Religious Nonconformity and Democracy

Dissenting Politics from the Seventeenth-Century Revolution to the Rise of the Labour Party

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The Dissenters of England and Wales, that is the Protestants who stood outside the Church of England, originally included five main strands. The largest body in the seventeenth century consisted of the Presbyterians, who, like their coreligionists in Scotland, upheld the stoutly Calvinist doctrines expounded in the Westminster Confession of 1646. They originally aspired to copy their Scottish contemporaries by creating a system of church courts that would govern a national church, supplanting the episcopal structure of the Church of England. Alongside them was the second and smaller strand, the Independents, who, while sharing the Calvinist theology of the Presbyterians, differed from them in church organisation. Rejecting any ecclesiastical authority outside the individual gathered congregation, the Independents gained their name from asserting that each such church was wholly independent. The Particular Baptists, the third strand, were so called because, as Calvinists, they believed in the redemption of a particular group, the elect, and they echoed the teaching of the Independents about congregational autonomy. In the fourth place, a minority of Baptists, the General Baptists, accepted the Arminian teaching that redemption was general and maintained a tighter connection between congregations than their Particular cousins. The fifth body, the Society of Friends or Quakers, was semi-detached from the other Dissenters because its members held that the inner light of God in human beings was an authority higher than the Bible. Consequently treated as unorthodox, the Quakers had distinctive ways such as refusing to doff their hats to social superiors. Later these five denominational groupings were to be joined in the ranks of non-Anglican Protestants by Methodists, but during the seventeenth century that development remained in the future. Religious Nonconformity was from the start a diverse phenomenon.

Nevertheless its adherents were united by a common desire to press the Reformation further than had happened in the sixteenth century. Under Queen Elizabeth from 1558 the Church of England had become fully Protestant, but it retained features of the pre-Reformation Catholic Church such as bishops, cathedrals and clerical vestments. The more zealous Protestants wanted to purify the church of its Romish trappings and earned the name of Puritans. Already under Elizabeth a few began to separate from the national church, but most Puritans preferred to call for further changes of a

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more firmly Protestant character from within the Church of England. Under Elizabeth's successor, James I, in the opening years of the seventeenth century, hopes that, as a Scottish Calvinist, he would press further in a Reformed direction were dashed when, on the contrary, he reinforced the authority of the bishops. Worse took place under his son, Charles I, from 1625. Motivated by High Church piety, Charles encouraged his Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, to reintroduce practices that savoured of Rome. Puritans were horrified when communion tables were redesigned as altars and railed off from ordinary worshippers. Some responded by fleeing to the New World, establishing the Puritan colonies of New England. Others remained to resist royal innovations in religion. They eagerly supported the gentry in parliament who decided that the king's tendencies to autocracy must be opposed in arms. When in 1642 civil war broke out between king and parliament, it was, as the Puritan Richard Baxter recorded, 'principally the differences about religious matters that filled up the Parliament's armies and put the resolution and valour into their soldiers'.[1] A significant number were Dissenters.

It was in these circles at a time of crisis that radical ideas began to emerge. Some of the prominent figures verged on the fanatical in their zeal against false religion. Thus Hugh Peter, a military chaplain, tried to persuade the army to demolish the pillars of the prehistoric circle at Stonehenge as 'monuments of heathenism'.[2] The fervour carried over into public affairs. Insisting on the principle of liberty of conscience, soldiers who identified with the Independents argued, as Baxter lamented, 'sometimes for state democracy, and sometimes for church democracy'.[3] Usually they began with the second and inferred the first. A gathered church in which all could play a part in congregational government led on in their minds to a free state in which all could play a part in public affairs. Their ideas were aired most publicly at the Putney debates of 1647, a consultation between army leaders and some of the common soldiers about political arrangements following the defeat of the king. Several of the more outspoken debaters, urging something like a parliamentary vote for all men, were members of Independent or Baptist churches. The most extreme notions were put forward by the Levellers, a group whose members embraced the drastic principle of social equality in an age when rank and deference were axiomatic. One of their leaders, John Lilburne, had joined a gathered church even before the civil war; another, Richard Overton, was a General Baptist. Oliver Cromwell, the general who emerged from the military struggle and the events surrounding the execution of the king as the arbiter of the nation's affairs, had probably once been pastor of a gathered church and shared fully in the Independents' desire

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[1] M. Sylvester (ed.), *Reliquiae Baxterianae, or Richard Baxter's Narratives of the Most Memorable Passages of his Life and Times* (1696), part 1, 31, quoted by Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford 1978), 106.

[2] Watts, *Dissenters*, 111.

[3] Sylvester (ed.), *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, part 1, 53, quoted by Watts, *Dissenters*, 110.

to establish godly rule. In 1653 he summoned a parliament of spiritually minded men, usually called after one of its strangely named members the Barebones Parliament, which he hoped would inaugurate widespread reforms. 'Truly', Cromwell told them, 'you are called by God to rule with him, and for him.'[4] The parliament soon disintegrated, achieving very little, but its ambitions had been high. At the same time there were emerging the Fifth Monarchy Men, those who believed that earthly power was about to be ended by the establishment of the kingdom of the Son of Man predicted by the prophet Daniel. At times these millenarians, usually drawn from the gathered churches, threatened to use force in the name of King Jesus. Alongside embryonic ideas of democracy, the middle years of the seventeenth century generated a wide range of political doctrines among Dissenters, some of them distinctly extravagant.

Perhaps it is not surprising that in 1660 the nation called back Charles II, the son of Charles I, to put an end to the radical experiments of the previous two decades. The regime of the restored monarchy set about imposing the traditional order in church and state. By the Act of Uniformity in 1662 all ministers of the Church of England were required to accept the Prayer Book as the sole form of worship. Those who refused, over 2,000 men, were expelled from their posts. The outcome was the creation of a much stronger Dissent. The ejected ministers, most of them moderate Presbyterians who had hoped to create a national Reformed church, stood alongside the more extreme members of sects who had contributed to the turmoil of the recent past. All Dissenters were subjected to persecution as the royalist victors tried to enforce uniformity of religious practice. The Corporation Act of 1661 excluded Dissenters from town councils; the Conventicle Act of 1664 prohibited religious meetings of five or more persons; and the Five Mile Act of 1665 imposed an oath on ejected ministers that they would not attempt 'any alteration of government either in church or state' or else required them to remain at least five miles away from places where they had ministered or substantial towns.[5] The legislation was crowned by a Test Act of 1673 which required all holders of public office to have taken the sacrament in the Church of England. The enforcement of the acts varied according to the keenness of the local authorities, but those who worshipped illegally outside the established church were always at risk of being thrown into gaol. Thus John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, was more than once imprisoned in his home town of Bedford. The effect of these measures was to weld the previously diverse fragments of Dissent into a more homogeneous whole. Although Quakers, with a distinct theology and an elaborate bureaucracy, remained apart, the other sections of Dissent found common

[4] W.C. Abbott, *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (Cambridge, MA), vol. 3, 7, quoted by Watts, *Dissenters*, 144.

[5] Watts, *Dissenters*, 226.

cause. Politically their great desire was no more than to be left alone to worship in peace. Their highest ambition was toleration.

When, in 1685, Charles II was succeeded by his brother James II, the situation changed. James was a Roman Catholic and the threat of his moving towards an absolutist state backed by the Catholic church on the model of Louis XIV's France became palpable. Initially many Dissenters were drawn into the attempt by Charles's illegitimate son, the Protestant Duke of Monmouth, to seize the throne, but that proved a failure. Gradually, however, the political nation swung against James. In 1688, in the so-called 'Glorious Revolution', James was replaced by William III and his queen, Mary, the daughter of Charles II, as joint monarchs. The tide had turned decisively in favour of Protestantism and so Protestant Dissenters now received a concession. By the Toleration Act of 1689 Dissenters were exempted from the penalties imposed on attending their meeting houses in previous legislation. The resulting pattern of the Church of England being established by law but Dissenters being allowed the privilege of unmolested worship was to remain in force for well over a century. In the early years it seemed at risk, for Queen Anne, William's successor from 1702, was sympathetic to the claims of the Church of England to a monopoly of religion. An Occasional Conformity Act (1711) forbade Dissenters to take the sacrament in the Church of England in order to qualify for local office. A Schism Act that was to have come into force on 1 August 1714 would have prohibited Dissenters from teaching, but the queen died that day and it did not take effect. The crown transferred to the House of Hanover and the dangers of Anne's reign came to an end. Toleration became the entrenched policy of the state.

In the more relaxed conditions of the eighteenth century the iron convictions of Dissenters began to rust away. The lay leaders of Dissent tended to prosper and the social appeal of the Church of England acted as a magnet. As lay figures moved over to the established church, their financial support was lost to the Dissenting churches. The number of congregations of Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists diminished: between 1727 and 1776, the total in London and Middlesex (the county adjacent to the capital) fell from 112 to 72. Already by the 1730s there was talk about 'the decay of the Dissenting interest'. At the same time intellectual changes exerted an influence over the movement. In the era of Enlightenment there was a wish to ensure that theology met the rational criteria of the times. Older Puritan versions of Reformed theology seemed antiquated; free enquiry appeared an obligation of the spirit of the age. Consequently many began to believe that the Westminster Confession or its equivalent should no longer be obligatory. In 1719, at a conference in Salters' Hall, London, ministers of the Dissenting churches of the capital decided by a bare majority that 'no human composition, or interpretations of the doctrine of the Trinity' should be required.[6]

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[6] *An Account of the Late Proceedings of the Dissenting Ministers at Salters' Hall* (1719), 10, quoted by Watts, *Dissenters*, 375.

The broader minded majority and their successors, who came to be known as 'Rational Dissenters', moved gradually in an unorthodox direction, initially to Arianism and later in the century to Socinianism. Although during the eighteenth century Unitarianism was technically illegal, by the end of the century some had reached that destination. The more liberal doctrinal positions rarely enjoyed popular appeal and so the theological trends reinforced the social currents of the period in fostering decline. Dissent looked as if it were on the wane.

The political context, however, was more benign. The state no longer threatened Dissent with extinction, though members of the churches knew that their security depended on Protestantism remaining in power. Dissenters were therefore active in resisting the efforts of members of the Catholic Stuart dynasty, the son and grandson of James II, to seize back the kingdom in the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745. Those in power, the Whig party that had ensured the succession of the Hanoverian dynasty, were resolutely Protestant. The Whigs also believed in liberty, though within due limits, and so endorsed the religious freedom of the Dissenting churches. Dissenters returned the compliment by giving consistent support to government Whigs in parliamentary and local elections during the years down to 1760. Their opponents were High Churchmen, those who believed that the state should profess a strongly Anglican confessional stance. They were usually identical with those who in politics were labelled Tories, upholders of more autocratic powers for the crown. Although in certain localities Tory High Churchmen could make life difficult for Dissenters, for example by refusing sites for places of worship, they were firmly excluded from power in national affairs. So Protestant Dissenters held a secure if sometimes marginal place in public life. Their political theory was summed up in the phrase 'civil and religious liberty', which many of their spokesmen expounded at length. They rarely proposed changes to a political system which served their needs very well.

After about 1760, however, there was a greater willingness to oppose the government. The crucial issue was the growing discontent in the American colonies that led to the creation of the United States. Dissenters in England felt a natural sympathy for their co-religionists in America and growing alarm about the failure of the government to make generous terms with the colonists. Caleb Evans, president of Bristol Baptist Academy, wrote a series of pamphlets in 1775–76 defending the Americans in their objection to taxation without representation in parliament. Of the fifteen Dissenters who sat in parliament after 1760, only two supported the government in the crisis over America. At a local level Dissenters could wield considerable power. In Nottingham during the 1770s, for example, they controlled nearly one third of the parliamentary votes. Dissenting politicians played a part in the normal electioneering methods of the day, paying for influence and advancing the interests of commercial groups in order to win support. Yet they tended to adopt a progressive position on certain issues. By the

1780s, when the reform of parliament's outdated electoral system first became a political issue, Dissenters often became prominent. They commonly opposed the monopoly of local power enjoyed by self-perpetuating town councils, challenging their candidates at parliamentary elections. In doing so, they acted as pioneers of party organisation within civil life. Dissenters were playing a part in the popular politics of the age.

The later eighteenth century was also remarkable for the Evangelical Revival. Beginning in the 1730s within the Church of England under the leadership of Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, the revival gave rise to the Methodist movement. The mainstream Methodists, who followed Wesley in adopting an Arminian rather than a Calvinist theology, sought to obtain holiness by meeting in local societies and to spread the gospel by preaching throughout the land. Methodism, the so-called 'New Dissent', became a body distinct from the Church of England only gradually, the key stage being the 1790s, just after the death of Wesley. By no means all Methodists regarded themselves as Dissenters even then. Most members of Wesleyan Methodism, by far the largest of the Methodist denominations, positioned themselves for many years midway between the Church and Dissent, but as the nineteenth century wore on they increasingly came to see themselves as part of Nonconformity, a term for Dissent that came into vogue around the middle years of the century. The revival made an impression on the older Dissent too. The Presbyterians, with their tendency towards rationalism, were little affected, but the Independents and Baptists were transformed into growing communities by an influx of preachers and members from the Calvinistic strand of the revival headed by Whitefield. The result was that whereas in the early eighteenth century Dissenters formed only around 6 per cent of the population, by the mid-nineteenth century they constituted some 17 per cent of the population of England and about 45 per cent of the population of Wales. The dimensions of Protestant Dissent were totally changed.

At first the political impact of Evangelical Nonconformity was small. A few of the Methodists who broke away from Wesleyan Methodism, and especially the Methodist New Connexion that split off in the 1790s, had little inhibition about politics, but most shared with the Wesleyans a 'no politics' rule because any partisanship risked plunging the denominations into discord. So for a long time the Methodists were less likely than the 'Old Dissent' to play a significant part in public affairs. Moreover the French Revolution of 1789 ensured that political activity among the masses of the population became suspect. The overthrow of the Roman Catholic Church in France made the authorities on the other side of the English Channel fearful that there might be some similar attempt to do away with the Church of England, which was seen as the chief bastion of social order. Dissent, by contrast, appeared a subversive force. In particular Joseph Priestley, the most eminent minister among the Rational Dissenters, was a target of widespread hatred. In 1791 he was chased from his home in Birmingham by a mob shouting for 'Church and King' which also destroyed meeting

houses and the homes of other Dissenters. Nor did Evangelical Dissenters escape. In 1793 William Winterbotham, a Baptist minister in Plymouth, was imprisoned for four years for a pair of sermons in which he ventured to criticise the current relations between crown and people in the mildest of terms. In these times it was wise to remain silent on public affairs. The Evangelicals, furthermore, believed that political activities constituted a diversion from their central task of spreading the gospel. In the final decade of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth Evangelical Nonconformists did little except express their great satisfaction with the liberties they enjoyed as Englishmen.

The rapid expansion of Methodism and other forms of Nonconformity caused growing alarm in the government. In a period of general mobilisation against Napoleon's France, a body of people owing no allegiance to the national church seemed a danger to the war effort. In 1811 the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, introduced a bill to stop Dissenting preachers from being allowed to register under the Toleration Act of 1689 unless they had a settled congregation where they ministered. His target was the practice of itinerant evangelism by which the Methodists, and increasingly other Nonconformists, were spreading from parish to parish. The threat to gospel preaching was put down largely through the intervention of William Wilberforce, the Evangelical Anglican who had led the campaign against the slave trade to success four years before. But the bill roused the Methodists to take political action in their own defence. Petitions poured into parliament against the bill. It was a precedent for subsequent pressure by the rank and file of Evangelical Nonconformists on the government. A second instance took place only two years later. In 1813 the charter of the East India Company, the organisation that acted as the government of the subcontinent, came up for renewal. The policy of the company had been to exclude missionaries form India for fear of stirring up religious animosity, but Evangelicals, from both Church and Dissent, exerted themselves to demand a change in the charter requiring their admission. Once more mass petitioning had its desired effect. There was a rising tide of political activism among Dissenters.

The Dissenting community also took up the question of its legal status. Under the Test and Corporation Acts Dissenters were in theory not supposed to sit on local borough councils, though in practice parliament passed an annual indemnity measure which normally prevented their being prosecuted. The acts marked Dissenters as second-class members of the commonwealth. In 1786 and 1790 there had been unsuccessful campaigns to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts, but in the wake of the French Revolution there was no scope for even minor constitutional change. By 1813 William Smith, the spokesman of Dissent in the House of Commons, was able to secure a lesser reform. A Unitarian Toleration Act abolished the penalties for professing anti-Trinitarian belief, providing relief for the growing number of Presbyterians of that persuasion. In the immediate aftermath

of the Napoleonic Wars, from 1815 down to 1819, an upsurge of economic distress and political radicalism again discouraged any further concessions to Dissenters. A few Methodists identified with the radical cause but they were rapidly expelled by the denominational authorities. By the 1820s, however, as social tension eased, it became timely once more to call for repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. A United Committee of Dissenters under William Smith persuaded several Whig members of the House of Lords to support the measure, which was carried in 1828. Dissenters could now take their seats on borough councils without fear of legal challenge. The stigma of being less than full subjects of the crown was swept away.

Two even greater constitutional changes followed in rapid succession. In 1829 the exclusion of Roman Catholics from parliament was abolished. Dissenters were divided on this issue. Some believed that, just as Dissenters had received redress of their chief political grievance, so Catholics should enjoy relief from theirs; but others held that Catholics remained, as in the seventeenth century, so serious a threat to the security of the country that they ought not to share in its governance. A marked suspicion of Catholic ambitions continued to mark Dissenting politics for well over a century. But the second change was almost unanimously supported by Dissenters. This constitutional alteration, the greatest during the nineteenth century, was the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832. A system of parliamentary representation unchanged in principle since the fifteenth century was transformed so as to extend the vote to a much wider section of the population. Dissenters commonly supported the organisations in cities such as Manchester and Birmingham which demanded seats in parliament for the first time. One of their number, John Bonham Carter, a wealthy barrister from Portsmouth, was responsible for redrafting the Reform Bill in 1831–32 so that it passed. Dissenters were delighted with some of the consequences of parliamentary reform. In particular in 1835 the Whig government carried an equivalent measure for municipal corporations, ending the system of recruiting new members by co-option and opening the corporations to election by the inhabitants. Many chapel-goers became councillors, aldermen and mayors of their towns over coming years. Of the one hundred and two Congregationalists who became Members of Parliament during the nineteenth century, at least twenty-three also served as aldermen and at least thirty-six as mayors. During the Victorian era from 1837 onwards Dissenters played a prominent role in local politics.

Now that many of their number enjoyed the privilege of votes in parliamentary and borough elections, Dissenters wanted to achieve the removal of their remaining grievances. One disability they suffered was that the only legal record of birth was an entry in the registers of the parish church for the baptism of a child. This arrangement was a particular problem for Quakers and Baptists, neither of whom observed the baptism of infants. Another handicap was that since 1753 all marriages in England and Wales, except those of Quakers and Jews, had to be performed in a parish church.

In this case the legal requirement bore especially hard on Unitarians, who were compelled to use formulae in the wedding service which acknowledged the Trinitarian doctrine they rejected. Burials in parish churchyards, often the only places available, had to follow the Prayer Book of the Church of England and were subject to charges for the benefit of the Anglican clergy. The ancient English universities had tests that excluded Dissenters from Oxford altogether and, while allowing them into Cambridge, prevented them from graduating unless they embraced Anglicanism. The most pressing hardship of all for many Dissenters was the system of church rates. If a meeting voted a local rate for the repair of the parish church, all ratepayers, of whatever denomination, were required to pay. Dissenters had to support a form of worship with which in conscience they disagreed. Local campaigns for the refusal of a church rate became a common form of Dissenting political activity in the 1830s. A whole set of grievances drove Dissenters further into political action.

At this juncture some Dissenters were driven to propose a much more radical policy. If they traced the disabilities they suffered to the root cause, they encountered the question of the relationship of church and state. The Church of England could claim unique privileges because it was the church exclusively recognised by the state. The monarch was supreme governor of the Church of England; bishops sat in the House of Lords as of right; the House of Commons served as the legislature of the Church of England. The specific problems might all be swept away, some Dissenters began to think in the 1830s, if the church were to be separated from the state by disestablishment. That would guarantee once for all that Dissenters would not be the victims of discrimination. In 1841 Edward Miall, a Congregational minister in Leicester who had been radicalised by the church rate issue, launched a newspaper, *The Nonconformist*, to campaign for disestablishment. Three years later Miall set up the British Anti-State Church Asssociation, which in 1853, the year after he entered parliament, became the Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control. Originally designed to take up only the question of church and state, it gradually extended its coverage to all the grievances of Dissenters. The Liberation Society, as it was usually called, turned into one of the most powerful pressure groups in mid-Victorian Britain, enjoying an income greater than that of the Liberal Party.

How successful was its cause? There were two major waves of reform in favour of Nonconformists. In the 1830s the Whig government took up some of the grievances of a body of people who were often its most faithful supporters. In 1834 there was a bill to open Oxford and Cambridge to non-Anglicans, but it failed. Two years later, however, the Whigs carried a measure introducing civil registration of births, marriages and deaths for all in the country, thus dealing with the first of the grievances. In 1837 a Dissenters' Marriages Act gave them the right to hold weddings in their own places of worship. The second wave of reform came later, from W.E.

Gladstone's Liberal Party, which also enjoyed the enthusiastic support of the bulk of Nonconformity. Compulsory church rates were ended in 1868. University tests were abolished three years later. From 1880 burials in parish churchyards could follow Nonconformist rites. So Nonconformists put these issues of discrimination on the political agenda against strong opposition from most Anglicans and Conservatives. Yet it should not be assumed that Nonconformists were wielding power in their own right. Governments were enacting changes when they chose and often the concessions were only partial. Thus, for example, the question of church rates took fully three decades to resolve and even then the solution was not the total ban Nonconformists wanted, but merely the ending of powers to make church rates compulsory. And most fundamentally, there was no progress towards the disestablishment of the Church of England in England itself. Its sister church in Ireland was disestablished by an act of 1869, but that measure was primarily designed to placate the Irish Roman Catholics. Nonconformists could not enforce changes on their own behalf. They were merely suppliants at the door of progressive politicians.

Meanwhile Nonconformists were playing a full role in wider Victorian politics. In general they were active Liberals, arguing for its characteristic programme of peace, retrenchment and reform. A good example of the political stance of a Nonconformist of the later nineteenth century is that of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Baptist pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in south London. Spurgeon is remembered for his powerful sermons, but he had few inhibitions about expressing his political views. At the 1880 general election he issued an address to the local electors. 'Are we to go on slaughtering and invading in order to obtain a scientific frontier and feeble neighbours?', he asked. 'Shall all great questions of reform and progress be utterly neglected for years? … Shall the struggle for religious equality be protracted and embittered? Shall our National Debt be increased?'[7] The first question was a protest against the recent imperialistic ventures of the Conservative government. The second called for measures of change that would benefit the common people. Religious equality, the subject of the third question, was the distinctive aim of Nonconformists, and the reduction of the national debt, the subject of the fourth, would mean a decrease in public spending. Peace, reform, religious equality and retrenchment – these were the core of Spurgeon's politics. He had also denounced American slavery, consequently supporting the North during the Civil War; he supported measures to ensure the observance of the sabbath; and he defended the place of the Bible in the schools created by the 1870 act. In 1886, however, Spurgeon found Gladstone's proposal of Home Rule for Ireland distasteful. It would entail, he believed, a surrender of the Protestants of Ireland to repression by the 80 per cent of the population who were Roman Catholics. On this issue Spurgeon diverged from the great majority of his

[7] *The Sword and the Trowel*, April 1880, 191.

fellow Nonconformists, but, with that exception, the preacher embodied much of the political spirit of Nonconformity in the high Victorian years.

The cause that, apart from disestablishment, came to be seen as most typical of Nonconformity was temperance reform. The temperance movement had begun in the 1830s as a campaign for self-improvement among artisans and had soon turned to the advocacy of total abstinence from all alcoholic drinks. At first Nonconformists had often looked askance on what seemed a rival enterprise proposing abstinence as an alternative to the gospel, but gradually, beginning with the Primitive Methodists, they began to recommend taking the pledge to avoid strong drink themselves. By the 1860s many chapels ran Bands of Hope, evening meetings designed to train children in the evils of alcohol. Their efforts concentrated on moral suasion, urging people to give up the bottle. From 1853, however, there existed a pressure group called the United Kingdom Alliance which campaigned to prohibit the sale or manufacture of alcohol and pressure mounted for the government to tackle the problem of excessive consumption. Temperance increasingly became a political issue. In 1872 Gladstone's Liberal government carried a bill enforcing licensing hours for the first time. The chapels gave it their support and steadily thereafter they became committed to the battle against the bottle. In 1879 only a minority of Congregational ministers were total abstainers, but by 1904 about five-sixths were. Nonconformists often took local action, pressing corporation licensing committees to decrease the number of public houses permitted in their areas. In national politics their aim was the local veto, the right of local authorities to ban alcohol altogether. Nonconformists were delighted that measures to restrict the consumption of alcohol were proposed by Liberal goverments in 1893, 1895 and 1908, but frustrated when the House of Lords, dominated by Conservatives, threw out the measures. Although many Anglicans in these years shared a desire for temperance reform, it became a hallmark of what was labelled 'the Nonconformist conscience'.

Many other issues preoccupied Nonconformists, or Free Churchmen, as they began to call themselves, in the thirty years or so before the First World War. The moral questions of social purity and anti-gambling were specially popular among them. Social purity was the assertion of Christian sexual standards, for example by raising the age of consent to sexual intercourse from thirteen to sixteen, a measure carried with Nonconformist support in 1885. Opposition to gambling led Nonconformists, for instance, to campaign for tighter restrictions on betting. These were areas, like temperance, in which reprehensible behaviour could readily be identified. Some prominent Free Churchmen, however, took their analysis of the social problems of the day to greater depth. Hugh Price Hughes, from 1885 the founding editor of *The Methodist Times* and from 1887 first superintendent of the Wesleyan West London Mission, was a pioneer of urging the reconstruction of society on a Christian basis. The gospel, he believed, was steadily transforming the world into the kingdom of God. 'The day is coming', he

announced, 'when justice and love and peace will reign with unchallenged supremacy in every land; and when men will literally do the will of God on earth as angels do it in heaven.'[8] Hughes criticised a Christianity that was too individualistic, insisting in particular that greed must cease to govern social relations, but he did not abandon his Methodist heritage of preaching for conversions. Another broad Evangelical was John Clifford, minister of Westbourne Grove Baptist Church in west London. Clifford drew inspiration from Oliver Cromwell, led the Nonconformist critique of the British part in the Boer War of 1899–1902 and campaigned against the Conservative Education Act of 1902 that made Nonconformists pay the local tax for schooling in the doctrines of the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. Clifford was willing to take steps unusual for a Liberal. He became a member of the Fabian Society, an organisation which existed to promote greater state intervention in social problems and which helped to found the Labour Party. This commitment to collective action on behalf of the weaker members of society was an expression of what he, like Hugh Price Hughes, called the 'social gospel'. While never wavering from his belief that the gospel challenged individuals, Clifford added the conviction that it also had the potential to transform society.

The rise of the Labour Party as a champion of the working people in the early twentieth century owed a major debt to the Nonconformist social gospel. Methodists were particularly strong in the trade union movement that was the seedbed of Labour. At least half the attenders at the conference of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain in 1890 were local preachers. When, in 1908, the miners' Members of Parliament transferred from the Liberal to the Labour whip, it was a crucial step in shifting the party allegiance of many in the chapels. Early Labour branches in mining areas were often founded by Methodists. In Durham, for example, Primitive Methodists were to the fore. At the same time the growth of support for greater state involvement in social reform led naturally towards support for Labour, though a further move into outright socialism could mean, as it often did in south Wales, a renunciation of previous chapel attendance. The ideology of the early Labour Party, however, was often far from dogmatic. The party was overwhelmingly concerned with the bread-and-butter issues of the home and workplace, so that Free Church voters could change their partisan allegiance without altering their political outlook. The ethical socialism of early Labour, in fact, was close to the altruism that was preached as Christian duty from many a Methodist pulpit. So it was easy for those who had previously voted Liberal to slide almost imperceptibly into the emergent Labour Party during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Specific events exerted a similar effect. The decision of David Lloyd George, the Liberal Prime Minister, to enter the 1918 general election in alliance with his wartime Conservative coalition partners jolted many Free

[8] Hugh Price Hughes, *Ethical Christianity* (London 1892), 76.

Church voters out of a lifetime's loyalty to the Liberal Party. At that election John Clifford chaired a Free Church rally in favour of the Labour programme. As many as twenty-two Free Churchmen were returned as Labour Members of Parliament in that year and from 1922 the bulk of the Free Church representatives in the Commons sat for Labour. In the interwar years the party drew enormous strength from its chapel roots. Nearly half the Labour Members of Parliament of the period and about a third of the members and officers of the party's national executive committee were at least chapel attenders. One of Labour's greatest figures in this period was a distinguished Wesleyan who always kept a portrait of Hugh Price Hughes above his desk. This was Arthur Henderson, secretary of the Labour Party from 1911 to 1933, Home Secretary in 1924 and Foreign Secretary in 1929–31. At local level Labour was even more reliant on Free Churchmen. The achievement of Peter Lee, a Primitive Methodist local preacher, in County Durham is a case in point. Serving as first chairman of the Labour group on the council from 1919 to 1933, he steered it into undertaking idealistic but practical measures for the welfare of the people. The boldest was the creation of a reservoir in the Pennine Hills to supply fresh water to the crowded districts nearer the coast. Lee's work was so valued that a postwar new town, Peterlee, was named in his honour. With good reason, Labour has often been said to have owed more to Methodism than to Marxism.

The Dissenters had played a significant part in the public affairs of England and Wales over the previous three centuries. They emerged on the political scene during the civil wars of the seventeenth century as radicals and so were repressed as a danger to the restored monarchy after 1660. Granted toleration in 1689, they were loyal to the Hanoverian regime of the eighteenth century but sometimes adopted an oppositional stance during the later years of the century. The Evangelical Revival hugely increased their numbers, but in the wake of the French Revolution they tended to remain politically quiescent. From the 1820s onwards, however, they began to seek redress of their grievances from their patrons, the Whigs, very slowly receiving concessions but aspiring to do no less than disestablish the Church of England. In broader public affairs they were inclined to pursue a common programme of peace, retrenchment and reform, becoming the shock troops of Liberalism. The peak of political involvement came in the era of the Nonconformist conscience around the opening of the twentieth century, when temperance, social purity and anti-gambling were among the key issues. Hugh Price Hughes and John Clifford elaborated a social gospel and, partly in consequence, Free Church people, believing the state should do more for public welfare, turned in increasing numbers to the emergent Labour Party. It would be a mistake to suppose that Dissenters were always committed to democracy, for over long years in the eighteenth century they willingly acquiesced in the rule of a Whig oligarchy. Yet there was an element in the Nonconformist ethos that made Dissenters likely champions of democratic ways when opportunity offered. In 1776 Caleb Evans,

the president of Bristol Baptist Academy, pointed out the affinity between the practice of congregations choosing their own ministers and 'the truly constitutional principle, that the origin of power is from the people'.[9] The ecclesiology of the Old Dissenters, together with the popular sympathies of the Methodists, frequently made Nonconformity a force for change in a democratic direction.

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[9] Caleb Evans, *Political Sophistry Detected, or, Brief Remarks on The Rev. Mr. Fletcher's Late Tract* (Bristol 1776), 28–29, quoted by James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Non-conformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge 1990), 139.