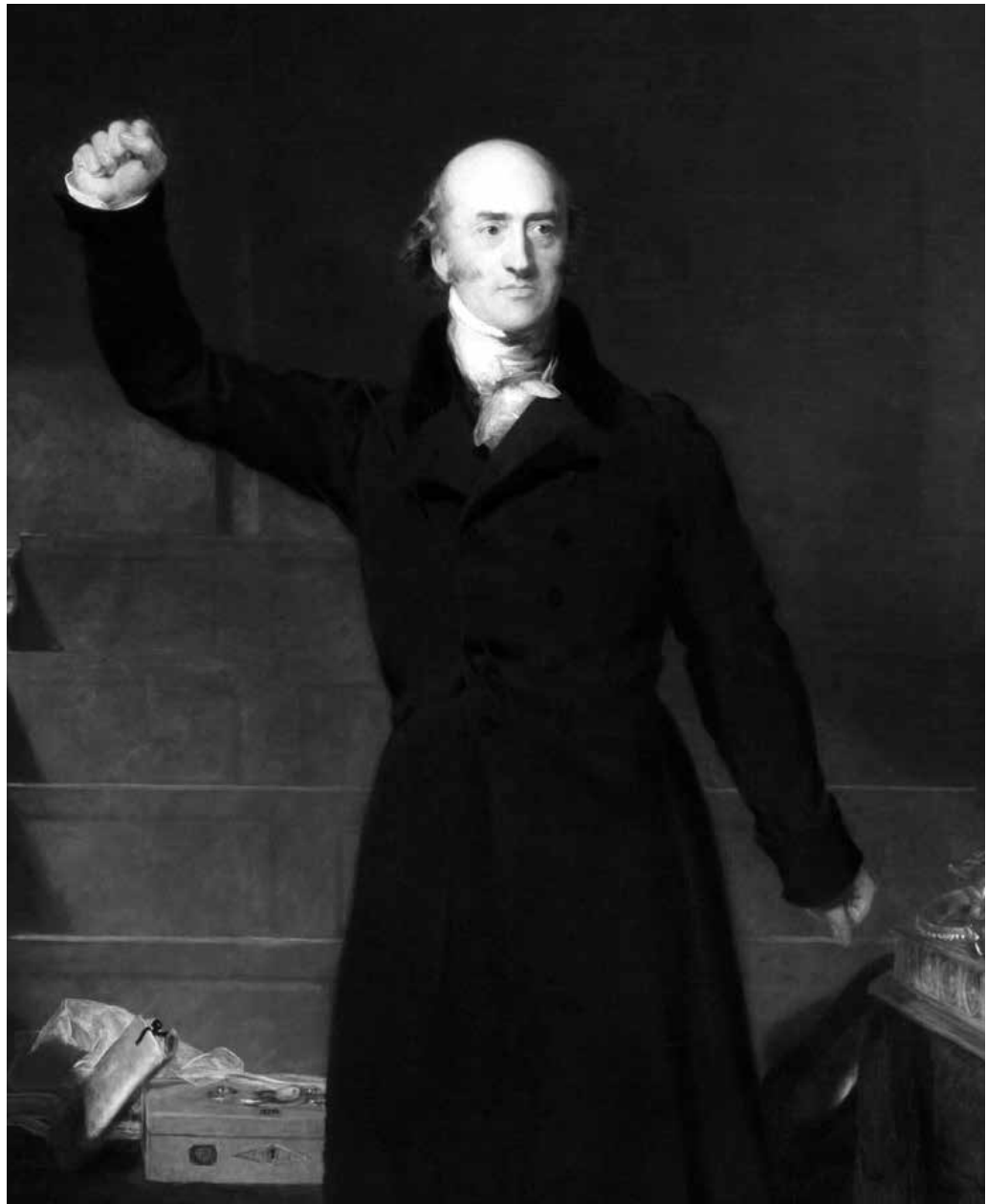


## Liberal Toryism

Stephen Lee analyses the impact of the 'Liberal Tory' George Canning on early nineteenth-century politics and the party system.

# 'Not straight b

## George Canning and the origins o



George Canning (1770–1827); oil on canvas, by Sir Thomas Lawrence, 1825 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

# Out serpentine' of nineteenth-century liberalism

**I**N JANUARY 1827, George Canning, at the time foreign secretary, attended the funeral of the Duke of York, held in a freezing cold St George's Chapel, Windsor. Although he escaped the fate of the Bishop of Lincoln, who died as a result of the experience, Canning and a number of mourners were seriously ill afterwards. For Canning, it was the beginning of a period of ill health that would culminate in his death on 8 August 1827, after the shortest premiership in British history, a mere 119 days.

George Canning's impact on early nineteenth-century politics and the party system, however, was much greater than his truncated premiership might appear to suggest. He was central to the emergence of the distinct approach to politics known as Liberal Toryism;<sup>1</sup> he helped define the parameters of the early nineteenth-century two-party system, yet kicked against its constraints; and his followers played a part in the emergence of the Liberal Party in the mid-nineteenth century. One curious coincidence associated with his death can be seen as a metaphor for the way his life intertwined with the Whig-Liberal tradition yet remained distinct from it.

By June 1827, the diarist Greville described Canning as 'dreadfully ill', and in late July Canning moved, for what he saw as a period of convalescence, into Chiswick House, lent to him for that purpose by the Duke of Devonshire. For those with long political memories, this was an ominous move. In September 1806, the Whig leader Charles James Fox had died in the same house, where he had gone for the same convalescent purpose as Canning, brought down not least by the 'seven pints of transparent fluid' and 'thirty five gallstones' found at his post mortem.<sup>2</sup> People at the time were aware

of the similarity of circumstances. The Duke of Devonshire himself wrote later: 'Canning died in a room upstairs. I had a great foreboding when he came here, and would not allow of his being in the room below where Fox had died.'<sup>3</sup> This anecdote illustrates how Canning had been, by the time of his ministry, increasingly absorbed into the Whig tradition, but also that he was never quite, even in death, in the same room. It is necessary to keep this in mind and to appreciate that Canning remained at his death a *Liberal Tory*, in order to understand his role in the origins of nineteenth-century liberalism.

## George Canning's Liberal Toryism

Canning's Liberal Toryism is often remarked upon but equally as often misunderstood. Typically, it is seen as a form of proto-liberalism, which, via what I have referred to as 'the half-way house of Peelism',<sup>4</sup> provides one of the strands that is woven into Victorian liberalism and the mid-nineteenth century Liberal Party. The risk inherent in such an approach is that it emphasises the liberal aspects of Canning's career and neglects his Toryism. To begin to understand this, we need to look more closely at three aspects of Canning's political ideas and practice: his support for Catholic emancipation; his opposition to parliamentary reform; and, his allegedly 'liberal' approach to foreign policy.

In the summer of 1822, Canning spoke in Liverpool, the city for which he was an MP between 1812 and 1822, and referred to the 'two great national questions' of Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform, noting that he differed 'almost as widely' with his supporters on the former as he did with their opponents on

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## 'Not straight but serpentine': George Canning and the origins of nineteenth-century liberalism

latter.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the issue of Catholic emancipation was to be so divisive that it would, in the end, destroy the early-nineteenth-century Tory Party and propel Canning, at the time of his premiership, into coalition with elements of the Whig Party.

Canning would emerge in the early decades of the nineteenth century as one of the most vocal supporters of Catholic emancipation, the name given to the process of removing the legislation that prevented Catholics from participating fully in public life by, for example, denying them the vote or prohibiting them from sitting in parliament. During the lifetime of his political lodestar, William Pitt the Younger, Canning followed his lead on the Catholic question. After the union with Ireland in 1801, Pitt appears to have promised not to raise the issue of Catholic emancipation again in George III's lifetime. Pitt's death in 1806 did not change Canning's approach immediately, but he did not feel bound by the promise any longer and he gradually emerged as a vocal proponent of emancipation, especially after George III's final relapse into illness in 1810 and the subsequent institution of a regency. He considered the regency as 'tantamount to a new reign'<sup>6</sup> and he quickly became the most prominent 'Catholic' on the Tory side of the House of Commons.

In February 1812, speaking in the Commons, he stated what could be seen as a key underlying principle of his Liberal Toryism when he noted of the Catholic question that it 'cannot ... be considered without reference to times and circumstances. It is not to be decided on abstract principles alone.' This Burkean approach led Canning to argue that emancipation was not 'solely a religious question' but a political one.<sup>7</sup> Catholics were not excluded from political and civic life because of their religion, he reasoned, but because their beliefs were 'signs of political opinion', namely an adherence to a 'banished dynasty'.<sup>8</sup> In short, Catholics were excluded from public life because they were regarded as actual or potential Jacobites – opponents of the Hanoverian state and Protestant establishment created after 1714. This danger had passed, he argued, and to maintain the exclusion of Catholics was actually dangerous, as it stoked up unnecessary resentment. He pointed to the dreadful events of the French revolution as an example of what can happen when 'fanciful and arbitrary barriers'<sup>9</sup> exclude one part of the community from active participation in public life. He felt that, far from weakening Britain, Catholic emancipation would strengthen it, giving the country a wider store of wealth and talent to draw upon.

It would also promote unity in the war against France that was raging at the time.

From this point on, Canning argued consistently for Catholic emancipation on these pragmatic grounds, rejecting what he referred to later in 1812 as 'wild theories of abstract right, of rights of man, and rights of citizens'. He did argue, however, 'that citizens of the same state, subjects living under the same government, are entitled, *prima facie*, to equal political rights and privileges'. Crucially, however, he linked this to the pragmatic goal of removing 'a cause of political discontent which agitates the minds of men' and weakens the state.<sup>10</sup> This would not least be the case in Ireland (although the Catholics who made up 80 per cent of the Irish population had more political rights than their co-religionists in Britain), which was as much a perennial problem in British politics in Canning's time as it would remain for many years to come.

Pausing to look at his attitude to the Catholic question, one could emphasise Canning's rejection of the abstract notion of 'rights of man' and, thus, question how someone who did this can even be seen as a proto-liberal, never mind as a liberal. Or, one could emphasise his commitment to 'equal political rights' and see this as a key 'liberal' political commitment. Either approach, however, would be one-sided and, as we shall see, one needs to give equal weight to both words in the description 'Liberal Toryism' if one is to understand the nature of Canning's thought and its relation to later liberalism.

Canning would go on to make important contributions to the national debate on the Catholic question, not least in key speeches in parliament in 1813, 1816, 1821, 1822 and 1825. All of which, of course, were unsuccessful but demonstrate the centrality of his 'Catholic' views to the version of Liberal Toryism he created and espoused. It is not without irony that Catholic emancipation came as a result of it being pushed through parliament in 1829 by the High Tory Duke of Wellington and the anti-Catholic Robert 'Orange' Peel in the face of the kind of widespread agitation that Canning had been trying to prevent.

Turning to the other 'national issue' of the day, parliamentary reform, we see that Canning is much more closely united with his colleagues in government. If his views on the Catholic question can be seen, at least in some senses, as liberal, his opposition to parliamentary reform is decidedly Tory. Once again, his Burkean approach would be to the fore. For Canning, as for most opponents of parliamentary reform, the key point was that it was

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unnecessary and dangerous. The British constitution and, specifically, the House of Commons had an ability to adapt over time that made wide-ranging, organic reform unneeded and potentially risky. Speaking in April 1822, when he opposed Lord John Russell's motion 'that the present state of the representation of the people in Parliament requires the most serious consideration of the House', Canning stated that the Commons has, 'without any forcible alteration, gradually, but faithfully, accommodated itself to the progressive spirit of the country'.<sup>11</sup>

This approach was consistent throughout Canning's political career. In 1812, he had rejected 'showy theories and fanciful schemes of arithmetical or geographical proportion'.<sup>12</sup> The evils complained of by the pro-reformers simply did not exist. As he noted in 1817, 'our system ... has grown up with our freedom and with our power, and ... it satisfies the wants, the opinions and the feelings of the great bulk and body of the nation'.<sup>13</sup> Canning was also sceptical that any concessions on reform made by the House of Commons would satisfy the 'cravings'<sup>14</sup> of radical reformers and risked sacrificing the constitution. In 1818, he asked:

If these silly doctrines of annual parliaments and universal suffrage could be inculcated into the people by their demagogues, is there any doubt, that the effect of them would be to derange and destroy the orderly regulated play of the British constitution?<sup>15</sup>

Thus, reform measures, however, minor were the thin end of a very thick wedge. Canning also argued for the positive qualities of the Hanoverian electoral system. He stated in 1822, for example, that he felt its 'want of uniformity' and 'variety of rights of election' were strengths, not weaknesses as the reformers argued.<sup>16</sup> When he did allow for some changes, for example in 1820 when he supported the removal of MPs from the Cornish borough of Grampound, he did it not 'on the principle of speculative improvement' but as punishment for corruption. This showed that the British constitution could respond to specific problems without the need for wholesale reform: 'Disfranchising Grampound, ... I mean to save Old Sarum', he stated, referring to one of the most rotten of rotten boroughs.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, then, Canning regarded parliamentary reform as unnecessary, impractical and dangerous. By contrast, Catholic emancipation was necessary, and it would be dangerous not to do so. Underlying both these attitudes

are the lessons he drew from the French revolution. Namely, 'that proper changes ought not to be delayed too long' (e.g. Catholic emancipation) but 'that precipitate changes are subversive of the peace and order and happiness of nations' (e.g. parliamentary reform).<sup>18</sup> If one wished to sum up the essence of Canning's Liberal Toryism, it would be the combination of these two Burkean principles. It would be these two figures, 'Mr. Burke and Mr. Canning', that William Gladstone would later claim that he had 'for teachers or idols or both in politics', although he did state that, as a young man, on the matter of reform 'Burke and Canning misled many on the subject, and they misled me'.<sup>19</sup> This is another example of why we must be highly cautious in drawing a direct line from Canning to later Victorian liberalism.

Similarly, we must also be cautious with descriptions of Canning's foreign policy as 'liberal', especially during his second period as foreign secretary, 1822–27. Superficially, his foreign policy looks 'liberal' in that he set himself in opposition to the forces of legitimist reaction and their expression in the Holy Alliance after the fall of Napoleon. Nonetheless, we should not push the pendulum too far the other way. Canning's espousal of independence for Spain's Latin American colonies was not a consequence of some developed ideological position that favoured national self-determination, republicanism or constitutionalism, but flowed from his desire to preserve the balance of power that served British interests so well. To that extent, his views on foreign policy are similar in kind to his approach to domestic issues such as Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform in that they sought to find a balance between opposing extremes. That is, 'between the spirit of unlimited monarchy, and the spirit of unlimited democracy'.<sup>20</sup> So, when he boasted in 1826 that, by recognising the independence of Spain's former colonies, he had 'called the New World into existence to redress the balance of the Old',<sup>21</sup> he meant precisely that. Canning was, in fact, sceptical of claims that the spread of liberal institutions, whether in the old or new world, were inevitably accompanied by the spread of peace. Moreover, the contrast often made between Canning's foreign policy and that of his immediate predecessor, Castlereagh, is overdone. What differences there are in their approaches are largely a consequence of changing circumstances and Canning would specifically state that he was carrying out the general principles of foreign policy laid out by Castlereagh in the latter's famous state paper of May 1820.

**In summary, then, Canning regarded parliamentary reform as unnecessary, impractical and dangerous. By contrast, Catholic emancipation was necessary, and it would be dangerous not to do so. Underlying both these attitudes are the lessons he drew from the French revolution.**

## 'Not straight but serpentine': George Canning and the origins of nineteenth-century liberalism

Canning's approach to Greek independence in the 1820s is a useful illustration of these points. Canning was, like virtually all British statesmen of the time, raised to be a philhellene. His education at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford, made him a formidable classical scholar, a reputation which followed him through life. Nonetheless, his approach to the issue of Greek independence from the Ottoman empire was always tempered by wider concerns for the balance of power. For example, the Greek question was a major bone of contention between the Ottoman and Russian empires and one might have expected, at first glance, that Canning would have fought shy of promoting the independence of Greece, for fear of undermining the Turks as a bulwark against Russian expansion. However, Canning saw war between Russia and the Ottomans as a possible alternative to Russian intervention in Spain, which he wished to avoid at all cost. Hostilities between the two eastern empires were not necessarily a bad thing, he thought, as 'in the prurient and tantalized state of the Russian army some vent must be found'. Even those historians who argue that the 'central motive' in Canning's approach to the issue was his 'sympathy for the Greek nationalist cause', recognise that this was part of a 'larger outlook' and that he was 'not an extreme philhellene'.<sup>22</sup> Allan Cunningham has summed up Canning's attitude well:

Like his countrymen in general, the foreign secretary was slow to respond to the Greek cause, inconstant in the attention he gave it, frequently chagrined by the behaviour of the revolutionaries themselves, and only led forward on their behalf when larger interests than those of the Greeks seemed to be involved.<sup>23</sup>

One area that has attracted recent attention is Canning's attitude to slavery, where one study has seen him as a political mainstay of the West India interest and an active barrier to the abolition of slavery. Canning's ameliorationist position, in which he advocated the betterment of the conditions of slaves as a necessary precursor to emancipation, has been characterised as, in practice, a cynical means of avoiding the immediate abolition of slavery.<sup>24</sup> It is certainly true that Canning did not regard the ending of slavery as his main priority, preoccupied as he was in the 1820s with Catholic emancipation and foreign policy. He was also closely associated with key figures of the West India interest, such as Charles Rose Ellis and John Gladstone.

His time as MP for Liverpool also meant he developed strong connections with the West India shipping interests that were prominent there. To describe his ameliorationist outlook as simply a cynical reflection of the slaveholders' pro-slavery position, however, lacks nuance. To expect someone whose whole political outlook was developed in the wake of the French revolution to advocate immediate emancipation of the slaves fails to understand Canning's typical search for a balance between what he saw as two extremes (namely, slavery and immediate abolition). Looking back from the twenty-first century, we might regard this as morally lacking, but it is entirely consistent with his approach to the other major questions of his day. Also, it is not insignificant, for example, that as foreign secretary he is estimated to have written more than a thousand despatches on the abolition of the slave trade.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, in any account of Canning's Liberal Toryism, it is worth noting one area where he was not at the centre of policy-making or debate. Canning had relatively little influence on, and frankly less interest in, Liberal Tory ideas on economic policy relating to matters such as tariffs and trade. To the extent that there was a Canningite legacy in later liberalism, it was a Huskissonite one, as Canning tended to defer to the economic expertise of his most prominent follower William Huskisson. In the crucial decade, the 1820s, as noted, Canning was busy with foreign policy and the Catholic question. Also, as his private secretary Augustus Stapleton wrote after Canning's death, speaking of commercial reform, this was 'a branch of politicks ... the least suited to his taste'.<sup>26</sup>

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### Public opinion and the press

One area where Canning does appear to resemble later Victorian politicians, and not just liberal ones, is his consciousness of the emerging importance of public opinion and his use of the press. In his willingness to speak outside parliament, to address the national public directly, he foreshadows the likes of Gladstone's Midlothian campaign or, perhaps, even Lord Randolph Churchill's attempts to create a 'Tory Democracy'.

Among the Pittites-cum-Tories of the first three decades of the nineteenth century, Canning was one of the first to recognise the growing power of public opinion in national politics. While politics would remain heavily influenced by local issues, as it can be even today, he also saw that there was value in turning his gaze



outward, from the closed political 'game' in Westminster, to the wider country. The crucial year in this 'outward turn', as I have called it, is 1812.<sup>27</sup> Having overplayed his hand in the aftermath of the assassination of Spencer Perceval, and finding himself out of the cabinet, Canning took, for him, the momentous decision to stand for the contested election in Liverpool. Invited to stand by a group of wealthy Liverpool merchants, including John Gladstone, the statesman William's father, Canning was plunged into a strange new world. Liverpool had an electorate of around 3,000 freemen (about 8–10 per cent of the adult male population), and Canning found himself for the first time having to campaign publicly to be elected. His correspondence is full of statements that indicate his surprise (shock, even) at the nature of campaigning in a populous borough. He claimed that his ceremonial procession into the town was of 'nearer 30,000 than 20,000 people ... It is just impossible to conceive the enthusiasm with which I am received. It makes me stare, & wonder what the devil I can have done to deserve it.' Canning was to give many speeches and to spend several hours a night canvassing in the political clubs during the campaign. He also had to curry favour with the press, not least Liverpool's five weekly newspapers. In addition, the constituency was flooded with printed addresses, broadsides, songs, poems and other so-called squibs. Much of this activity is familiar to historians of elections in large constituencies throughout the long eighteenth century. What is noteworthy here is the extent to which the presence of Canning as a candidate for the Tory side transformed this into a national spectacle and the way Canning used it to reassert his national prominence after the disappointments of earlier in the year. He saw the election, as he said in one of his speeches, as:

the arena on which ... the battle was to be fought between those principles both of external and domestic policy which have made Great Britain what she is [i.e. Pittite Toryism], and those which it has been the business of my life to oppose [i.e. the supposedly revolutionary ideas of Foxite Whiggism]...<sup>28</sup>

The parallels with Gladstone's Midlothian campaign of 1878–80 are obvious but worth spelling out: both Canning and Gladstone were out of office; both were trying to make some form of 'comeback'; both campaigns spent at least as much time on national issues

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as local ones; and both campaigns garnered significant interest beyond the local electorate and their particular constituency boundaries. Gladstone's campaign is often regarded as the first 'modern' electoral campaign, but it is clear that it had substantial precedents, not least Canning's campaign in Gladstone's own hometown of Liverpool. Canning was the first major Tory figure to sit for a populous borough and this would bring him into close contact with a socio-economic group that is regarded as the archetypal support base for Victorian liberalism, the urban middle class.

Canning is often seen, by virtue of his own background and his experiences in Liverpool, as having a close relationship with the emerging middle classes. He certainly used the language of class and he, like others, saw the middle classes as important generators and bearers of public opinion. As early as 1799, Canning had referred approvingly in the Commons to 'those classes of men, who connect the upper and lower orders of society, and who thereby blend together and harmonise the whole'.<sup>29</sup> In 1812 at Liverpool, he spoke of 'those ... who by their commercial enterprise [sic] and honest industry' multiply 'a hundred-fold' the wealth created by land.<sup>30</sup> Analysis of poll books from the Liverpool elections of 1812 and 1818 shows that Canning did have disproportionate support from among the middle classes of Liverpool, who had asked him to stand in the first place, of course. Both locally and nationally, Canning paid close attention to what he clearly saw as a middle-class audience. Moreover, it was becoming a commonplace that the middle classes were the location of what was seen as emerging public opinion. Harold Temperley, in his seminal study of Canning's foreign policy, went so far as to argue that 'there is nothing in which Canning's attitude was so peculiar and unique in his own day, as in his policy towards the Press and the public in his own and other countries'.<sup>31</sup> For Canning, public opinion embodied in a free press increasingly controlled public life, with a power he compared to 'the power of STEAM'.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, we should not be carried away by this rhetoric, as Canning always saw public opinion as something that, while being recognised, had to be channelled, moulded and controlled. This can be seen in his career as a writer for journals, such as the ones he founded: *The Anti-Jacobin* and, particularly, the *Quarterly Review*. It is also seen in his habit of regularly speaking 'out-of-doors', as speeches outside parliament were described at the time. He was much criticised on the

High Tory side for going around the country 'speechifying',<sup>33</sup> something that was more associated with Whig politicians than Tories. In this, Canning has been seen to 'foreshadow the middle-class prima donna in politics, with his thin skin and his obligations to "his" public'.<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Parry has gone so far as to argue that Canning's focus on the middle class and public opinion contribute to the development of a 'liberal' style in politics.<sup>35</sup>

We can see, then, that there are elements of Canning's political ideas and his approach to politics generally, that can be seen as 'liberal', at least in so far as they were in contrast to the ideas and practice of his High Tory colleagues in government in the 1820s. Even here, however, as Canning himself stated, 'the line that is fancifully drawn between the liberals and illiberals in the Cabinet, is not straight but serpentine'.<sup>36</sup> Also, there are clearly aspects of Canning's ideas that resemble later Burkean Conservatism. Moreover, we must be wary of the dangers inherent in ascribing influence to one person over others. That is, just because some of Canning's ideas look a bit like some aspects of later liberalism, we must be cautious in assuming that he must have influenced these later developments. Why, then, is Canning so often brought up in discussions of the origins of Victorian liberalism? If the evidence is so equivocal, why do people still consider Canning as one of the origin points of later liberalism? To understand why, we need to turn to aspects of political organisation and to the trajectories of the political careers of those who called themselves Canningites, for these would be the means by which Canning's ideas and practice would be handed down to later liberalism.

### **Political influence**

The Canningite faction, what he called his 'little Senate', emerged during the period of Canning's opposition to the ministry of Henry Addington, 1801–04, and the Ministry of All the Talents, 1806–07. It would persist in something like the same form until he disbanded it in 1813. Thenceforth, there would be a looser formation of MPs that regarded themselves as Canningites up to and beyond Canning's death in 1827. Key members of this group, not least Viscount Palmerston, would switch their allegiance to the Whig Party during the Reform Crisis of 1827–32. In so doing, they would become an important strand in the emergence of the mid-Victorian Liberal Party. In addition, upon the formation of Canning's ministry, a number of Whig politicians would join

Canning's ministry, allowing him to form a viable coalition ministry in the face of High and Ultra Tory opposition.

In early 1827, Lord Liverpool, prime minister continuously since 1812, suffered an incapacitating stroke, bringing an end to his premiership (and his life the following year). Liverpool had been the keystone of the early-nineteenth-century Tory Party, and without him it fell apart. His removal from office allowed barely concealed ideological and personal rivalries to emerge into the harsh light of day. The most explosive issue was Catholic emancipation, which for many years had been deemed an 'open' question in the cabinet, precisely to avoid the divisions which would now emerge. Canning was the leading 'Catholic' and also the leading contender to succeed Liverpool. When he became prime minister in April 1827, six High Tory 'Protestants' resigned from the cabinet, including the Duke of Wellington and Robert Peel. Most resigned because of their opposition to Canning's views on the Catholic question. Thirty-five other more junior officeholders also resigned for the same reasons. From this point onwards, Canning and his supporters would largely cease to be referred to as Tories. Canning needed to reinforce his ministry, and three prominent Whigs – the Marquess of Lansdowne, the Earl of Carlisle and George Tierney – joined the government in May 1827, giving it an overwhelmingly 'Catholic' character. The junction of Canning with elements of the Whig Party had been a standard topic of political gossip throughout the 1820s, especially among Canning's High Tory opponents. This coalition would induce a temporary split in the Whig Party, but it was reunited relatively quickly under Earl Grey by 1830, whereas for the Tories this was a decisive schism. The majority of Canningites never returned to the Tory Party and the split between Canning and Peel brought to an end the first phase of Liberal Toryism.

The question of whether Canningism could have emerged as a third force or party in British politics (analogous to Peelism later) was rendered moot by the early loss of its key leaders. As we have seen, Canning died in August 1827 and his obvious successor William Huskisson perished from injuries inflicted under the wheels of Stephenson's Rocket at the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester railway in September 1830. Third parties tended not to fare well or last long in the nineteenth century anyway, but without their two obvious leaders, it was inevitable that a Canningite party did not emerge. The majority of Canningites made their way over to the Whig

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Party during the Reform Crisis by a variety of more or less convoluted routes. They took Canning's ideas and approach with them, and in many ways, this is the most significant mechanism by which his political legacy influenced the emerging Liberal Party. While some Canningites did revert to the Conservative Party, key Canningite/Huskissonite figures would vote in the Commons against Wellington in November 1830 (precipitating his fall and Grey's premiership) and, significantly, for the Great Reform Bill later. These MPs included Charles and Robert Grant, E. J. Littleton, Dudley Ryder (Viscount Sandon, later 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Harrowby), Robert Vernon Smith, Viscount Morpeth and Viscount Palmerston. A similar group of Canningite/Huskissonite peers was to make the same journey into Whiggism, not least Lord Melbourne, who would go on to be prime minister in 1834 and 1835–41. Viscount Palmerston is perhaps the most interesting example of a Canningite after Canning, due to the centrality of foreign policy to his career both before and during his two periods as prime minister (1855–8, 1859–65).

Palmerston was foreign secretary during the periods 1830–34, 1835–41 and 1846–51 and was commonly seen as Canning's successor, although he emerged as a Canningite only late in Canning's life. So closely was he identified with Canning, however, that in 1831 he had to defend himself against charges of inconsistency when he supported parliamentary reform, arguing that Canning's 'gigantic mind' and 'mighty genius' would have embraced reform due to the changed circumstances.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, there are clear differences between Canning's and Palmerston's approach to foreign policy. For example, Palmerston was more of an interventionist. Nonetheless, Palmerston's repeated rhetorical use of Canning's name is a significant indicator of the shadow that Canning's ideas and his approach to politics cast over those nineteenth-century Liberals who claimed to be following in his footsteps.

## Conclusion

LORD CAVERSHAM. ... Chiltern's speech last night on this Argentine Canal scheme was one of the finest pieces of oratory ever delivered in the House since Canning.

LORD GORING. Ah! Never heard of Canning. Never wanted to.

Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act IV (1895)

George Canning, despite Lord Goring's wilful ignorance, cast a long shadow across the nineteenth century. As Wilde implies, he was remembered for the power of his oratory. His foreign policy, especially its supposedly liberal approach, was influential long after his death. His followers took key elements of his politics forward into the new parties that emerged after the Reform Crisis of 1827–32, especially into the Whig-Liberal Party of the 1830s and 1840s and, with Peelite accretions, into what became the mid- to late-Victorian Liberal Party from the 1850s onwards. Canning, thus, had an important liberal legacy. While, as historians, we need to emphasise that he was a Liberal Tory, and to recognise that we run the risk of mischaracterising his contribution to British politics if we ignore the noun in favour of the adjective, we must also recognise that, in the eyes of many, followers and opponents alike, he made an important contribution to the emergence of mid-Victorian liberalism, albeit as only one strand of a much thicker rope.

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- 1 The phrase 'Liberal Tory' is sometimes seen as an anachronism, retrospectively applied by historians to people and policies who did not use or would not recognise the term. This is not the case. It, and similar terms, were increasingly applied to Canning and others as the political schism in the Tory Party widened over the 1820s. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, for example, referred to the 'new or liberal Tories' in June 1826 (xix, p. 636). Canning was described as the leader of 'the liberal party' in Lord Liverpool's government by his High Tory opponent Harriet Arbuthnot. See Frances Bamford and Gerald Wellesley, 7<sup>th</sup> Duke of Wellington (eds.), *Journal of Mrs Arbuthnot, 1820–1832* (2 vols, London, 1950), vol. ii, p. 60, entry for 28 Nov. 1826. For discussion of the use of the term Liberal Tory in the 1820s, see Stephen M. Lee, *George Canning and Liberal Toryism* (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 138–140.
- 2 L. G. Mitchell, *Charles James Fox* (London, 1992), p. 238.
- 3 Duke of Devonshire, *Notes and Queries*, vol. clxxiii, p. 332, quoted in Charles Petrie, *George Canning* (London, 1930), p. 244.
- 4 Lee, *George Canning*, p. 2.

**While, as historians, we need to emphasise that he was a Liberal Tory, and to recognise that we run the risk of mischaracterising his contribution to British politics if we ignore the noun in favour of the adjective, we must also recognise that, in the eyes of many, followers and opponents alike, he made an important contribution to the emergence of mid-Victorian liberalism, albeit as only one strand of a much thicker rope.**

Concluded on page 58



## Report: The Peterloo Massacre and Nineteenth-Century Popular Radicalism

he explained, which was built upon by the passage of the Great Reform Act of 1832.

Dr Riding then posed a fascinating and possibly related challenge: why don't the Liberal Democrats claim Peterloo as an integral part of their history, rather than allowing it to remain the preserve of the Labour Party and the left? Members of the History Group committee explained that they had tended to focus on events

following the formation of the Liberal Party in the 1850s, and that this meeting was the first stage of an attempt to redress the balance. This was a reasonable response, but it raised intriguing questions about Liberal Democrats' attitudes to the Whigs, as well as to historical demands for political and constitutional reform and the strategies used by the campaigners. For that matter, if anything, what do the attitudes of modern liberals to Peterloo reveal

about their perceptions of historical conflicts between 'the people' and 'the powerful', the 'prosperous' and the 'left behind', and how such tensions might be resolved? Perhaps the Liberal Democrat History Group will return to these questions.

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## 'Not straight but serpentine': George Canning and the origins of nineteenth-century liberalism

Continued from page 31

- 5 T. Kaye (ed.), *Speeches of the Right Hon. George Canning delivered on public occasions in Liverpool*, (Liverpool, 1825), p. 254 [hereafter *Liverpool Speeches*].
- 6 R. Therry (ed.), *Speeches of the Right Honourable George Canning with a memoir of his life* (London, 1828), vol. v, p. 364 [hereafter *Canning Speeches*].
- 7 Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates* (series 1) vol. 21, cols. 520, 522.
- 8 *Ibid.*, col. 523.
- 9 *Ibid.*, cols. 532–3.
- 10 *Ibid.*, vol. 23, cols. 635–6.
- 11 *Canning Speeches*, vol. iv, p. 334.
- 12 *Speeches and public addresses of the Right Honourable George Canning, during the late election in Liverpool, etc.* (Liverpool, 1812), pp. 50–1 [hereafter *Speeches and Public Addresses* (1812)].
- 13 Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates* (series 1) vol. 35, col. 130.
- 14 *Canning Speeches*, vol. iv, p. 341.
- 15 *The speeches and public addresses of the Right Hon. George Canning, during the election in Liverpool, etc.* (Liverpool, 1818), p. 25.
- 16 *Canning Speeches*, vol. iv, p. 343.
- 17 *Liverpool Speeches*, pp. 321–2.
- 18 *Canning Speeches*, vol. iv, p. 193–4.
- 19 From Morley's biography of Gladstone, cited in Lee, *George Canning*, p. 104.
- 20 *Canning Speeches*, vol. v, p. 129.
- 21 *Ibid.*, vol. vi, p. 111.
- 22 Steven Schwartzberg, 'The lion and the phoenix – I: British policy toward the 'Greek question', 1821–32'; The lion and the phoenix, II', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 24 (1988), pp. 139–77, 3287–311, quotations at pp. 153–54, 292.
- 23 Allan Cunningham, 'The philhellenes, Canning and Greek independence', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 14 (1978), 151–81, quotation at p. 169.
- 24 Michael Taylor, *The Interest: How the British establishment resisted the abolition of slavery* (London, 2020).
- 25 Harold Temperley, *The Foreign Policy of Canning 1822–1827: England, the Neo-Holy Alliance, and the New World* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., London, 1966), pp. 313–14.
- 26 Augustus Stapleton, *The Political Life of the Right Honourable George Canning*, (3 vols, 2nd edn., London, 1831), vol. iii, p. 3.
- 27 See Lee, *George Canning*, 'Part II: The outward turn', pp. 57–131 passim.
- 28 *Speeches and Public Addresses* (1812), p. 46.
- 29 *Canning Speeches*, vol. i, pp. 148–9.
- 30 *Speeches and Public Addresses* (1812), p. 40.
- 31 Cited in Lee, *George Canning*, p. 115.
- 32 *Liverpool Speeches*, pp. 363–5, speaking in Aug. 1822.
- 33 See *Journal of Mrs Arbuthnot*, vol. i, p. 275, entry for 18 Nov. 1823.
- 34 Richard Pares, *King George III and the Politicians* (Oxford, 1953).
- 35 Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (London, 1993), pp. 43–4.
- 36 *Canning Speeches*, vol. v, pp. 316–7.
- 37 Quoted in Stephen M. Lee, 'Palmerston and Canning' in David Brown and Miles Taylor (eds.), *Palmerston Studies* (Southampton, 2007), vol. i, p. 6.

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