drafted on the back of these enquiries prescribed a new model: it did not leave that to be determined by an intermediate body. This helped to ensure that Parliament itself was the scene of heated debate—sited above all in the House of Lords. Peers took fright because they thought that the old order as embodied in municipal corporations was unnervingly analogous to that incarnate in the peerage itself. Resistance from peers helped to spark some hundreds of petitions: mostly for, but in many cases against the bill; sometimes from corporate bodies but sometimes from public meetings convened in towns. Worries about freemen's rights, municipal charities and transfer of power over Anglican religious institutions into the hands of Dissenters loomed large in critical petitions. Representatives of some thirty boroughs were invited to testify at hearings in the chamber: mostly they testified to their own good conduct and denounced the commissioners as biased.⁴⁶ Controversy in Parliament was mirrored within boroughs. In Leicester, which sent petitions both for and against the bill, a larger clash of values overshadowed local specificities: the bill's backers were attacked as revolutionaries; they for their part argued that proceedings in the upper chamber demonstrated the urgency of reforming the House of Lords.⁴⁷ But Peel did not back the wreckers, and the Lords ultimately contented themselves with requiring some amendments, notably the addition of an indirectly elected aldermanic body, and reservation to government of the right to appoint magistrates.⁴⁸

Once the parliamentary battle had in substance been won, again there was an implementation phase. Crown-appointed barristers visited the affected towns and mapped out electoral wards, apportioned councillors among wards and publicly revised the list of burgesses (that is, of municipal electors), to ensure its conformity to the specifications of the Act. Proposals resulting were announced at a public meeting. Outcomes were

⁴⁵ Moret, *Urban Regime*, 34–78 on the operation of the commission; 57–64 specifically on public hearings.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 268–287. Proceedings were not reported in Hansard, but can be followed in esp. the Tory press, e.g., *The Morning Post*.

⁴⁷ Alfred Temple Patterson, *Radical Leicester: A History of Leicester 1780–1850* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1975), 208–211.

⁴⁸ Moret, *Urban Ancient Regime*, 296–301.

sometimes objected to at the time, sometimes later, once their political implications became clear.⁴⁹

Once the basic set-up was completed, the next stage was to people the new governing bodies. Elections of councilmen proceeded through public nomination meetings to approve candidates, campaigns and polling. Some towns had experience of such elections (if involving different electorates); in others, they were a new phenomenon. Councillors once elected chose inaugural aldermen and mayors.⁵⁰ Reform candidates often did well in early elections, and even groups displaced by the process of change sometimes thought it wise to put forward new men to court favour in a new era, so big changes in governing personnel sometimes ensued (though those new to corporate governance might already have been helping to run improvement trusts and the like).⁵¹ Law and choice combined to determine that new governing bodies projected a new image, notably discontinuing traditional pageantry and ceremonial (though later in the century, some of this would be revived).⁵²

Experience revealed various ambiguities in the original act, spurring the passage of multiple amending acts and more substantial tidying-up legislation in 1837.⁵³ Significant disputes were often generated as the process of identifying and re-allocating the many and various forms of corporate property got underway.⁵⁴ Against that background, though new urban police forces were sometimes promptly set up (responding to encouragement in the Act), several years might pass before a Council

⁴⁹ Graham Bush, *Bristol and Its Municipal Government 1820–51* (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, xxix, 1976), 116–118.

⁵⁰ E.g. *Ibid.*, 116–123.

⁵¹ Fraser, *Urban Politics*, 124–153; John Phillips, *The Great Reform Bill in the Boroughs: English Electoral Behaviour 1818–41* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 227–234.

⁵² For discontinuance, with contumely, Patterson, *Radical Leicester*, 216–217. Roey Sweet has pointed me towards their historicization in e.g. [W. C. Ewing], *Notices and Illustrations of the Costume, Processions, Pageantry, &c Formerly Displayed by the Corporation of Norwich* (Norwich: Charles Muskett, 1850) esp. Preface, and William Kelly, *Notices Illustrative of the Drama and other Popular Amusements, Chiefly in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Incidentally Illustrating Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (London: Smith, 1865), 139–140.

⁵³ 7 Will. 4 & 1 Vict. c., 78.

⁵⁴ Bush, *Bristol*, 29, 155–156; Patterson, *Radical Leicester*, 217–220, 222; and Peter Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth Century Urban Government* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Educational, 1973), 188.

felt ready to turn its mind to other new projects. In Bristol, thus, further 'improvement' to the City was not considered until 1839—when a local improvement plan was put together, and in the following year submitted to and approved by Parliament.

Political heat generated by changes in the structure and functioning of municipal government sometimes waned in subsequent years, only to flare up again when local or national issues inflamed local feeling. Changes both in the institutional framework and in the substance of politics made alignments in the new era fluid and unpredictable. The existence of various aggrieved parties within remodelled towns—including sometimes large numbers of freemen—gave Tories a starting point when it came to fighting back.⁵⁵

REFORM REMEMBERED

As reform plans crystallized—when the commissioners got to work, in the case of the New Poor Law; on the floor of Parliament itself, in the case of the Municipal Corporations Act—debate changed shape, as some options dropped away. Subsequent implementation phases foregrounded new issues, as matters of detail were presented for settlement, and local battles were won or lost. In the case of the New Poor Law, as we have noted, the development of an anti-poor-law movement, especially in the Midlands and North, with vigorous supporters in Parliament, raised the temperature of the issue during the late 1830s and early 1840s, helping to galvanize the formation of new across-the-board political identities, radical and Tory-radical. But this furore subsided in the later 1840s, as local compromises were forged, Chartism fragmented, and Tories discontented with Robert Peel's moderate-reforming leadership played their part in undermining him—thereby undermining their own party's parliamentary power. In the case of the Municipal Corporations Act, opposition was less root and branch. Though discontent among alienated freemen combined with anxiety about threats to the Church and other causes (such as opposition to the New Poor Law and demands for more effective factory legislation) spurred the formation of 'Operative Conservative'

⁵⁵ See below nn. 56, 58.

associations, which multiplied after 1835, the aim was not to roll back corporation reform but rather to mobilize support for Toryism in the new framework.⁵⁶ Both locally and nationally, Tories learned in the early 1840s that they could make headway under new rules. Though some of their gains were squandered when the parliamentary party split, even the malcontents increasingly focussed on identifying achievable goals within the new landscape.

In that context, debate increasingly centred on whether new systems were working well or badly: were workhouses properly maintained, and if rigorously yet humanely run? And if not, what kind of pressure could be brought to bear to make them better? Were town governments striking the right balance between frugality and maintenance of an orderly urban environment? Or what more needed doing and by whom and how was that best done? How to institutionalize and conduct ‘local government’ remained a contentious matter, but there came to be general agreement that in principle ‘local self-government’ was both an age-old and a continuingly important English constitutional tradition, and that its spirit was embodied, if not perfectly embodied, in an evolving array of institutions. In his best-selling *Constitutional History of England*, Thomas Erskine May gave confident expression to this relatively recent view: ‘England alone among the nations of the earth has maintained for centuries a constitutional polity; and her liberties may be ascribed, above all things, to her free local institutions’. The effect of reform, as he portrayed it, had been to reverse abuses that had accreted over the centuries to compromise the exercise of that liberty.⁵⁷

In the 1840s an idealized past—often a medieval past—was sometimes set against a supposedly soulless, overly rational and mechanically minded present: thus in dramatic imagery by the Catholic-convert Augustus Pugin in his *Contrasts*, also by Anglo-Catholic ‘Tractarians’, and aficionados of the romantic-conservative movement ‘Young England’. These evocations did not initially provide the basis for much in the way

⁵⁶ Salmon, *Electoral*, 66–69; Matthew Cragoe, ‘The Great Reform Act and the Modernization of British Politics: The Impact of Conservative Associations, 1835–1841’, *Journal of British Studies* 47: 3 (2008), 581–603; and Neuheiser, *Crown, Church, Constitution*, 69–78.

⁵⁷ Thomas Erskine May, *The Constitutional History of England Since the Accession of George III, 1760–1860* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1861), ii, chapter 15, ‘Local Government’, 492–493.

of a practical response.⁵⁸ However, some decades later, aspects of this idealized past were imaginatively incorporated into the present, finding expression in, for example, 'Gothic' alms houses and civic buildings, the melding of charity into public administration (with the growth of, for example, women's 'workhouse visiting'), and the revival of urban pageantry, self-consciously celebrating historical continuities.⁵⁹

Histories of the recent past issuing from the 1840s through the 1880s—some of them narrating only the recent past, others presenting it as an epilogue to longer narratives—were nonetheless strikingly consistent in emphasizing rupture, while recounting it approvingly.⁶⁰ Of course, disapproval was also sometimes voiced—but not much in this genre.

⁵⁸ Augustus Pugin, *Contrasts or a Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages, and Corresponding Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (London: Charles Dolman, 1841); and John Morrow ed., *Young England: The New Generation: A Selection of Primary Texts* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999). Some parish-level responses are described in Simon Skinner, 'Liberalism and Mammon: Tractarian Reaction in the Age of Reform', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 4: 2 (1999), 197–227.

⁵⁹ Francis Dollman, *Examples of English Domestic Architecture: Illustrating the Hospitals, Bede Houses, Schools, Almshouses Etc. of the Middle Ages in England*, 2 vols. (London: Atchley & Co., 1858); and Brian Bailey, *Almshouses* (London: Robert Hale, 1988), 166–170—his discussion suggests that Tudor/Elizabethan was another favoured style. Mark Girouard, *The English Town: History of Urban Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 202–216 suggests that Gothic town halls only slowly rose to rival the classical, peaking in the 1860s and 70s. For workhouse visiting, Laura Foster, *The Representation of the Workhouse in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Cardiff, 2014), 133–185. I am indebted to Roey Sweet for interesting information about the decline and revival of urban ritual.

⁶⁰ Helen Kingstone, *Victorian Narratives of the Recent Past: Memory, History, Fiction* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) provides a thoughtful introduction to the genre. Among the histories that I have consulted, the ones with material relevant to my current purpose were: [Martineau], *Knight's Popular History VIII*; Alison, *History of Europe from the Fall of Napoleon... to the Rise of Louis Napoleon...*, 8 vols.; John Russell, *An Essay on the History of the English Government and Constitution*, new ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, & Green, 1865); Harriet Martineau, *A History of the Thirty Years Peace*, 4 vols., rev. ed. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1877); May, *Constitutional History*; Spencer Walpole, *A History of England from the Conclusion of the Great War in 1815*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1879). I have also looked at children's histories: Richmal Mangnall, *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions*, new ed. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1859); Charlotte Yonge, *Kings of England: A History for Young Children* (London: John and Charles Mozley, 1848); and Lady Maria Calcott, *Little Arthur's History of England*, new ed. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans and Roberts, 1859).

The Tory historian Archibald Alison, as noted above, was critical of the reform process, but nonetheless endorsed much that flowed from it, while arguing in effect that it could have been done better: in his view, the New Poor Law had had less impact than had been hoped (and had driven a wave of emigration); moreover, the Municipal Corporations Act had erred in founding its new regime on ‘numbers’ and not ‘classes’.⁶¹ Historians who considered the matter varied in terms of when they thought the tide had turned towards ‘reform’, though often they looked back to the years before the Reform ministry came to power: Alison saw currency reform in 1819 as a turning point; others highlighted free trade and foreign-policy shifts in the early 1820s, or Catholic Emancipation in 1829.⁶²

Though sited within longer-term developments, ‘reform’ was never presented as a smooth process. Every history noted the drama—and even children’s histories sometimes noted the violence—that had accompanied the struggle over the Reform Bill in 1831–1832.⁶³ The backwash of anger over the New Poor Law was commonly acknowledged, though (in this genre) denigrated, as the work of those who wanted to be left in idleness, or had been stirred up by noisy demagogues. Parliamentary battles over the Municipal Corporations Act, especially in the House of Lords, were recounted, though Tories were said to have learned from the Reform Bill debacle not to press their opposition too far (though still far enough to provoke calls for the abolition of the upper house). Harriet Martineau was unusual in noting preceding hubbub outside Parliament, in the context of commissioners’ meetings. Did she reflect her own, or family and friends’ experience when she wrote ‘No one can forget what he saw [in that context] of the action of opposition?’ Still, she said, this passion had quickly passed.⁶⁴

Yet overall the tone was upbeat. Though the fractiousness of the process was acknowledged, from the 1860s, ‘reform’ was generally represented as having set England squarely on the track of progress.

⁶¹ Alison, *History*, v: 472–482; vi: 165–176.

⁶² Thus Alison, *History*; [Martineau], *Knight’s Popular History*; Russell, *Essay on History*.

⁶³ Yonge, *Kings of England*, 248. The 1879 *Young Folks’ History of England* has more detail on parliamentary and other reforms, but it seems to exist only in American editions, and though it’s credited to Yonge, it is not clear to me if all this prose was hers.

⁶⁴ Martineau, *History*, iii: 225.

AN EXPERIENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

What has this chapter said about the experience of significant institutional change? It has sought to make several points, some generic, some specific to this time and place.

Its main generic point has been that significant institutional change characteristically involves a *process*. People do not experience first an old, then a new order. Rather there is first one order—perhaps a highly contested one. Then (at least when change is endogenous, developed within a political order, rather than, say, imposed by a conqueror) there may follow a phase of exploring what are now firmly conceptualized as 'problems'; then a phase of generating 'solutions', new ways of doing things; then a phase of debate about proposed alternatives; then a phase of debate around implementation tangled up with a process of implementation—all of this perhaps wrapped up and shaped by higher-profile and more wide-ranging debates about the larger changes which had set the scene for more targeted, perhaps locally particular change. Options and issues present themselves in different ways at different moments along such timelines, and as that happens, people's perceptions shift. By the time they are living in the new order, they therefore experience it not just as contrasting with the old order, but also as the resolution of a period of uncertainty, and as something to be assessed in relation to other alternatives canvassed along the way; moreover, they view the outcome in the light of new perspectives developed in the course of intervening events. The process of developing new perspectives on changes that have taken place continues; indeed, it continues indefinitely, above all but not only in the hands of historians. It is repeatedly reshaped by the narratives that people continue to construct and reconstruct about the past and about the shape and meaning of change.

British historiography has familiarized its readers with the *process* of reforming Parliament: that episode is commonly told in terms of change being formulated, and contested, and (though to a lesser extent) in terms of perceptions changing along the way. Accounts of 'reforms' to the poor law and municipal corporations less often linger on process. The chief recipient of this genre of attention has been the 'anti-poor-law' movement. A few historians have attended in more general terms to processes of change in these contexts, and I am especially indebted to their accounts, but even they have not always sufficed to make it possible to piece together the accounts of processes supplied here. I have instead

had to dig around in local histories, and to draw on discussion with specialist researchers.⁶⁵

Two points specific to this time and place deserve to be underlined. In calling these points ‘specific’, I do not mean to imply that they are unique; merely, that they are not necessarily generalizable. Firstly, the changes that I have been chronicling were endogenous, they were generated within the political culture. That culture was one in which debate was encouraged; moreover, public participation was institutionalized in new ways as part and parcel of the ‘reforms’. Meanwhile, in the background, intense party warfare amplified as well as helped to structure debate. All of these circumstances must have shaped the experience of change, making it (especially in urban and industrial regions) one of contestation, involving the making of choices between alternatives. Party warfare probably also encouraged the reiterative rewriting of narratives: the reworking of accounts of what was happening, had happened and might still happen, according to calculations as to what best served the interests of parties, or fractions of parties, or concurrently mobilizing popular political movements.

Ultimately, the ‘reforms’ explored here were enacted and implemented—largely, if not always exactly, along lines that their most powerful proponents had projected. Furthermore, reform narratives largely triumphed. Within twenty years, although it remained possible to critique reforms, especially in terms of their having given too much power to the ‘propertied’ or ‘middle classes’, they had essentially become and would continue to consolidate their character as the new normal; indeed, as more than that, as an advance, even if one that might in due course be reshaped by further advance. British historians have inherited this narrative, and, having done so, have not done a great deal to explore how it came to triumph. Was that something contingent: an effect of Sir Robert Peel’s centrist leadership at the peak of uncertainty? Or instead something to do with the way in which these ‘reforms’ aligned with deeper shifts in values, not only in Britain but in Europe? Or was it the effect of some deeper process still: is it a general pattern that changes tend to be naturalized with the passage of time, as people’s expectations adjust to what becomes the everyday normal? That process can be, and ultimately usually

⁶⁵ Among accounts cited above, Brundage, *Making New Poor Law* and Moret, *Urban Ancient Regime* have been especially helpful. I am furthermore especially indebted to the knowledge and perspectives of Myungsu Kang and Roey Sweet.

is, disrupted by the rise of new narratives, but not necessarily until after the elapse of much time.

In this chapter I have tried to open up these questions, though I do not claim to have done more than to put them on the table, in the hope that others will probe further, and shed more light.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

