Sir Robert Peel, 1846-1850: Unwilling Leader of a Splinter Party

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SIR ROBERT PEEL, 1846-1850:
UNWILLING LEADER OF A SPLINTER PARTY

by

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ABSTRACT

SIR ROBERT PEEL, 1846-1850: UNWILLING LEADER OF A SPLINTER PARTY

Donald A. Kerr
Old Dominion University, 1978
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This thesis is an examination of the last four years (1846-1850) of the life of Sir Robert Peel, Prime Minister of England. Peel was one of the great political figures in England during the 1800s, a leader of the Conservative Party for more than fifteen years, and the leading political figure in the successful fight to repeal the Corn Laws in 1846. Following the defeat of his government in 1846 however, he declined to provide further leadership either to the party or to the small group of his close followers known as the Peelites. The effects of Peel's continued presence in the House of Commons (in a minor role) upon the continued dichotomy within the Conservative Party as well as the actions of Parliament are discussed. The actions of the Peelites, whose attempts to persuade Peel to return to a leadership position resulted in their own indecision on critical issues, are examined as is Peel's decision to support the weak Whig government of Lord John Russell.
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INTRODUCTION

The politics of England during the 1840s were dominated by Sir Robert Peel. No other statesman of the period possessed his wide experience in both office and opposition, or his command of the essentials of government.

Peel's political philosophy and readiness to consider new ideas made him peculiarly fitted to guide England through this period of social change; this sensitivity also made him a poor party man.

Peel was a member of the Conservative Party. Although parties still were, for the most part, basically groups of gentlemen having similar ideas on the major questions of the day, organization was coming. This organizational activity caused Peel concern. Politicians in his mold were independent, motivated by concern for the country as a whole, not political expediency. They considered each issue on its merits and gave or withheld support according to the dictates of their own political philosophy or consciences.

The new organizations (obviously miniscule in terms of 20th century political sophistication) inhibited independence. Agents such as Francis Bonham kept party leaders informed concerning shifts in the political atmosphere. They were also instrumental in coordinating the efforts of the local orga-
nizations. The national party organization assisted in local campaigns. In turn, Members who owed their election to the help of the organization could increasingly be counted upon to vote the "party line." In both Houses of Parliament, each party (or major party sub-group) appointed whips, whose function was both to organize "bloc" voting and to act as the "eyes and ears" of the party leadership.

In contrast to the emerging organization politicians, Peel held that Conservatism was a government ethic, not a party interest. His type of conservatism was not a tactical doctrine designed to draw votes to the Tory party; the party was the device by which to put conservatism into practice. One may easily see the consternation such a theory might hold for "organization party members." Peel's views on conservatism as it should be practiced were most explicitly stated in 1833, in his first speech before the reformed House of Commons:

> It is my duty to support the Crown... and the support I give is dictated by principles perfectly independent and disinterested. ... When I see the Government disposed to maintain the rights of property, the authority of law, and in a qualified sense, the established order of things against rash innovation, I shall without regard to party feelings, deem it my duty to range myself on their side. ...

He held true to this philosophy, in office or as a member of the opposition, until his death.

The key thought in the passage quoted above appears to be Peel's definition of "rash innovation." Peel certainly leaned far toward Liberal thought in his support of Catholic emancipation, and his conversion to Free Trade and subsequent
activities along this line might certainly be said to have disturbed "the established order of things." Further, his remarks in 1833 did not discuss his deep concern for the working classes and his belief that Government must keep in mind that segment of the population not able to make their desires known through the electoral system. Concerning this last point, his economic philosophy reinforced his political sentiments, especially after 1842.

Both the political and economic principles discussed above received their ultimate test in 1846. Peel had gradually swung to support of the doctrine of Free Trade and had already made plans to seek repeal of the Corn Laws. The Irish potato famine forced him to move much more quickly than he desired. But he moved forward to ask for the repeal of the restrictive tariffs, secure in the personal knowledge that he was doing what was best for England. He argued, as he always had, that party ethics and constitutional government would best be served if men acted as they thought best for the national interest. This was Peelism in its most basic definition.

Through the efforts of the Liberal Free Traders (who may or may not have been affected by the purity of his political ideals) and his followers within the Tory party, but mostly on the pure strength of the enormous respect which the country at large held for him, Peel was able to secure passage of the repeal measure. In so doing, he destroyed the party he had built, incurred the lasting enmity of some of England's
most powerful peers, and relinquished control of the government to a weak Whig ministry.

For many political life would have ended at this point. Not so, despite his wishes, for Sir Robert Peel. He lived only four more years. During that time, although he retained his seat in the House of Commons, he refused leadership of the Conservative party and refused to influence or even advise his friends. His influence over the party he had recently led, and his reputation throughout the country, were too great to allow him the semi-retirement he sought. Instead, he found himself in a unique position for one who held no formal office and led no recognized party. Conservative leaders deferred to him in spite of his wishes to the contrary. He was a virtual unofficial member of Lord John Russell's cabinet and supported the Government strongly. The latter action was, of course, well in keeping with his political philosophy.

Peel's actions during his final four years are the subject of this paper. His support of Russell's ministry kept the government in power when it might have fallen in several instances. In so doing, Peel not only affected the internal policies of England, but allowed Palmerston to "wheel and deal" in the Foreign Office during the great social revolutions of Europe. Peel's refusal to lead the Conservatives, and the unwillingness of anyone else to lead, kept the Tories, and the party system in England as a whole, in a confused state until several years after his death. Political power is an
inescapable part of the political scene. In most instances, however, power is eagerly sought and jealously guarded. In the case of Sir Robert Peel, his desire to "disengage" and his inability to do so materially affected English political development.

It is difficult to discuss the final years of Sir Robert Peel's life without beginning the discussion by examining the immediate events which brought him to June, 1846. Peel was a withdrawn, somewhat bitter man following the defeat of his government. To his mind, at least, the acrimonious debate over his decision to seek abolition of the Corn Laws was ample justification for his emotional state.

Certain questions arise concerning his decision regarding the Corn Laws. What caused Peel to move so directly into opposition certain to include a large segment of his own party? What political forces influenced his decision? What economic forces demanded abandonment of a policy not only long-standing but also the major emphasis upon which he had been elected? Who were his confidants during this time and what part did their counsel play in his decision?

These questions must be analyzed if one is to understand what induced one of England's greatest Prime Ministers to seek withdrawal from political leadership in 1846 and contentedly assume a minor role in the government of England for the remainder of his life.
CHAPTER I
REPEAL OF THE CORN LAWS

Sir Robert Peel's decision to seek repeal of the highly protective duties on corn and other grains was neither emotional nor precipitate. As early as 1843, Peel had mentioned to William E. Gladstone that he would find defense of the Corn Laws difficult in the future. Even before the potato crop failed in Ireland, Peel had decided to move ahead with his change of policy. It would be incorrect to say that concern over the impending Irish famine was merely a pretext for Peel to act, as he had already decided. There was, however, no sign that he considered any method for dealing with the crisis which did not involve repeal of the duties. He might have elected a different time and method had the potato crop failure not forced his hand, but his decision concerning the continued validity of the Corn Laws had already been made.

The controversy over the Corn Laws reflected symbolically the interests in conflict within English society. To landowners, they were the last security against ruin and visible reassurance of the primacy of the landed interest. To the

factory operatives, the duties were the means by which food prices were kept artificially high and the symbol of the unfair predominance of the agricultural community over the manufacturing interests.

Throughout the 1840s, the dispute was given ample publicity through the activities of the Anti-Corn Law League. The League dedicated itself to repealing the Corn Laws to the exclusion of all other considerations. It did not become involved in a complicated and extensive program of political beliefs as did the Chartists. Yet its initial efforts were failures. No impact was made on agricultural areas, and the expense of the propaganda campaigns was ruinous. Support in London was weak and politicians such as Wellington and Russell refused to receive League deputations.

Richard Cobden emerged in 1840 as the dominating force in the League leadership. He had always advocated working from within the existing political structure, and began to concentrate League energies on the election of Free Trade candidates. In the 1841 general election, several League members including Cobden were returned. Though there were disappointments, with Cobden the leader in Parliament as well as in the country the League became an effective political machine. League influence began to grow. Renewed efforts were made to establish chapters in towns which had previously refused them. The support of the dissenting churches was actively sought, and a large effort was made to win the support of O'Connell and the Irish. Irish
goodwill was particularly valuable in the northwest, where Irish immigration had been substantial. Through these efforts, the League succeeded in uniting several diverse interests while remaining committed to one ideal, a success which had eluded the Chartists.

Cobden's belief in restraint and the use of only legal means was effective. Although opposed by a militant faction led by John Bright, who advocated closing the factories to force the hand of the government, Cobden's insistence on legal political action proved correct. By 1843, the League was financially secure, effectively organized and had an active representation in Commons which included both Cobden and Bright.

Cobden and Bright began building toward the general elections of 1848. They moved League headquarters to London in 1843. They lobbied Members of Parliament in an unceasing effort to build Free Trade representation. Agents were sent into agricultural areas to preach the deficiencies of Protection, and the penny post was used to great advantage to maintain liaison between London and local League offices.²

Despite its successes, the League was not powerful enough to carry repeal against the opposition of the landed interests. Even giving due recognition to the tremendous efforts which the League made in preparation for the 1848 elections, it is doubtful that it would have done more than

increase its Parliamentary representation and thus form a larger pressure group. But its activities had certainly come to Peel's attention and had probably influenced his growing conviction that the Corn Laws had to be changed. The actual catalyst for the repeal action, however, was unforeseen by anyone.

In 1845, the grain harvest both in England and on the Continent was afflicted by the abnormally heavy rainfall and low temperatures during the late summer months. What had been a possible problem area became a disastrous reality with the appearance of a fungus on the potato crop. The potato fed the poor in both Ireland and England; its failure in England would be serious, in Ireland a calamity. By October it was clear that in many Irish districts the potato crop would be a complete failure. By mid-October Peel was convinced that Ireland faced a major famine and that such superficial measures as the closing of distilleries or the prohibition of grain exports would not affect the problem. Sir James Graham reached the same opinion and furthermore concluded that the duties on grain would have to be lifted in order to increase amounts of cheap imported grain available to the poor. He posed three questions which summarized Peel's political problem. Would it be proper to remit grain duties in November by Order in Council when Parliament could easily be called? Could the duties if remitted, either by Order in Council or Parliamentary act, ever be reimposed? Could the Government maintain the existing
duties in their present form when to do so virtually guaranteed death by starvation for a large segment of the population of Ireland.\(^3\)

By late October there was confirmation that the potato crop had failed throughout Ireland. The corn harvest in England had also been bad, and corn was being exported from Ireland to England.\(^4\)

Peel had already received one request from the League to repeal the duty on maize and another to admit foreign wheat duty-free through an Order in Council.\(^5\) Peel and Graham both felt that neither of these actions attacked the root of the matter. To rely on American maize was to hope for the instantaneous acceptance of an unknown and possibly unpalatable food.\(^6\) Moreover the government would surely be attacked for retaining the duties on wheat and oats. Temporarily to suspend the duties on grain would merely confirm the League's argument that the Corn Laws aggravated scarcity. Once suspended, they probably could be reimposed only at the cost of violent public reaction.

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\(^4\)The corn merchants were reluctant to lose the English market, and the government did not think it proper to interfere with the regular habits of trade.


\(^6\)The unfamiliar maize did prove to be unpopular. The peasants called it "Peel's brimstone."
Peel called the Cabinet together at the end of October. He felt that there was now sufficient proof of the severity of the food shortage in Ireland, and he presented evidence of the food deficiency in England and Scotland as well. Peel then posed to his Ministers the gist of the questions Graham had presented to him, i.e., should action be taken by Order in Council or should the problem be placed before the full Parliament, and could money be voted for relief of the poor without ending restrictions on the import of grain? He noted that once Parliament had been assembled, it would be dangerous for the government to resist changes in the Corn Laws, and before Parliament convened it would be necessary for the Cabinet to "...make our choice between determined maintenance, modification and suspension of the existing Corn Laws." 7

Although Peel by this time clearly favored repeal, he did not pressure his Ministers in that direction but only cautioned them on the necessity of a firm, unanimous position. Unanimity was not to be. Uncertainty tinged with opposition, as well as outright opposition, was immediately evident. Certain Ministers were unable or unwilling to acknowledge the severity of the problem and felt that a Conservative government should not invade the "sanctity" of the Corn Laws. Others, such as Stanley, immediately recognized that to open the ports for even a limited period would be to repeal the duties,

and they felt that if Peel chose to push the issue, it would bring about the downfall of the government. In early November, Peel first advised the Queen of the lack of agreement in the Cabinet. The following day he placed specific proposals before his colleagues: to remit the duty on bonded grain and open the ports to all foreign grain at a reduced rate; and to meet the Parliament at the end of November to ask for a ratification of this action while simultaneously announcing the intention to introduce a modified corn bill after Christmas. Only three of Peel's colleagues, Lord Aberdeen, Sir James Graham, and Sidney Herbert, agreed with this action. Peel was willing to allow time for consideration of the matter, but he had decided that if support from the Cabinet was not forthcoming when they met again, he would resign. By the end of November, the situation had changed significantly.

The Cabinet meetings in early November had generated intense public interest. Coverage by several leading newspapers including The Times had escalated the repeal question far beyond the most optimistic dreams of the Anti-Corn Law League. In late November, Lord John Russell set the famine crisis and the Corn Law question squarely in the public domain. In a public letter he called upon all interested parties to consider courses of action to ease the approaching food shortage.

Citing the Cabinet meetings and the subsequent apparent inaction

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8 Stanley to Peel, 2 Nov. 1845, quoted in Mahon and Cardwell, ed., Peel Memoirs, 2:160-161.
of Peel's government, Russell announced his conversion to the principle of repeal and stated: "The Government appears to be waiting for some excuse to give up the present Corn Laws. Let the People by petition, by address, by remonstrance, afford them the excuse they seek."\(^9\)

By the end of November, Peel's choices had narrowed. He recognized, as did his Ministers, that any decision would now have to be made by Parliament. To open the ports by Order in Council after such a long delay had become unjustifiable. He continued to press his colleagues to decide between maintenance, modification or suspension of the existing laws.\(^10\)

Most favored more discussion. Wellington was against suspension in principle but would follow Peel's lead. Wharncliffe and Ripon advised delay. They felt that if no settlement could be reached, resignation of the government before Christmas would be a betrayal of the principles of the Conservative Party. In a more constructive vein, both were also of the opinion that more discussion might lead to a suitable compromise. Peel

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\(^9\) In actuality, Peel had taken several steps to meet the Irish crisis. An emergency relief organization for the distribution of food and control of the markets was established in Ireland. British consulates in the Mediterranean had been queried as to the availability of potato supplies in those countries, and the Admiralty was instructed to buy oats privately at the ports. The possibility of buying wheat from Odessa and Danzig was investigated and large amounts of maize and meal were purchased from the United States. For newspaper coverage, see The Times, 12, 13, 15, 18, 19 Nov. 1845.

refused to accept this procrastination, reminding both that they must make a decision on the one issue of suspension of duties on foreign corn. Throughout these discussions, there is evidence of continued respect for Peel among all the Cabinet members. All seemed to desire that his government continue, and some appeared to genuinely regret the course he had elected to follow.

In early December it appeared that the matter was settled. In a memorandum to the Cabinet, Peel stated his view on the future of Protection. He defended his own record, pointing out that he had always refused to pledge himself against changing the 1842 act. He now believed that the correct course of action was the gradual removal of agricultural protection, and he recommended introduction of a new Corn Law with a new scale of duties. For a short time it seemed possible that the Cabinet might accept his proposals, but upon overnight reflection Stanley and Buccleuch decided they would rather retire from office than support the program. Peel was then in an unenviable position, for public interest remained extremely high and any action taken by the government would appear to have been forced by public opinion. The Cabinet was hopelessly split and that, of course, would virtually guarantee the defeat of the program in Parliament if Peel persisted in

11 Ripon to Peel, 29 Nov. 1845; Wellington to Peel, 30 Nov. 1845; Goulburn to Peel, 30 Nov. 1845; Wharncliffe to Peel, 1 Dec. 1845; Stanley to Peel, 2 Dec. 1845; Cabinet memorandum, 2 Dec. 1845, quoted in Mahon and Cardwell, ed., Peel Memoirs, 2:194-220.
bringing it before that body. Peel continued to believe that repeal was in the best interests of the country, but he saw no possibility for success.

In early December, Peel admitted defeat and prepared to offer his resignation. His logical successor was, of course, the newly converted advocate of repeal, Lord John Russell. Again, however, in what appears to have been an almost commonplace occurrence in this entire affair, the solution which seemed most logical and attainable only served to further confuse the situation. Russell was unable or unwilling to form a government. Whether he really wanted to form a government, since he would then have to deal with the repeal issue, is a debatable point. His party was very much in the minority, and in his understandable uneasiness at this circumstance, he attempted to gain assurance that Peel would support a Whig repeal program. Although Peel was generally in concert with Russell’s views as expressed in the public letter described earlier, he would not commit himself to support a specific measure not yet introduced. He promised his general support of Russell in the settlement of the Corn Laws question, and he was also able to lay to rest Russell’s concern that Protectionists from Peel’s former Cabinet would attempt to form a government.\(^{12}\)

Still Russell vacillated until finally in late December

he found the excuse he was looking for. In attempting to fill positions in his Cabinet, Russell encountered resistance from Lord Grey. Grey informed Russell that he declined to serve if Palmerston was given the Foreign Office; Palmerston was unwilling to serve in any other capacity. Russell's marginal store of enthusiasm for the task vanished, and, fatigued and worried about his wife's ill health, he reported to the Queen that he was unable to form a government. Peel, upon learning of this development, returned immediately to the Queen, assured her of his continued support, and once again returned to the Corn Laws question.\(^\text{13}\)

Though Peel must have been in a highly emotional state by this time and by all accounts returned to the job of Prime Minister with great enthusiasm, it is important, in light of the events that were to occur over the next six months, to note his physical condition at this time. He was 58 years old and feeling the strain of office. An exacting man by nature, he oversaw much of the business of his Ministers personally, as well as answering in Commons for five major departments in addition to his regular responsibilities. His mental and physical fatigue, due to his incredibly crowded schedule, was becoming increasingly apparent to him.\(^\text{14}\) He suffered continu-


\(^{14}\)A rapidly proliferating mass of correspondence on every conceivable subject and a constant stream of visitors and delegations more than filled the morning hours. Long
ally from ear trouble caused by a shooting accident in the 1820s, and that undoubtedly further strained his overall physical condition. His had always been a withdrawn personality, and the constant physical and mental stress of the crisis and following Parliamentary debates could not help but push him further inside himself. His cultivation of other members of the party, never a strong point, lagged more than usual at a time when he needed all possible support.

Peel met with his Cabinet in December 1845 and announced his firm resolve to present plans for repeal of the duties on grain to Parliament with or without the support of the Cabinet. The situation had changed slightly in that the continuance of the government had become as important as the repeal question. The repeal issue would again be of prime importance only when the Cabinet could show a united front. Lord Stanley persisted in his desire to resign, but Peel had the support of the remainder of the Cabinet (he had begun in October with the support of only three of the Cabinet members). The Cabinet was reorganized and gained additional strength from the services of Gladstone, Dalhousie, Ellenborough and St. Germans.

Peel's first priority was to take the Corn Law question out of the social context into which it had been moved. His fear was that battlelines would be drawn between the landed aristocracy and the combined forces of the manufacturers,

hours in the inadequately ventilated House (most times until the small hours of the morning) left little time for rest and less for Cabinet meetings.
working classes and the agricultural laborers. Such a conflict could only result in the defeat of the aristocracy. That conflict would completely overshadow the question of tariff reform. His solution was to deal with the Corn Laws as part of a policy to abolish all unnecessary duties and reduce all protection. This plan had two inherent weaknesses. First, it obscured the connection between the Irish potato crop failure and repeal of the Corn Laws. Second, it linked an emergency measure with a long-term economic policy. If accepted, it would appear that the government had not been serious in its defense of the Corn Laws all along. If the Protectionists refused to be drawn away from the Corn Laws as the central issue, the entire program might be delayed. Peel, however, felt he could carry the entire repeal measure. He expected resistance from the agriculturists and probably from some of the extreme Radicals to whom only total and immediate repeal would suffice. But Russell would support the measure. Free Trade in general had strong support in Commons and was backed by a very active public opinion.

Peel did not have the same optimistic outlook concerning the fate of his Ministry. He had informed the Queen, upon retaking office in December, that he felt he could form a

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16 Peel to Arbuthnot, 8 Jan. 1846, quoted in Parker, ed., Peel, private papers, 3:326.
government which would last long enough to carry the free trade issue. ¹⁷ He had sufficient political experience to realize that when he carried the repeal effort, his opponents would spare no effort to organize the next available opportunity to turn him out. St. Germans, in fact, had asked Peel, as he took his Cabinet seat, if Peel expected to continue in office following the passage of the repeal measure. Peel indicated that he did not. But he entered the battleground of the House of Commons in January 1846 determined to repeal the Corn Laws.

Probably the most singular aspect of Peel's address to the opening session of Commons was his acknowledgment of his change of opinion concerning the Corn Laws. He went on to explain the rationale which had led to this change.¹⁸ The entire speech, some two hours in length, was heard in silence by the other members of his party. The one exception to this silence was cheering when Peel made references to Stanley's view that the crisis was being exaggerated and repeal was completely unnecessary.

The opposition to Peel's program came mainly from

¹⁷Morley, Life of Gladstone, 1:210-212.

¹⁸ He was satisfied that the rate of wages did not necessarily vary with the price of food. He felt the removal of protective duties had benefitted industry and that crime and social disorder were best countered by employment and cheap food; The Address, 22 Jan. 1846, quoted in The Speeches of the Rt. Hon. Sir Robert Peel, Bart., 4 vols. (London: George Routledge and Co., 1853; reprint ed., New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1972), 4:568.
within the Conservative party. The two who became leaders of the Protectionist group of "country gentlemen" were an unlikely combination. Lord George Bentinck was one, Benjamin Disraeli the other. Bentinck had been a "silent" member of Commons for some time. An almost fanatical horse-racing advocate, he had previously refused to take any responsibility within the Commons or party that would interfere with his racing activities. In some manner the Corn Law situation aroused his emotions, and his slashing, vituperative attacks on Peel were to cause the Prime Minister personal concern. Disraeli was not a member of the "country gentlemen" group. He was a brilliant, ambitious man of letters and politician whose intellectual gifts and flamboyant dress had earned him the suspicions of his colleagues. He had unsuccessfully sought office in 1841, and he now seized the opportunity to become one of the leaders of a group who had formerly treated him with contempt and whose mentality he despised. Disraeli, above all else an opportunist, became a dazzling speaker for the generally inarticulate. His passionless, sarcastic speeches did not appear to cause Peel the same personal irritation as those of Bentinck, but they were heartily endorsed by the Protectionist group and added to the weight of the opposition.

In late January, Peel presented his proposals concerning the Corn Laws. As he had earlier decided, he did not single out agriculture in his reform, but he presented a general review of the tariff system in which all protected
interests were considered. In a rather dull and long speech, he slowly worked toward what was, for many, the only real issue. Coming finally to the Corn Laws, he proposed a reduction in the duties on foreign corn for three years with an end to the duties in 1849. The speech was virtually anticlimatic. Peel had deliberately set out to relieve the tension of the issue by burying it in a general tariff reform. Although he accomplished this goal to some extent, the result satisfied no one. The many complicated changes appeared tedious and irrelevant to many. The immediate admission of maize and colonial corn was not enough for the doctrinaire Free Traders. The three-year transition period, with no mention of compensation (although there was to be some), was not enough for the half-hearted Protectionists who wanted some compromise to offer their constituents in order to justify their support of the reform. Peel was satisfied, however, to have presented his program, and he stepped back to await the furor.

The remainder of January was filled with political turmoil within the Conservative ranks. Peel maintained a calm exterior but could not help but feel the increased tension. He answered letters of resignation with quiet replies. To some of those who hesitated between resignation and acceptance of his program he wrote equally quiet, articulate letters of

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argument for his policies.  

Peel also had to deal with the problem of by-elections. Knowing the opinion of a majority of their constituents, Free Trade converts from Protectionist constituencies faced the decision of whether to stand for re-election. Peel's new Ministers, who had resigned to seek re-election as was the custom, were especially vulnerable.

Peel's relative secrecy about his program had prevented the Protectionists from formulating an opposing proposition. Some Protectionists, disappointed at Russell's previous inability to form a government, urged him to oppose Peel's program. But as the choosing of sides began to stabilize, Peel became relatively assured of the bill's passage. The mass of Free Traders would support him. Many others would support his program entirely because of the confidence they had in him as an individual. Many who were not averse to repeal of the Corn Laws but who could not bring themselves to accept the doctrine of the Anti-Corn Law League, could accept Peel's proposals. Unless there was a major shift, victory in Commons was assured. But the Protectionists in the Conservative Party were determined to fight the program. The Central Agricultural Protection Society (first organized in 1844 by the Duke of Richmond to counter League activities) dropped its rule of nonintervention in politics and began to exert noticeable pressure on Conservative M.P.'s sitting for rural counties and boroughs. Society

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agitators also began to work in other areas where moderates, disappointed by Peel's program and undecided as to the future, were feeling pressure from their constituents.21

There was a positive political (and personal) note in the midst of the growing tension surrounding the Prime Minister. Richard Cobden's hostility toward Peel was well known, but its basis had always been a mystery to Peel. He now discovered that it stemmed from an incident in 1843 during which Peel chose to consider remarks made by Cobden in Commons as personal, and had replied in kind. Although Peel retracted his remarks shortly thereafter, being assured by Cobden that his had been directed at the office of the Prime Minister rather than at the individual holding that office, Cobden had felt that the retraction was insincere and had allowed his personal feelings to become quite bitter over the intervening years. Peace-making efforts by Graham and Harriet Martineau were successful, and they brought Peel the full support of Cobden and the League.22

The actual debates on the Corn Laws are significant, of course. But they are important to this study chiefly in the context of their length and the violence of the personal attacks against Peel levied by Disraeli, Bentinck and others.


Possibly even more important than the debates at this juncture was the introduction of the Irish bill. Peel wanted to finish dealing with the Corn Laws before allowing debate to begin on the Irish protection of life bill. He lost that fight. Bentinck then formed an alliance with O'Brien, leader of the Young Ireland group, to prolong debate on this bill as long as possible to allow the Protectionists more time in which to mount an attack on the Corn Law reforms. The resultant stultifying Commons sessions robbed Peel of his remaining reserves of strength, elasticity and temper. Peel recognized the delay tactics, but could do nothing about the situation.23

As debate on the Corn Laws moved slowly ahead, Bentinck and Disraeli lost no opportunity to criticize Peel in an increasingly personal manner. Peel kept his temper but Jonathan Peel (Sir Robert's brother and M.P. from Huntingdon Borough) lost his and challenged Disraeli to a duel after Disraeli had finished a particularly acrimonious speech against the Prime Minister. Fortunately, several persons intervened and the duel was averted. Finally, in the middle of May after much delay, the tariff reform program had progressed to final speeches before a vote on the third reading. Two speeches on this occasion were significant. The first, another attack by Disraeli, was unparalleled in its studied and sustained invective. His cohort laughed at his sallies and cheered at the diatribe. Peel

also spoke that evening. It was his last speech in the Corn Law debates. The speech was marked by interruptions from the Protectionist benches and a rare near-breakdown by the Prime Minister as he attempted once again to defend his career and ambitions. After summarizing the rationale for repeal, his final remarks reflected the heart of his political philosophy:

My earnest wish has been, during my tenure of power, to impress the people of this country with a belief that the legislature was animated with a sincere desire to frame its legislation upon the principle of equity and justice. I have a strong belief that the greatest object which we or any other government can contemplate should be to elevate the social condition of that class of the people with whom we are brought into no direct relationship by the exercise of the elective franchise.24

With the gladiatorial forensics momentarily lulled, Commons divided for the third time and Peel's program was approved.

Peel had successfully passed one major hurdle but had another yet to go. Passage of repeal through the less-disciplined House of Lords remained, and the specter of the Irish protection of life bill and the possible defeat of Peel's Ministry remained on the immediate horizon. It should also be noted that prolonged debate over the tariff reforms and the delaying tactics employed during debate of the Irish bill had brought passage of other legislation to a complete halt for over a month.

24Speeches, 4:687-696 (15 May 1846).
The House of Lords was thick with rumors of deals and alliances. Peel realized that the success of the bill depended again on the actions of the Protectionist group. However, Russell's reassertion of command over the Whig party provided the final pressure needed. Russell, speaking to a meeting of Whig Peers, told them that he would not support any attempt to alter the tariff program. He continued by saying that if the government was defeated on the Corn Law issue, he would not consent to continue in the leadership of the Whig party. Whig support was assured, and several days later the tariff program passed the crucial second reading, the reading on which Protectionists had hoped to defeat the program.

From that point forward the tariff reform bill was almost of secondary importance. Resistance to the program lessened, and its final passage was assured. Of primary importance was the Irish bill and its effect on Peel's Ministry. Norman Gash refers to this bill as Peel's "silver bullet."\(^{25}\) It surely was in the sense that it was the immediate catalyst for the downfall of Peel's government; but it was not in the sense that the bullet is normally unforeseen. Peel was fully aware that the days of his Ministry were numbered. Although he first expected to be beaten on a ten-hour factory labor bill (which was carried by Whig and some Protectionist support, much to the disgust of Bentinck), he correctly identified the

\(^{25}\)Gash, Peel, p. 592.
Irish bill as the instrument by which the Protectionists would have their revenge.

In early June, House of Commons Liberals met with Russell to decide upon their course of action on the Irish bill. With the foreknowledge that many Protectionists would oppose the measure, their virtually unanimous decision to join in opposition meant the end of the Peel Ministry. But they decided not to push action on that bill until the Corn Law measures were safely through the House of Lords. The Irish members, who had shown their mastery of parliamentary maneuvering during the early stages of debate on the protection of life bill, pledged to continue debate until the tariff issue was completed. Peel knew of this decision and probably approved, knowing that it was the best he could hope for under the circumstances. One cannot help but wonder if he felt relief at the approach of the end. The aftermath of losing this issue would, at least, be peaceful. Before the relaxation, however, there was one more severe test of his emotions.

During debate on the second reading of the Irish bill, Bentinck saw fit to attack Peel once again with an outburst which was unduly savage and more incoherent than was usual even for him. This savage attack contained personal refer-

26 This attack disgusted most members of Commons. But Bentinck's accusation had also included reference to Peel's break with Canning in 1827, about which an air of mystery still prevailed. That Peel did not immediately answer the charge added "fuel to the fire." In actuality, Peel had been so angered by the remarks that he felt a duel was necessary to regain his personal honor.
ences to Peel's actions, accusing him of "base and dishonest conduct" and "conduct inconsistent with the duty of a Minister to his Sovereign." Under normal circumstances Peel probably would have dismissed the remarks. But the strain of the past several months finally told. He interpreted the attack as a personal affront to his honor and asked Lincoln to act as his second. Only after much argument and Lincoln's appeal for consideration of the feelings of the Queen did Peel allow himself to be dissuaded.

In late June the carefully orchestrated end to Peel's Ministry was accomplished. Within a few hours of each other, the separate actions of passage of the Corn Law repeal in Lords and the defeat of the Irish bill in Commons were completed. Three days later the resignation of the government was announced in both Houses. Such diverse personalities as Richard Cobden and the Duke of Wellington had urged Peel to dissolve Parliament and seek re-election under the Free Trade banner. Peel saw necessary compromises in such a program which he was unwilling to make. Possibly, he was looking forward to the opportunity to rest.

Peel's final speech was completely in keeping with his manner. In his usual dry style he noted that if he had failed


28Lord Lincoln, son and heir of the powerful Duke of Newcastle, was Peel's Irish Secretary.

29Morley, Cobden, 2:390-401.
to carry the tariff reforms he would have dissolved Parliament and appealed to the country. That action had not been necessary, and there was no advantage to be gained from an election now. After noting several of the accomplishments of his Ministry, he again turned to the repeal issue. Surprisingly, after observing that the repeal had been accomplished by groups not normally found in concert, he gave credit for the repeal to Richard Cobden. His final words reiterated a maxim of his political philosophy:

...but it may be that I shall leave a name sometimes remembered with expressions of good will in the abodes of those whose lot it is to labor, and to earn their daily bread by the sweat of their brow, when they shall recruit their exhausted strength with abundant and untaxed food, the sweeter because it is no longer leavened by a sense of injustice.

Peel conducted himself throughout this entire affair in keeping with the political precepts to which he had adhered for the past twenty years. He had always been guided by his sense of what the national interest required, and he refused to allow party obligations or the effects of his actions upon party

30 This remark caused misgivings among Peel's supporters. Peelites and Liberals who supported Peel felt they were being ignored. Protectionists felt it was a deliberate insult to them since Cobden had so strongly attacked the landed aristocracy. Gash (Peel, p. 606) feels it was more likely a quirk in Peel's character; a compulsive integrity which led him to deprecate personal claims in favor of someone who might have supported a now-successful argument before Peel became converted to it; Elie Halevy, The History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century, vol. 4: The Victorian Years, 1841-1895 (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961), p. 148.

unity to temper his course of action. He had a strong sense of loyalty in private relationships but in public affairs was not troubled by accusations of betrayal or by fear that his actions would undoubtedly sacrifice the careers of some who had chosen to follow him. In June 1846, though physically and emotionally exhausted and undoubtedly bitter at the reactions of those who he felt had not risen to the standards expected of members of the Imperial legislature, he must have had a sense of deep satisfaction.

Those seven months of the famine crisis and Corn Law debates had set the stage for the next several years of Peel's life. He never forgot the "slings and arrows" of the Protectionist invective and resolved never again to place himself in such a situation. He could not, however, bring himself to retire completely from politics. His decision to attempt to continue in politics in only a minor role produced a curious admixture within his personal and political life and had a noticeable effect on the course of English politics.
Implicit in Sir Robert Peel's decision to seek repeal of the Corn Laws was the destruction of the Conservative party. Virtually inherent in this decision was the downfall of his Ministry. There is ample evidence to indicate that he was aware of both possibilities, did not consider the former a compelling argument to change his course of action, and welcomed the latter.

The political fortunes of his followers were also affected by his decision. These Peelites, as they were often called (without definitive amplification), supported Peel for a variety of reasons. In so doing, however, they tied themselves to a man whose political philosophy eschewed political organization in favor of the national interest. The characteristics of this group and the actions of certain individuals within it are crucial to an examination of Sir Robert Peel's last years. For during the Ministry of Lord John Russell, Peel's hesitancy to continue as Peelite leader and the inability of any other member of that group to assume leadership, had a visible effect on the success of the government and the future of political parties in England.
For the purposes of this study, a "Peelite" is defined as a Free Trade Conservative who, as a member of Parliament, voted with Peel during the 1846 division, or who joined the group later.¹ A Peelite in the purest sense would be one who was a friend of Peel, who followed him, and who believed in free trade. Aside from the possibility that the latter definition is erroneous in that the somewhat withdrawn and aloof Peel had very few close friends, there remain individuals who do not fit either definition but who should be considered Peelites.

The largest group to whom the term Peelites might apply is generally considered to be that group of 112 Conservative party members who voted in support of Peel in February 1846 during the first division on repeal of the Corn Laws. For a more complete understanding of the term, however, it is necessary to subdivide this group and actually go back to the formation of Peel's new Cabinet in December 1845. One might argue that all of the members of that rebuilt Cabinet were Peelites by definition, but an examination of their individual positions appears to negate this argument and also provides some insight into the complexity of the Peelite group.

¹Addition of the phrase "or who joined the group later" admittedly renders the definition clumsy. But without this addition, the definition excludes William E. Gladstone, who, though a strong supporter of Peel, had vacated his Commons seat (Newark) when he accepted the Colonial Secretaryship in December and was unable to find another seat prior to the fall of Peel's Ministry.
Among the Cabinet officers in Commons, only three (Graham, Herbert and Lincoln) fit the definition of "pure" Peelite as postulated above. Gladstone should be considered a fourth although, of course, he was not in the Commons at that time. Lord Granville Somerset was a less enthusiastic exponent of free trade and was probably closer to Wellington than Peel. Henry Goulburn was as close a friend as Peel had, followed him during the Corn Law affair, but was not a Free Trader. He supported Peel as a bulwark against unrestrained democracy.\(^2\)

In the House of Lords, Aberdeen, the Foreign Secretary, supported Peel because the present Ministry provided him the opportunity to carry out his foreign policy (some years later he confessed to the Queen that he had never understood the question of free trade).\(^3\) In late 1845 he wished to continue his negotiations with the United States over the Oregon question and to shut Palmerston out of the Foreign Office. He was an old acquaintance and Cabinet colleague of Peel's and followed him, but was a Free Trader only by chance. The Duke of Buccleuch had initially supported Stanley in the belief that the Irish potato famine was being used as a pretext for repeal of the Corn Laws. He accepted a post in the new Cabinet reluctantly,

\(^2\)Goulburn to Peel, 30 Nov. 1845, quoted in Mahon and Cardwell, ed., *Peel Memoirs*, 2:201-207.

appearing to feel that repeal was a matter of necessity simply to settle the issue.\footnote{Buccleuch to Peel, 22 Dec. 1845, quoted in Mahon and Cardwell, ed., \textit{Peel Memoirs}, 2:254-257.} Aberdeen probably had some influence over him (as a fellow Scot), but Buccleuch was not particularly close to Peel. He was a Peelite, then, only in the sense that he followed Peel in 1845-46. Lord Dalhousie, though befriended by Peel, appears to have been a follower of Wellington. But he was not unfriendly to Peel, followed him during the crisis and was an advocate of free trade, so must be considered a Peelite under the terms of the stated definition. The remainder of the Cabinet continued to mirror the conflicting views found among those discussed above. Lord Ellenborough (Admiralty) appears to have also looked to Wellington and, in fact, blamed Peel for a lack of support in 1844, when he had been recalled from the governor-generalship of India. He followed Peel, however, and seems to qualify as at least a moderate Free Trader. Lord Haddington (Privy Seal) was friendly towards Peel but not necessarily towards free trade. He appears to have supported repeal to keep Peel in office. Lord Lyndhurst (Lord Chancellor), though opposing repeal during Cabinet sessions in November and believing that the government would not be able to carry the measure, stayed because he was unwilling to desert the government. Lyndhurst does not appear to have been particularly interested in free trade. Lord St. Germans (Post Office) had always been a Protectionist but accepted
repeal when provisions were made for agricultural compensation. Once converted, he became a strong ally. In contrast, Lord Ripon had been an advocate of free trade for more than thirty years. He was a close follower of Peel and an old acquaintance.

The remaining member of the Cabinet, the Duke of Wellington, is somewhat of an enigma. He was the most powerful figure in the Lords. Most scholars agree that he was never a Free Trader, and that his relations with Peel were not always comfortable. But the bulwark of his political philosophy was support of the Queen, and he may have decided to support Peel for that reason and in hopes that the Conservative Party could be saved from destruction.

Peel did not feel it was necessary for a Minister to present himself for re-election if newly appointed or, in fact, to have a seat in Parliament to continue in office. Those of his Ministers who did feel that re-election was necessary quickly discovered the Protectionist mood of the great landed proprietors and borough-mongers. Gladstone,

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5Elizabeth Longford in Wellington, Pillar of State, feels that basic differences in the personalities of the two men caused this seeming lack of cooperation. She points out, however, that they had been political companions since the 1830s, had great respect for each other, were aware of their differences, and still managed to work quite effectively together.


7Jones and Ericson, Peelites, p. 19 (note).
declining even to try for re-election in Newark (controlled by the Duke of Newcastle), was unable to find another seat and, although holding the portfolio of the Colonial Office, was not present in the Commons during the six months of Peel's government. Lord Lincoln, given the Irish Secretaryship, was turned out of Nottingham by his father, the same Duke of Newcastle, and did not find another seat in time to assist Peel's program.

One of the more interesting constitutional situations which arose during this period was involved with the question of whether a Conservative, elected as a Protectionist and now turned Free Trader, was obligated to let his constituents approve his change of philosophy. Peel maintained that Parliament had the right to determine this change of policy without seeking electoral approval. But many voters and representatives alike did not share this view. In a majority of cases, Conservatives who resigned to seek re-election or simply resigned were replaced by Protectionists in time for the crucial division of February, 1846.8

There is evidence to support the view that Peel was somewhat unsure of his new Cabinet. The half-hearted support of some of his Ministers convinced him of the wisdom of postponing full Cabinet discussion of his program until a short time before the opening of Parliament, to discourage controversy among them. In view of his changed views on compensation, and the fact that St. Germans had agreed to serve in the Cabi-

8Jones and Ericson, Peelites, p. 20.
net only after being reassured on the scope of that compensation, Peel's concern was probably well-founded. The full Cabinet did, however, approve the plan without great discussion, with a measure of pressure from the Prime Minister.\(^9\)

Peel, in choosing the mover and seconder of the introduction of his measure in the House of Commons, was apparently trying to maintain an impression of party unity, although it must have been clear to all by that time that the Conservative party had become two warring factions. Lord Francis Egerton, a Protectionist, agreed to move the address with the reservation that his acceptance of this task would not bind him to unqualified support. Egerton did, as it turned out, choose to support Peel throughout. Edmund B. Denison, a member of the Central Agricultural Protection Society, agreed to second, although he later told Commons that the full extent of Peel's plans had not been made clear to him at the time he consented to the request of the Prime Minister. Denison, in fact, voted entirely with the Protectionists. In the Lords, Wellington received two refusals before Lord Home (a Conservative Scottish Representative Peer) agreed to move the address. Wellington almost had to second the measure himself, but finally secured the services of Baron de Ros, a Protectionist, who later voted against the measure.\(^10\)


\(^10\)Ibid., 2:266-268.
Although Peel's secrecy incurred the displeasure of many of his followers, it was effective in preventing the growth of a strong anti-repeal bloc during the weeks before the opening of Parliament. As late as the middle of January, neither Bentinck in the Commons nor Stanley in the Lords could be sure that Peel was about to ask for total repeal. Once the Prime Minister revealed his program, the Protectionists were not in a position to rally support from outside their own ranks.\(^\text{11}\)

Peel presented his program to Commons in late January, 1846. Debate began in early February, and the crucial first division took place in late February. This vote created the group traditionally referred to as the "112." A comparison of the division list in Hansard and biographical data in Dod's Parliamentary Companion produces some questions, but none of major importance. On the second division there were only 102 "Peelites," but on the third division there were 113.

An examination also appears to indicate that the Peelites did not add to the debates in proportion to the amount of talent present in the group. Twenty-two members challenged Protectionist hostility by placing their views before the Commons during the February debate, and four others spoke at other times. These speakers may be placed in four general categories, although several fit equally well into more than one, demonstrating again the range of opinions present in the Peelite section.

\(^{11}\)Jones and Ericson, Peelites, p. 28.
Individuals such as Edward Cardwell, Sidney Herbert and Sir George Clerk, along with Peel and Graham, may be considered convinced Free Traders. Individuals in a second category, while they made friendly references to the theory of free trade, primarily stressed the necessity of ending a controversy which had become dangerous. Henry Baillie (Inverness) and Viscount Villiers (Cirencester) were apprehensive about the possibility of uprisings against the gentry. Colonel Thomas Wood (Middlesex) simply wanted to end the issue which had been dividing the manufacturing and agricultural interests.  

Members of a third category appear to have been motivated by their confidence in Peel. Lord Northland (Dungannon), a Conservative and the eldest son of the Earl of Ranfurly, felt that Peel's measures were unnecessary, but if they must be, preferred that Peel implement them rather than Russell. Vernon (East Retford) preferred a slightly higher fixed duty, but he stated that he had been a follower of Peel since 1836, and he would continue to be. This category was probably most adequately represented by Lord Sandon (Liverpool), a Conservative. Sandon "disapproved the measure proposed" but intended to support it with his vote because he wished to continue to support Peel's enlightened opinions.  

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The fourth category is best labeled "miscellaneous." The speakers in this category had a variety of motives for their positions, from Milnes (Pontefract), who stated that Russell's refusal to take office left him with no alternative but to support Peel even though he had no confidence in him, to Henry Goulburn, Chancellor of the Exchequer and one of Peel's oldest friends, who stated that he had opposed repeal in November but had changed his position in view of the calamity in Ireland. 14

Two other motivations, though not openly expressed, are strong possibilities. Political expediency cannot ever be far from the central thinking of any politician. Although the Conservative ranks contained a few of those men who placed personal convictions above political considerations (and many of them paid for it), others achieved re-election in 1847, suggesting the strong possibility that they assessed the tenor of political feeling in their constituencies in early 1846, and, having no deep personal feelings to refute their conclusions, voted as their constituents demanded. The second unspoken motivation is probably even more vague. It is possible that some of these former Conservatives had caught the progressive fever and wanted to change their political philosophy. The political current was changing both in England and on the Continent, and many of the Peelites seemed to want

to be associated with that change.

For whatever reason, these 112 (or so) Conservatives combined with the Whig Free Traders and a few Radicals to follow Peel's lead in ending the major consideration upon which the Conservative party had been brought to power.

Conservative members of the House of Lords harbored a great deal of anti-repeal sentiment, and might well have come into conflict with Commons on this issue had it not been for the strength of the Duke of Wellington.

Wellington's relationship with Sir Robert Peel has been alluded to earlier. Relations between the two men were so distant that Graham actually advised Wellington regarding party tactics in Lords on the Corn Laws issue. In accordance with his loyalty to the Queen, Wellington was prepared to do anything possible to keep the government together. In this instance, of course, this meant insuring that Peel's program was accepted by the upper House. Lords Buccleuch and St. Germans acted as Peelite whips. Despite the development of an active Protectionist section headed by Stanley, and the secret sympathy of a great many of the members of Lords for the Protectionist cause, the Peelites carried almost half of the Conservative vote on the crucial second reading.\(^{15}\)

The Peelite members of the Lords were not impressive

during debate. Though victory here was less certain than in Commons, there was a reluctance on the part of the Peelites to speak strongly on the issue. In certain cases, perhaps this lack of enthusiasm was due to a definite uncertainty concerning the wisdom of the move; in others, it may have also stemmed from a reluctance to antagonize Protectionist friends. This reluctance was certainly not out of fear of the Protectionists, but more possibly from the hope that the Conservatives could find political unity again once the crisis had passed.

As of July, 1846, the Peelites were a political party (or more possibly a political group) without a leader. But this group included some of the finest talent in Parliament. As William E. Gladstone noted in an unpublished letter written in 1855:

"... Though they were some five and twenty or thirty gentlemen there was scarcely one among them who was not, for one reason or another, much above par as a member of Parliament. The direct influence of personal character, the derivative influence of great and important constituencies, long Parliamentary experience, high literary accomplishment, the weight that attaches to birth and connection; all of these were to be found among that small band of independent gentlemen in a degree far exceeding the proportion due to their numbers."17

16 During the January-June, 1846, period, Greville and others referred to the group as either "the Government" or sometimes "Peelites." After they left office, they were referred to as "the remnant of Peel's party" or the "112." Late in 1846, Goulburn called the group "our friends" or "our party."

Although he was speaking primarily of those closest to Peel, it is an acceptable definition of the Peelite group as a whole.

The eight Peelite members who were most prominent during the Opposition period divide into two age groups, a generation apart. The first group includes Peel, Aberdeen, Goulburn and Sir James Graham (in their fifties and sixties); the second, Dalhousie, Lincoln, Sidney Herbert and Gladstone (in their thirties). Three additional names are usually added to the latter group: Lord Canning, ex-undersecretary of state, Sir John Young, Peel's whip and Edward Cardwell, ex-undersecretary of the Treasury. The younger group was quite close, all having attended Oxford at the same time, and had formed close attachments with each other prior to coming to Parliament. The talent possessed by this group, and the power they held if they chose to vote together, was easily recognizable, especially by Lord John Russell.

Russell, hoping to strengthen his Ministry and, perhaps, to begin the process of dissolution of the Peelites, made offers to Herbert, Lincoln and Dalhousie in July, 1846. The offers were refused. He then turned to Graham who initially refused, then reconsidered when he learned the Queen had asked for him by name. Although, in Graham's case, the position was on the permanent council of the duchy of Lancaster and not political in nature, Russell had succeeded in establishing ties

with the Peelite group. He also, of course, had another avenue of approach through the Duke of Wellington, who had retained his post as Commander in chief. This encouraged his hope of more Peelite cooperation in the future.

By the end of the 1846 session the Peelites had achieved a sort of identity as a parliamentary section, having withstood Russell's attempts to win over some of the group's most important members, and also an attempt to reunite the Conservative party in the House of Lords. If Peel had chosen to give strength and organization to the section, he might have had as many as 110 members in Commons and a sizeable bloc in Lords as a following. Peel undoubtedly had greater stature than Russell within Parliament as well as in the whole of England. He might well have drawn enough Whigs away from Russell to form a party strong enough to form an administration. But he did not.

An alternate course of action would have been for Peel to retire completely from the political scene, so that his followers would have been forced to give up all hope of his return to power and seek places in other political sections. But he did not.

Peel's position, obviously, was of paramount importance. However, if his attitude at this time could be reduced to a single factor, that factor would have been the desire to pursue a perfectly independent course in Parliament and to
consider measures, not men. The fact that Peel followed neither of the courses discussed above meant that the Peelites had to continue the search for their political identity. Meanwhile, they existed in limbo, with their political goals a mystery to their contemporaries and, probably, to themselves.

It is very mystifying, even acknowledging the great esteem in which Sir Robert Peel was held by his followers, that the Peelite section remained virtually unable to operate as a group without him. His activities upon returning to office in December, 1845, and throughout the fight for repeal had been a negation of party politics. He had made a moral issue of repeal of the Corn Laws, willingly resigned from the highest attainable political office in England and suddenly and bluntly severed all party ties. He slighted the peers and kept almost everyone in the party in doubt as to his repeal program. These actions, and his complete unwillingness to provide any direction to his followers after the resignation of his Ministry notwithstanding, most of the Peelites remained loyal to Peel, and unwilling or unable to operate effectively in the vacuum he created, until his death in 1850.
CHAPTER III
PEEL AND THE PEELITES, 1847-1848

Peel left London immediately after his resignation. He was mentally and emotionally spent; and he was physically unwell. Peel was tired of politics and resentful of the verbal brickbats and backbiting he had received for accomplishing only that which he construed as necessary. He also could not help but feel a large measure of personal satisfaction from what he had accomplished.¹ The story of the Opposition "Minister-at-Large," the withdrawn, sensitive man who let memories of the Corn Law debates affect his personal and political judgment for the brief remainder of his life, begins here.

Peel made it very clear to his friends that he had no intention of returning to office or leading a party in the foreseeable future. For a short time he considered leaving Parliament altogether. However, probably out of loyalty to the Queen, he decided not to end his political career. He did

¹Peel wrote to Graham in early July, 1846: ...I heartily rejoice that we have concluded with honor a successful career as well as a desperate conflict. I could not have sustained it much longer... Few know what I have been suffering from noises and pains in the head. (Charles S. Parker, Life and Letters of Sir James Graham, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1907), 2:49.)
decide to maintain from this point on, a completely independent position in Parliament. His followers were dismayed at the seeming finality of his attitude. Sidney Herbert protested that no politician of Peel's standing had ever become a true independent. Gladstone went further, and accused Peel of defeatism. In the unpublished paper already quoted, Gladstone wrote:

And when in the midst of the struggle he [Peel] came to feel its true intensity he seems in his own mind to have substituted indifference about the destruction of the party which was so eminently his for previous excess of confidence in its being preserved. It might have been in his power to make some provision for the holding together, or for the reconstruction of that great Party which he had reared. . . .

Gladstone went on to criticize Peel's professed independent position as well as his entire attitude:

Prime Ministers unattached are dangerous; as great rafts would be dangerous floating unmoored in a harbor. . . . The position of Sir Robert Peel for the last four years of his life was a thoroughly false position. 3

Herbert, Gladstone and other Peelites such as Cardwell, Lincoln, Young and Goulburn were those in whose loyalty Peel might well have taken pride. Instead, his strongest emotion seems to have been one of chagrin and resentment against the hostile majority of the Conservative Party who had opposed him.

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2 Gash, Peel, p. 617.
Peel's attitude placed obvious limitations on the immediate political future of his followers. The younger Peelites were especially disconcerted by the rigidity of his position. It was undoubtedly a source of some pride to them to be associated with the greatest politician of the age, especially since Peel retained his popularity with the public. It was, nevertheless, disconcerting to realize that the leader had no intention of leading any further. Individual Peelites possessed of great political talents, could, of course, strike out on their own, but the combination of personal loyalty, intellectual conviction and the recent animosities made this independent action difficult. The opportunities were there, but the Peelites were unwilling to take advantage of them.

The brief remainder of the 1846 session gave some evidence of the position of Peel and his followers. Peel, who had had a cordial meeting with Lord John Russell immediately after Russell's takeover, supported the Government on two pieces of legislation. The first, a free trade measure to admit slave-grown sugar on the same terms as ordinary foreign sugar, thus removing the special higher rate formerly imposed against slave-grown sugar, passed by a substantial majority. The second, a proposed renewal of the Irish Arms Act, was withdrawn after the second reading. Peel scorned such timidity, but, despite early signs of weakness in the Whig administration, was determined not to move from his "noninvolvement" stance.
The Peelite group showed early signs of the indecision and splintering which was to plague it afterwards. Graham, Peel's closest friend, mirrored his wish to be disassociated from governmental positions and the party. Graham resigned from the Carlton Club to avoid being associated with attempts to reunite the Conservative Party. At the same time, as he told Gladstone, he wanted to continue to serve in Parliament, but as an independent. Further reflecting Peel's attitude, Graham appeared to feel no bitterness towards the Whigs; they were fairly in possession of power. But he would have nothing more to do with those Conservatives who had "displaced the late Government with a factious vote." He felt that it would be impossible to reconcile the differences between them.\(^4\) To continue to serve as a Member of the House of Commons but to avoid sitting with either the Whigs or Protectionists did pose a problem. Graham finally decided to sit as an Independent on the Opposition side.\(^5\)

At least three other Peelites--Lincoln, Dalhousie and Edward Cardwell--wanted to keep the Free Trade members of the Conservative Party together, possibly in a third party. But neither Peel nor Graham offered any encouragement to this scheme. The attempts to organize the Peelites as an independent force, as well as the refusals of Lincoln, Herbert and

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\(^4\)Morley, Life of Gladstone, 1:296.

Dalhousie to join the Whig Cabinet indicated that Peel and his followers were, at least, on common ground in their determination to avoid a formal alliance with the Whigs.

In the Peelite search for a political identity, the autumn of 1846 was a climactic period, for they found themselves searching for the answers to several critical questions. What would their positions be when Parliament assembled in 1847? Should they attempt to function as a section or go in with no plan or policy? The answers to these questions became more important as it became obvious that the Conservative Party under Stanley was making an attempt to bring several Peelites into their group. Goulburn was now convinced that, if some measures were not taken to keep the Peelites together, most would attach themselves to Stanley.6

In an effort to prevent Peelite defections, Goulburn met with Cardwell, Young, Lincoln and Francis Bonham in early December, 1846. In order to demonstrate the continued vitality of the Peelite faction, this group of four agreed to send out the customary pre-session letters to all Peel supporters. Goulburn sent a very carefully prepared letter to Peel, urging that he give leadership to the group, but to no avail. Peel

6The obvious barriers to such a move were the presence of Bentinck in the Protectionist hierarchy as well as Stanley's refusal to forgive Graham for his support of repeal. Still, there appeared to be tendency among Peelites to continue to regard themselves as Conservatives; Bonham to Peel, 12 Nov. 1846, quoted in Jones and Ericson, Peelites, p. 60.
stuck to his decision. He had never been fond of party politics
and, although he had recognized the necessity of parties in the
past, he was determined not to be entrapped again. 7 His com-
ments in a letter to Hardinge do not require deep analysis:

I intend to keep aloof from party combinations. So far as a man can be justified in forming such a
resolution, I am determined not again to resume
office.

I will take care not again to burn my fingers
by organizing a party. There is too much truth
in the saying, "the head of the party must be
directed by the tail." As heads see, and tails
are blind, I think heads are the best judges as
to the course to be taken. 8

He also made it very clear to Goulburn that, after the treatment
he had received at the hands of the landed aristocracy, he would
take pains not to place himself again in a similar position.

Peel refused to allow use of his name on the pre-session
letter. He told Goulburn that he did not object to the use of
any other name, but personally felt the entire matter of an
attendance summons might be very difficult. Graham also was
opposed to the idea and expressed his feelings to Goulburn.
He pointed out that Young had formerly been the accustomed
channel for political communications from Peel to his followers,
and Young's signature on this letter might give the false
impression that the letter had been written by Peel. The
younger Peelites must have felt renewed disappointment at

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7 Norman Gash, "Peel and the Party System, 1830-1850,"
Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, London. Fifth

this development, for Peel's arguments against accepting leadership of the group were far from conclusive. Goulburn himself accepted Peel's decision, but saw fit to remark that it would be difficult to avoid the leadership, whether or not Peel wanted it. Lincoln reported to Peel in early January of 1847 that 240 letters had been dispatched and approximately 90 replies had been received.⁹

In the spring of 1847, Goulburn tentatively raised the question of some communication concerning tactics between the two wings of the Conservative party. He received no encouragement from Peel. Unfortunately, at the time Goulburn's letter arrived, Peel had been going through his 1845 correspondence, and all his hurt feelings had been revived. He replied to Goulburn:

I do not wish to be any impediment whatever to the reunion of the Conservative body, but I cannot be a party to the attempt at reunion. . . . I quite admit however that my position is a peculiar one, justifying feelings on my part which others perhaps need not, perhaps ought not to entertain, and I repeat with the utmost sincerity that I have not the slightest wish to obstruct or discourage any union into which they might be disposed to enter.¹⁰

Peel continued to find Goulburn optimistic, but he still found

⁹The letters merely informed selected Conservatives of the day on which Parliament would meet and asked if the Members would be in their places. The 90 replies received might be taken as proof of the continuing (for the moment) solidarity of the Peelite bloc. (Parker, Graham, 2:53.)

¹⁰Peel to Goulburn, 3 April 1847, quoted in Gash, Peel, p. 622.
it easy to conclude, when brooding over the events of his Ministry, that the causes of party disunity went back beyond 1845.

But to Peel a more immediate problem than reunion of the Conservatives was the Irish famine, with which the Whig administration seemed unable to deal effectively. Indeed, the weakness of the Whigs made the session of 1847 barren in every respect: in the view of The Times of 2 July 1847, many more such sessions would ruin the empire. The lack of significant legislation was, however, not so much an instance of Whig incapacity as it was their desire to mark time before the general elections of that summer.

One of the first acts of the government at the beginning of the session was to suspend the Corn Law duties of the Navigating Acts. England was also in financial trouble, despite the surplus left by Peel's Government, and Charles Wood, the Whig Chancellor of the Exchequer, had to ask for approval for a substantial loan. Wood had already communicated with Peel on two occasions, once by letter in December, 1846, and again, through Sir John Young, at the beginning of the 1847 session. In both instances Wood had gone to some length to praise Peel's financial program and state that his aim was to continue in the same vein.

At the beginning of February, Edward Ellice, the Whig general man of business, asked if he could consult with Peel on financial matters, and relay Peel's remarks to Wood. Peel
expressed interest in such a discussion, and agreed to talk
directly to Wood. Wood conferred discreetly with Peel in early
February and received assurances that Peel would support a
strong attempt by the government to meet the revenue shortage
by direct taxation. Peel had been hesitant concerning the
practicability of the idea when Ellice presented it in their
initial meeting, but now agreed to support the action provided
Wood consider certain points Peel thought should receive
particular emphasis. He cautioned Wood that to bring forward
any proposals without being absolutely sure of the strength
to carry them would be worse than useless, since defeat would
be a blow not only to the stability of the administration but
to the whole principle of the income tax. Second, he felt
that the state of Ireland at the moment made imposition of
the income tax there questionable. Peel felt that the idea
of a time limit on the tax as a means of forestalling criticism
might prove a restriction on future ministerial action. He
advised the Whigs to wait until the next Parliamentary ses-
sion to advance the entire matter, since the current tax,
due to expire in 1848, would be a major topic of discussion.
However, if the Whigs felt it necessary to bring the tax forward
in 1847, Peel pledged to support the action. He further cau-
tioned, however, that he could not and would not speak for
anyone but himself. Wood evidently took Peel's words to heart
and convinced the Whig leadership to do likewise.\textsuperscript{11}

Though the Cabinet decided not to push the taxation program, there were continuing problems in other areas. Peel himself was critical of the famine relief programs, and was mistrustful of Russell's attitude toward Bentinck. Peel did, however, continue to support the government, and contributed heavily to the defeat of Bentinck's proposal for a loan to Irish railway companies.\textsuperscript{12} During the next two months he supported the government in such widely diverse areas as a motion by the Opposition to repudiate a Russian loan because of Austrian annexation of Cracow, and on a Whig motion for an educational scheme which drew much Radical and Dissenting opposition. He again supported the government in May during a debate on financial policy and the Bank of England.

This session, the last of the 1841 parliament, ended in July. The Whig administration was still intact, but had no appearance of strength either at home or abroad. Earlier in the session Peel had concluded that Russell did not exert


\textsuperscript{12}Bentinck believed that his "political fame" depended on the success of this measure, and he warned his father that no one in their family should, under any circumstances, acquire a financial interest in the Irish railways. (Bentinck to Portland, 19 Feb. 1847, quoted in Jones and Ericson, \textit{Peelites}, p. 63 note.). Bentinck's motives were good; and his economic vision better than many of his contemporaries. History does not generally treat him as a perceptive man; Benjamin Disraeli, \textit{Lord George Bentinck} (New York: E. P. Dutton Co., 1905), pp. 243-257.
the authority and determination expected of a Prime Minister. The final weeks of the session, characterized by abandoned bills and the increasing independence of Palmerston in the Foreign Office, did nothing to change Peel's opinion.

The Peelites faced the general election of 1847 with at least the rudiments of organization. Bonham continued to act as agent, and Young kept a record of election results and finances. The Peelites as a group did quite well. This was gratifying since the Protectionists had sustained severe losses. The "appeal to the electorate," which had been such a

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13 A further note of the definition of the term "party" is pertinent here. A party, to be a party, must have a leader. Though a majority of the Peelites continued to consider Peel the leader, he declined to lead. A party usually has a structure composed of officers with specific duties, and a treasury. Although Sir John Young, acting with the advice of Goulburn, Lincoln and others, attempted to function as a party whip, the Peelites did not appear to have either a structure or a treasury. The members of a party usually vote together. The Peelite group had split on both Bentinck's Irish Railways bill and the Factories bill (introduced in February, 1847). Even under the nebulous Victorian criteria for a party, the Peelites did not qualify.

14 Most Peelites were successful in the election, but the going was not always easy. The result was that several of Peel's close friends found new constituencies which were more ideologically cramped than their previous ones. Cardwell (Liverpool) did continue to have as much freedom as he desired. Graham (now representing Ripon) was aware that his patron (Earl de Grey, Lord Ripon's brother) was much less liberal in religious matters than Graham would have wished. Lincoln (Falkirk) had a large group of Ultra-Protestant constituents. Gladstone (now sitting for Oxford University after more than a year with no seat) was faced with constituents who considered the Conservative Party the protector of the Established Church, and Sidney Herbert had been returned by an agricultural constituency which had been unexpectedly tolerant of his commercial views, but which could certainly not be considered "safe."
popular theme during the Corn Law debates of 1846, appears to have been an endorsement of Peel and free trade. In fact, according to Bonham, religious policy was more of a stumbling block than economic policy.\textsuperscript{15} Peel was returned for Tamworth, although he received invitations to stand for North Lancashire, the City and several other large towns. He was pressed by Lord Brougham to accept the invitation of the City of London, but remained loyal to Tamworth.\textsuperscript{16} He was, perhaps, loath to exchange the relative freedom of his old constituency for the problems of a larger urban electorate.

The nominal strength of the Whig government had increased. In actuality, however, in a House of Commons with at least four discernible groups, the government could regularly depend on less than half of the total number of members.\textsuperscript{17}

To many, it now seemed that the government would either have to adopt a more radical policy or be content to rely on the uncertain support of Peelites and Protectionists. In either case, Peel's position in the future would be crucial, and was still in doubt. In September, 1847, the Queen requested information from Aberdeen as to Peel's intentions and the strength of the Peelite group. Aberdeen's rather bleak reply

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{15} Gash, Peel, p. 625.
\bibitem{16} Peel to Brougham, 19 April 1847, quoted in Parker, ed., Peel, private papers, 3:486.
\end{thebibliography}
was that, in his mind, the basis of party consisted either in the possession or pursuit of office. Since Peel was not interested in either, it could not be said that he had a party at all. This surprised the Queen, but when apprised of the Queen's reaction by Aberdeen, Peel stated that he could not understand her surprise, since he had discussed his position with her on several occasions.

As noncommittal as Peel's position continued to be, events during the latter half of 1847 continued to demonstrate that the Whig government relied heavily upon him for support.

The boom in railway construction since 1844 had strained the entire economy. The potato failure in 1845 and 1846 had produced high prices and a large scale search for food. The Bank of England was not in a position to check speculation. The situation grew markedly worse when, in the summer of 1847, just as prospects began to brighten, the corn market collapsed. Pressure immediately began to grow to suspend Peel's 1844 Bank Charter Act. In late October, Wood called on Peel several times in the course of two days to seek advice. He felt that pressure on the government would make suspension of the 1844 act necessary, and solicited Peel's help. Peel did not feel that the situation warranted suspension, but again pledged to support

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18Although Peel had canvassed Tamworth and the outlying hamlets, he had professed little interest in the results of the election and less interest in the various estimates of the size of the Peelite group; Aberdeen to Peel, 18 Sept. 1847 and Peel to Aberdeen, 22 Sept. 1847, quoted in Gash, Peel, p. 627.
whatever position the government took. In fact, Peel actively assisted the Whigs. He helped Wood draft a letter to the Bank concerning suspension. He spoke with Prince Albert at length on the problem, taking care that all his remarks were conveyed to Russell so that the Prime Minister was fully aware of what information the Royal Family possessed. When, finally, the Cabinet did decide to suspend the act, Peel fully supported the decision.19

Parliament was called together in late November, 1847, to discuss the facts of the financial crisis. An attack by Protectionists, private bankers and Scottish members on the Bank Charter Act was anticipated. What emerged was a lengthy, confused discussion which not only appeared to be an inquest on the 1844 act, but also of the entire commercial and financial policy of Peel's Ministry. Wood defended Peel's work and refused to accept the argument that its failure to prevent the crisis indicated its lack of effectiveness. Peel supported the government throughout. In a speech in early December, he defended the 1844 act but endorsed the decision of the government to suspend it in this situation. He further supported the specific motions being debated at that time, that of establishment of a select commission to study the crisis and the effect of the Bank Charter Act upon it. Peel, technically a member of the Opposition, emerged as a major spokesman for

19Gash, Peel, p. 629; Disraeli, Bentinck, pp. 299-301.
the government in this affair.20

The confidential relations between Peel and Charles Wood during 1847 did not help Peel's position within his own party. The 1848 Parliamentary session demonstrated further that Peel was becoming a captive of Whig policy. In many respects he did not think that the Whigs conducted themselves professionally, but he had pledged himself in his own mind to support the government unless their position became one which he positively could not support. Accordingly, the support he gave probably allowed Russell's Ministry to remain in power far longer than it would have under normal circumstances.

Peel's fiscal policies had always been the primary bond among the Peelites. It is interesting, then, to note the Peelite response to the two important divisions which arose during the 1848 session: the first in the middle of February when Herries, the Protectionist's financial expert, moved to amend the Bank Charter Act; the second at the beginning of June, when Herries introduced an amendment to the government program to reform the Navigation Acts. The amendment would have maintained the acts in their existing form.

Herries' proposed amendment of the Bank Charter Act would have modified it on the grounds that the recent panic had proven that the act needed review. The findings of the commission appointed in December, 1847, had shown clearly that the act was not responsible for the crisis. The danger that

the Bank could not back its note issue with gold had been removed in 1844, but there remained the alternative danger that the bank could not meet the claims of its depositors in notes. The crisis was one of credit, not currency. Few Peelites bothered to appear in this division, although a majority of them had supported the government (and Peel) in late 1847, in the division concerning the membership of the select commission.21

The division on Herries' proposal concerning the Navigation Acts was just a preliminary to the battle on the same subject which erupted in the 1849 session. It was important as a glaring indicator of the trouble to come. During debate on the second reading, Peel delivered a very effective speech in favor of the government position. He criticized and virtually destroyed the Protectionist argument, leaving Russell (in Russell's own words) with nothing more to be said. Herries' amendment was defeated, with a majority of the Peelites supporting Peel.22

Another issue on which Peel's supporters were more aggressive in support of the government against the combined opposition of Protectionists and Radicals was the renewal of the income tax. Peel, Goulburn, Cardwell and Gladstone all contributed to the debate on the side of the Whigs. A hostile

21Jones and Ericson, Peelites, p. 92.
amendment was handily defeated, with the majority of the Peelites again supporting Russell.

The government was also hard pressed on its West Indian sugar policy. Peel's supporters were much more reluctant to follow him in support of Whig policy on this issue. Gladstone, although he made known his disappointment with the positions on both sides, voted with the Opposition, as did Cardwell, Goulburn, Herbert and Lincoln. Of the total of 92 Free Trade Conservatives who voted in this division, 65 joined the Opposition.23

The 1848 session ended for Peel and the Peelites much the way the 1847 session had begun. Peel remained adamant against taking office or exercising any influence over his followers. Although there was strong feeling in some circles that Peel should replace Russell, this was not a viable idea. Peel had no party. It would have been an impossibility for him to lead either the Whigs or the Protectionists. Deprived of any normal party organization, Peel's supporters lacked cohesion as a parliamentary group. When the Houses divided, they often found themselves split between the two lobbies. The younger Peelites had no intention of entering into a permanent alliance with the Protectionists, but they were unmoved by the prospect of the resignation of Russell's Ministry. They did not think that the weak and blundering Whig adminis-

tration could continue much longer; they calculated that the only possible outcome of the failure of the government would be a central coalition under Peel.

Lincoln, Cardwell and Herbert took one definite step to promote their views of the fortunes of the Peelites by purchasing the Morning Chronicle in February 1848. The purchase, probably funded by Sidney Herbert, son of the Earl of Pembroke (though Greville attributed the purchase to Lincoln), was important for two reasons.\(^{24}\) First, it appeared to mark the first open sign of dissatisfaction with the innocuousness of Peel's political behavior. Second, it gave the Peelite group a public forum for the first time since the split of the Conservative Party in 1846. In little more than a month the paper had shifted from criticizing Lord Lincoln to a full-fledged attack on Palmerston (and support for the foreign policy views of Aberdeen).

The reaction of the Morning Chronicle to Russell's attempt to bring Graham into the Government in January 1849, is a good example of its editorial opinion toward the Whigs in general. Following Graham's refusal of Russell's offer, the Chronicle observed, "... and Sir James, from motives, we are convinced, equally creditable to himself and the country, having cast his eyes over the sorry lot with whom he was thus invited to cooperate, has, respectfully but firmly, declined

to march through Coventry with them." This issue then continued with critical remarks concerning individual Whig ministers (the editor felt Sir Charles Wood was "acquitting himself ill in Exchequer") and a general attack on Russell's Government.25

The Morning Chronicle's specific opinion of Palmerston was, if possible, more critical than its feelings concerning the Whigs. In June 1848, during the debate over Palmerston's actions in the Spanish Marriages Question, it had this to say concerning the general foreign policy line being followed by the Whigs: "...England--with her, nonintervention in the affairs of her neighbors is the rule--intervention, on specific and rare occasions, the exception. Systematic enfringement of this rule characterizes Lord John Russell's Government."26

The Chronicle continued to be distinctly more hostile to the Whigs (and Protectionists) than were either Peel or Graham, possibly reflecting the greater political partisanship of the younger Peelites. Peel was, most probably, unhappy with these publicly expressed opinions. He had been careful not to express any opinion concerning Russell's attempts to bring Peelites into the Government, and had worked closely

25Morning Chronicle (London), 16 January 1849.
26Ibid., 5 June 1848.
with Sir Charles Wood during the financial crisis of 1847.\textsuperscript{27}

It is also possible that these editorial opinions were designed to press him toward retaking office. If this was the case, he was probably aware of the maneuverings. Despite them, he held firm to his resolve to remain independent.

\textsuperscript{27}Gash, \textit{Peel}, p. 638.
CHAPTER IV
THE LAST YEARS

The session of 1849 began no better for the Whig administration than had those of the two previous years. Their credit as a Government had almost disappeared. They increasingly gave the impression of being merely a caretaker, keeping the administration of the country going until some more qualified, more permanent grouping could replace them.

1848 had seen a succession of revolutions in virtually every important state in Europe as well as a great Chartist demonstration in England. It seemed that the need for a strong government was more vital than at any time in the past twenty years, and it also seemed that the Whigs could not supply that strength.

The fires of hope continued to burn in the breasts of Peel's followers and, possibly, this hope was not without some basis. Several Peelites had the impression that the events of 1848 had softened Peel's attitude. The revolutionary movements on the Continent, Palmerston's machinations in the Foreign Office, and the continued political ineptitude of the Whigs all combined to produce a negative situation which could not help but have an effect upon a man of Peel's ability. A major
obstacle to Peel's renewed interest in government had also been removed in September 1848, with the death of Bentinck.¹

In October, Goulburn commented to Cardwell on the change in Peel's attitude he had observed during a visit to Drayton:

Our Host's caution in speaking on political prospects was as great if not greater than ever but I thought I perceived a less repugnance on his part to the idea of resumption of office as not merely possible but as ultimately not altogether improbable. . . . Undoubtedly the death of Lord George has diminished to a certain extent the difficulties of reuniting the main body of the Conservative Party as with him will die the most rancorous part of the personal hostility. . . .²

Francis Bonham had also been with the house party and noticed the same softening of attitude, not in anything specific Peel said as in his general criticisms of the Ministry and his friendly references to several former followers who had left him in 1846.

However, the new session began with Peel still aloof and independent, and his followers with no firm evidence as to his views on the political situation. Everything he said and did suggested that he was content to assist the Whigs as long as they could provide an administration which protected the essentials of Peelite policy. The problem was to decide how far general support should be allowed to override dislike for particular measures. Gladstone was convinced that Peel would

¹Jones, Lord Derby, p. 138.
²Goulburn to Cardwell, 1 Oct. 1848, quoted in Gash, Peel, p. 638.
never oppose the Government on any crucial issue because he did not want either to risk their resignation or to appear to be seeking office for himself.\textsuperscript{3} There continued to be Peelite criticism of Whig fiscal policy even though Peel and Wood continued a close relationship. But on the subject of Irish administration and the subject of foreign policy, it was not a matter of criticism as of complete disagreement. Consideration of Whig foreign policy during Russell's Ministry and the corresponding Peelite views has been deferred in this paper thus far but must now be discussed, because it is indispensable to an understanding of the years 1846-1850.

To speak of British foreign policy during the middle of the nineteenth century in any context is impossible without being aware of the aspirations and idiosyncrasies of Henry John Temple, Lord Palmerston. By 1849, though his second term as Foreign Secretary was nearing its end, he controlled the foreign policy of England and allowed scant interference from anyone, including the Queen. He had made no attempt to moderate his policies although these had not, to say the least, met with approval in some circles, and they had met with the increasingly active disapproval of the Royal Family. Palmerston believed strongly in maintaining and extending the influence of England. He worked to maintain the balance of power, and felt that England should have no permanent friends.

\textsuperscript{3}Morley, \textit{Life of Gladstone}, 1:355; Parker, \textit{Graham}, 2:80-82.
or enemies. In the ideological struggle between absolutism and liberalism in Europe, he appeared to prefer a policy of neutralism. And he believed implicitly in the rights of British citizens abroad, a precept which figured prominently in his relations with the Peelites. Since 1846, his approach to foreign policy had involved England in the Spanish marriages issue, the Swiss War of the Sonderbund and the Italian and German Revolutions of 1848.

In fairness to Palmerston, however, it appears that his general reputation as a haughty autocrat who defied the Queen and actively meddled in the affairs of the European states as well as fostering the cause of revolution on the Continent was not completely deserved. For example, in the affair of the Spanish marriages, Palmerston definitely erred by showing the contents of the dispatch he had sent to Bulwer to Count Jarnac, the French chargé d'affaires in London. Palmerston meant this act to be a gesture of good faith. He appeared to have a strong desire to remain on good terms with France. His action was seized upon by Guizot and Louis Phillipe

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4Jasper Ridley, Lord Palmerston (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), p. 122. This section concerning Palmerston is based on Ridley. Ridley's treatment of Palmerston is in contrast to other biographies, such as Bell's two volume work. Ridley states in his preface that he used as the chief source Palmerston's papers in the British Museum (formerly the Broadlands Papers). He feels that this collection had not been sufficiently utilized. Ridley's treatment seems to show that Palmerston was not always the instigator, but sometimes the victim. This position appears consistent with what is known of the necessary independence of British Ambassadors, the slowness of communications, and the continual fight for diplomatic predominance on the Continent.
as a great opportunity to embarrass Palmerston (and England), which it did. Palmerston took the risk of trusting Guizot and lost—not a large risk for a Foreign Minister to take in an attempt to improve relations with another power.\textsuperscript{5} Even the \textit{Morning Chronicle}, not known as pro-Palmerston, was somewhat sympathetic. The \textit{Chronicle} stated that it "...approved of Lord Palmerston's energetic and able policy in the whole question, but we regret his being betrayed in the final hour of triumph..."\textsuperscript{6}

The Swiss War of the Sonderbund provides another example of a situation seized upon by Palmerston's enemies to implicate him to a much greater degree than his actual involvement. The rise of Radicalism in the Swiss Federal Parliament had caused seven cantons to unite in a separate League to protect their interests. In 1847 the Radicals gained enough power to change the constitution of the Swiss Confederation and decreed the expulsion of all Jesuits as well as the dissolution of the Sonderbund. The Sonderbund refused to acknowledge the authority of the Federal Government, and civil war seemed imminent.

British public opinion was strongly on the side of the Liberals, against the Jesuits and the Sonderbund. England was the only country to support the Radicals. Although they were almost too radical for Palmerston, he did write them

\textsuperscript{5}Ibid., pp. 314-315.

\textsuperscript{6}\textit{Morning Chronicle} (London), 17 March 1848.
several letters of encouragement. While Guizot and Metternich were planning some sort of military action against the Radical government, Palmerston was trying his best to forestall any such attempt.

Palmerston continued to maneuver for a peaceful solution. He sent Lord Minto to Berne, the Swiss capital, in October 1847 to urge the Federal Government not to attack the Sonderbund. Minto then went on to Rome to attempt to convince the new Pope, Pius IX, to voluntarily withdraw the Jesuits from Switzerland, which would defuse one of the main issues. Unfortunately, the Federal Government ignored Palmerston's entreaties. In November 1847, they attacked and defeated the Sonderbund. Guizot and Metternich accused Palmerston of deliberately engineering the entire affair to promote the rise of Radical elements in Europe. Palmerston was denounced by the international Conservative press as a champion of the Radical movement, and the British Liberal press took all the accusations against him as obvious truth. Peel's attitude toward Palmerston's actions was typical of his attitude toward the entire Whig Ministry, and very frustrating to the Peelites, especially Aberdeen, his ex-Foreign Secretary. Peel seemed always ready to allow his desire not to cause undue problems for the government to override his true feelings concerning its policies. For example, this excerpt of Peel's remarks

7Ridley, Lord Palmerston, pp. 327-331.
during the House of Commons debate concerning the expulsion of the British Minister, Sir Henry Bulwer, from Spain in 1848 shows his cautious disagreement with the actions of the Foreign Secretary. It also shows his refusal to take strong action against the government:

... looking at these despatches, I see no grounds for imparting any blame to Sir Henry Bulwer. The instructions of the noble Lord [Palmerston] appear plain. ... I do think, if the noble Lord had wished to make an impression upon the mind of the Spanish people, it would have been wiser to have held different language, and to have proffered advice in a different manner. ... The nature of our duty is to manifest on the part of the House of Commons a desire to support the Crown in indicating the insulted honor of the nation. ... If we vote that a proposed interference with the internal concerns of the Spanish government has placed the British government in a position humiliating to its character, so far from aiding the Government in vindicating the honor of England, you would send the British Government who conducted these negotiations ... away in disgrace ... I apprehend it is very difficult to conduct diplomatic transactions of this kind without making errors. ... The error on this occasion, in my opinion, was not an error in fact--the error was in the way in which the noble Lord exercised his authority, which I think he was entitled to exercise. ... I cannot sanction a resolution that records that my country is in a humiliated state. I think ... that the penalty proposed by the resolution is far too severe, for that penalty is

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8 The Opposition resolution, introduced by Disraeli, read: "that the House learns, with deep regret, from a correspondence between the British Government and the Government of Spain, now upon the table of this House, that a proposed interference with the internal concerns of the Spanish Government, as conducted under the authority and with the entire approval of Her Majesty's Ministers, has placed the British Government and our representative at the Court of Madrid, in a position humiliating in its character and which is calculated to affect the friendly relations existing between the Courts of Great Britain and Spain. (Hansard, ed., Parliamentary Debates, 99:403 (5 June 1848)).
the censure of the House of Commons.⁹

Peel was always extremely guarded in his comments on foreign policy, but seemed to feel that although Palmerston's actions were not always in the best interests of England, these actions alone were not justification for seeking the removal of Russell's administration.¹⁰

Aberdeen was most emphatically a Palmerston opponent. As Peel's Foreign Secretary, he had successfully engineered what Gash calls the "entente cordiale" with France only to watch Palmerston destroy it shortly thereafter through his heavy-handed actions in the Spanish marriages affair. Palmerston also showed a strong inclination to support the cause of revolution in Europe and to mix in the domestic affairs of the Continental states. Such behavior was anathema to Aberdeen.¹¹

By the spring of 1849, Palmerston had amassed a long list of "mistakes" and his position was becoming increasingly difficult. Palmerston's actions concerning the key events of the coming months would continue to draw heavy criticism. These events were: the conflict between Charles Albert and the Austrians in Italy; the Magyar revolt against the Austrians in Hungary; the attempts of the German liberals to form a

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¹⁰Gash, Peel, p. 651.

¹¹Aberdeen became a good deal more liberal on domestic issues as time passed, but remained always conservative and monarchical in his foreign policy.
national government; and especially the Schleswig-Holstein issue.12

Aberdeen watched Palmerston's "progress" during 1849 with increasing distaste. He wrote to Lord Brougham, "Altogether, Europe is recovering from the revolutionary mania in spite of us."13 He was not the only Peelite to openly express dissatisfaction. Graham strongly distrusted Palmerston, as did Henry Goulburn.14 Even Peel, who continued to support the government on all issues, felt it necessary to explain to the House of Commons that he did not approve of all of Palmerston's actions. However, he was still opposed to bringing on a political crisis over Palmerston's policies. Peel feared that such a situation might be used by the Protectionists to their advantage. Although he did not feel inclined to attempt to coordinate an attack on Palmerston in both Houses, Aberdeen lost no opportunity to criticize the


13Aberdeen to Brougham, 30 August 1849, quoted in Ericson and Jones, Peelites, p. 108.

Foreign Secretary in the House of Lords.\textsuperscript{15}

Despite castigation from Liberals, Radicals and Conservatives alike (depending on the particular issue), Palmerston finished 1849 in a fairly strong position. However, the session ended with an attempt by Aberdeen to carry a motion of censure in the House of Lords on Palmerston's Italian policy. The vote failed by only a slim margin. Aberdeen had attempted to persuade Peel to lead a similar attack in Commons, but Peel declined. Palmerston may not have survived a coordinated attack in both Houses.

Also in the 1849 session, Irish affairs continued to absorb Parliamentary attention. Early in the session, the Government asked for renewal of the act, passed in 1848, which suspended Habeas Corpus in Ireland. Peel was reluctant to support Russell in this action, but he finally did so. In fact, there was hardly a segment of Russell's handling of the Irish problem with which Peel did agree. In the case of suspension of Habeas Corpus, Peel said pointedly that he had no great confidence in the men by whom the act was to be administered. Further, he hoped that the government would take the opportunity to introduce reforms for Ireland with which all

\textsuperscript{15}Palmerston's remarks were very often quite pointed. He once described the views of the group critical to his policies toward Austria and France as "an example of antiquated imbecility." It was common knowledge that his particular target was Aberdeen; it was also common knowledge that Aberdeen's attitude toward Austria and France had always been in consonance with that of the Royal Family. (Hansard, ed., Parliamentary Debates, 107:810 (21 July 1849); Bell, Lord Palmerston, 1:441-443.)
could agree. At the end of March, in what Norman Gash feels was one of Peel's most interesting and most neglected speeches, he disclosed some of his own possible remedies.

Peel began this speech with the premise that the famine had not caused, but merely highlighted, the critical state of the Irish problem. He felt that what was wrong with Ireland was its basically defective social and economic structure: the impoverished laborers, the struggling small land holders, and the inefficient estates which were a tremendous burden to the more efficient ones. He proposed a solution both startling and innovative, but a generation ahead of its time: first, appoint a government commission to take over bankrupt poor law unions and oversee loans for drainage, fisheries, public works and emigration; second, also empower the commission to take over the encumbered or insolvent estates (now administered by the Court of Chancery) and arrange for them to be farmed by men "of capital and efficiency;" finally, in the boldest portion of his program, he recommended that the commission not only be made responsible for managing encumbered estates but "instrumental in forwarding the transfer of property from one class of proprietors to another." 17

16 Peel felt that a good opportunity existed at this time because of the political and economic paralysis caused by the famine.

17 *Speeches*, 4:788 (30 March 1849).
His ideas met with enthusiasm from many with first-hand knowledge of the Irish problem. Clarendon, the Lord Lieutenant for Ireland, was sufficiently impressed to seek out Peel and discuss his proposals. For the most part, however, the Whigs were not interested in Peel's ideas on this subject. In his talks with Clarendon, Peel had made it clear that he would abandon his own program if Clarendon would press the issue of the encumbered estates, and Clarendon did bring a bill forward later in the session. Peel's suggestion of a special commission was adopted, but the commission was given only limited power to sell to new owners. Though it was less than Peel had desired, he supported the measure. There was little possibility that any truly radical measure pertaining to Ireland would come from Russell's administration, but it is interesting to note that Peel did interest many, if not a majority of the Whigs, in his Irish reform proposals.

The most important accomplishment of this session was the repeal of the Navigation Acts. The Protectionists, of course, opposed repeal at every stage. The Free Trade Conservatives were divided. Gladstone favored provisions for negotiating reciprocal free trade agreements with other countries. He, Goulburn, and Cardwell met with Peel several times to discuss this approach. Since the Whig government favored total repeal, and Peel was not inclined to go against the wishes of the government, he was not amenable to Gladstone's

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18Parker, ed., *Peel, private papers*, 3:509-519.
proposal. Peel believed that there would be an attempt to reimpose protective duties which, of course, he would resist. With this possibility in mind, he did not want to become involved in any way against a government which was acting generally on conservative principles and which generally met with his approval. In his effort to remain uninvolved, Peel did not play an open part in the passage of the repeal action through the House of Commons. He was, however, active behind the scenes in mobilizing Peelite support. With Gladstone's threatened opposition not materializing (because Gladstone did not wish to act without Peel's support), the bill passed through Commons easily. Much stiffer opposition was expected in the House of Lords. Charles Wood asked Peel to use his influence to insure the passage of the bill in the upper House. Peel, always uneasy at the thought of soliciting political support among the peers, did not do so openly, but he was able to impress upon Aberdeen and Hardinge the necessity of supporting the government. His efforts may well have been the deciding factor. The repeal measure only passed the second reading by ten votes, but those votes were sufficient.

Peel continued to support the government through helping to defeat a Radical attack on colonial administration in British Guiana and Ceylon and his support of the Jewish

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20 Wood to Peel, 18 May 1849, quoted in Parker, ed., Peel, private papers, 3:504.
disabilities bill. He also found opportunities to continue his defense of free trade.

In July 1849, in answering a speech of Disraeli's which contained a general denunciation of free trade, Peel delivered one of the most comprehensive explanations he had ever made of his concepts of free trade. The logical, practical and analytical delivery answered Disraeli point by point both on his criticism of the government and on the economic policy he advocated as an alternative. For the last time (although, of course, no one could know at that time), Peel defended the concept of free trade as:

...a question which affects the happiness of the people, which affects their social progress, their progress in morals, in the enjoyment of life, in refinement of taste and civilization of manners-it concerns these things at least as much as it concerns the accumulation of wealth.21

As a final exposition of the policy he had committed himself to since 1841, it could hardly have been bettered. Disraeli's motion was defeated and the 1849 session ended shortly thereafter.

The year 1850 initially promised some relief to the Peelites in the dilemma. Two incidents, one domestic, the other concerned with foreign policy, provide good examples of the Peelite situation. During the opening of Parliament, agricultural distress dominated debate on the Address.

Disraeli, in a typically political move, let it be known to the Peelites that he now realized that a return to Protectionism was not possible, and he was looking towards means which might reunite the Conservative Party. He further indicated that he knew his chances for leadership were nonexistent, and he would be willing to back Graham as leader in the House of Commons. Graham was unimpressed; not only did he fail to find enthusiasm for Disraeli's maneuvering, but he was determined to maintain the independent posture he, as Peel, had adopted following the defeat of the Government in 1846.  

The following day Disraeli introduced a bill to help alleviate the agricultural situation by transferring certain debts from the landed interests to the national Exchequer. Debate on this motion produced a definite split in the Peelite ranks. Graham, defending the Government against the bill, was answered by Gladstone. Gladstone's arguments were, in turn, later criticized by Peel. In the division on the measure (which only lost by 21 votes), 35 Peelites supported Disraeli while 28 (including Peel) supported the government. 

Sir John Young, who had not voted with Peel on this division, wrote to him shortly afterward. Young felt that the Peelites had reached a crisis point. He pointed out that the

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22Graham had told Gladstone in 1846 that he was tired of office. He wanted to take a position parallel to that of Peel--continue to serve in the House of Commons, but without party ties. (Morley, Life of Gladstone, 1:296.)

division appeared to have proven that the Whigs and Radicals were numerically inferior to the combined Peelites and Protectionists. Without Peelite aid on this division, the government would have been defeated. The Peelites would, in his opinion, continue to stand by the free trade issue. But they had neither confidence in nor sympathy for Russell's government. They backed the government out of support for Peel rather than faith in Russell. Young presented a clear analysis of the situation:

The Peelites. . . would rally around you personally, or any organization... guided by your advice, but they will not make sacrifices and risk their seats night after night. . . for those whom they cannot help regarding as political opponents. I do not believe that any active opposition is contemplated but support will no doubt be withheld, and without such support, the Whigs have no. . . majority.

It was the sharpest warning yet given to Peel, and delivered by a man in a very good position to know.24

The 1850 session also brought into the open the long-standing dissatisfaction of the Peelites with Palmerston's foreign policy.

Palmerston, as discussed earlier, held a firm belief in the protection of the rights of the British citizen abroad. Although this attribute was laudable and much appreciated by English merchants and traders, Palmerston's critics found inconsistency in his behavior. As the Morning Chronicle 24Young to Peel, 22 Feb. 1850, quoted in Parker, ed., Peel, private papers, 3:532, 533.
observed, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, when commenting on the vote of censure passed by the House of Lords in June, 1850, it was interesting to note that the forcefulness of Palmerston's remarks was very often in direct proportion to the relative strength of the country being addressed. The Chronicle made specific reference to: "...the courteous politeness with which the British Government received the sharp remonstrances of Russia, and its curt, rude and imperious demeanor towards the feeble Kingdom of Greece..."25 This brings us to the story of Don Pacifico.

Early in 1850, Palmerston decided to revive the case of David Pacifico, a Spanish Jew born in Gibraltar (therefore a British subject by birth) and now living in Athens. Pacifico's home had been burned and ransacked by a Greek mob in 1847, and he applied to Captain Lyons, the British Minister in Athens, for redress. The basis for much of the claim was questionable, but Palmerston endorsed Lyons' action in accepting the claim, and further recommended an addition to compensate for the insults and suffering which this British subject had been forced to endure. Ridley feels that there were probably two reasons for Palmerston's actions, his normal defense of a British citizen in a foreign country, and a long-standing disaffection for the Greek Government of King Otho. Whatever the grounds, Palmerston did not act further in this matter until 1850.

25 Morning Chronicle (London), 18 June 1850.
In September 1849, Sir Stratford Canning, the British Ambassador to Turkey, acting on his own responsibility, brought the British Mediterranean fleet from Malta to the Dardanelles. This gesture was calculated to be one of support to Turkey in its refusal to extradite Kossuth and the Hungarian rebels to Russia. Palmerston supported Canning in this action, and persuaded the British Cabinet to also endorse the action. He also seized on the presence of the British fleet in the eastern Mediterranean as a good opportunity to revive the claims against Greece. At the end of November 1849, he instructed Admiral Parker, Commander-in-Chief of the fleet, to place himself under the orders of Mr. Wyse, who earlier in the year had succeeded Captain Lyons as Minister to Greece. Palmerston then instructed Wyse (in early December) that he was to use the fleet as he deemed necessary to obtain satisfaction of British claims, among them that of Pacifico.

On 16 January Wyse presented a note to the Greek Foreign Minister demanding payment of the claims. Wyse refused subsequent offers of mediation, and began a blockade of the Piraeus and several other ports.

In London, Palmerston was under great pressure from the French and Russian ambassadors as well as the Queen and Lord John Russell. Palmerston finally agreed to French mediation in February 1850, and ordered the blockade suspended. He also ordered Wyse to begin negotiations with the French Ambassador in Athens, who would mediate between Wyse and the
Greek Government. In mid-April agreement was reached between Palmerston and the Greek Ambassador in London. The French Ambassador (Drouyn de Lhuys) immediately sent word of the development to the French Ambassador in Athens, but Palmerston delayed for several days before sending word to Wyse. He also sent this word by the regular packet boat instead of special messenger, incurring a further delay. Palmerston informed Wyse of the terms of the compromise, but also stated that any agreement finalized by Wyse prior to receipt of this dispatch would take precedence. In late April, just hours before the blockade was scheduled to resume, the French ambassador in Athens received word of the London settlement. He informed Wyse and asked that the blockade not be reinstated. Wyse, having no instructions from Palmerston, refused. Two days later (26 April 1850) the Greek Government agreed to all of Wyse's demands.

When the news of the events in Athens reached Paris, Louis Phillipe accused Palmerston of deliberately holding back the dispatches to Wyse to embarrass the French Government. French popular opinion rose against Palmerston, and in mid-May, Drouyn de Lhuys was ordered to return to France as a protest of Palmerston's actions.²⁶

The Peelites, especially Aberdeen, were disgusted by the entire affair. Although Peel privately criticized

²⁶Ridley, Lord Palmerston, pp. 374-383.
Palmerston's policies, what he said in private and what he was prepared to do in Parliament were still different matters. Peel had declined to assist Aberdeen in a vote of censure against Palmerston at the end of the 1849 session; he continued to be hesitant, but his attitude was changing.

In the House of Lords, Stanley and Aberdeen spoke in highly critical terms of Palmerston's actions in the Pacifico affair. Throughout the early weeks of the affair Peel had been silent, a circumstance which Palmerston attempted to turn to his advantage. The Globe, in an article perhaps partially written by Palmerston, claimed that the absence of criticism from Peel in the House of Commons indicated that Peel was in sympathy with Palmerston's "generous and far-sighted views" on foreign policy. Graham and Aberdeen brought the article to Peel's attention, with Aberdeen commenting that it was "unfortunate, and likely to prove injurious in its consequences."27 Peel, who considered Aberdeen extremely sensitive on any matter connected with Palmerston, felt that the public would not be misled by his silence, whatever Palmerston's actions might be. In replying to Aberdeen, Peel again stated his feelings on open opposition to the incumbent government. If there was to be a serious indictment of the foreign policy of the government, Peel stated, it would have to be done in a deliberate and collective action. He

27 Aberdeen to Peel, 30 March 1850, quoted in Parker, ed., Peel, private papers, 3:535.
left no doubt as to his position in such an action:

There may be a very good reason for men acting in concert, that is, forming party connections, and cooperating in the spirit and with the unity of Party—or for those who have had enough of party connections and are resolved to maintain themselves free from its engagement to retire altogether from an arena only suited to the contentions of party. I shall have no difficulty in making my choice between these alternatives.

Norman Gash feels that these remarks indicate strongly that Peel was ready to consider even leaving politics rather than plotting the fall of Russell's administration. The opinions of neither Peel nor Aberdeen seemed to affect the actions of the other. 28

Stanley and Aberdeen introduced another censure motion in the House of Lords. The Morning Chronicle gave strong support to the motion, stating: "...we have destroyed one legitimate influence in the Levant, quarreled with France, offended Russia...and we have done all this in struggling to extort satisfaction for demands an unvarnished statement of which, from the claimants own vouchers, was enough to dissolve the decorous gravity of the House of Lords into peals of uncontrollable merriment." 29 Unlike their attempt in 1849, this time the motion was approved, with most of the Peelite peers joining Aberdeen. Such a vote in the upper House would

28 Aberdeen to Peel, 2 April 1850, quoted in Gash, Peel, p. 653; Peel to Graham, 2 and 4 April 1850, quoted in Parker, ed., Peel, private papers, 3:535-538.

29 Morning Chronicle (London), 18 June 1850.
not involve the defeat of the government, but it certainly was a danger sign. Russell had to insure the support of the House of Commons. To save his government, he arranged for Roebuck, a Radical, to introduce a resolution which would not only reverse the action of the House of Lords, but would gain approval for Palmerston's policies as a whole.

The *Morning Chronicle* commented on Russell's actions: "The entire Cabinet has now become to such a degree associated with the wayward eccentricities of the most mischief-making of its members that it could not extrude him without some loss of credit and character--and would not be quite cleared of blame even by his retirement." Peel reluctantly concluded that he had been pushed past the limit of his cooperation. The *Morning Chronicle* kept up its campaign. Peel may, by this time, have come to agree more with the editorial comments of the paper, but he still evinced every sign of dismay at the prospect of voting against the Government. The opinion of the *Chronicle* concerning Roebuck's motion seemed to summarize the feelings, expressed privately, of most of the Peelite leaders: "But if the ingenuity of Mr. Roebuck can extract anything like a

30 Roebuck's motion read: "that the principles on which the Foreign Policy of Her Majesty's Government has been regulated, have been such as were calculated to maintain the honor and dignity of this country, and, in times of unexampled difficulty, to preserve peace between England and the various nations of the world. (Hansard, ed., *Parliamentary Debates*, 112:255). Aberdeen must have virtually choked on each word.

31 *Morning Chronicle* (London), 21 June 1850.
"principle" from a course of policy which appears to us to be made up of personal and political partisanship, of pique, caprice and whim, then we say without hesitation that that principle is one which it concerns the country distinctly to repudiate and disclaim.\textsuperscript{32} Primarily due to the sweeping nature of the Roebuck motion, Peel finally resolved to speak and vote against the Government. In mitigation of the radical departure from past actions that this decision would seem to indicate, it should be noted that Peel was also quite aware that the government had the necessary support to carry the resolution. He was, then, in the enviable position of being able to make his opposing opinion known without risking the defeat of the government.

The circumstances of the debate on Roebuck's motion are generally well known. The highlight of the discussion was Palmerston's immensely successful defense of his protection of British citizens on 25 June. Peel's speech was one of moderate condemnation, yet all knew that he had broken with the government over this issue. Peel stressed that he was not a part of any party collusion and had no desire to overthrow a Ministry which he had consistently supported for four years. But, he continued, when faced with a resolution asking him to agree that the foreign policy course followed by the government had been calculated to maintain the honor of England, he felt

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Morning Chronicle} (London), 24 June 1850.
He could not. His vote against the measure was given, according to Gladstone, "with visible signs of repugnance." Gladstone also felt strongly about the Whig motion. As he said:

I am convinced the majority of the House of Commons was with us in heart and in conviction; but fear of inconveniences attending the removal of a Ministry which there is no regularly organized opposition ready to succeed carried the day... It remains to hope that the demonstration which has been made will not be without effect upon the tone of Lord Palmerston's future proceedings.

It is also interesting to note that the Peelites appeared to have a unity beyond an allegiance to Peel (the reluctant leader). About 70% of the original Peelites were present, and voted to sustain Aberdeen's approach to foreign policy.

The Morning Chronicle had a most interesting analysis of the Whig vote: "Gentlemen on the Ministerial side of the House walked last night into the lobby, if we may believe their own spokesmen, not to express their confidence in Lord Palmerston, but for a totally different purpose—to keep Lord John Russell in and Lord Stanley out. It was not the foreign policy of the Government they were thinking about; it was the reimposition of the duties on corn. So much for the composition

33 Speeches, 4:846 (28 June 1850).
34 Gladstone to Guizot, quoted in Morley, Life of Gladstone, 1:371.
35 Jones and Ericson, Peelites, p. 116.
of the Ministerial majority, which we take leave to pro-
nounce tantamount to a defeat." 36

The Don Pacifico affair was important for the Peel-
ites, but anticlimactic. Sir Robert Peel had finally found
it necessary to openly declare his disappointment with
Russell's Ministry and, in so doing, gave direction to
those of his followers who still considered his opinions
to be binding. But Peel died just four days later, following
a fall from his horse. His death erased with finality any
plans his supporters might have had concerning rallying around
him in opposition to Russell, or any plans which might still
be lingering which postulated a new government with Peel at
the head. Just as it seemed that Peel might be beginning to
break the shell he had so carefully constructed around himself
since 1846, his masterful contribution to the development and
guidance of England came to an end.

36 *Morning Chronicle* (London), 29 June 1850.
CONCLUSION

Argument as to why Sir Robert Peel chose to act as he did during the last four years of his life might be interesting but is certainly not critical. The critical fact is that his actions affected the progress of the government of England during that time.

On the lowest level, a great mass of the public looked to Peel and were affected in their political behavior by his actions. On the highest level, loyalty to him produced within the Parliament a group which was not under the control of either major party, and whose existence denied the party structure the services of several men of obvious experience and talent.

Peel's death rendered unnecessary further speculation as to whether he would ever again have sought the leadership of a party or the Government. The more important aspect of his death was to free the Peelites and compel them to decide their futures. Palmerston found the friends of the deceased statesman irritating: "Their airs, their weeds, their sadly shaken heads begin to pall; and soon a hasty world resents their dutiful reference of all questions to the unforgotten words of a single oracle." Disraeli was more pointed, although
his remarks aimed specifically at the Peelites were made several years later: "Would that band of self-admiring geniuses, who had upset every Cabinet with whom they were connected, return on the shoulders of the people, as they always dreamed, though they were always the persons of whom the people never seemed to think?" ¹

The Peelite leaders (principally Aberdeen, Graham and Goulburn) began to reconsider their position. They had two alternatives: to continue to occupy their present rather nebulous political position, or formally to dissolve the group and let each member move to one of the parties. Surprisingly, the latter course was not popular. However, opinions differed as to which direction the group should move. Graham leaned definitely toward the Whigs; Gladstone and Goulburn thought seriously about reunion with the Conservatives. Aberdeen, the next logical Peelite leader, also thought of union with the Whigs but wanted to use entrance of the Peelite group into that party as a means of unseating Russell. Any thought of alliance with the Whigs was made impossible, however, by Russell's actions against the so-called papal aggression issue and the Peelite response, which showed them to be solidly in favor of religious liberalism. ²

The criticism generated by Russell's actions brought

²Jones and Ericson, Peelites, pp. 122-123.
an end to his Ministry in February 1851.

During the next several weeks, the Whigs made a number of attempts to form a stable government. A Whig-Peelite coalition was first officially discussed during this period, and all principals involved seemed to agree that Palmerston was not to resume his former duties. Peelite absorption into the Russell Ministry was contemplated, but rejected due to the continued Peelite objection to Russell's attitude toward the Papacy. All attempts to form a government with someone other than Russell at the head were unsuccessful, and the Queen was forced to request Russell's return. This he did, but he frustrated the Queen's desire to eliminate Palmerston by admitting that Palmerston was the strongest member of the Cabinet. Without him, the Government would not stand.

But Palmerston was only to last out the year. He drove both the Queen and Russell to the decision to replace him, despite the consequences, through his behavior in the Kossuth incident, and his comments to Walewski, the French ambassador in London, regarding the seizure of power by Louis Napoleon.\(^3\) Palmerston was removed from office by Russell in December.\(^4\)

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\(^3\)He agreed to the demands of the Queen not to receive Kossuth, but did receive a Radical delegation who honored him for his services to the cause of liberty, and referred to the ruling powers of Russia and Austria as "odious and detestable tyrants" in the process.

\(^4\)Bell, Lord Palmerston, 2:40-47; Ridley, Palmerston, pp. 397-398.
The Russell Government fell (again) in February 1852, beaten, ironically, by Palmerstonian Whigs and Liberals. The Peelites played a small part in the fall of the Ministry, generally preferring to adopt a "wait and see" attitude. However, Gladstone and Herbert did vote in opposition to the Government, so we may consider their vote to be the "official" Peelite view.  

At the end of the Russell Ministry the Peelites were still a unit, but it did not appear that they would remain so very long. Of the major Peelite figures Aberdeen and Graham were very close in thought and were becoming more liberal on reform issues (though their views on foreign policy remained conservative). Gladstone and Herbert, in contrast, appeared to remain essentially conservative, and seemed likely to move away from the older Peelite leaders. The principle which had always kept the Peelites together, defense of Free Trade, had virtually ceased to be an issue.  

The eventuality of Peelite-Whig synthesis had been demonstrated in early 1851, but the physical act took more than a year to consummate. Peel's death had done little to erase the Peelite-Protectionist rift, especially since Graham, Goulburn and Aberdeen, now the nominal Peelite leaders, continued to maintain Peel's feelings toward the other faction.

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5 Jones and Ericson, *Peelites*, p. 132.
of the Conservative Party. But Russell's actions in the papal aggression matter, and, to some extent, a backlash of feeling against the Whigs by some of the lesser Peelites who felt that Peel's dogged support of Russell had been wrong, initially kept the Peelites from moving in the direction of the Liberals.

The defeat of Russell's Ministry resulted in the formation of the Derby Ministry. Three occurrences during the early days of this Government helped move the Peelites solidly toward the Whigs: Derby's refusal to abandon Protection, his disinterest in including the Peelites in his Government coupled with the constant pressure from Russell to join the Whigs, and the emergence of Gladstone, Herbert and Lincoln as Peelite leaders (although Aberdeen remained the best choice for "overall" leader).

The three new Peelite leaders were also committed to the fight against Protection. It quickly became obvious to them that Derby could not survive an election while continuing to insist on that cause. The obvious alternative appeared to be a Conservative-Liberal government of Peelites and moderate Whigs. The presence of Aberdeen as a viable coalition leader, the absence of any such candidate from the Whig ranks, and the narrowing of the gap between the two factions to only lingering political traditions which now had no real significance resulted in the Aberdeen coalition Government of 1852. The Peelites had found a home.
The Peelites secured six places in the new Cabinet, quite out of proportion to their total numbers. Aberdeen was convinced that his Government would not get the independent Conservative support he desired if it was predominantly Whig, and the Whig leaders realized that if the Government was a success the Peelites would be drawn into the larger liberal mass. There was grumbling but no real resistance to the somewhat unnaturally large Peelite presence. Gladstone's decision to join the coalition was especially significant. He was the Peelite leader who had seemed least inclined to join the Liberals (although, of course, in later years he became one of England's greatest liberals). He was a strong party man, and did much to bring solid Peelite support to the new Government.

Sir Robert Peel and the Peelite group did not make a significant contribution to the government of England during the years 1846-1850. Peel's advocates were free of his physical influence but imbued with his principles. Their contributions during the next four decades would show the extraordinary worth of this group to the development of English government.
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SECONDARY


