PART ONE

1867–1900

CHAPTER ONE

Party and Participation 1867–1900

We have only to imagine, if we can, a Pitt or a Castlereagh stumping the provinces, and taking into his confidence, not merely a handful of electors, but any crowd he could collect in any part of this island.

The Times, 26 December 1879, on the first Midlothian campaign

Between the 1860s and the turn of the century, British politics, in the constituency, party and parliamentary spheres, took on recognizably modern characteristics. Although the transition necessarily proved a lengthy and patchy process, the 1880s stand out as the key decade of change. Indeed the general election of 1880 may, with some justification, be regarded as the first modern election. It was a *general* election in that five-sixths of the constituencies were actually contested, and in that it produced a national campaign as distinct from the sporadic, localized contests typical of mid-Victorian elections. Voters were offered an unusually clear-cut choice, largely through the initiative of the *de facto* leader of the opposition, W. E. Gladstone, who promised to reverse the imperial and foreign policy of Disraeli if he was returned with a majority. In contemporary eyes the novelty of the Midlothian campaign, that 'ten days' waterspout dealing with all human affairs', as *The Times* put it, consisted in a prospective prime minister taking voters so seriously as to deliver to them lengthy speeches on weighty subjects more properly addressed to the Houses of Parliament. The year 1880 brought to a climax that polarization of loyalties between the two party leaders which, since Gladstone's championing of franchise reform in 1866, had begun to transcend the local and personal patterns of allegiance; and which imprinted upon British politics for decades thereafter two stereotyped party positions in both foreign and domestic affairs.

Moreover, the 1880 election physically resembled a modern one. Hitherto the leaders had usually avoided speaking in other men's constituencies after nominations lest they be seen to interfere in a community's private affair; now they found ever more excuses to permit the electorate the novelty of oratory from outside. Gladstone pioneered the nearest approach to a whistle-stop tour as he journeyed up to Edinburgh, descending from his train at Grantham, York and Newcastle to deliver short harangues, somewhat to the annoyance of the ordinary passengers, thence proceeding to an intensive programme of two daily speeches for a fortnight on his second campaign in Midlothian. Though many of the thousands who attended his progress around the constituency could not hear his speeches, Gladstone's every word at West Calder or Dalkeith was caught up by eager journalists to be reprinted in the dense black columns of the provincial and national press, to be bandied about by the more obscure participants up and down the country. 'This duty of making political speeches', Lord Salisbury complained to Queen Victoria in 1887, 'is an aggravation of the labours of your Majesty's servants which we owe entirely to Mr Gladstone.' One should not allow Salisbury's weary cynicism to obscure his own successful adaptation to a variety of political practices, including regular speech-making, of which he disapproved. It would be rash to conclude that the mass of voters felt moved to return Gladstone to power in 1880 because they shared the same concern with the affairs of Afghanistan and the Balkans. The impact of the controversy that had begun in 1876 over the Bulgarian atrocities and culminated in the Midlothian campaigns fell more forcefully upon the partisan activists and local backers of Liberalism, that vital intermediate group whose voluntary efforts and high morale were increasingly indispensable in harnessing the voters at large; but these party workers comprised a characteristic and central element in the political transition of late Victorian Britain.

Voting and Non-voting

Victorians did not claim that their system was democratic, a term that smacked of continental abstraction and implied an excess of equality characteristic of American society; rather, it produced effective government, it guaranteed 'liberty', and it was representative. What it represented directly was those considered fit by reason of their independence, their material stake in society, their education and political knowledge to exercise the parliamentary franchise with beneficial effects upon political life. Men wholly absorbed in the daily struggle for existence were unlikely to develop the capacity for political judgement, still less the opportunity to exercise it freely. Conscious of the defects of even the existing electorate,

radicals of the 1860s accepted that drastic and ill-considered extensions of the franchise would only open further opportunities for corruption; the business of a reformer was to find a form of words in law which in practice would define those who were beyond corrupting pressures. Moreover, the late Victorian conception of corruption extended beyond the traditional individual type to the more formal, institutional forms practised in the United States in which politicians offered groups of voters specific pledges of material gain in return for support. Political integrity required that a man who depended upon the state for his maintenance should be ineligible to vote for the government; hence in Britain men in receipt of relief from the poor law guardians remained disqualified until 1918.

In fact an election was not primarily about the individual's rights, but about the representation of his *community*, from which it followed that the interests of non-electors could be represented quite adequately by the leaders of their community. Thus a landowner spoke for his labourers politically as an extension of his other duties towards them; similarly the interests of the largest single group of non-voters, women, were upheld by their fathers and husbands. In a family, as in any other community, there was no special merit in every individual member voting in person, for 'mere numbers' provided no guarantee of efficiency or morality. Women were generally perceived by male politicians to be deficient in the intellectual and temperamental qualities appropriate for politics, to lack the independence, inclination and even the energy, which was devoted instead to the vital task of childbirth.[1] 'Woman', in short, was equated with 'married woman', despite the fact that nearly a quarter of adult females were actually spinsters or widows in the 1860s, many of whom paid local rates and managed property; even wives were permitted, under the Married Women's Property Acts 1870, 1874 and 1882, to retain their property instead of surrendering it to their husbands on marriage. Faced with the fact that some women were 'fit', even on men's terms, for the franchise, politicians allowed female participation, in discreet numbers, in municipal elections, on school boards and on boards of guardians. However, despite the growing similarity between local and national government in the late nineteenth century, most politicians stuck to the view that the great parliamentary issues of Empire, war and national security ought not to be exposed to the vacillating and emotional judgements of women. Moreover, once a majority of men had obtained enfranchisement after 1884, the impetus behind Victorian reform waned noticeably; the remaining male non-voters stood pat upon their superior status as *men*, and eschewed making common cause with women.

The male non-voter himself was by no means uninvolved in the political process. Particularly in smaller boroughs, elections were characterized by popular participation, if only in the form of processions, rioting and

THE POLITICAL EGG-DANCE.
Mr. Disraeli's dexterous management of the Reform Bill in
Committee enabled him to defeat several amendments moved by
the Opposition. – 1867.
Punch, 29 June 1867

intimidation. This attendant disorder obliged the authorities to extend the poll over two to three weeks (as in modern India) in order to allow the police to transfer scarce resources from one group of constituencies to another; not until 1918 did they feel confident enough to risk one-day polling. However, popular involvement also took on a political tone. Since

the days of the Chartists non-electors had made a practice in some towns of gathering at the hustings when nominations were due, proceeding thence to elect, on a show of hands, an 'MP' as an alternative to the formal poll. Also, disfranchised radical working men in such towns as Rochdale, Stockport, Warrington, Stoke and Morpeth took to boycotting the shops and pubs of their political opponents, thereby playing a more independent role than some enfranchised workers who were more subject to employers' pressure at elections.[2] In addition, the disfranchised invariably shared with the electors themselves a vicarious sense of participation in elections by aligning themselves with one candidate or party; millions of people wore ribbons and rosettes in party colours, or sported primroses on Disraeli's birthday. For a generation not yet in thrall to the personalities of football, films or popular music, political leaders and their contests provided a great entertainment or spectacle, a cause to belong to, and a link with, the lives of the great.

Although the debate over franchise was conducted on the high ground of principle, the translation of 'fitness' into law proved to be severely limited by sheer ignorance of the numbers involved, by the exigencies of parliamentary management, and by assumptions about the help or hindrance newly enfranchised groups would lend to the legislating party. Disraeli's inability to patch together a temporary majority in the Commons in 1867 except by offering concessions to radical Liberal backbenchers produced a dramatic increase in the borough electorate, extending the suffrage to householders and to occupiers and lodgers paying an annual rent of £10, while leaving the county electorate but slightly modified. This lopsided, typically English pattern proved indefensible, and led to the rationalization of 1884 when the new borough franchises were extended by Gladstone to counties. The numerical effect of these changes provided the underlying dynamic to late Victorian political evolution (see table 1.1).

Under this system the proportion of adult males entitled to vote fluctuated usually between 63 and 66 per cent; the more imminent a general election the greater incentive for the parties to ensure that their supporters were on the register. However, the figures overstate the true proportion since half a million men were registered more than once; therefore, no more than six

TABLE 1.1   *Parliamentary electors in the United Kingdom 1866–1911*

1866	1,364,000
1869	2,445,000
1883	3,152,000
1885	5,708,000
1911	7,904,000

TABLE 1.2   *Parliamentary franchises 1885–1918*

		Proportion of the 1911 electorate (%)
Household	franchise for inhabitant occupiers, whether owners or tenants, of a separate dwelling house	
Occupation	franchise for those who occupied as owners or tenants, any land or tenement of £10 annual value	84.3
Lodger	franchise for those who rented rooms valued unfurnished at £10 p.a.	4.6
Property	franchise for 40s freeholders and other freeholders, copyholders and leaseholders (almost wholly confined to counties)	8.4
Service	franchise for inhabitant occupiers of a separate dwelling house through their employment or office, not as owner or tenant	1.8
University	franchise for graduates	0.6
Freemen's	franchise for freemen by birth or apprenticeship in boroughs where the qualification had existed before 1832	0.3

Source: Parl. Papers 1911, LXII, pp. 679–700.

out of every ten men, at most, were parliamentary voters before 1914. Industrial towns, where enfranchisement had traditionally been much lower than that in medieval boroughs and counties, experienced particularly dramatic rises: in Blackburn 1,800 voters became 9,700 in 1868; Newcastle's 6,600 voters had increased to 21,400 by 1872. However, considerable unevenness persisted until 1914 in that residential towns (Oxford 75 per cent) and counties (Cornwall 80 per cent) enjoyed substantially higher enfranchisement than industrial boroughs (Oldham 63 per cent), the extremes being characteristic of large conurbations (Glasgow 52 per cent, Bethnal Green 42 per cent). This pattern was in fact a built-in consequence of the system adopted in 1884. For although the third Reform Act rationalized the existing pattern it nonetheless bequeathed a complex structure of seven distinct types of qualification (see table 1.2).

Those who were expressly excluded by the electoral law fell into three groups; first, women who had been eliminated since the 1832 Act which adopted 'male persons' for the first time; secondly, such categories of men as lunatics, aliens, criminals, peers, receivers of poor relief, those guilty of corrupt practices in elections, and some officials involved in elections; thirdly, men such as sons living in their parents' home and servants residing with their employers who were effectively excluded as they could not claim to be householders. In this way some 1.5 million men (by 1914) found themselves excluded. However, this still left a much greater number – 3.75 million by 1914[3] – who failed to make good their claim (usually as householders or lodgers) simply because of the complicated process of registration. To introduce his name on to the register a potential householder or lodger had to demonstrate continuous residence for 12 months at a given address from July of one year to June of the next. On this basis his name could be entered on the preliminary list in April or May, and if it survived the scrutiny in September–October, would appear on the new parliamentary register in December, which became operative in January of the next year – an 18-month cycle. If the voter moved outside his borough or county constituency, or if his move involved a change of qualification, say from householder to lodger, he had not maintained continuity of residence for 12 months and forfeited his place. Since in working-class boroughs in the large conurbations up to 30 per cent of the population commonly moved each year, massive disfranchisement was inevitable.

The system was also less than democratic in allowing the opportunity to vote many times. Joseph Chamberlain apparently possessed six qualifications, though this was by no means a record; given the leisurely spread of polling, some men claimed to cast as many as ten votes. Overall the plural voters amounted to over half a million or 7 per cent of the total,[4] concentrated in commercial seats, in London and in county seats adjacent to or surrounding parliamentary boroughs. Supporters of plural voting argued that it properly reflected the stake a man had in each particular community. However, if every piece of property a man possessed fell within a single parliamentary borough or in a single division of a county he could vote but once; plural voting was possible only if his property was spread over different constituencies. Moreover, under the anachronistic convention that a borough was part of a county, freeholders in parliamentary boroughs exercised this vote in a neighbouring county seat with which they often had no interest or connection.

The final dimension of inequality lay in the marked variation in constituency size, despite the effect the 1885 redistribution had in correcting the historic over-representation of the South and South-West. By adopting a basic population unit of 50,000 to justify new seats it proved possible to grant 39 additional metropolitan representatives, 15 to Lancashire and 13

to Yorkshire. Some 36 constituencies whose population was above 15,000 but below 50,000 lost one of their two members, while 72 boroughs under 15,000 were simply merged into surrounding counties. However, this still left many small boroughs returning their own members, for example Windsor, Durham, St Andrews and Salisbury, all with around 3,000 actual electors. At the other extreme the largest electorate by 1910 was the Romford division of Essex (61,000). An imbalance, moreover, remained marked between certain areas of the British Isles, notably Ireland, whose 103 members represented an average electorate of 6,700 by contrast with the English average of 13,000. Ireland's exaggerated representation at Westminster had profound effects upon British politics before the First World War. In abandoning the traditional two-member constituencies for the more geographically restricted single-member seats in 1885 the legislators hoped to preserve the community basis of politics. However, the effect in the mature industrial society of late Victorian Britain was a system of constituencies frequently characterized by one dominant class; this was the reality behind what seemed to MPs rather artificial entities – North-East Norfolk, North-West Manchester – that were deficient in the prestige previously attaching to the representation of a county or major borough. This was symptomatic of the changing orientation of politics from the local to the national level, and from community to class.

Electoral Practice and Malpractice

Victorian elections were expected as a matter of course to be punctuated by excessive drinking, mob action ranging from exuberance to intimidation, an exchange of cash and a judicious application of the 'screw'. However, 'influence' covered a multitude of practices and forms, many of which were regarded as perfectly natural and proper. By tradition county politics was the preserve of landed gentlemen who both provided candidates and effectively determined the outcome through the loyalty they commanded among farmers and smallholders. The exercise of such influence could be effortless and inconspicuous, not necessarily coercive or unwelcome to the lower levels of rural society. So long as party politics remained a remote and intangible concept the typical county elector would act within the ambit of his local community; it was the county or community that his MP represented rather than either individuals or a party. Moreover, as the person who remitted rent in bad years, provided work in inclement weather, and contributed financially and socially to the life of the village or estate, the squire could legitimately expect political support; the relationship between squire and local electorate rested upon a mutual sense of duty and responsibility. Insofar as voters anticipated a flow of benefits from an election it

was these regular, tangible ones rather than legislative programmes at Westminster. Studies of politics in counties such as Lincolnshire from the 1830s to the 1880s suggest that 'politics' comprised certain agricultural matters, notably the malt tax and the tariff, which tended to unite farmers and landowners, thus offering few openings for genuine party alternatives.[5]

However, this is to describe an ideal situation of rural stability characteristic of the capital-intensive and profitable agriculture of the mid-nineteeth century; it could not survive unscathed the contractions and changes in ownership brought on by falling agricultural profitability after 1875.[6] As unprofitable estates were disposed of and the gentry rented out a number of country houses to families without local, traditional connections, influence inevitably waned or, at least, required to be more deliberately exercised than before. While a landowner who was resident or played a full part in the life of the community might legitimately command loyalty, one who attempted to exercise it as an absentee or negligent owner encountered opposition and resentment.[7] This had always been the case; influence had never been easy to extend to a second candidate connected merely by party, not by ties of family or county.[8]

Nor was a coercive element entirely absent, though it had always been more prevalent in Wales and Ireland than in the English counties, at least in the obvious form of eviction of tenants after elections. As late as 1894, however, Northamptonshire farmers took reprisals against agricultural labourers who had shown the temerity to stand successfully for election in the new parish councils.[9] On the whole influence was most effective when no active steps were necessary to exercise it; in the 1860s it was still regarded as bad form, as well as being futile, to canvass a landowner's tenants without first seeking his permission. Significantly the formal canvass seems to have become more normal from 1885, and was widely associated with undue pressure; Joseph Arch (founder of the Agricultural Labourers Union and Liberal MP for N.W. Norfolk) carried his inbred fear of the canvass to the extent of refusing to adopt it when himself a candidate, describing it as a 'mean subterfuge. Its object is to get at a man's vote in an indirect way.'[10]

It is often asserted that the apparently slight impact of the secret ballot, introduced by Gladstone in 1872, is an indication of the general absence of undue pressure. This is by no means consistent with the actions of many politicians themselves. In order to arrest their declining control in rural areas Conservative landlords often stationed an estate manager or agent outside the polling station to take down the names of those who voted;[11] and since ballot boxes were separately counted it was known how many votes each village had cast for the other side.[12] It was thus not difficult to undermine the rural elector's confidence that the ballot really was secret as the radicals claimed. Naturally voters who were habitually deferential

towards their social superiors did not suddenly change their practice in the absence of strong political pressures to do so. Ireland provided a dramatic exception following the introduction of the secret ballot in the form of 57 Home Rulers elected in 1874. In Wales 1874 brought gains for the Liberals, despite a national tide against them, but this was no more than a continuation of a well-established trend. In both these countries the basis of political revolt lay in the fact that landlord and rural voter were frequently not of the same community; a well-developed alternative community of a cultural-religious type generated an early break with political practice. In Scotland large landowners were often Liberal, albeit Whiggish, in allegiance and therefore pulled in the same direction as their tenants wished to go. In England the ballot made little impact under the restricted franchise before 1884; but it was a different matter under the reformed electorate and the subsequent widespread politicization of the counties. It is unlikely that Liberal gains in hitherto Conservative counties in 1885 would have been so extensive had the poll remained open, or that the rebellious Crofter candidates would have prised Highland seats from Whig control.

Influence in the boroughs had for long been more obviously corrupt and coercive. Small boroughs often saw an election as the best means of attracting money to the town. Indeed, an immediate objection to the Ballot Act was that it facilitated the taking of bribes from *both* sides by electors. Contemporary alarm over excessive levels of expenditure during the elections of 1868, 1874 and 1880 stimulated the Gladstone government to enact a Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act in 1883 which set maximum expenditure limits according to the size of the electorate, imposed upon a single designated agent the responsibility for making a complete return of his candidate's expenses, and made it the duty of the Director of Public Prosecutions to initiate cases where corruption had occurred. Although this appears to have been relatively effective in setting limits to spending during campaigns, it would be optimistic to think that it radically altered attitudes. Neither a politician guilty of corrupt practices nor a voter who took bribes was ostracized for what were regarded as minor peccadilloes. In ancient parliamentary boroughs bribery amounted to a tradition rather than a venal sin; as late as 1911, for example, when Worcester was investigated by a Royal Commission, no less than 500 electors emerged guilty; by this period bribery had settled at an unspectacular level of 2*s* 6*d*, or 5*s*,[13] plus a few drinks per vote, and the Worcesters had ceased to be typical. Such practices dwindled essentially because they ceased to be efficacious; in substantial boroughs with 10,000–20,000 voters large-scale bribery was hardly worth the cost and was too blatantly obvious.

However, politicians circumvented the Act of 1883 to a considerable extent by spending money outside the election campaign period and by allowing others to spend it on their behalf, or in their interest. For the

public still regarded it as a proper function of the MP to assist the borough, notably as an employer, and as a regular investor in community projects, charities and sporting clubs. MPs frequently distributed coal and blankets in winter, showered sweets upon the children, and saw that tea parties and 'knife-and-fork' suppers were thrown on suitable occasions. In addition the member's postbag would be full of begging letters from individual constituents seeking money or jobs. On top of this came the costs of being in Parliament. After 1885 expenditure of £800 to £1,000 was typical for a campaign; the candidates paid the often exaggerated costs of the returning officer; and the member commonly provided a salary of £100 to £300 per annum for his agent, plus additional sums for registration work each year. Thus the fact that by the First World War petitions alleging electoral malpractice had shrunk to a handful cannot obscure a certain continuity in the relation between a politician and his constituents.

Victorian reformers who hoped that judicious expansion of the electorate would foster a mature and informed debate on political issues in place of corruption and influence invariably lived to be disillusioned. Historians have rightly grown sceptical about any quick emergence of a 'politics of opinion' based upon the thinking individual voter after 1867. Indeed, good evidence has emerged to suggest that the pattern in new industrial boroughs often repeated in certain respects that of county or medieval borough seats. Some employers, for example, appear to have mobilized the votes of their workers as effectively as any rural squire, and many a self-made manufacturer was known to give his men breakfast on polling day before marching them off to cast their votes for himself or his candidate. A number of medium-sized towns made it a practice to return the largest employer of labour – J. J. Colman the mustard manufacturer at Norwich, Joseph Pease the Quaker ironmaster at Darlington, or Charles Mark Palmer, whose shipyards supported the economy of Jarrow; similarly, industrialized county seats such as Northwich (Cheshire) returned the local chemical magnate Sir John Brunner, and the Mansfield division of Nottinghamshire elected the coal owner Arthur Markham. Detailed study of Blackburn and Bury has demonstrated a distinct pattern in which working-class voters who resided near and worked in a factory owned by an active Liberal or Conservative reflected overwhelmingly his allegiance.[14] In such circumstances the result of an election could be as predictable from the relative strength of Liberal and Conservative employers as in a county from the number of the landlords' retainers. This is explicable, especially in 1868, if one envisages the 1867 Act as enfranchising urban villages in which the factory served as the rural estate; here the pressures for unity around one's place of work against rival, external forces could be stronger than the individual's political opinion. Though dismissal of the politically rebellious introduced an occasional coercive element it was apparently the exception;

coercion was more likely to be applied by a voter's own workmates than by his employer.[15]

Lest this should be seen as the universal pattern of urban politics in the late nineteenth century certain qualifications may be entered. Employer influence was characteristic of medium-sized towns where the range of employment was limited to one or two trades, and where the owners still resided near their workers in the 1880s. Where there existed a more varied economy and no dominant employers, a more rapid emergence of political opinion was a natural consequence.[16] Also the greater likelihood of residential separation of owner from worker in the larger conurbations, and even in the smaller Lancashire and Yorkshire towns by the 1890s, undermined the paternal relationships of the 1860s. Nor was the voter–employer relationship merely a passive, non-political one on the worker's part. In the constant shifting of house and job a workman of, say, Liberal views could deliberately seek a connection with a radical mill-owner. Just as a rural magnate who changed his politics did not expect the tenantry to switch allegiance automatically, so the employer had to recognize the existence of loyalties that were political or party as distinct from personal. Finally, the exercise of influence was naturally marked in the election following immediately upon the 1867 Reform Act, when large numbers or working men voted for the first time but under the old conditions of open voting. By the 1880s even entrenched MPs were vulnerable to political issues; Brunner lost his seat in 1886; Palmer found himself almost unseated by a socialist in 1900. Moreover, any owner had to be known as a good employer or face a battery of criticism and innuendo during a campaign. As a result of personal and political considerations, by the turn of the century entrepreneurs with political ambitions were migrating away from the seats of their business: Richard Holt of Liverpool found a constituency at Hexham in Northumberland; Walter Runciman of Tyneside sat for Dewsbury; Alfred Mond of Cheshire represented Swansea. Such movements reflected the fact that it was no longer enough to be a local employer; allegiance to a political party furnished the safest guide to a constituency's representation.

The Rise of the Party Activist

One of the most striking features of mid-Victorian elections is that barely half the constituencies actually experienced a contest; and where seats were contested a third or more of voters normally split their two votes across party lines – an indication that Whig and Tory were not sharp political divisions but amorphous and overlapping groupings. Since two members had to be returned, Whigs and Tories frequently agreed to nominate a single candidate each with a view to avoiding the trouble and

TABLE 1.3   *Uncontested seats at general elections 1857–1910*

1857	333	1880	109	1900	243
1859	383	1885	43	1906	114
1865	302	1886	225	1910 (Jan.)	75
1868	212	1892	63	1910 (Dec.)	163
1874	188	1895	189		

expense of a contest. Thus an election was often the result of a split *within* one side, between radicals and Whigs or individual rivals, rather than between parties. Such cosy arrangements were, of course, anathema to the dedicated party activists of the late Victorian era whose objective in manning the constituency organization on a permanent basis was to ensure a fight at every election. After 1885 single-member constituencies[17] eliminated traditional Whig–Tory collusion, and the advance of formal party organization, stimulated by franchise extensions, may be measured from the decline in unopposed returns (see table 1.3). As the table shows, 1885 marked the nearest approach to the mid-twentieth-century practice in which virtually every constituency is contested; around thirty of the unopposed returns occurred in staunchly Nationalist areas of Ireland which the Unionists found it futile to fight. Even so, the large totals for 1886, 1895 and 1900, when the Liberal organizations were either split or starved of resources, indicate how incomplete the evolution remained.

Hitherto parliamentary election campaigns had rested in the hands of small groups of landowners, professional men or employers who used solicitors to organize the poll and the registration. However, an alternative approach based upon the assumption of a regular party conflict evolved particularly in those towns whose government had been re-formed under the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act;[18] the municipally inspired prototype did not generally displace the improvisations at parliamentary level until politicians had to face the challenges and problems raised by the new franchises, the redistribution, and the restrictions upon expenditure in the 1880s, which generated a permanent, institutional framework eventually covering the whole country.

Three major manifestations of organized party activity may be identified. First the professional party agent began to displace the solicitor for whom electoral work was just a sideline. This was no more than a natural consequence of the complexity of the franchise and registration process after 1885. The agent's responsibility was to ensure that his party's supporters appeared on the preliminary list of voters in May, to put in further claims and defend them before the revising barristers in the autumn, and particularly

to lodge objections against the names of known opponents. Such work could make all the difference to the lodgers' vote since they had to make a fresh application every year; if they or householders shifted house the party agents pursued them in an annual charade. Some found that lodging objections paid higher dividends than making claims. In Newcastle the Conservatives objected to 9,500 names between 1888 and 1891 and in nearby Gateshead, where the population rose by 16 per cent between 1885 and 1891, the electorate dropped by 301![19] In 1908 the Leeds Liberals secured a net advantage from registration of 257 (98 claims, 159 objections) over their opponents; in Keighley the Conservative agent claimed net gains ranging from 69 in 1892 to 238 in 1897.[20] In dozens of seats a turnover of these proportions was enough to determine the result of an election, and the party that neglected registration work for a year or two suffered badly. Where both agents were alert and thorough they habitually met privately before the revising courts got to work for a mutual withdrawal of objections; there is thus no little substance in the view that the parties, as much as the law, determined the franchise before 1918. Agents had also to keep abreast of legal cases which modified the interpretation of the Act; for example the 'latchkey' decision of 1907 by which 'lodgers' who held a front-door key to the building could qualify as 'householders' produced a sudden influx of new voters. Sensible of their role in winning elections the party agents asserted their status by establishing professional associations, the Liberals in 1882 and the Conservatives in 1891; they adopted examinations for full membership, endeavoured to impose minimum salary levels upon the parties, set up benevolent funds, and published semi-secret journals to brief members on the latest tricks of the trade.

A second characteristic of the post-1867 system was the local party-sponsored club. Especially in Lancashire and Yorkshire, working men's clubs were a long-standing feature, but politicians felt so apprehensive of losing touch with the urban electors of 1867 that they threw considerable resources into extending the network. A typical neighbourhood club was a modest affair of two or three rooms, one for lectures, one for reading, drinking, billiards or smoking; even a strongly radical town like Keighley boasted 13 such Conservative clubs in 1907. A popular extension of club activity during the summer involved mass picnics and excursions by train to the country home of the MP, candidate or other party dignitary; in September 1900, we learn, 600 North Salford Liberals picnicked at Matlock Bath in Derbyshire by day and enjoyed a Venetian fête on the river by night.[21] On a more regular basis, urban party associations developed their own brass bands and football clubs which the MP was expected to subsidize. In such ways the parties helped to fill the role nowadays occupied by a vast and varied entertainments industry. Their motives in moving deliberately beyond strictly political activity were to inculcate the values of the

parliamentary system among the new voters, to impart political education
at least to the activist elite, and to foster an habitual loyalty on the part of
those who were uninterested in or ignorant of politics. In addition the
parties frequently sponsored benefit societies, friendly societies, sick and
burial societies, and even building societies; according to one Liverpool
Tory in 1879: 'working men in the north country always wanted to see
some return for their money, and would therefore more willingly join a
benefit club than an association for a purely abstract object'.[22] The success
of the clubs and the Primrose League shows how misleading, in the Brit-
ish context, is the assumption that traditional parliamentary parties were
simply parties of 'individual representation' that failed to involve their
supporters except intermittently at election times; the evidence suggests
that the Conservatives, rather than any of the extraparliamentary socialist
or labour bodies, approximated to a party of 'social integration' in that
they permeated the daily lives of their members.

Finally, party growth manifested itself in the emergence of formal con-
stituency associations based upon individual membership running into
hundreds or thousands, divided between branches for each ward or poll-
ing district. This provided the centre for volunteer activists whose time
and efforts now provided free much of the canvassing, transport and
propaganda work previously paid for on an *ad hoc* basis. Representative
constituency bodies were pioneered by radical Liberals – it was dubbed
the 'caucus' system – who gave it central institutional form in the National
Liberal Federation (NLF) of 1877. Rank-and-file Conservatives encoun-
tered greater opposition from landed and parliamentary patrons who sensed
a threat to their own control, and eschewed the Liberals' pretensions to
policy-making and selection of candidates; nonetheless, after a slow start
in 1867 the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associ-
ations (NUCCA) attained official approval and spawned affiliated associ-
ations across the country during the mid-1880s. By this stage few candidates
stood without the benefit of an agent, a permanent association, or the
backing of a network of social organizations which gave them links with
the mass of voters no longer attainable simply through the personal con-
nections of leading families. By building up habitual party loyalty the
politicians themselves helped to replace older forms of community and
group influence with institutional, political ones.

Party, Parliament and the 'Independent Member'

By 1900 observers of British politics had begun to draw certain conclusions,
often pessimistic ones, from the experience of the reformed system since
1867. Graham Wallas, in his *Human Nature in Politics* (1908), highlighted

the irrationality of a mass electorate in contrast to the liberal ideal. Also in 1908 the American academic A. L. Lowell, in *The Government of England*, dwelt upon the centralization of power in the Cabinet and the corresponding decline in the authority and independence of the House of Commons. The roots of this change had already been identified in M. Ostrogorski's *Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties* (1902), which drew attention to what he saw as the debilitating effects of caucus politics upon Parliament. Seen in perspective Ostrogorski's pessimism seems exaggerated, even misplaced, since, despite the pretensions of Victorian party organizations in the 1870s, by 1900 both Liberal and Conservative parliamentary leaders had harnessed their extra-parliamentary forces to serve their ends; they appealed directly to the voters over the heads of their critics for the 'mandate' as the fashionable term had it; their command of patronage and policy was rarely challenged successfully even in the Labour Party, whose roots and strength lay, as yet, outside the House of Commons. Very few politicians used the party organization as their high-road to power; even Joseph Chamberlain and Lord Randolph Churchill merely toyed with it before reverting to playing the game by the existing rules.

However, this should not obscure the very real changes that took place in the career and functions of the backbench politician in the late nineteenth century. Until this time membership of the House of Commons was still widely regarded less as a career than as a part-time activity undertaken along with other unpaid duties towards the community. This was held to be no small advantage in deterring carpetbaggers and in attracting to public service representatives of independent means. 'Once pay a member for his votes collectively,' declared Sir William Harcourt, 'and he will very soon make a market for his individual votes.'[23] Yet both tighter party discipline and the growing demands made by governments upon MPs undermined the conventional conception of the MP in our period. By tradition membership of the Commons impinged lightly upon the MP's time. Government business occupied only a fraction of the time of the House; attendance was frequently fitful and whipping slack, even unnecessary, for a ministry rested upon administrative rather than political support. Each August Parliament rose for the shooting season, members displaying a marked reluctance to return until the following February.

However, under Gladstone and his successors the parliamentary year grew longer. Governments appropriated sittings hitherto reserved for backbench legislation; and severe pressure upon government business caused by regular Irish Nationalist obstructionism prompted Gladstone in 1882 to pioneer the procedure for closure of debate by simple majority vote, a practice ritually condemned but nonetheless adopted by all governments anxious to squeeze legislation through. With the burgeoning scope of official activity came both lengthier and more complex legislation and

financial proposals. Both the Public Accounts Committee of 1861 and the Estimates Committee of 1912 represented attempts to maintain the principle of Commons' scrutiny and control of finance without absorbing excessive amounts of time on the floor of the House. In practice Commons debates on Supply evolved into a largely ritual aspect of Parliament's work; in 1896 A. J. Balfour simply fixed the number of Supply days after which all remaining votes were taken by closure; they ceased to be opportunities for criticism of expenditure in detail and became instead occasions for general discussions initiated by the opposition. Thus governments grew to dominate the timetable and members to depend upon the party whip to keep them in touch with business from hour to hour. As attack by the opposition became normal practice so the whips displayed increasing intolerance of non-attendance or revolt. Life gradually ceased to be congenial for what Lord Salisbury described as 'the old judicial type of Member who sat rather loose to his party'.

Whereas the governments of the 1850s regularly suffered 10 to 15 defeats each year, by the 1900s their successors experienced only one per session on average. We may measure the growth of disciplined party behaviour by the number of Commons divisions in which 90 per cent of a party's representatives went into the same lobby (see table 1.4). Two features are particularly striking. First, the Conservatives in office and in opposition displayed tighter discipline or cohesion than the Liberals. This is quite at odds with contemporary criticism of the caucus for supposedly subjecting the politicians to its dictates; in practice the NLF invariably lent encouragement to MPs in rebellion against the leadership. Secondly, the lax discipline prevailing up to the 1860s tightened up after 1868, but

TABLE 1.4   *'Party votes' in the House of Commons 1850–1903*

	No. of divisions	Conservatives (%)	Liberals (%)
1850	321	45	37
1860	257	31	25
1871	256	61	55
1881	199	71	66
1883	253	65	52
1890	261	87	64
1894	237	92	84
1899	357	91	76
1903	260	83	88

Source: H. Berrington, 'Partisanship and Dissidence in the Nineteenth Century House of Commons', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 21 (1967–8), p. 342.

weakened somewhat during the early 1880s when the party leaders were inclined to seek co-operation from their opponents against their own rebellious supporters. However, the great divide on Home Rule in 1886 drove both sides towards greater cohesion than ever before, reaching a peak under the management of Salisbury and Balfour. A fundamental alteration had taken place since mid-century when government and opposition had been more fluid and relaxed, and neither side represented rigid parties. After 1886 governments ceased to be able to rely upon support from oppositions which now criticized everything but without prospect of defeating anything. All now turned upon maintaining the allegiance of one's own party majority; the older traditions of cross-bench voting by a large proportion of members gradually died out. Thus when Edwardians looked back nostalgically to a golden age of the 'Independent Member' they had in mind what we would think of as a House of 'moderates' whose fluctuating votes reflected the blurred and ambiguous lines of party demarcation.

Such developments seemed to many contemporaries to undermine the status of the MP while encroaching upon his time and freedom. Life in the Commons began to lose its attractions for young gentlemen. This is not to say that landed families did not continue to play a prominent role in both parties; simply that they had to make more deliberate efforts than before and acquiesce in the restrictions of parliamentary life. But the social composition of the Commons underwent a steady modification during the late Victorian era. It has been found that between 1868 and 1910 landowners fell from 46 to 26 per cent as a proportion of Conservative members and from 26 to 7 per cent among Liberals;[24] in the same period those whose livelihood lay in industry and trade rose from 31 to 53 per cent of Conservatives and from 50 to 66 per cent of Liberals; while those from legal and professional occupations grew from 9 to 12 per cent among Conservatives and from 17 to 23 per cent among Liberals. The dominance of lawyers in particular at cabinet level was a noticeable feature of the Liberal governments of 1906–14 which included very few industrialists. This march of the middle classes, which some Edwardians professed to abhor as an invasion by 'wirepullers', professional politicians and men on the make, reminds us how very protracted was the process of penetration initiated by the famous 'middle-class' victories of 1832 and 1846.

In fact by 1900 many a rising bourgeois had discovered a short cut, if not to power, at least to prestige, by obtaining a knighthood, baronetcy or peerage, often after (though not necessarily because of) generous contributions to party funds, aid to ailing party newspapers and services at elections. The rate of creation of peerages during the 1880s and 1890s was twice that of the 1830–60 period. Moreover the proportion of industrial and professional middle-class men among the newly ennobled reached 43 per cent during 1897–1911 by comparison with 14 per cent during

1867–81.[25] Certain types of recruit, notably brewers and newspaper pro-
prietors, attracted criticism for their prominence; Guinnesses were elevated
in 1880 and 1891, and a Bass and an Allsopp both in 1886; Lord Glenesk
arose from the *Morning Post* in 1899, Lord Burnham from the *Daily Tele-
graph* in 1903, and Lord Northcliffe from the *Daily Mail* in 1905. Yet the
solid centre of British industry was well represented by Lords Armstrong
(armaments) in 1887, Inverclyde (shipping) in 1897, Joicey and Allendale
(mining) in 1906, and Mount Stephen (railways) in 1891, to take only a
few examples. Though both parties, especially the Liberals, were under
more pressure to raise central funds from wealthy men by the 1880s,
financial contributions were not the sole factor. After 1886 Gladstone had
to fortify the depleted Liberal ranks in the Lords. Conversely Salisbury,
whose 1885–6 ministry was a turning point in rapid creations, felt obliged
to dispense honours as an alternative to posts now thinly spread between
Conservatives and Liberal Unionists.

In the quest for office the new men competed under the old rules in that
until 1911, when MPs were awarded a £400 salary, the backbencher had
to live off a fortune amassed before his entry into politics; by 1900 of course
many a second-generation industrialist could use his father's business to
launch him into politics in his youth. But party loyalty now demanded
that aspiring members should first tackle one or two hopeless or marginal
constituencies before being nominated for a safe seat for life. For the
politician's essential lifeline lay through his party rather than in his roots in
his locality. As Augustine Birrell remarked to Asquith and Haldane one
day as they gazed out across the Firth of Forth to the country beyond:
'What a grateful thought that there is not an acre in this vast and varied
landscape that is not represented at Westminster by a London barrister!'[26]