ARTICLE

The Third Earl Grey, Liberalism, and the British Empire

Jonathan Parry*

Pembroke College, University of Cambridge
*Corresponding author. E-mail: Jpp3@cam.ac.uk

This article suggests that Henry, third Earl Grey, had a vision of a liberal British world, which he hoped to implement through a political career. It was based on strong executive governance, representative politics, and the abolition of protection and slavery. It relied on the free market and good race relations to bring progress. He rejected the idea that legislation could impose improvement on colonial peoples. His program was quickly derailed, because of turbulent representative politics in Britain and the colonies after 1848. Later political developments made any integrated liberal vision of empire even more impractical. Studying Grey's arguments, and their fate, can help the task of defining British imperial liberalism. It is best understood as an attempt to check (Tory) vested interests, rather than as an ideology of interventionist improvement. Its priorities and tensions make most sense in relation to the concepts, assumptions, and turning points that dominated British politics.

This article examines the opinions of Henry, third Earl Grey, regarding Britain's empire over the course of his long life, which spanned the trajectory of Victorian political Liberalism. He was a junior minister in the government of his father (the second Earl Grey) when it brought in the first Reform Bill in March 1831; he lived to see the end of Gladstone's final premiership in 1894. Grey was an influential Liberal Party policy maker in the twenty years after 1832, particularly in colonial affairs.[1] He was also self-consciously an intellectual in politics, who took extreme care to ground his policy positions in political principle, to the extent

---

[1] J. M. Ward, *Earl Grey and the Australian Colonies, 1846–57: A Study of Self-Government and Self-Interest* (Melbourne, 1958); Ged Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation, 1837–1867* (Basingstoke, 1995); Peter Burroughs, "Lord Howick and the Colonial Church Establishment," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 25/4 (1974), 381–405; Peter Burroughs, "Liberal, Paternalist or Cassandra? Earl Grey as a Critic of Colonial Self-Government," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 18/1 (1990), 33–60; William A. Green, *British Slave Emancipation: The Sugar Colonies and the Great Experiment, 1830–1865* (Oxford, 1976); K. M. De Silva, "The Third Earl Grey and the Maintenance of an Imperial Policy on the Sale of Crown Lands in Ceylon, *c.*1832–52: Some Influences of Edward Gibbon Wakefield's Doctrines in a Tropical Colony," *Journal of Asian Studies* 27/1 (1967), 5–20; Philip Harling, "The Trouble with Convicts: From Transportation to Penal Servitude, 1840–67," *Journal of British Studies* 53/1 (2014), 80–110.

that he was often seen as crotchety.[2] He wrote one trail-blazing book on colonial policy, and many journal articles. He produced a large corpus of parliamentary speeches. His reputation and family name ensured that even in his eighties his frequent letters to *The Times* were published and would elicit comment. This article is based on those outputs, supplemented by some of his Cabinet memoranda and private letters. Its main object is to present Grey's political philosophy in the round, for the first time. Imperial historians are aware of his role in particular controversies—on slavery and indenture, on the granting of representative government, on colonial land policy—but have never tried to discern an underlying unity to them. I argue here that his core concerns were to strengthen Crown power across the British world, and to implement policies that are often called Cobdenite: free trade, economy, and dislike of costly military interventions abroad.[3] Grey applied the same basic principles of governance to Britain and to its main overseas territories, rather than seeing the empire as a space apart.

Another aim is to contribute to the long-running debate about the role of liberalism in British imperial development. Though this debate has prioritized the rigorous interrogation of texts as an end in itself, several of its participants have also wanted to shed light on British imperial *policy*. The imperial historian Thomas Metcalf began the discussion (channeling earlier authors like Eric Stokes) by presenting the writings of T. B. Macaulay, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill as a program to bring Western civilization and modernity to India by using law, education, and political economy to reform individual behaviour. He also showed the naivety and contradictions in their writings, and the severe limits in practice to the implementation of their legal and educational proposals.[4] Alan Ryan added that J. S. Mill and fellow civil servants could make little difference to the lives of Indians, since the East India Company office in London where he worked lacked executive powers, and the new charter arrangements of 1833 greatly constrained its previous independence.[5] Other imperial historians continue to stress the limited purchase of these reforming ideas, and the predominance of less liberal values in Indian administration, at least before the heyday of the Indian Civil Service. Margot Finn, for example, reminds us that a major concern of early nineteenth-century Indian officials was to secure and enrich family dynasties.[6] Jon Wilson argues that the brief flowering of "liberal imperialism" in India only took place after 1918.[7]

---

[2] See e.g. John M. Ward, "The Third Earl Grey and Federalism, 1846–1852," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 3/1 (1957), 18–32, at 19.

[3] For Cobden see Anthony Howe, *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846–1946* (Oxford, 1997); Anthony Howe and Simon Morgan, eds., *Rethinking Nineteenth-Century Liberalism: Richard Cobden Bicentenary Essays* (Aldershot, 2006).

[4] Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge, 1994), 28–43. See Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford, 1959).

[5] Alan Ryan, "Introduction," in Martin I. Moir, Douglas M. Peers, and Lynn Zastoupil, eds., *J. S. Mill's Encounter with India* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1999), 1–17, at 6, 12–13.

[6] C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), 237; Douglas M. Peers, *India under Colonial Rule, 1700–1885* (Harlow, 2006), 51–9; Margot C. Finn, "Material Turns in British History: II. Corruption: Imperial Power, Princely Politics and Gifts Gone Rogue," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 29 (2019), 1–25, at 9.

[7] Jon E. Wilson, *India Conquered: Britain's Raj and the Passions of Empire* (London, 2016), Ch. 13.

Despite these caveats, an assumption has grown up that nineteenth-century empire was underpinned by a liberal "imperial ideology." A few liberal authors have acquired canonical status as proponents of the idea that British imperialism could be "an effective and legitimate tool of moral and material progress."[8] This idea owed a lot to Uday Singh Mehta's exploration of J. S. Mill's universalist liberalism, which stressed Mill's intolerance and lack of curiosity about alternative value systems, and his willingness to condone the exclusionary paternalist government of Indians in the name of their improvement.[9] Mehta's book has given Mill's rather scant writing about India an extraordinary prominence in subsequent discussions about liberal ideas of empire. The fact that Macaulay and the Mills held roles in Indian administration for a time is sometimes used to validate this emphasis. Priya Satia claims, in defiance of Ryan, that J. S. Mill had "outsized influence on the policy-making process."[10] A similar assumption has been made about Henry Maine, who investigated customary practices in traditional societies and emphasized their role in preserving social stability, and who was also law member of the Viceroy's Council for seven years in the 1860s. Karuna Mantena presents him as the leading figure in a culturalist turn in imperial ideology, away from the Millite "liberal imperialism" described above. Her narrative makes the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the Morant Bay rising of 1865 pivotal in this shift, on the grounds that these political crises exposed the inconsistencies of the reformist liberal imperialist worldview and forced an ideological shift to a new mode of imperial legitimation, based on indirect rule and the acceptance of customary practices.[11] Jennifer Pitts takes the same stance.[12] Mantena's "liberals" include the East India Company chairman Charles Grant (though he was not a Liberal in any political sense), which enables her to incorporate into the liberal agenda the evangelical impulse to Christianize imperial subjects. The notion that an improving and exclusionary liberalism was a dominant imperial ideology for much of the nineteenth century now seems to have widespread support. Caroline Elkins's recent best-selling account of British imperial brutality accords great explanatory power to the potency of this liberalism, which she blames for a resort to legalized violence against refractory subject peoples—on the basis of some remarks by Mill on the legitimacy of despotism in barbarian societies.[13] This article suggests some problems with these conceptions, particularly as used by Mantena, Pitts, and Elkins.

*   *   *

---

[8]Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton, 2010), 1. See also Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2005).

[9]Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, 1999).

[10]Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: How History Makes History* (Cambridge, MA, 2020), 2.

[11]Mantena, *Alibis of Empire*, 1–2 and *passim*.

[12]Jennifer Pitts, "Ideas of Empire: Civilization, Race, and Global Hierarchy," in Warren Breckman and Peter E. Gordon, eds., *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, vol. 1, *The Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2019), 447–69, at 457–8.

[13]Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (London, 2022), 49–51, citing Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government*.

Liberal imperialism has also acquired a supplemental meaning, as a project for more professional and systematic administration, focused on the gathering of knowledge and better record keeping, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of local economies and societies.[14] It is easy to imagine how this accumulation of information might in theory facilitate directive government and social transformation on "liberal" principles. British administration across the world undoubtedly came to place much more emphasis on efficiency and information gathering between 1790 and 1820, primarily because of the need to organize a global war while dealing with massive population growth and economic change at home.[15] However, it does not follow that most administrators planned to use this knowledge to reshape India along Western lines. Information channels were useful, first and foremost, for surveillance purposes.[16] Beyond that, the aims of the bureaucrats described as "liberal imperialists" by Anna Clark and Aaron Windel were probably typical: to understand trade flows, improve East India Company revenue streams, and, at most, review the effectiveness of land tenures.[17] In any case, as Jon Wilson has argued, most of these official attempts to generalize about social trends were so abstract and imprecise as to be irrelevant to the situation on the ground.[18] Metcalf conflated "liberalism" and "westernization" and singled out Lord Dalhousie, governor-general from 1848 to 1856, as a model "westernizer." But care is needed in labeling him a "liberal." Dalhousie was a Peelite administrative reformer concerned with the hard-headed rationalization of government business itself, and with the development of railways, telegraphs, and public works to aid military security, boost revenue, and consolidate Company rule.[19] Twenty years earlier, Tories like John Malcolm, faced with a confusion of Indian government structures, had supported the steamboat revolution for similar reasons.[20]

So there was nothing inherently liberal about these important bureaucratic and technological developments. Moreover, liberal-minded people could and did respond to them in very different ways. For example, there was a fault line between those who thought that the main aim of collecting information about India (or any

---

[14]For background see Richard Drayton, "Knowledge and Empire," in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 2, *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), 231–52, at 246–50; Anna Clark and Aaron Windel, "The Early Roots of Liberal Imperialism: 'The Science of a Legislator' in Eighteenth-Century India," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 14 (2013), http://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2013.0025.

[15]Henry Parris, *Constitutional Bureaucracy: The Development of British Central Administration since the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1969); David Eastwood, "'Amplifying the Province of the Legislature': The Flow of Information and the English State in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Historical Research* 62 (1989), 276–94.

[16]C. A. Bayly, "Knowing the Country: Empire and Information in India," *Modern Asian Studies* 27/1 (1993), 3–43.

[17]Clark and Windel, "Early Roots of Liberal Imperialism."

[18]Jon E. Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780–1835* (London, 2008), 11–12, 184–5.

[19]Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, 42; Suresh Chandra Ghosh, "The Utilitarianism of Dalhousie and the Material Improvement of India," *Modern Asian Studies* 12/1 (1978), 97–110.

[20]Wilson, *India Conquered*, Ch. 7.

imperial territory) would be the encouragement of commerce and free markets, and those who thought that it would allow a more ambitious state-interventionist agenda. There was another divide between those who thought that the main benefit of steamboats and railways would be the extension of the market economy and peaceful commercial relations, and those who saw them as extending British military capacity in Central Asia and facilitating state security and perhaps territorial conquest.[21] Furthermore, while some on both sides of the latter debate were interested in how this modern communications revolution might facilitate a particular kind of rule over Indians, many others were primarily concerned with how it might enhance British global power over illiberal Russia.[22] Grey, the subject of this article, had heated clashes with some other Liberals on all these issues. The reduction of liberalism to a simple modernist and "improving" imperial ideology was actually a partisan Tory invention which was briefly effective in the 1850s. Several influential Tories in Parliament, led by Benjamin Disraeli, painted Dalhousie as a rootless liberal destroyer of Indian cultural identities, in an agenda to make Prime Minister Palmerston's party look responsible for the 1857 Rebellion.[23]

Once we accept the variegated nature of political Liberalism, we can also appreciate that liberal ideas could be refashioned in different combinations at different times. In fact the more ideologically aware British political Liberal leaders sought to do so in order to construct a coalition of support and drive a governing agenda. This article views the liberalism-and-empire debate from the perspective of a British political historian. Politicians, and particularly intellectuals in politics, articulate dreams just as writers do. As Andrew Sartori pointed out, "Liberalism" is a word with a great variety of potential meanings—political, economic, legal–cultural, intellectual. It makes sense to define it in the way most appropriate to the task in hand.[24] If one is writing about British politics, it is surely legitimate to define liberalism as what Liberal leaders did, or tried to do. This approach is easier than it once was, because British historians have been analyzing the strategies and thought of political leaders for forty years, though little of this work has so far impacted on their imperial or intellectual counterparts.[25]

---

[21]On the latter see James Hevia, *The Imperial Security State: British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-Building in Asia* (Cambridge, 2015); Martin J. Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge, International Relations, and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1808–1878* (Cambridge, 2016).

[22]For the Hobhouse–Palmerston project to use steam power to do this in the Middle East in the 1830s see Jonathan Parry, *Promised Lands: The British and the Ottoman Middle East* (Princeton, 2022), 136–44, 376–7.

[23]Matthew Stubbings, "British Conservatism and the Indian Revolt: The Annexation of Awadh and the Consequences of Liberal Empire, 1856–1858," *Journal of British Studies* 55/4 (2016), 728–49, at 734–9.

[24]Andrew Sartori, "The British Empire and Its Liberal Mission," *Journal of Modern History* 78/3 (2006), 623–42. In his *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History* (Berkeley, 2014), he applied liberal concepts in the context of economic and legal debates about property in Bengal.

[25]Richard Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics: Whiggery, Religion and Reform, 1830–1841* (Oxford, 1987); Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford, 1988); Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830–1852* (Oxford, 1990); Howe, *Free Trade*; Peter Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843–50* (Dublin, 1998); Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999); Michael Bentley, *Lord Salisbury's World:*

There are, of course, a number of difficulties in writing about ideas in politics, because of the slippery and often demotic nature of political discourse, the centrality of negotiated compromise to representative politics, and the role of personal ambition in shaping the nature and timing of specific interventions. Nonetheless, leadership in representative politics does sometimes operate through the articulation of dreams and visions which are coherent enough to deserve analysis. They rarely retain their rigour and effectiveness for long, but it is worth asking what gives them potency and what later deprives them of it. The suggestion here is that Grey had a liberal vision for Britain and the British world which is historically important enough to deserve attention, both in itself and for the reactions that it inspired.[26]

Grey was fascinated by ideas. He was also the heir of an aristocratic prime minister, and both father and son had a very high view of their family's national role. Grey hoped, and sometimes expected, to determine the future direction of the country. He grew to maturity at a propitious time, since there was much more confidence in the 1830s than ever before that government policy could be reformed along rational intellectual lines. Before 1830, British governments had limited ambitions, and hardly ever showed interest in anything approaching a political philosophy. His father's Reform Act of 1832 broadened the constitution, convincing ministers that they now had the legitimacy to pass measures of nationwide significance. Moreover, Reform resulted from a social and political crisis in the late 1820s which made many thinking men fear unrest and social chaos if such ambitious measures—to tackle pauperism, crime, ignorance, and Irish disaffection—were delayed. In this situation, many intellectual Liberals and radicals set out plans to rationalize British society.[27] These plans mostly rested on universalist explanations of human behaviour—and therefore might apply abroad as well. As Kate Boehme, Alan Lester, and Peter Mitchell have recently suggested, it was newly fashionable in the 1830s to dream of "ruling the world."[28] Most of Grey's ideas were not original to himself. In particular, he owed much to Richard Cobden and to Edward

---

Conservative Environments in Late-Victorian Britain (Cambridge, 2001); Jonathan Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe, 1830–1886* (Cambridge, 2006); David Brown and Miles Taylor, eds., *Palmerston Studies*, 2 vols. (Southampton, 2007); John Bew, *The Glory of Being Britons: Civic Unionism in Nineteenth-Century Belfast* (Dublin, 2009); David Craig and James Thompson, eds., *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2013); K. Theodore Hoppen, *Governing Hibernia: British Politicians and Ireland, 1800–1921* (Oxford, 2016).

[26]Though I have called it a Liberal strategy, Grey, like his father, was usually labeled a Whig at the time, and some historians take the view that the transition from Whig to Liberal government only occurred in the 1850s. However, in the 1830s the word "Liberal" was already often applied to the party and movement on which Whig leaders relied for support: see Joseph Coohill, *Ideas of the Liberal Party: Perceptions, Agendas and Liberal Politics in the House of Commons, 1832–1852* (Oxford, 2011). Grey and his brother Charles regularly used the term "Liberal" in the mid-1830s, e.g. Grey to Charles Grey, 9 Feb. 1835, GP GRE/B95/1/61. Grey's views on free trade and Ireland fitted contemporary "Liberal" notions particularly well.

[27]Geoffrey B. A. M. Finlayson, *England in the 1830s: Decade of Reform* (London, 1969); U. R. Q. Henriques, *Before the Welfare State: Social Administration in Early Industrial Britain* (London, 1979); William Thomas, *The Philosophic Radicals: Nine Studies in Theory and Practice, 1817–1841* (Oxford, 1979); D. A. Haury, *The Origins of the Liberal Party and Liberal Imperialism: The Career of Charles Buller, 1806–1848* (New York, 1987).

[28]Kate Boehme, Alan Lester, and Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilisation and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge, 2021), Part I.

Gibbon Wakefield—whose significance was highlighted by works of the 1970s and 1980s which might profitably be revisited.[29]

* * *

Grey's approach made him one of the most contentious colonial secretaries in the history of the British Empire, between 1846 and 1852. But this was not because of any clamor for him to be a more interfering and improving "liberal imperialist." The complaints about him were in a different register. He provoked a political crisis which turned on how the British world should be governed. His preference for strong executive government upset many staunch defenders of popular representation in Britain and the empire. The global crisis of 1848 left Grey's model of the development of the British world unpopular in both the metropolis and the colonies.[30] In both spheres, prominent political spokesmen demanded more respect for their rights and freedoms. They claimed that effective popular representation was, or should be, an essential British constitutional principle, and painted Grey as indifferent or hostile to it.

Though Grey never held office again after 1852, he continued to argue for his vision of the British world. This became politically significant at various points, particularly in the 1880s, when he was one of a large number of intellectual Liberals who opposed Gladstone's policy of Home Rule for Ireland and abandoned him for Liberal Unionism. Such people argued that Gladstone's Home Rule scheme, and the low politicking which seemed to have produced it, abnegated official responsibility for the good government of Ireland. They held Parnell's demotic Irish nationalism in evident distaste, though it swept the board in the Irish elections of 1885 outside Ulster. Moreover, irritation at the apparent inability of modern British governments to address the geopolitical threats now posed by global rivals led many of these Liberals, including Grey, to pursue the idea of greater imperial cooperation in the 1880s and 1890s.[31]

---

[29]See e.g. Bernard Semmel, *The Rise of Free Trade Imperialism: Classical Political Economy, the Empire of Free Trade and Imperialism 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1970); Semmel, *Liberalism and Naval Strategy: Ideology, Interest and Sea Power during the Pax Britannica* (Boston, 1986); Ronald Hyam and Ged Martin, *Reappraisals in British Imperial History* (London, 1975); Peter J. Cain, "Capitalism, War and Internationalism in the Thought of Richard Cobden," *British Journal of International Studies* 5/3 (1979), 112–30; Tony Ballantyne, "The Theory and Practice of Empire Building: Edward Gibbon Wakefield and 'Systematic Colonisation'," in Robert Aldrich and Kirsten McKenzie, eds., *The Routledge History of Western Empires* (London, 2014), 89–101.

[30]On 1848 as an imperial crisis see Miles Taylor, "The 1848 Revolutions and the British Empire," *Past and Present* 166 (2000), 146–80.

[31]Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 2007). In fact, Grey was skeptical about larger schemes of federation or commercial union. His scheme was a limited one: to reconvene the long-dormant Committee of the Privy Council on Trade and Plantations, as an advisory body attached to the Colonial Office. It would be made up of representatives of the governments of each of the self-governing colonies, who would discuss the plans of each colony on defense, commerce, and potential extensions of territory, in the hope of furthering consensus on them. Earl Grey, "How Shall We Retain the Colonies?", *Nineteenth Century* 5 (1879), 935–54, especially 953–4. For his doubts about larger schemes, see his 1888 paper on colonial commercial union, GP GRE/B80/1A/3; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 7 Jan. 1885, 2.

What gave their various arguments underlying coherence, therefore, was distaste for modern democratic party politics, which they feared would prevent "good government" by a knowledgeable, responsible official class—in Britain, Ireland, or elsewhere in the British world. Their concern was the same as Grey's from 1848 to 1852: how to defend responsible executive leadership from the pressures of modern representative politics.

This article underlines that British Liberalism was primarily a political ideology, concerned with issues of representation and political relationships, and argues that the debate about liberalism in empire would benefit from paying more attention to these issues.[32] Political Liberalism also took on different identities at different times. In order to gain traction, political initiatives rely on specific conditions of time and place, and political historians seeking to explain why they succeed or fail need to be sensitive to the constraints of chronological specificity.[33] The interaction of these two elements explains not only why Grey's universalist liberal vision for the British world failed, but also why no one was able to make anything like it work subsequently, and why the failed imperial cooperation movement of the 1880s and 1890s is best seen as a coda to it.

* * *

Grey was known as Viscount Howick until he moved to the House of Lords on his father's death in 1845, but will be called Grey consistently here.[34] Born in 1802, and an MP from 1826, he was the leading representative of the Grey family name after his father resigned the premiership in 1834, and joined Melbourne's Cabinet in 1835 as Secretary at War. His political philosophy was formed in the late 1820s and early 1830s. Like other liberal intellectuals of the time, who were often described as "philosophical" liberals or radicals, he was intoxicated by the vision of a confident central executive governing intelligently on behalf of the nation for the first time, by systematizing the Poor Law and the criminal justice system and developing national education and better public health.[35] A large amount of European literature on these themes helped them to formulate policy proposals (so there is little evidence or need to link Grey specifically with Jeremy Bentham, whose name does not appear in the 660-page catalogue of his papers).[36] Much has been written on the impact of these rationalizing universalist ideas, especially

---

[32]Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, 2016), Ch. 2, has already and rightly stressed the need to broaden the "canon" of liberal writers and to give more attention to their visions of the settler colonies.

[33]This is my issue with Gregory Conti's otherwise very impressive *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2019): see J. P. Parry (review), *English Historical Review* 135 (2020), 1613–15.

[34]Except in footnotes, where Howick (H) is usually used until 1845, especially in citing from the papers of the third Earl Grey held in the Durham University Library (GP). After 1845, "Grey" in footnotes refers to him rather than to other members of his family.

[35]See H to Charles Grey, 15 Dec. 1833, GP GRE/B95/1/36.

[36]For an interesting survey of the slavery abolition debates, which highlights differences of approach between Bentham and Grey, see Leroy Levy, "The Self-Purchase of 'Freedom': A Reparative History of the Abolition of Caribbean Slavery, 1832–1833," *Intellectual History Review* (2023), https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.1080/17496977.2023.2229149.

in the area of punishment-and-crime reform. There was a particular concern to develop more systematic legal codes and to enforce them more decisively. These works have reminded us that early nineteenth-century liberalism had a strong sense of the fragility of civilization in the face of unprecedented economic and social change, and sought to improve the legitimate authority of the state and its capacity to secure social discipline.[37]

Grey combined this vision with a zealous commitment to free-market economics, believing that the greatest boon to human welfare and prosperity was increased industrial productivity, which was best secured by leaving capital and labor free to seek the highest return. He admired laissez-faire principles, though he was also an activist politician who appreciated the need for state initiatives in the face of specific crises. (In 1847, for example, he proposed a government currency board in order to prevent overtight credit and thus make possible state loans to famine-hit Ireland and Canada.[38]) Like Cobden, whom he respected greatly, he rejected pessimists' talk of innate constraints on growth. The economic crisis of the late 1830s made him a strong and lifelong advocate of dismantling tariffs; fifty years later, he described protection as like Luddism, a crude attempt to stop economic progress.[39] He was the first Cabinet-level Liberal to attack imperial protection, in 1842. He was a zealous supporter of Corn Law repeal in 1846, anticipating that low prices would improve the demand for labor, increase consumption, facilitate capital investment in agriculture, allow the workingman to buy a wider variety of goods, and render the country "flourishing and prosperous."[40] He repeatedly criticized high defense spending for raising taxes and preventing capital from flowing productively into the economy.

The success of lobbies for protection and high military spending seemed proof that vested interests had too much political power. Grey supported his father's 1832 Reform Act as an attack on that influence. It removed a plethora of boroughs that did not represent real interests, and reduced opportunities for rich men to buy their way into Parliament to help nobody but themselves. However, Grey had no interest in the idea of extending the right to vote for its own sake. Many MPs spoke enthusiastically for the bill because they saw themselves as popular tribunes; he did not. He saw the Reform Bill as a bold "final settlement" by the executive, grappling firmly with an identified popular grievance—rather than as a compromise proposal which would not put the issue to bed but instead would allow radicals to agitate successfully for further democratic change. He always thereafter claimed that the 1832 Act improved the working of the constitution, and popular confidence in government, because a more representative Parliament led to a more continuous and

---

[37]For example, Martin J. Wiener, *Reconstructing the Criminal: Culture, Law, and Policy in England, 1838–1914* (Cambridge, 1990). See also Paul Smith, "Liberalism as Authority and Discipline," *Historical Journal* 32/3 (1989), 723–37.

[38]The dominance of the ultra-orthodox currency school made these ideas politically impossible, but he was able to implement them in Mauritius. See Charles Read, *The Great Famine in Ireland and Britain's Financial Crisis* (Woodbridge, 2022), 174–7, 236–42, 251–6. For the activist policy program he proposed in 1845 for the next Liberal government, see Mandler, *Aristocratic Government*, 228.

[39]Earl Grey, "Protection – Free Trade – Fair Trade – Colonial Trade," *Nineteenth Century* 31 (1892), 38–60, at 39–42; Howe, *Free Trade*, 41–2.

[40]28 May 1846, *Hansard*, 86, 1296.

trusting dialogue between government, MPs, and the people. Parliament should express grievances, in order to guide ministers towards proposing decisive measures expeditiously. Increased popular confidence in government would allow it to govern for the nation.[41]

In other words, Grey—like many intellectual Liberals—hoped that Reform would give government more legitimacy to rule with authority. The basic day-to-day problem for British governments was the management of Parliament. This was hard even when they possessed clear majorities, which they often did not. Gentlemanly MPs were difficult to discipline, and made a virtue of their independence. Like many philosophical Liberals of his stamp, Grey lambasted the lack of grip shown by the Tory governments of the late 1820s—in the face of the growing evil of pauperism and potentially severe social unrest—because of their manifest lack of such confidence. As he later reflected, the Reform Act gave government the authority that it had previously lacked to tackle what seemed to be severe structural failures of the old Poor Law.[42]

He made the same complaint about weak Tory government in colonial affairs. In June 1832 he wrote a long memorandum criticizing the neglect, weakness, and indecision of the Duke of Wellington's Tory government of 1828–30, particularly in tackling slavery and Canada.[43] When it came to colonial affairs, representative parliaments posed a double problem unless disciplined. First, groups of colonials wanted to use their own legislative assemblies to defend their economic interests. The Jamaica planters had long been a particularly egregious example of this, while Antipodean settlers increasingly agitated for similar political rights in order to secure more native land for themselves. Second, this pressure was more difficult to resist because these groups had lobbyists working for them in the British Parliament, who claimed the status of "experts" in colonial debates.

In the 1830s, Grey identified two malevolent vested interests outside Britain: the Protestant Tory elite in Ireland, and the West Indian planters, which governments had failed to suppress. Irish issues dominated much of the decade. Despite initial hesitation (caused by his father's hostility to concessions), Grey came out for bold legislation to change the position of the Established Anglican Church in Ireland, in response to the agitation of Daniel O'Connell and his mostly Catholic supporters. He suggested that government should divide the existing property of the Irish Church between the three major Irish religions. He considered Catholic clerics and landowners justified in resenting the British connection while they suffered discrimination of this kind. Right up until the disendowment of the Anglican Church in Ireland in 1869, he continued to advocate the redirection of some of its assets to pay for Catholic priests and teaching—a financial redistribution towards Catholics which neither Gladstone nor British Nonconformists would accept. His fundamental principle of church–state relations was that states

---

[41]7 March 1831, *Hansard*, 3, 144–5; M. M. E[scott], "Grey, Henry, Vsct. Howick (1802–1894)," in D. R. Fisher, ed., *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1820–1832*, 7 vols. (Cambridge, 2009), 5: 422–32, at 429; Earl Grey, *Parliamentary Government Considered with Reference to Reform: A New Edition* (London, 1864), 94–8.

[42]See Earl Grey, "In Peril from Parliament: II," *Nineteenth Century* 28 (1890), 1012–30, at 1018–19. On Liberals and the strengthening of state activity after 1832 see Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 49–54.

[43]16 June 1832, GP GRE/B143/B2.

must be prepared to support religious instruction in whatever form the people would accept it.[44] What he saw as bold executive action to root out grievances seemed to more worldly politicians to be impractical naivety.

He advocated a similar approach to the great problem in the West Indies: the planters' grip on the assemblies. In November 1830, Grey was named undersecretary for the colonies, and became the leading ministerial advocate for the immediate abolition of slavery. He proposed this partly on moral grounds: evidence of increased mistreatment and mortality underlined slavery's innate cruelty and injustice. But he also came to believe that only the shock treatment of immediate abolition would destroy a system so artificial, yet so entrenched. He resigned in spring 1833 in protest at the Cabinet's decision to introduce a six-year apprenticeship system for the former slaves instead of immediate abolition.

Slavery, he felt, was entirely illogical; its brutality was necessary to force laborers to work in a place where there was no rational incentive to do so, given their small numbers in relation to the amount of fertile land. If free sugar had been allowed to compete on equal terms with slave estates 150 years ago, slavery would quickly have collapsed; imperial protection had kept it alive.[45] It must be abolished, but the surplus of land to labor meant that the islands would then revert to a stagnant subsistence economy. The only way of making them viable international competitors was to force an adjustment to a wage economy and the discipline of the market. The long-term interests of planters and freed slaves were identical: harder work offered higher wages and more rewards for the laborer, and viable profits for the landowner.[46] However, this meant forcing the laborer to forgo the temptations of subsistence. Grey's preferred solution was to impose direct taxes on land; the taxes would fund the schools and provision for old and destitute laborers that the planters had failed to provide.[47] Increasing the price of land to discipline the freed slave into wage work was not a policy driven by racialism; it used the same logic on which Grey supported the New Poor Law at home, and Wakefield's policy of high land prices for Australia.[48]

The planters had no interest in such schemes. The only policies that they would accept involved as slow and reluctant an adjustment to the wage economy as possible. They expected laborers to continue to be forced in practice to supply their labor, through lengthy apprenticeship arrangements backed up by planter control of the courts and prisons. Grey rejected apprenticeship partly on economic logic: as long as the laborer was governed by fear and the whip, he would never learn the incentive to work for money. More fundamentally, he felt that it was yet another

---

[44]See e.g. his speech, 16 March 1866, in *Hansard*, 182, 358; P. M. H. Bell, *Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales* (London, 1969), 67–8; his letters to Charles Grey, 24 Jan. 1835, 9 Feb. 1835, 31 Jan. 1837, 1 March 1869, GP GRE B95/1/57, 61, B95/2/4, B95/4/112.

[45]H, 25 June 1839, *Hansard*, 48, 899; Grey, 7 Feb. 1848, *Hansard*, 96, 206; H to Russell, 5 Dec. 1832, GP GRE/V/C1; H to his father, 7 Feb. 1833, 2nd Earl Grey Papers, Durham University Library, GRE/B24/4/26.

[46]Grey, 7 Feb. 1848, *Hansard*, 96, 193–4.

[47]Howick's scheme of 1833 is summarized in Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, 1992), 47–50; Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 117–18. For the provision for old and destitute freed slaves see H to Russell, 9 April 1838, GP GRE/B123/4/28.

[48]As Holt acknowledges: *The Problem of Freedom*, 50. See also Grey, 7 Feb. 1848, *Hansard*, 96, 192.

concession to planter power.[49] He proposed his alternative, the imposition of immediate abolition by bold central executive action, deliberately in order to nullify their entrenched dominance of the island assemblies. Immediate abolition would be a market shock, disabling their resistance and leaving them with no alternative but to cooperate with London's schemes. If they did not, London would abandon them to their fate—a black insurrection against their centuries of oppression.[50] As with the Tories over Reform in 1832, a real fear of popular revolt would compel them to accept a new political logic. A bold and complete measure was also the only way to appease domestic abolitionist anger at the government's irresolution.[51]

For decades to come, Grey blamed the state of the West Indies on the decision of ministers in 1833 to opt for apprenticeship rather than to follow his plan. Apprenticeship had still not ended in January 1839, when he offered Melbourne his resignation from the Cabinet because he felt that the Colonial Office under Lord Glenelg continued to appease the planters. The latter insisted on maintaining their privileges and on defying pressure from Britain to loosen their grip on the prison and justice system. So Grey felt that strong leadership from London, imposing proper emancipation, was necessary if the West Indies were to stand a chance of rising "into a state of civilization & prosperity."[52] He finally resigned in September 1839, by which time he clearly wanted to be Colonial Secretary himself.[53]

Between 1841 and 1846, the Liberals were in opposition to Peel's Conservative government, and Grey worked with his brother-in-law, Charles Wood, on a strategy to occupy the political center ground. They advocated a politics organized around the principles of freer trade, peace, low taxes, and government economy. They hoped that this would revitalize the Liberal Party by rallying middle-class anti-Corn Law opinion as well as liberal Tories. In the political crisis of December 1845 caused by Peel's conversion to Corn Law repeal, they were probably hoping to engineer a new coalition government organized on free-trade principles, but failed.[54]

Though the primary logic of this free-trade liberalism was domestic, it also had benefits for the rest of the British world. In 1842 Grey attacked the principle of imperial preference, a major historic element of British colonial policy. Peel's government had proposed new arrangements to protect colonial tea and tobacco. Grey argued that such policies damaged British revenue and kept prices high for the consumer, but did not benefit the colonies, whose trade should flow in the most natural channels. Differential duties were usually proposed by vested interests, and the empowerment of such artificial interests in the colonies was damaging in the long run, as slavery had shown. Protection had detached the West Indies from reality, inflating wages to a point where laborers only needed to work for a couple of days per week.[55] The Canadian corn duties that the Tories introduced in 1843

---

[49]See Howick's speech, 14 May 1833, *Hansard*, 17, 1231; Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 43–7, 49–50.

[50]This argument is best stated in H to Mulgrave, 17 April 1833, GP GRE/V/C1, but also on 14 May 1833, *Hansard*, 17, 1253–6.

[51]H to his father, 7 Feb. 1833, 2nd Earl Grey Papers, GRE/B24/4/26.

[52]H to Melbourne, 30 Jan. 1839, 2nd Earl Grey Papers, GRE/B24/8/11.

[53]Grey's fullest account of these events was written in 1884 for Mandell Creighton: GP GRE/B113/16A/7.

[54]F. A. Dreyer, "The Whigs and the Political Crisis of 1845," *English Historical Review* 80 (1965), 514–37, at 524–6.

[55]H, 13 May 1842, *Hansard*, 63, 512. On slavery and protection see Grey, 7 Feb. 1848, *Hansard*, 96, 196–8.

badly distorted local commerce by creating an artificial advantage that could not last. Grey instead envisaged Canada developing its "natural" trade to its south, thereby also smoothing the severe diplomatic crisis of 1842 with the United States.[56]

The political drama of 1845–6 led to the immediate repeal of the Corn Laws and the replacement of Peel's government with a Liberal ministry headed by Lord John Russell, but with the "Grey party" in prominent positions.[57] Grey himself became Colonial Secretary, charged with permanently accommodating the British world to the end of slavery, protection, and imperial preference. Within a month of the Liberals' return to power, his principle of undifferentiated sugar duties became law. They were to be equalized in stages, by 1851, at the low rate currently in force preferentially for colonies: fourteen shillings per hundredweight. The rate for slave-grown foreign sugar, from Cuba and Brazil, had been a prohibitive sixty-three shillings. For Grey, this enforced market revolution would finally defeat planter obstruction over the slave issue.

More mundanely, it would end the poisonous influence on British global politics of Grey's bête noire and political contemporary Lord Stanley, soon to be the fourteenth Earl of Derby. Stanley had risen ahead of Grey in the early 1830s, claiming to be a Reformer. But, from a liberal point of view, he had quickly revealed his unsoundness on the three issues that Grey cared most about: apprenticeship, the Irish Church, and protection. These issues had made Stanley a convert to Toryism and, after 1846, the leader of the Conservative Party. Grey clearly hoped that Russell's new government, by forcing liberal principles on the British world, would prevent people like Stanley from ever imposing their vested-interest prejudices again.[58]

* * *

How could local vested interests be faced down across the empire? Grey's solution was for imperial government to project authority from the center. He put great faith in the Crown's governors as the embodiment of this authority on the spot, charged with keeping sectional forces under control. (This paralleled his respect for Crown authority at home: the Grey family lacked the inherent suspicion of the British court to which some historically aware Whigs—especially Russell—were liable owing to family memories of resisting the Stuarts in 1688. Grey's brother Charles was private secretary to Prince Albert from 1849 and then Queen Victoria's first official private secretary on Albert's death in 1861.[59]) Grey expected strong governors to look after the general interest while maneuvering effectively in colonial politics—just as he expected Liberal politicians to offer wise and flexible

---

[56]H, 13 May 1842, *Hansard*, 63, 519–20. On the distorting effects of the 1843 corn duties on the Canadian economy see Sir Arthur G. Doughty, ed., *The Elgin–Grey Papers 1846–1852* (Ottawa, 1937), 256, 557.

[57]The phrase was Prince Albert's, among others. Core members were Grey, his cousin George Grey, and Wood: Gray, *Famine, Land and Politics*, 24–6.

[58]See the letters to Charles Grey, 5 Jan. 1835, 9 June 1869, GP GRE/B95/1/53, GRE/B95/4/115. Stanley was also responsible for the 1843 Canada Corn Act.

[59]Charles's successor Henry Ponsonby, another Grey relative, secretly consulted Grey on the 1873 ministerial crisis: GP GRE/B119/15/1-5.

leadership at home.[60] For example, he left policy in New Zealand from 1846 to 1852 almost entirely in the hands of Governor George Grey (no relation).[61] In South Africa, he put trust—too much, as it turned out—in Sir Harry Smith. The main reason why his transportation policy was unpopular in Australia was because of the poor advice he received from the governors in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land.[62]

His emphasis on governor power has been obscured, because too much of the historical discussion of Britain's relations with its colonies in the 1840s has revolved around unstable analytical categories like "self-government" or "responsible government," which meant different things in different contexts. Grey repeatedly criticized "responsible government" for New Zealand, in the full sense—that is, the surrender by the Crown of control of policy and patronage to the leaders of majority parties in the assemblies. But in private he had advocated "responsible government" for Canada even before the 1837 rebellions. This was much less inconsistent than it appeared. Grey's priority was always to maintain the power of the governor in local politics, so that he could discipline the assemblies. When he urged Colonial Secretary Glenelg to accept the principle of "responsible government" for Lower Canada in 1835, it was a careful political calculation of how to prevent Louis-Joseph Papineau and his French party from holding the governor to ransom. He proposed revising the governor's executive council to give Papineau an official post and control of provincial patronage, and some of his supporters seats on it. This would force Papineau to work with, rather than against, the governor: to acknowledge that the patronage he exercised emanated from the Crown. Underlying this proposal was Grey's confidence that Papineau realized that the Crown was the best defender of the rights of the French party (since if they rebelled they would be suppressed and left subordinate to the British majority in Canada as a whole).[63] Similarly, he proposed "self-government" for New Zealand in 1845, because he defined it in opposition to "misgovernment … in Downing Street." He charged that Colonial Office interventionism and popular missionary society pressure had shackled the weak governor Robert Fitzroy, whose muddled land policy had laid the foundations for a Maori war. What was needed instead was firm leadership by a governor able to manage the sale and development of Crown lands on coherent principles.[64]

Grey's neatest achievement as Colonial Secretary came because he gave Lord Elgin, his governor in Canada, freedom to manage the local politicians. In the 1830s, Grey had disliked Glenelg's policy toward Canada because it had neither been decisive itself nor delegated power effectively to the governors. After the 1837 rebellion, the government had made amends, as (under pressure initially from Grey but mainly from Lord John Russell) it had sent Canada in succession

---

[60]Earl Grey, *The Colonial Policy of Lord John Russell's Administration*, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (London, 1853), 1: 21. On governor self-perception in the settler colonies in this period see Mark Francis, *Governors and Settlers: Image and Authority in the British Colonies, 1820–1860* (Christchurch, 1992).

[61]The chapter on New Zealand in Grey's *Colonial Policy* consists very largely of Governor Grey's own account.

[62]John M. Ward, *Empire in the Antipodes: The British in Australasia, 1840–1860* (London, 1966), 42–5.

[63]H to Glenelg, 10 Dec. 1835, GP GRE/B87/6/11.

[64]H, 18 June 1845, *Hansard*, 81, 815–46, at 815, 844–5.

two strong governors with British Cabinet experience, Lord Durham and Charles Poulett Thomson, to find acceptable solutions. Elgin's policy was to adopt a confident high profile, liaising constantly with his ministers, while ultimately accepting whichever coalitions and policies could command a majority in the Canadian assembly. Specifically, he encouraged coalitions that included French as well as British representatives, accepted the proposal to reinstitute French as a second official language, and supported the contentious measure of 1849 that legalized compensation to French Canadians whose property had been destroyed by the army during the 1837 rebellion. These policies—all of which were attacked in Britain, and by Canadian Tories—have always been rightly presented in Canadian history as successes for the idea of self-government.[65] But, equally importantly, they were successes for a system of government which maintained the authority of the Crown and governor in Parliament. For Elgin and Grey, the most significant political battle of 1848–9 in Canada was the one against pressure for annexation to the republican United States (which had gained momentum mainly from the abolition of imperial protection, combined with anti-French feeling in Montreal).

In Grey's view, the "safety" and "welfare" of the state depended on the cooperation between a responsible executive and its popular assembly.[66] This Crown-in-parliament system was manifestly superior to the republicanism of the United States, where there was no single source of authority. The American president and the legislators made separate bids for electoral legitimacy, jeopardizing any attempt at united action. Moreover, both bid for the favors of a large electorate. This meant that the president needed no executive talent, and was also very difficult to remove, unlike prime ministers, who needed to keep the confidence of Parliament. Congress contained too many interest lobbies which had bought voters with promises of various kinds; politics became a matter of horse-trading between them. They could channel revenues to their favorite interests without worrying about the consequences for national budgets, as British governments had to do in their negotiations with Parliament. All this lowered the political tone, and repelled honest and thoughtful politicians.[67]

At several points in 1849, Elgin seemed to doubt that pressure for annexation and republicanism could be resisted.[68] By the early 1850s, however, the panic was over. By 1853, Canada was a more effective symbol of Crown-in-parliament principles against the increasingly dysfunctional alternative across the border than at any time since the American revolution.[69]

* * *

Grey also hoped that the British Parliament would offer the Canadian provinces a loan to build an intercolonial railway, which he felt would facilitate eventual

---

[65]The best modern account is Phillip A. Buckner, *The Transition to Responsible Government: British Policy in British North America, 1815–1850* (Westport, 1985), Ch. 8.

[66]Grey, "In Peril from Parliament," 1027.

[67]Grey, *Parliamentary Government*, 30–31, 160–84.

[68]Doughty, *Elgin–Grey Papers*, 318, 350, 471, 525, 528–9, 557.

[69]For Elgin on this theme see John Manning Ward, *Colonial Self-Government: The British Experience 1759–1856* (London, 1976), 296–7.

confederation. But MPs were not interested in committing any money for colonial integration.[70] This was one example of the most pervasive problem that Grey faced as Colonial Secretary, particularly in the years after 1848. The Russell government, which lacked a firm majority in the House of Commons, found it almost impossible to control parliamentary discussion of empire matters. MPs took up contentious colonial issues with enthusiasm. In fact, they used them as opportunities to reassert their own radical identities, by making points of principle about popular rights and liberties, and the need for ministerial cost-cutting. In contrast, they painted Grey, the Colonial Office, and the government as dictatorial and "un-English." Colonial debates became surrogates for discussions of principle about the future direction of British Liberalism, now that parliamentary reform and the basic principles of free trade had been secured. For many Liberals, the domestic demonstrations and Continental revolutions of 1848 underlined the need to be seen to be listening to popular grievances. The crisis of 1848 in British Liberalism exposed the unpopularity of Grey's executive centralism.[71]

MPs' standard complaint about the Colonial Office in these years was that it was overbearing: that it interfered wilfully and oppressively in the affairs of the British colonies, showing contempt for the rights of the freeborn Britons who had settled there. The press took up the charge made some years previously by Charles Buller (who ironically had since become a great ministerial ally of Grey, until his early death in November 1848) that colonial policy was dictated by the smothering bureaucratic instincts of "Mr Mothercountry" in Downing Street (James Stephen, its leading permanent official).[72] This movement was fueled by the traditional radical critique of the British elite as a network of "old corruption"—men who gave their friends lucrative but unnecessary posts at home and abroad, which should be abolished instead. Financial crisis and economic depression from 1847 drove an intense domestic resistance to government taxation and expenditure. Underlying this language was a widely held view that, after the free-trade revolution of the 1840s, there was no need for expensive imperial governance at all.

This language fitted neatly with complaints about Colonial Office interference from settlers in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, who collaborated with MPs in Britain lobbying on their behalf. In 1849, a Society for the Reform of Colonial Government was set up to this end.[73] The radical MP William Molesworth and the Conservative Charles Adderley were two of the most prominent advocates of colonial reform, but there was also a tendency for groups of MPs to take up specific settler interests. For example, Peelites like Gladstone keenly supported the Anglican settlement at Canterbury, New Zealand, while many Protectionists defended the Jamaica planters. The effect was constant criticism of Grey's colonial policy from powerful Commons factions, damaging the authority of Russell's government. Even in the Lords, Carlisle noted "a regular Grey-hunt, which seems to be the favourite sport of the times."[74] There were particularly virulent discussions about

---

[70]Doughty, *Elgin–Grey Papers*, 286, 437, 527.
[71]Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 184–91.
[72]Charles Buller, *Responsible Government for Colonies* (London, 1840), Ch. 6.
[73]Stanley R. Stembridge, *Parliament, the Press, and the Colonies, 1846–1880* (New York, 1982), 7–8, 75–8.
[74]John Prest, *Lord John Russell* (London, 1972), 309.

the government's attempt to continue transportation to some of the Australian colonies, and its insistence on retaining rather than selling Crown lands.[75]

This widespread parliamentary hostility to Grey's defense of Crown authority led to a fundamental shift of attitude in colonial policy after he left office in 1852. The minority Conservative government of 1852, and even more the Peelite-dominated coalition of Lord Aberdeen (1852–5), saw no benefit in continuing his battles against the colonial reformers; indeed Molesworth was given a symbolic place in Aberdeen's Cabinet. Between 1853 and 1855, the Peelite Colonial Secretary Newcastle ceded "responsible government" to New Zealand and to the more developed Australian colonies: ministries resting on assembly majorities were from now on given control of official patronage. This was not because of strong pressure from those colonies; it was because Grey's successors at home found it politically appealing to identify with an image of the British world as a communion of free peoples.[76]

For the rest of his life, Grey complained at the irresponsibility of instituting assembly government across the settler empire, which he said imperilled good race relations. His main example was New Zealand. In the 1840s, he had hoped that the New Zealand colonial settlements could develop the land coherently, in a way that would "amalgamate the races" in pursuit of liberal capitalism.[77] Grey accepted that the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi entitled the Maori to govern their own land areas according to their own legal structures, but saw this as a staging post on the way to better integration of the two races, as the chiefs came to notice the benefits of British-style land development in the rest of the island. His planned constitution of 1846 again recognized that Maori law should apply in their indigenous districts for the foreseeable future. Between 1846 and 1852, he approved—in most respects—of the firm leadership of Governor Grey, because he reimposed the Crown control of land sales that Fitzroy had jeopardized, asserted British authority by cracking down on instances of Maori lawlessness, and multiplied school and road building, yet kept costs firmly under control. The draft constitution which, as Colonial Secretary, Grey left for his successor in 1852 was careful to reserve land purchase and Maori policy to the Crown, as well as to acknowledge the continuing applicability of Maori law in their districts.[78]

By the 1860s, however, this vision of slow and racially harmonious improvement in New Zealand had collapsed. Grey blamed the Peelites' cession of responsible government in 1854–5, and the subsequent pressure imposed on governors by the increasing number of European settlers. The latter gained control over revenue. The governor had to accept the recommendations of his executive council, which acted as delegates of the assembly. In addition, Grey's Conservative successor, Pakington, had made the provincial superintendents elective in 1852, giving them an independent legitimacy that led them to obey settler interests rather

---

[75]Ward, *Empire in the Antipodes*, 42–9, 63–4, 75–7; Grey, *Colonial Policy*, 1: 319–25.

[76]Ward, *Colonial Self-Government*, Ch. 9.

[77]On amalgamation see H, 18 June 1845, *Hansard*, 81, 833, 845; Grey, 29 June 1863, *Hansard*, 171, 1608.

[78]On the constitutions of 1846 and 1852 see Mark Hickford, "Designing Constitutions in Britain's Mid-Nineteenth Century Empire: Indigenous Territorial Government in New Zealand and Retrieving Constitutional Histories," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46/4 (2018), 676–706, at 689–90, 693–4. For his praise of Governor Grey see Grey, *Colonial Policy*, 2: 112–60.

than the governor. The reservation of native policy to the governor had become nominal. Settler pressure ruled everything. School and hospital building for the Maori had stopped. They had been deprived of the vote and of representation in the assembly by underhand means. The Maori war of 1860–61 began when settlers demanded seizure of a piece of land on terms that the Maori chiefs disputed. Grey felt that the chiefs' militancy was understandable, since they believed that government no longer respected their interests and rights.[79] He regarded settlers' minority assertiveness against the majority as even worse than in Protestant ascendancy Ireland, as it was "aggravated by the contemptuous feeling which Englishmen, especially those of the less educated classes, habitually entertain towards the coloured races, whom they contumeliously describe as 'niggers'."[80] Britain now had to send troops; it could not stand by and see Europeans attacked and the colony destroyed. But it must not accept settler pressure for "the extermination of the native race," so the constitution must be suspended. If Britain was to pay for a war caused by colonist extremism, it must restore the balance between races by fair government and by "gaining the confidence of the people." This would not be done by laws, but by fairness and practical benevolence, through offering the Maori roads and schools.[81]

The increasing powerlessness of the New Zealand governor in the face of a sectional assembly was no surprise to Grey, not least because he had already encountered it in Jamaica. Between 1847 and 1849, the Jamaica assembly rejected all his policy prescriptions. Grey lamented that it had already gained more control over revenue and grants than most colonial assemblies. It was also dominated by non-resident planters with no permanent interest in the success of the colony.[82] The 1847 recession plunged West Indian sugar into crisis. The planters imagined that this, together with the weakness of the Russell government, would force a return to protection, though in fact they gained only a small concession: the final equalization of foreign and colonial sugar duties was postponed from 1851 to 1854. Therefore they continued to refuse to cooperate with London. Instead of following Grey's tax plans, they imposed heavy indirect taxes on former slaves.[83] They also cut official salaries, including the governor's, clearly hoping to hold the London government to ransom. They were supported by "professed friends" in Britain, particularly protectionist Conservatives.[84] After a protracted dispute, the governor persuaded a newly elected assembly to pass an acceptable retrenchment policy. However, there was no chance of race conciliation, financial fairness, or improvement. Though the British government offered the West Indian colonies guaranteed

---

[79]For these points see Grey, 28 May 1861, *Hansard*, 163, 152–66; and, on the superintendents, Grey, 22 June 1852, *Hansard*, 122, 1168–9.

[80]Grey, 30 May 1864, *Hansard*, 175, 793–4.

[81]Grey, 28 May 1861, *Hansard*, 163, 153–4, 157–8, 165 (quotations at 153–4); Grey, 24 June 1862, *Hansard*, 167, 967.

[82]Grey, *Colonial Policy*, 1: 166–7, 174–7; Grey, 30 June 1853, *Hansard*, 128, 971; Grey, 13 March 1866, *Hansard*, 182, 126.

[83]Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 206–7. Grey also asked the Guyana planters to reduce their indirect taxes, though they made only cosmetic changes. Brian L. Moore, *Race, Power, and Social Segmentation in Colonial Society: Guyana after Slavery, 1838–1891* (New York, 1987), 115.

[84]Grey, *Colonial Policy*, 1: 171.

state-backed loans for estate development in 1848, Jamaica, unlike Guyana and Trinidad, did not take them up.

Grey indicated several times that, as former slaves acquired property, they would naturally become eligible to vote, and would eventually secure an electoral majority in the Jamaica assembly. He warned that there would be no constraint on the power of that majority, because the planters had grabbed excessive power for the assembly in order to check Colonial Office and governor interference.[85] These remarks have been read as racialist.[86] Of course Grey, like everyone else, did not think that given the actual state of Jamaica it was responsible to hand over power straight away to black leadership, and in 1839 and 1866 he advocated instead suspending the constitution in order to avoid a race war.[87] But Catherine Hall, following Holt, is mistaken to allege that here Grey was making a race-based distinction between Jamaica and Canada—that in the former, but not the latter, Crown authority must be maintained against popular government. She thinks that he was against conceding power to another race, whereas in fact he was reiterating the criticism of sectional planter greed that he had made since 1832. He was warning the planters of the flawed logic of their own assertion of assembly power. Indeed he reminded them that Canadian-style self-government would require their assembly to give up some of the revenue powers that it had previously usurped. Most importantly, as noted above, Grey did not think that self-government imperilled Crown authority in Canada, on account of anti-American loyalism there, whereas it did in Australia and New Zealand, precisely because it gave power to selfish white settlers.[88]

The real lesson of Grey's relationship with the West Indies was how little power a liberal Colonial Secretary had, given that governors tended to accept planters' views of economic requirements. Governor Mulgrave was the first to warn him that the lack of local surveys made his scheme of direct taxes impractical.[89] In the 1850s, local gerrymandering disfranchised most black voters.[90] Above all, Grey had to surrender to the governor–planter alliance in favor of indentured immigration from India, a scheme distressingly similar to the apprenticeship that he had opposed so strongly. He preferred voluntary immigration from Africa, on the ground that conditions there were worse.[91] In 1846 and 1847, he resisted the principle of indentured labor contracts for the Indian immigrants, and disallowed the plans of Lord Harris, governor of Trinidad, to circumscribe the liberty of those who had arrived there in 1845. Harris bombarded him with complaints about his naivety, and warned repeatedly of the need to discipline Indians who were abandoning estates and succumbing to vagrancy. As a result, the Colonial Office was forced to accept

---

[85] Ibid., 190–91; Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 211–14; 30 June 1853, *Hansard*, 128, 972.

[86] Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 216; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Cambridge, 2002), 203–4.

[87] Grey, 13 March 1866, *Hansard*, 182, 131.

[88] Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, 203–4; Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 235–6. Grey's point that the Jamaican assembly would have to lose control of revenue in order to fit the Canadian constitutional model is noted in his summary of Colonial Office policy for 1849 in GP GRE/B143/B7, 27.

[89] Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 118.

[90] Ibid., 176–7; Moore, *Race, Power*, 87–9.

[91] Grey, 7 Feb. 1848, *Hansard*, 96, 199; Philip Harling, "Assisted Emigration and the Moral Dilemmas of the Mid-Victorian Imperial State," *Historical Journal* 59/4 (2016), 1027–49, at 1044–5, 1048.

a one-year indentured scheme in 1848, and a provisional three-year one when Indian immigration was revived in 1851, which was tightened up in 1854. Eventually five-year indentured contracts became the norm.[92]

* * *

After he left the Colonial Office on the fall of Russell's government in February 1852, Grey never held political office again. This was because he disagreed fundamentally with the two strategies that emerged in the early 1850s for reviving Liberal Party dynamism by reconnecting it to popular enthusiasms. One was associated with Lord John Russell and the other with Viscount Palmerston. They and their followers battled for control of the Liberal Party and British politics in the early 1850s, by setting out different notions of the political ideals that Liberalism should prioritize. Grey's alternative worldview could not remotely compete with either in terms of political appeal.

Russell's strategy was based on representation—on reviving the cause of parliamentary reform. He had introduced the first Reform Bill in the Commons in 1831, and was proud of his personal reputation as a defender of constitutional liberties. Once many backbench Liberal and radical MPs responded to the Chartist petition of 1848 by urging franchise extension, Russell could not resist declaring in Parliament that he had never been against limited improvements to the voting system, and that the time was "not distant" when such measures could be introduced with a chance of passing.[93] He began to float the idea of a bill replacing the old freeman franchise with a reduction of the borough voting threshold in order to include more working-class voters. He hoped that this would give his party more seats and more focus as a policy-making force. In the second half of his premiership, between 1849 and 1851, he kept asking his unenthusiastic Cabinet to commit itself to such a bill; Grey was one of the leading opponents. Russell wore his colleagues down sufficiently to introduce one, based on a five-pound annual rental borough franchise, in February 1852, just before his government fell.[94] Grey was furious with Russell's tactics. He pointed out that, unlike in 1831–2, there was no defined grievance to be met that could confine the debate to a rational outcome. Russell's measure introduced the "abstract principle" that a larger proportion of the population deserved to share political power. Other agitators were sure to demand more, and he would lose control of the initiative, sooner or later, to democratic proponents of household or universal suffrage and equal electoral districts. The controversy might well lead to a class war. In December 1852, Russell made his participation in the new Aberdeen coalition government dependent on the introduction of a reform bill, and Grey refused to serve. He was left complaining about Russell's egocentricity, irresponsibility, and vanity as the leader of Liberal

---

[92]Green, *British Slave Emancipation*, 276–80; K. O. Laurence, *Immigration into the West Indies in the 19th century* (St Lawrence, Barbados, 1971), 24; Jonathan Connolly, "Indentured Labour Migration and the Meaning of Emancipation: Free Trade, Race, and Labour in British Public Debate, 1838–1860," *Past and Present* 238 (2018), 85–119.

[93]20 June 1848, *Hansard*, 99, 928–9.

[94]Prest, *Lord John Russell*, 306, 324–5, 333, 336; Robert Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848–1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Farnham, 2011), 46–7.

MPs.[95] His contribution to the subsequent debate was *Parliamentary Government* (1858), which observed regretfully that in practice the 1832 Act had strengthened Parliament against executive government, and that further reform would exacerbate the problem unless reformers were very careful.[96] The book received much attention, but did not sway opinion: many Liberal MPs represented significant towns, and faced pressure from grassroots radicals for household suffrage. In the 1860s, and again in the late 1870s, "reform" was a very attractive and ultimately irresistible party rallying cry, triggering the legislation which granted household suffrage in the boroughs in 1867 and the counties in 1884.[97]

However, the more immediate effect of the 1848 revolutions was to allow Palmerston to develop a different strategy, which he used to take control of the Liberal Party between 1851 and 1855, and to counter Russell's reform agenda more effectively than Grey. He defined Britain's mission as the support of liberal constitutionalism against Russia, Austria, and European autocracy in general, and rallied many voters and newspapers behind his activist foreign-policy gestures. After 1855, he was prime minister for nearly a decade, supported mostly by Liberal MPs but without needing to offer them a defined party identity or domestic policy manifesto.[98] Grey was viscerally opposed to Palmerston's approach to foreign affairs—as he had made clear when he objected to serving with him as Foreign Secretary in the aborted Liberal government of December 1845, on account of his brinkmanship towards France and the United States.[99] Grey had criticized Palmerston's eastern policy in 1840 for jeopardizing the good understanding with France that, like most Liberals, he felt underpinned global peace, prosperity, and progress.

Two elements of Grey's liberalism underlay his hostility to Palmerston. One was his intense aversion to war as a destroyer of human life, commercial interchange, mutual prosperity, and the exchange of civilized values.[100] It interrupted trade and brought misery instead of international understanding. Peace, economic progress, and the growth of knowledge and technology benefited both Britain and the world. The longer wars were deferred, the more advantage liberal and prosperous countries would have in fighting them. In the 1830s, he thought the growing press fear of Russia absurd. Russia relied on physical force and mere machine power, but Britain's strength was intelligence, education, communications, and capitalism. Russia would pose progressively less threat as the nineteenth century wore on; time was the greatest ally of liberal capitalist Britain.[101] (For that reason, he opposed the Afghan wars of 1839 and 1878, and India's westward expansion to the Punjab in 1849.[102])

---

[95]Grey to Charles Wood, 7 Nov. 1852, 18 Dec. 1852, GP GRE/B106/11/26, 60; Grey to Ellice, 3 Jan. 1859, GP GRE/B84/8/149.

[96]Grey, *Parliamentary Government*, 98–109; see Conti, *Parliament the Mirror*, 69–73, 142–6.

[97]Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism*, Ch. 1. See also Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1993), 7–14.

[98]Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism*, Chs. 4–5.

[99]Dreyer, "The Whigs," 528–31.

[100]Grey, 25 May 1855, *Hansard*, 138, 1094–5.

[101]H to Charles Grey, 24 Jan. 1839, GP GRE/B95/2/47; H to Russell, 8 Oct. 1838, GP GRE/B122/4/34.

[102]See H to Russell, 18 Oct. 1838, GP GRE/B123/4/38; *The Times*, 10 Oct. 1878, 10; Grey, 10 Dec. 1878, *Hansard*, 243, 407–21. Grey to Russell, 22 Nov. 1848, GP GRE/B123/5/56; Grey, 3 Feb. 1857, *Hansard*, 144, 61–75.

Specifically, therefore, Grey opposed Palmerston's emphasis on defense spending, and especially the expensive Channel fortifications with which he proposed to meet the threat from Napoleon III's France in 1859–60.[103] Husbanding national wealth was a much better way to prepare for future wars. Rapid technological development would make many expensive weapons redundant, while standing armies took men from the productive economy.[104] His priority, which he pressed for decades until finally vindicated, was to replace a long-service army and amateurish local militia with a short-service one: former soldiers should reenter the civilian workforce as soon as possible, but remain available for war as reserves.[105]

Second, he disliked Palmerston's rhetorical boasts about Britain's mission to challenge European autocracy and promote the rule of law globally. In particular, he never believed that British pressure could succeed in liberalizing the governance of the Ottoman Empire, and he opposed the Crimean War of 1854–6. He considered the Ottomans barbarians who conquered by the sword. Their religion discouraged moral improvement and civilization; they continued to oppress their Christians. Their fertile lands lay undeveloped, their administration was corrupt, and "poverty and wretchedness cover the most fruitful region of the East."[106] Palmerston's claim to uphold Ottoman independence from Russian intimidation was a lie, since the Sultan was not an independent ruler. Britain, however, infringed his independence more than Russia. Russia was within its rights to ask the Sultan to respect the religious rights of his Greek Orthodox subjects.

In a desperate attempt to check Russian pressure at Constantinople, which benefited from Ottoman mistreatment of those subjects, Palmerston and Britain's Ottoman ambassador Stratford Canning began from 1847 to demand that the Sultan should reform his legal system in order to give Christians equal rights at law with Muslims.[107] Grey criticized this demand, which he saw as an instruction to the Sultan to subvert "the authority of the Koran"—"in direct opposition to the laws of the religion of which he is the chief, and on which his power mainly rests." New laws which offended local public opinion were misconceived: "it was a blunder to suppose that by compelling a corrupt Government to pass good laws they could secure good Government." Britain would end up governing in the Sultan's place, trying to keep the peace between Muslims and Christians, reminiscent of the way that it had got sucked into India. It was far better just to let commerce and steam power gradually improve Ottoman rule, especially as the backward, incompetent Russian Army and its corrupt government posed no threat.[108]

---

[103]Grey, 26 June 1862, *Hansard*, 167, 1084.

[104]Earl Grey, "The Armed Peace of Europe," *Quarterly Review* 141 (1876), 81–103, at 83–4.

[105]Ibid., 88; Hew Strachan, "Lord Grey and Imperial Defence," in Ian Beckett and John Gooch, eds., *Politicians and Defence: Studies in the Formulation of British Defence Policy, 1845–1970* (Manchester, 1981), 1–23, at 13–15.

[106]25 May 1855, *Hansard*, 138, 1112.

[107]I have discussed this Canning–Palmerston legal reform strategy in Parry, *Promised Lands*, 283–90, 389–90. It deserves more attention than it has received, as a liberal imperialist push to westernize Ottoman governance. However, its main aim was clearly to defeat Russian illiberalism rather than to improve Ottoman peoples, and there was a strong backlash against it by the 1860s, both in the empire and in Britain. As such, it is an excellent example of the contingency of "liberal imperialism."

[108]He made the arguments summarized in these two paragraphs in several Lords' speeches, particularly on 14 Feb. 1854, *Hansard*, 130, 596 (last quotation at 604), and 25 May 1855, *Hansard*, 138, 1093

* * *

Palmerston's dominance was not primarily ideological. It rested on populism and nationalism as well as on liberal constitutionalism—on the support of a chauvinistic press, on Palmerston's own masculine popular identity, and on the lack of real pressure for any alternative domestic program. One important aspect of his appeal was his popular image, which fitted the more democratic post-1848 political mood better than either Russell or Grey could. Though all three were aristocrats, Russell, to some degree, and Grey, to a much larger one, were perceived as practitioners of an outdated politics which relied on exclusive landed family networks.[109] At one level, Grey was upset by his enforced departure from Cabinet-level politics, but he was also clearly relieved by it. Ever since his father's death, he had intermittently said that he would prefer to be a thinker shaping policy from the sidelines. He was shy, a poor speaker, angry at the constraints of party, often in indifferent health, and fundamentally disadvantaged by his position in the Lords, from which no prime minister succeeded in making Liberal government work after 1841.[110] For the rest of his life, he set up as a critic and pundit.

This new life began in 1853 with his two-volume defense of his turbulent tenure as Colonial Secretary, *The Colonial Policy of Lord John Russell's Administration*. Grey was the first Cabinet minister in history to produce a closely argued defense of his policy record. The book also had a wider aim: to convert those who denied that the colonies still had a purpose, now that free-trade liberalism had destroyed the old colonial protectionist system. It argued that the function of the British connection was to promote liberal economic and political principles across the world. The settler colonies formed an association of territories which added to British global prestige because of their political and economic culture. The Colonial Office must also ensure that they maintain a common economic policy, and not impose protective tariffs against each other. More specifically, a liberal Britain had a responsibility to maintain peace between the peoples that it governed. He insisted that British political and military power needed to be maintained in the West Indies, in Ceylon, in New Zealand, and at the Cape, because otherwise "a fearful war of colour" was likely, "by which the germs of improvement now existing there would be destroyed, and civilization would be thrown back for centuries."[111] He had already set out this doctrine at the beginning of 1850 in a Colonial Office paper.[112] In the 1870s and 1880s, Grey's major contribution to public life was to make the case ever more forcefully that Britain's mission was to prevent this race war. To this end, he intervened frequently in the debates about Africa, and found a new audience for his arguments. He criticized the indecisiveness of

---

(preceding quotations at 1124–5). For the Ottomans see also 5 May 1856, *Hansard*, 141, 2025; 10 May 1861, *Hansard*, 162, 1851. For his respect for Russia see 31 March 1854, *Hansard*, 132, 190. Cobden's arguments about Russia were strikingly similar.

[109]Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism*, 173 and Ch. 4 more generally.

[110]Only two peers had the chance to try: Russell in 1865–6 and Rosebery in 1894–5. See Grey to Wood, 3 Jan. 1846, GP GRE/V/C16, 7 Dec. 1852, GP GRE/B106/11/52.

[111]Grey, *Colonial Policy*, 1: 12–17 (quotation at 14), 2: 253–4.

[112]7 Jan. 1850, GP GRE/B143/B7, 4.

Gladstone's popularity-seeking Liberal governments, but also the Tories' new interest in confederation in South Africa, which he saw as a fig leaf disguising a doctrine of white expansionism.

Grey's instincts about South African affairs can already be discerned in retrospect during the period of his colonial secretaryship. He wanted to limit Britain's expansion there, while recognizing that its past activities obliged it to protect settler property and to secure racial harmony. In *Colonial Policy*, he argued that it would have been best to confine the British presence to the Cape, as an imperial naval station. Moving east and establishing a settlement at Albany, in 1820, had been a great mistake by Lord Liverpool's government. Settlers had then spread over the eastern Cape with little chance of protecting themselves.[113] Boer, but also British, farmers had insisted on moving further inland and seizing land from native tribes. As Colonial Secretary from 1846, Grey proposed to protect native rights in the territory east of the Keiskamma river, British Kaffraria, annexed at the end of the latest Xhosa war. He wanted it governed indirectly, by a confederacy of native chiefs, who would exercise local jurisdiction according to their own laws; there would be a native police and militia supervised by European officials. He insisted that Britain must preserve rather than undermine local customs, while schools and churches would no doubt do useful civilizing work over the long term. The chiefs should receive salaries from government, and the power to impose tithes and modest direct taxation to pay for infrastructure.[114] However, few of these ideas were publicly visible in these years, because Grey put too much trust in the Cape governor that he sent out in 1847, Sir Harry Smith, who had a different approach. When, for example, Smith wrote home in 1848 that he had proclaimed a new area of British sovereignty beyond the Orange river, Grey retrospectively sanctioned it, naively assuming that Smith would be able to keep the peace and hold the balance between the Boers and the native tribes.[115]

Once the New Zealand crisis led to the Maori wars, Grey was even more convinced that responsible government in South Africa would bring on a similar race conflict because the governor would not be able to resist the demands of British and Boer settlers. In the 1870s, he criticized Gladstone's first government for ceding responsible government at the Cape and reducing the cost of the imperial garrison. Both changes were lamentable; they would leave South Africa more vulnerable to a "war of extermination between the races."[116] He criticized the settlers' oppression of the tribes at the Cape itself, blaming their revolt on the unjustified seizure of native land, and ruing the inability of the Colonial Office to interfere, because of the concession of self-government.[117] Moreover, he attacked the Conservatives' annexation of the Transvaal (1877) because it extended the area of British responsibility. He was suspicious of Colonial Secretary Carnarvon's support for South African confederation, on the ground that it

---

[113]Grey, *Colonial Policy*, 2: 248–51.
[114]Ibid., 2: 201–6; Earl Grey, "Past and Future Policy in South Africa," *Nineteenth Century* 5 (1879), 583–96, at 593–4. See John S. Galbraith, *Reluctant Empire: British Policy on the South African Frontier, 1834–1854* (Berkeley, 1963), 224–6.
[115]Grey, *Colonial Policy*, 2: 206–8; Galbraith, *Reluctant Empire*, 234.
[116]Grey, "Past and Future Policy," 585.
[117]Earl Grey, "South Africa," *Nineteenth Century* 8 (1880), 933–54, at 934.

promised white dominance over a much larger geographical area. Everywhere in South Africa, the white colonists wished to take land from the tribes and use them as cheap labor.[118] In effect, Britain's policy meant acquiescing in Boer dominance, whereas it had a responsibility to intervene in order to mitigate its effects. After the war of 1879 with the Zulu, Grey denied that their leader Cetewayo had been a threat to British interests; a Zulu native state would have been a useful check on the Boers. By encouraging them to make war on him, Britain had created anarchy; it now had a duty to create something better.[119] The Boers were also oppressing the Tswana tribes, trying to divide and ultimately to enslave them, in breach of the Pretoria Convention. In March 1883, he called for Britain to intervene on their behalf in what became known as Bechuanaland.[120] By December 1884, he had concluded that Britain must appoint a high commissioner with powers over all these disputed inland areas. They must not be subordinated to the "responsible government" at the Cape. Instead the authority of the Crown should be asserted directly over the chiefs. As in Kaffraria in the 1840s, they should be given a salary but allowed to maintain their own laws, military force, and taxation. "The great mistake to be avoided would be that of endeavouring to push on improvement too fast and thus losing the willing support of the people themselves."[121] In 1892, he advocated a similar light-touch solution to the problems of Uganda.[122]

On South Africa, therefore, Grey held to two different principles. The first was the abstract authority and responsibility of the Crown to intervene to protect order and good race relations, rather than to surrender to sectional settler pressure or to the apathy of noninterventionists in Britain. The second was the need to ensure that intervention should be strictly limited to the maintenance of those good relations, and should resist overbearing meddling in the name of "improvement." Such rhetoric, he felt, was beguiling but dangerous; it would achieve little, and undermine tribal authority and dignity.

* * *

This article has argued that Grey had an idea of empire—even an "imperial ideology"—which he intended to apply in those parts of the British world which he felt capable of a liberal politics. In this liberal politics, representative institutions and popular consent would underpin strong and responsible executive government. Government would then challenge the vested interests that had sustained Toryism everywhere—preventing reform in Britain, upholding Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, and keeping slavery and protection alive in the empire. Vested interests driven by sinful humans always posed a major threat to good government; the primary aim of liberal politics was to keep them in check. Only if those interests were rigorously policed might society benefit properly from the spread of commerce and education. "Improvement" was emphatically not something that could

---

[118]Ibid., 936–41.

[119]*The Times*, 13 Oct. 1884, 3–4.

[120]*The Times*, 27 March 1883, 6.

[121]*The Times*, 23 Dec. 1884, 5. His plan of devolving government to the tribal chiefs was set out at more length in Earl Grey, "The Prospect in South Africa," *Nineteenth Century* 21 (1887), 428–51, at 439–45.

[122]*The Times*, 24 Oct. 1892, 12, 17 Nov. 1892, 13, 22 Nov. 1892, 13.

be hurried. As he admitted in 1858, he had never given India much thought, apparently because it did not have the institutions necessary for a liberal politics.[123]

Grey's vision was destroyed by the workings of the liberal political process itself, in both the metropole and the settler colonies. The debates of 1848 underlined the inherent tensions between representative rights and the idea of Crown authority. These tensions surfaced in the Jamaica assembly, New Zealand, and Canada, but also in the British Parliament, which wanted to renew the virtuous battle against an overmighty establishment. British MPs exploited imperial topics to make general allegations about arrogant elites and overmighty government. In the colonies, meanwhile, most governors were unable to play the wise leadership role, disciplining settlers' biases, that Grey envisaged. Governors became dependent on the goodwill of local assemblies in a way that frustrated all his hopes. Settlers were able to skew land and franchise policy to their benefit because they had many formal and informal channels through which to persuade governors to support their case, supplemented by an ability to lobby Westminster MPs. In New Zealand and South Africa, George Grey pursued a policy that was in practice very biased towards settler interests, as recent accounts have exposed.[124] The process of reassigning native land to settlers accelerated. This land grab was justified by the Enlightenment language of improvement—that white men could develop resources better than local tribes could manage. Nonetheless the driving forces behind it were clearly the economic interests and insecurities, and the racism, of planters, settlers, and merchants, and their ability to manipulate political power to their advantage.

The crisis of 1848–52 ensured the triumph of representative government in Canada, New Zealand, and much of Australia, leaving the British Parliament with much less sense of responsibility for colonial matters, and much less interest in discussing them. Subtly different political cultures emerged in each colony. By 1867, British and settler colony politics could not be fitted into the same framework, as Alex Middleton showed in his demolition of Catherine Hall's assumption that ideas of empire mattered in the Second Reform Act debates.[125] By the 1880s, Grey's vision of an intelligent trans-colonial policy was even less viable, because of the further development of representative politics. His interventions on Africa policy in the 1870s and 1880s were shaped by his anger at the workings of British quasi-democracy after 1867, which he thought substituted muddled populism for clear and prompt executive decision making.[126] In 1884–5, when a further dramatic step towards democracy was being implemented in Britain, he took up the cause of imperial cooperation, as noted above. The distaste of Grey and other Liberal Unionist intellectuals for contemporary democratic culture blinded them to new

---

[123]14 May 1858, *Hansard*, 150, 637. For some remarks about the inhabitants of Ceylon being at a stage of civilization too low for popular governments to take root there see Grey, *Colonial Policy*, 1: 27.

[124]Richard Price, *Making Empire: Colonial Encounters and the Creation of Imperial Rule in Nineteenth-Century Africa* (Cambridge, 2008), Ch. 10; Boehme, Lester, and Mitchell, *Ruling the World*, esp. 197–204.

[125]Alex Middleton, "The Second Reform Act and the Politics of Empire," *Parliamentary History* 36/1 (2017), 82–96, esp. 93–4 for the importance of the move to responsible government in the 1850s in this shift.

[126]See, for example, his critique of the Gladstone government's Egyptian policy: *The Times*, 12 May 1884, 10, 5 June 1884, 12.

political realities. Demotic partisan politics at home was now a permanent feature; so was the nationalism that swept southern Ireland in 1885; so was the variegated nature of settler colony political culture, rendering most imperial cooperation schemes impractical.

<p style="text-align:center">⋆ ⋆ ⋆</p>

So if we want to understand the rise and fall of Grey's vision, we need to focus on political concepts and processes. If, instead, we try to apply artificial and unstable frameworks like "liberal imperialism" or "culturalism," we will lose our way. Though Grey was in some senses by definition a "liberal imperialist," in Mantena's terminology he was a culturalist. All his instincts were in favor of limiting British rule over tribal peoples as far as possible, and making it as indirect as possible where it was necessary, reserving as much autonomy to tribal chiefs as was compatible with the maintenance of order. This was not because he was what Victorians called "sentimental" about humanitarian or race issues. He was a firm upholder of the sanctity of law, and had no compunction about imposing harsh punishments on seditious rebels, which he claimed was "real humanity," on account of its deterrent effect on the less zealous majority.[127] But though he believed in bold administrative action to remove injurious artificial impositions like slavery, he had a very strong hostility to the idea that legislation could force improvement on peoples who were not disposed to accept it. He considered it pointless as well as offensive to impose new laws unless those subject to it appreciated their rationale.[128] His view that laws could and should only ever reflect an existing public consensus was commonly held in Britain in the 1840s and 1850s, when "public opinion" seemed all-powerful, and parliamentary legislation struggled to keep up.[129] As noted above, Grey applied this logic throughout the British world. In Ireland, he wanted the state to support religious teaching in whatever form the people would accept it; ideally, he would have liked Irish Catholic priests, like his South African chiefs, to receive salaries (but the priests did not want this). He thought that Palmerston's hope of liberalizing the Ottomans was delusional, as it involved undermining centuries-old Muslim laws, the basis of the regime's survival and popularity. For him, as for Cobden, worthwhile change would be promoted not by well-intentioned laws, but only by the operation over time of market forces—of liberal capitalism and technology.

Mantena sees culturalism—indirect rule—as a strategy for imperial governance which gained more converts in reaction to the 1857 Rebellion. But this reading surely understates its appeal, and overstates that of her improvement-oriented "liberal imperialist" alternative, in previous decades, stretching right back to the

---

[127]See H to Charles Grey, 12 Dec. 1838, GP GRE/B95/2/39; Grey to Elgin, 6 Sept. 1848, GP GRE/V/C16. He used that phrase to condone Colonel Drought's summary execution of eighteen people during the Ceylon rebellion of 1848, while acknowledging that he did not know the detailed circumstances. Colonial Office summary for 1848, 8 Feb. 1849, GP GRE/B143/B3, 17. See also 1 April 1851, *Hansard*, 115, 878.

[128]Grey, *Parliamentary Government*, 17–19.

[129]Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, 168–70; Ryan Vieira, *Time and Politics: Parliament and the Culture of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the British World* (Oxford, 2015), 70–73.

influential scholarly orientalism of the late eighteenth century. Hickford, for example, traced culturalist thinking at work in the Colonial Office drafts of New Zealand constitutions in the 1840s.[130] As Zastoupil and Sartori pointed out, J. S. Mill himself developed strongly culturalist instincts on India, stressing the need for governors to acquaint themselves with local customs and habits—a development that was paralleled by Mill's support for peasant proprietorship and customary tenure in Ireland, in hostility to the liberal capitalist assumptions which dominated Britain's Irish policy in the 1840s.[131]

Grey's culturalism was driven by impeccably liberal sentiments which he wanted to apply as universally as was politically possible. These included a desire for economy in spending, a pluralist constitutional attitude to religion, a hostility to militarism and military adventure, and a pragmatic acceptance that societies could not be remade by the flourish of a pen. But probably the most important factor was his dislike of the missionary mentality, which used pious rhetoric about social transformation and Christianization to justify aggressive incursions into complex tribal environments. The main cheerleaders for an imperialism of "improvement" for most of the nineteenth century were not a tiny band of utilitarians in India, but the well-funded missionary societies and their domestic pressure groups.[132] To their many detractors, missionaries seemed to emphasize their own duty to God rather than careful assessments of political and economic realities in distant realms. For an executive-minded liberal, the main question about India was not whether to support "improving" legal reform against "culturalism." It was which political arrangements were most likely to encourage or suppress unhelpful pressures from home, particularly from religious interest groups, but also from economic ones.

It was this question that prompted Grey's main intervention on India, during the political controversy about its government in 1858. His views aligned with Mill's. When Mill wrote about India in *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), his aim was not to set out a program of Indian transformation, but to defend the existing structure of Indian administration, the independence of its expert officials, and their cautious past policy, which he thought was threatened by interference by populist British MPs.[133] Mill and Grey both attacked the 1858 India Act, which, in response to the 1857 Rebellion, had abolished the rule of East India Company officials and subordinated Indian affairs to the ultimate control of the British Parliament. Mill complained that "the traditions of Indian government" were now placed at the mercy of "public ignorance," and specifically the ignorance of British people far away from India. He foresaw two major risks from this pressure. One was of thrusting "English ideas down the throats of the natives,"

---

[130]Hickford, "Designing Constitutions," 678.

[131]Sartori, "The British Empire and Its Liberal Mission," 631–2, referencing Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford, CA, 1994), 176–80.

[132]For the most complete study see Andrew N. Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester, 2004). Hall, *Civilising Subjects*, discusses the mind-set of Birmingham Dissenters about Jamaica.

[133]Sartori, "The British Empire and Its Liberal Mission," 631. Mill's discussion of despotism as a historic mode of government hardly mentioned India: see J. S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, 2nd edn (London, 1861), Chs. 2–4. At 330–31 there is a brief allusion to India and despotism.

by which he meant Protestant Christianity in particular. The other was that monied vested interests would buy influence over Indian policy through British media or political networks.[134] In the Lords in 1858, Grey presented a petition from the Company against the proposed changes. His argument was essentially the same: that ignorant public pressure would distort future Indian policy. His two examples of regrettable distortion were characteristic of him: first, that white racist clamor, of the sort expressed in Calcutta after the rebellion, would force government to mistreat the Indian majority and alienate them from British rule; second, that sentimental pressure at home would stop British governors from executing those directly responsible for violent uprisings, thereby spreading the risk of serious conflagration.[135]

Many Liberals condoned Britain's imperial status, and so there were many approaches to specific political or imperial situations that can be called "liberal imperialism."[136] But the currently fashionable stereotype of a dominant, coherent liberal imperial ideology, centered on racial difference and on dreams of improvement and transformation, is misconceived. It began as a political jibe, hatched in the fertile imagination of Disraeli and other mid-Victorian Tories. It rests on the extraordinary assumption that a few pages of abstract writing by an intellectual can capture the global outlook of a world power, and on the conflation of two fundamentally different ways of thinking, those of secular liberals and conversion-minded evangelicals. In its more casual applications, it is little more than a vapid generalization used to disguise historians' lack of interest in the political culture of the country that governed the places about which they aspire to write. Its continuing prominence also owes something to a more constructive trend, for reexamining well-known liberal writings for previously unacknowledged racialist subtexts. Heightened awareness of these subtexts can certainly add to our understanding of individual authors.[137] Race was a serious blind spot for very many Victorian commentators. But this helped to ensure that liberal political debate was primarily concerned with questions of representation and accountability. Ronald Hyam famously argued that 1857 and 1865 ushered in more racialist notions of imperial governance, owing to the Indian Rebellion and the Morant Bay crisis.[138] But in the specific field of liberal imperial debate, dates that formed watersheds in British politics, such as 1832, 1848, 1858, 1867, 1884, and 1886, should be given more weight. These watersheds heightened concern about core political problems that British commentators were used to pondering all the time, in

---

[134]Mill, *Considerations*, 255, 333–5.

[135]7 Dec. 1857, *Hansard,* 148, 260; 11 Feb. 1858, *Hansard*, 148, 1128–9.

[136]E.g. H. C. G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists: The Ideas and Politics of a Post-Gladstonian Élite* (Oxford: 1973); Haury, *The Origins of the Liberal Party and Liberal Imperialism*; John Newsinger, "Liberal Imperialism and the Occupation of Egypt in 1882," *Race and Class* 49/3 (2008), 54–75.

[137]Amanda Behm, *Imperial History and the Global Politics of Exclusion: Britain, 1880–1940* (London, 2018); Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, 2020). Michael Ledger-Lomas has pointed out that Bell's Anglo-Saxonist dreamworlds remained mere *Herrenvolk* phantasms because of the superior power of constitutionalism—because public opinion in Britain, Canada, and the United States was much more attached to the existing constitutional forms of each country. Michael Ledger-Lomas (review), *Victorian Review* 47/2 (2021), 299–305, at 300–1.

[138]Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion* (Basingstoke, 2002), 155–66.

domestic and in European contexts. We will gain a distorted understanding of how British liberal commentators viewed their country's place in the nineteenth-century world if we try to bend their opinions into an ideology for a racialized unit called "the empire." We will do better if we see that their debates and controversies about the prospects of various different parts of the globe were shaped by assessments of how far it was viable at any one time to apply there the political values and assumptions with which they were familiar at home.