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Disraeli and Victorian Conservatism

T. A. Jenkins

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NOTE ON PARTY TERMINOLOGY

By the mid-1830s, the party label 'Conservative' was beginning to displace the older title of 'Tory', although contemporaries often used these party names interchangeably — as, indeed, we still do today. However, the term 'Tory' was adopted by some, at various times, to denote a political tradition founded on the defence of established institutions, like the Crown, which allegedly commanded widespread popular support. This represented a contrast to the 'Conservative' strategy, associated above all with Sir Robert Peel, which had similar objectives but sought to achieve them through an alliance between the aristocracy and the middle classes.

In 1846 the Conservative party was disastrously split over the question of the repeal of the Corn Laws. Those who opposed repeal, the bulk of the party, were sometimes labelled 'Protectionists', but they soon reverted to calling themselves Conservatives, and this is how I have chosen to describe them. The followers of Peel, who supported the repeal of the Corn Laws, are referred to as 'Peelites'.

There was no less terminological confusion on the other side of politics. At the beginning of the Victorian age, the 'party' of the left was in reality a fragile alliance of Whigs, radicals and semi-independent Irish MPs. I have used the generic term 'Liberal' to describe this alliance when referring to events after 1846. However, the older sectional labels continued to survive. For instance, contemporaries frequently described the aristocratic leaders of the Liberal party as 'Whigs', and this could also be a convenient blanket term for all moderate Liberals.