

Cornwall Politics 1826-1832: Another Face of Reform?

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It is now more than six years since Professors D.C. Moore and R.W. Davis battled it out, toe to toe like a pair of heavyweights, over the "other face of reform" in Buckinghamshire. The controversy began, it will be recalled, when Davis in his book on Bucks electoral politics addressed himself to Moore's conclusions about a country-based reform movement. Moore suggested that it was composed of ultra-Tories and rural Whigs, who eventually influenced the framing of the First Reform Act. Davis labelled Moore's "other face of reform" an "hallucination," at least so far as Bucks was concerned. Whereupon the latter launched a vigorous counterattack in the pages of this journal.¹ Both scholars defended their conclusions about events in Bucks, as well as the sources upon which they were based. When the final bell rang each stood bloodied but unbowed, still convinced of the validity of his viewpoint. Since then no challengers have come forward to join the battle. The arena has remained empty, the spotlights dimmed, as if mourning a memorable brawl.

Professor Moore originally claimed the heavyweight crown when he turned the prevailing historical orthodoxy on its head in 1961.² The crux of his argument lay in the English counties where in the 1820s many country squires, already worried by the Tory government's policies on finance and agricultural protection ("cash" and "corn"), regarded Wellington and Peel's political aboutface over Catholic Emancipation as the final straw. From that springboard these disgruntled ultra-Tories launched themselves into a shortlived but crucial campaign for parliamentary reform. It took the form of a series of county and other reform meetings in the winter and spring of 1830. Joining with the rural Whigs, who were equally concerned about "cash" and "corn" but not "Catholics" (many of them favoured Catholic Emancipation), they pressed their demands for reform. The ultra-Tory gentry, firm in their anti-liberalism, had their sights firmly set on the aristocratic borough patrons and other borough mongers whose support for the Duke of Wellington, they believed, had allowed the passage of Catholic Emancipation. So Moore's country reform movement was gentry-led, and had its genesis in ultra-

¹D.C. Moore, "The Other Face of Reform", *Victorian Studies*, V, 1 (1961), 7-34; R.W. Davis, *Political Change And Continuity 1760-1885: A Buckinghamshire Study* (Newton Abbot 1972); Moore, "Is 'The Other Face of Reform' in Bucks an 'Hallucination'?", and Davis, "Yes", *Journal of British Studies*, XV, 2 (1976), 150-161; Moore, "Some Thoughts on Thoroughness and Carefulness Suggested by Comparing the Reports of the Aylesbury Meeting of 24 February 1830 in The Times and the Bucks Gazette, and Davis; "Rebuttal", *Journal of British Studies*, XVII, 1 (1977), 141-144.

²Moore "Other Face of Reform."

Tory discontent. Ultimately it was these revengeful gentry who profited most from the Reform Act of 1832.

Where Moore's sweeping and often provocative generalizations were based on a study of several counties, Davis confined himself to Bucks, analyzing both county and borough politics. After applying Moore's model he judged it to be sadly awry. Davis found that in Bucks "the reform movement was not primarily a movement of the gentry, ultra or any other sort."³ In Aylesbury it was drawn from "prominent members of the middling classes," some of whom opposed Catholic Emancipation. The squires were nowhere to be found, the currency issue never aroused periodic discussion, nor did protection. Moore's "country party" was still-born in Bucks according to Davis.⁴ He finished the final round with an invitation, reminiscent of that issued years earlier by Professor Norman Gash:

My Bucks study was not of course meant to provide a final answer as to the nature of provincial politics, but rather to raise questions and re-open controversy. . . . It will be useful, however, if others pursue these questions further afield.⁵

That invitation is willingly accepted.

There is no doubt that fresh light can be shed on what has become an historical stalemate. Cornwall offers several attractions as a choice to test Moore's generalizations and Davis's quite specific criticisms and conclusions. Forty-two members were sent to the House of Commons after 1826, most of them representing pocket boroughs of which there was a very high proportion in Cornwall. Corrupt voters were the rule rather than the exception in a county well known as the most notorious in the unreformed electoral system. Given this degree of political control and its geographical isolation, Cornwall would appear to be an unlikely locale for a burgeoning reform movement, yet developments in England's most western county between 1826 and 1832 reveal important similarities and differences to the findings of both historians. Cornwall, it seems, provides "another face of reform" markedly different to that originally suggested by Professor Moore.

I

Undoubtedly Moore would be the first to admit that, without an identifiable group of ultra-Tories emerging in the aftermath of Catholic Emancipation to press the case of parliamentary reform, his model would collapse. The ultra-Tories certainly existed in Cornwall, but before examining their beliefs and political behavior it should also be stressed that side by side with them in the county was a formidable collection of

³Davis, *Political Change*, p. 88.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 85, 88.

⁵Davis "Rebuttal", p. 144.

borough patrons—families whose support for Wellington provoked the “other face of reform.” In fact Cornwall was over-endowed with these political manipulators. Between them the Eliot, Edgcumbe, Hawkins, and Buller families, together with such outsiders as the Dukes of Northumberland and Leeds, controlled almost all of the county’s borough seats.⁴ Most of those members voted for Catholic Emancipation, with Edward Boscawen, Earl of Falmouth (and his nominees) being the only patron among the opposition. Therefore it might readily—and correctly—be assumed that it was this pro-government behavior of the Cornish patrons and their fellow boroughmongers elsewhere which upset many county squires. Finally, as the patrons faithfully toed the government line over Emancipation so they inevitably turned their backs on parliamentary reform after 1829. Thus Cornwall exemplified the situation which stimulated Moore’s ultra-Tory phenomenon.

However there was also a visible clique of Tory extremists, if we judge membership of that group by their “Protestantism” in particular. Among them were two of Western Cornwall’s principal landlords, Lord Falmouth and Sir Richard Vyvyan (county M.P. 1825-31), as well as Reginald Pole Carew and Viscount Valletort (Earl Mt. Edgcumbe’s eldest son), whose territorial bases lay in the southeastern parishes. All four represented powerful families who might aptly be labelled “oligarchical wielders of influence.” Among their allies were members of the lesser gentry, including Nicholas Kendall, Edward Archer, Francis Rodd, John Coryton, Francis Glanville, various members of the Hext family, and others. Most of them were eastern landowners of relatively minor social and political significance.

All of the leading ultra-Tories were active on Vyvyan’s behalf during the prolonged canvassing before the 1826 general election. It was freely acknowledged throughout Cornwall that he opposed Catholic Emancipation, and parliamentary reform, was not enamored of government tampering with the Corn Laws, and refused to commit his vote for the abolition of colonial slavery.⁵ Lord Falmouth, Vyvyan’s principal supporter, was known to support him in each of these points, and presumably Pole Carew, Glanville, Coryton, and Kendall also agreed for they were key members of Vyvyan’s electoral organization. Proof of their opinions on one issue is also revealed by their actions; Vyvyan’s backers, wisely or not, proceeded to make Catholic Emancipation a contentious issue. Their principal reason for doing so was to emphasize the ideological differences among the three candidates. Since 1821 John Tremayne, Vyvyan’s fellow county M.P., had been equivocal on the question, an attitude which did little to endear him to the powerful Lord Falmouth and kindred ultras.⁶

⁴In fact in 1830 none of Cornwall’s 20 boroughs could have been termed “open”; Mitchell, Tregony, Penryn, Helston and several others were notoriously venal.

⁵See E. Jaggard, “Patrons, Principles And Parties: Cornwall Electoral Politics 1760-1910”; (Ph.D. dissertation, Washington University, St. Louis, 1980), chapter IV.

⁶Ibid.

For Edward Pendarves, the Whig candidate, there was also a dilemma; he and other Whig reformers had publicly supported Catholic claims as long ago as 1813, so he was firmly identified with the emancipationists. At the beginning of his campaign Pendarves reiterated his support for Catholics; later his opinions were muted, in the interests of practical electoral politics. To Pendarves, Vyvyan's tactics were clear: "He is doing all he can to raise the cry of " 'No Popery' but this will effect Tremayne quite as much as it does me. . . ."⁹

By the time of the general election it was all too clear that Cornwall's Tories were badly divided, with the ultras having Vyvyan's re-election as their first priority, while the far less active "moderates" led by De Dunstanville, although supporting Vyvyan, showed that their preference lay with Tremayne.¹⁰ Eventually it was a triumph for the ultras, Tremayne withdrawing from the contest on the poll's eve. Most of the borough patrons then contented themselves with their usual political chicanery—far from overjoyed at the outcome in the county. Besides enduring the indignity of being unable to guarantee Tremayne's re-election, Lords Mt. Edgcumbe, Eliot, and De Dunstanville, as well as the politically prominent Buller, Rashleigh, and Gilbert families, now knew that the Catholic question would maintain the split among Cornish Tories and in the longer term that could only weaken the party.

Between 1826 and 1828 the ultra-Tories promoted only one major petition against Emancipation. As well Glanville, Pole Carew, and Vyvyan also busied themselves in airing their opinions on another matter of concern to them—the proposed alteration to the Corn Laws.¹¹ But generally public political discussion was low key until late in 1828 when the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* announced:

To our Correspondents who complain that the County of Cornwall remains silent at this season of peril to the Church and Constitution of England, we can only reply that we are ourselves astonished at the fact—at the seeming apathy which pervades the County—believing as we do that nine-tenths of its population are diametrically opposed to the ruinous and unconstitutional demands of the Roman Catholics.¹²

Immediately requisitions for meetings in many of the principal towns appeared. They provoked the rival *West Briton* to assert,

⁹[C]ornwall [R]ecord [O]ffice, Rashleigh MSS, DD.R. 5318, Pendarves to William Rashleigh, 24 December 1825.

¹⁰This was openly admitted in June 1826 when more than 1300 freeholders, headed by De Dunstanville, signed a petition asking Tremayne to offer himself again at the coming election. See *West Briton*, 2.6.1826, p.1.

¹¹These activities are explained in W.B. Elvins, "The Reform Movement And County Politics In Cornwall 1809-1852"; (M.A. thesis, University of Birmingham 1959), chapter 5, pages 1-2.

¹² *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 6.12.1828, p.2.

Knowing that all the resident Peers, with ONE exception, and a decided majority of the County were favourable to the final adjustment of the Catholic question, the Ultras have devised a plan for getting up so many petitions against the Catholics without openly and fairly taking the sense of the County, by calling meetings in different parts of the County for the same day.¹³

On this issue the ultras were prepared for a public showdown, particularly with Cornwall's gentry Whig reformers led by John Colman Rashleigh, who had been politically active for over two decades.¹⁴

Helston, Callington, Bodmin, and Launceston were the venues for meetings on January 7, 1829. At Truro the meeting was six days later.¹⁵ Together the gatherings illustrate three different positions adopted on Catholic Emancipation. First, at all of the meetings the ultra-Tories, who were remarkably prominent, were totally uncompromising. To them Emancipation was anathema, an attitude shared by many Dissenters. Even Lord Falmouth who rarely appeared on such occasions spoke forcefully and at some length at Truro. Second, there were the moderate Tories, those families whose political power within the county was considerable and who were prepared to stand with Wellington and Peel. They studiously avoided any appearances, almost certainly because they did not wish to appear as allies of the gentry Whigs with whom they had no other common political ground. And finally there were the reformers; at three of the meetings prominent members of that group, David Howell (Launceston), Edward Budd (Truro), Colman Rashleigh and William Peter (Bodmin), forcefully defended the Catholic claims as most of them had done for sixteen years. What the meetings also revealed was that Falmouth, Vyvyan, Pole Carew, and company were extremely angry with the Duke of Wellington's government.

Thus far it is difficult to challenge the validity of Moore's model, but besides "Catholics" some consideration must be given to "corn" and "cash" which, he alleged, also stirred ultra-Tory disenchantment. Neither issue was particularly significant in Cornwall. The reason was simple; besides the gentry it was yeoman and tenant farmers who were most directly affected by a deflated currency and a reduced scale of duties on imported corn. After 1822 Cornwall's rural middle classes formed a powerful alliance with the Whig reformers who convinced them that the best solution

¹³ *West Briton*, 2.1.1829, p.2.

¹⁴ Colman Rashleigh, William Peter, Reverend Robert Walker, Edward Pendarves, John Trelawney and the other dozen or so who were the principal members of the Whig reformers after 1809, were all lesser gentry. Most were J.P.s, and their political impact (which was considerable) has been analyzed in E. Jaggard, "The Parliamentary Reform Movement in Cornwall, 1805-1826", *Parliamentary History Yearbook*, (forthcoming).

¹⁵ Detailed reports of these meetings appeared in the *West Briton*. 9.1.1829, p. 3 and 16.1.1829, p.2.

for all their economic grievances lay in parliamentary reform—a more responsive House of Commons. Thus throughout the later 1820s the farmers were in no mood to align themselves with the complaints of the ultra-Tories. They much preferred the reformers' analysis of the causes of the post-war slump—poor rates, tithes, and taxes. Under such circumstances it was hardly surprising that “cash” and “corn” remained relatively minor questions after 1826.

For example, in the spring of 1827 Carew, Glanville, and Vyvyan promoted a petition among farmers in southeastern Cornwall, complaining about the principle of the sliding scale on foreign corn imports. From Westminster Vyvyan explained to Carew that, “The Country Gentlemen are united to a certain degree, we have had some meetings but they all speak at once and without regarding the opinion of the predominant.”¹⁶ In Cornwall they barely spoke at all, and when they did the evidence suggests they shared William Rashleigh's view. He observed to his steward Thomas Robins that, “Should the present alteration in the Corn Laws pass the House of Lords, I think they (sic) will prove beneficial to the Country.”¹⁷

Until the beginning of 1830 when agricultural distress assumed worrying proportions in eastern Cornwall there were few public expressions of concern about “corn” from ultras, Whig reformers or farmers.

The same conclusion can be reached on “cash.” Proof that there was never a prolonged debate on this emerges from the activities of two ideological opposites, Vyvyan and Penhallow Peters, a rumbustious, highly vocal farmer.

On May 26, 1828 Vyvyan wrote to all his Tory agents and others throughout Cornwall on the topic of promissory notes; he was “convinced that nothing short of a continuance of a one pound note circulation will save us from stagnation in our mines and agriculture, a depreciation of value in every article of produce, and a melancholy want of employment.”¹⁸ Vyvyan hoped that the response to his doleful predictions would be dozens of petitions and memorials. Instead he was rebuffed. Men were not interested and a Lostwithiel correspondent explained why:

I have consulted every intelligent man here with the exception of Mr Foster—whom I have not been able to see—and I find them most decidedly averse to petition, on the promissory note question, as they are convinced that a Gold and Silver Currency is necessary and can be supported by the Country—without any danger to its interests.¹⁹

¹⁶Antony House (Cornwall), Carew MSS, CC/N/60, Vyvyan to Carew, 9 March 1827.

¹⁷C.R.O. Rashleigh MSS, DD.R. 5320, Rashleigh to Robins, 23 March 1827.

¹⁸C.R.O. Vyvyan MSS, DD.V. 36/47, Vyvyan to all his election agents, 26 May 1828.

¹⁹Ibid., 47/34, Captain Henry Thomson to Vyvyan, 29 May 1828.

This opinion, and an unwillingness to disturb the existing system, resulted in the complete failure of Vyvyan's campaign. Never again did he return to the currency question.

Several days before Vyvyan's letter Penhallow Peters, perhaps the best known of all Cornish yeoman farmers, an improving agriculturist, and a persistent reformer to boot, also tested public opinion. Through the anti-government *West Briton* he announced that:

The dissatisfaction that everywhere exists in the County, among all classes of persons, at the prospect of the Act, for withdrawing LOCAL ONE POUND NOTES from circulation being permitted to come into full operation, and a conviction of the inevitable ruin that must follow that measure, to the *Agricultural and Mining* interests, and every other Business connected with this County, with various applications made to me to promote *petitions* against that destructive Act—induce me hereby to propose a meeting.²⁰

As reported in the *West Briton* Peters presided over a well attended meeting at Truro on May 21 and letters mentioning stagnation of business and the growing difficulties of paying miners were read. Peters spoke with some feeling on monetary problems facing agriculturists. Because he believed, "It was unfair of the landowners to leave their tenantry to grapple with their increasing difficulties, . . . ," he proposed a county meeting at which the principal gentlemen connected with agriculture, mining, and trade could help the freeholders and others to arrive at well reasoned protests.²¹ Presumably Peters anticipated that Cornwall's leading Tories would help to pressure the government. Like Vyvyan he was to be sadly disillusioned. No support was forthcoming and Peters thereafter left well alone. In fact during his speech at the Bodmin county meeting in 1830 he avoided currency, preferring to rail against one of his favorite aversions, the oppressive church tithes.

While it might truthfully be said that "corn" and "cash" were questions on which ultra-Tories and rural Whigs shared roughly similar viewpoints (for example there was little difference between Vyvyan and Pendarves over protection in 1825-26) neither aroused much interest. There is nothing whatsoever to suggest as Professor Moore does that they were instrumental in pushing "many influential Tories . . . into clear opposition."²² As we have already seen, Catholic Emancipation was far more influential in arousing ultra passions against Wellington's government, but in mid-1829 when applied to Cornwall, Moore's model collapses. According to Moore,

²⁰*West Briton*, 16.5.1828, p.3.

²¹*Ibid.*, 23.5.1828, p.2.

²²Moore "Other Face of Reform," p.17.

It was the passage of the Catholic Relief Act, and, even more, the manner in which it was passed, which prompted many of these latter [the oligarchical wielders of influence] first to appraise the political structure of the kingdom and then to add their more effective voices to the cry for reform.²³

Almost without exception the Cornish ultras remained silent at this time (as they did in Bucks too). The question is why were they mute at a time when the “cry for reform” was heard so clearly?

There appear to be several related explanations, the first of which is self evident from the preceding argument. Cornwall ultra-Tories felt very strongly about Catholic Emancipation but this was not the climax to a series of grievances against various Tory governments. Instead it was the single issue which prompted them to make a public declaration of principle and, by itself, it was insufficient to tempt them to turn on the Wellington government. Also, since 1825 Falmouth, Vyvyan, Pole Carew, and other ultras had consistently revealed uncompromising attitudes towards parliamentary reform, Catholic Emancipation, slavery and several lesser issues. Because of Pendarves’s long campaign before his election in 1826 and his well known involvement with the Cornwall reform movement since 1809, the ultras were drawn into making firm and repeated denials of the need for parliamentary reform which became a key issue in the county election. Amid hisses, taunts, and jeers Vyvyan had proudly announced on the hustings in July 1826 that he was no reformer, principally because he believed the House of Commons had never been purer than it was in that year.²⁴ He assured his listeners that no matter when and how the general question of reform was brought before parliament, he would oppose it. Under such circumstances Vyvyan, Lord Falmouth, his chief supporter, and their hard working band of ultra followers, having taken a public stand on reform *before* Emancipation, would have been hard pressed to perform a credible *volte-face* *after* March 1829.

Lastly we cannot overlook the longstanding antipathy between Tories and reformers; beginning in 1809 it was a visible element of Cornwall county politics for the next twenty years and there is no doubt that the reformers profited most from the rivalry. Besides turning frequent county meetings into forums for parliamentary reform and winning the farmers to their side, they reduced the Tories to behind-the-scenes machinations because they were unwilling to share the same platform as Colman Rashleigh and his lieutenants. For Cornwall’s ultras there was no chance of even a fleeting “country party” alliance of the type postulated by Moore.

The breakdown of his model is exemplified by a series of well attended meetings held in eastern Cornwall during February-March 1830. Cal-

²³*Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁴*West Briton*, 17.6.1826, p.2.

lington and Liskeard were the venue of Hundred meetings, Bodmin the scene of a full scale county meeting. None of the ultras already mentioned spoke at any of the gatherings. Nevertheless the drift of the arguments at Callington fits Moore's model, for the chairman Stephen Archer suggested that the current rural distress may have been caused by free trade policies or the change in currency.²⁵ That question and the overwhelming burden of taxation were taken up by a prominent Liskeard Tory solicitor Peter Glubb who suggested at each of the Hundred meetings that parliamentary reform was an urgent necessity. "Ministers would not grant adequate relief until *compelled* to do so by an *honest* House of Commons, Constitutionally elected by the voice of the People."²⁶ Before this Glubb had been a Tory; he now changed his political colors but he was not a member of the gentry and was politically insignificant by comparison with Vyvyan, Pole Carew, and the rest.

As for the county meeting, an ultra-Tory sherriff Edward Collins tried to stop it!²⁷ Currency and parliamentary reform were the central topics of discussion, however all the speakers belonged to the reform party which had been so active in the past. Moore's "rural Whigs"—half of the "country party"—completely dominated proceedings which reaffirmed the strength and unity of the farmer-reformer alliance.

Thus so far as the "other face of reform" is concerned only fragments of it were present in Cornwall. As early as 1825 there was an identifiable ultra-Tory faction which was characterized more by Protestantism than a dislike of government economic or fiscal policy. That they were an influential segment of county opinion was proved by their successful reelection of Sir Richard Vyvyan in 1826, but even Vyvyan, who was appalled by Wellington's apostasy over Catholic Emancipation, would not flirt with reform in 1829-31. Such an action by him or the other ultras would have exposed them to public ridicule from the Whig reformers, thereby weakening even further their political authority.

II

If the "country party" composed of ultra-Tories and rural Whigs is at the center of Professor Moore's model, it is "prominent members of the middling classes, some of whom happen to have opposed Catholic emancipation" who headed the Bucks reform movement. Professor Davis added that, "far from being dominated by 'squires,' ultras or any others, one of the prime motives behind the movement was an intense dislike of landed and all other sorts of exclusive influence."²⁸ He also found that a reform meeting held in Aylesbury in February 1830, undoubtedly a part of

²⁵Archer admitted that he had little idea of the precise causes of distress. *West Briton*, 26.2.1830, p.2.

²⁶*Ibid.* and 13.3.1830, pp.2-3.

²⁷*West Briton*, 5.3.1830, p.2.

²⁸Davis *Political Change*, p. 85.

Moore's "county" reform movement, revealed that the "other face of reform" in Bucks was "an hallucination." Anti-liberals did not influence it, the deflated currency was not seriously discussed, and few of the requisitioners were ultra-Tories. Several of these conclusions are mirrored in Cornwall, but like Moore's model they do not neatly dovetail, reinforcing the concept of "another face of reform."

It will be remembered that the Moore-Davis clash arose from their different interpretations of the speeches and resolutions at the Aylesbury meeting. As mentioned earlier there was a full-scale county meeting at Bodmin in March 1830, ostensibly another in the series making up Moore's country reform movement. Yet events at Bodmin bore little resemblance to either his model or the occasion at Aylesbury.

When the meeting was held in the county town on March 22 the sheriff, Edward Collins, who was a notable ally of Lord Falmouth, should have been in attendance but was not. Despite seven magistrates and several hundred freeholders signing the requisition Collins declared that too few of the clergy and "principal freeholders" were on the list. In effect he was attempting to ignore the very development which Cornwall's reformers had successfully sponsored—county meetings open to all, not merely substantial freeholders. Collins believed a *county* meeting was not warranted; he also felt unable to justify endangering the "unanimity and peace of the county" in times of difficulty and distress. Consequently the meeting was authorized by eight Whig magistrates, among them the Reverend Robert Walker, William Peter, David Howell, and Richard Bennet, all prominent reformers. None of the magistrates can be identified as ultras; certainly none were anti-Catholics.

There are several interesting points arising from these preliminaries. It would seem that the principal ultra-Tories totally disapproved of a meeting on parliamentary reform, otherwise Collins's decision would have been very different. Also county meetings may have been rare in Bucks, but after 1809 they were commonplace in Cornwall. Colman Rashleigh, Edward Pendarves, Peter, and Walker saw to that. Finally when concluding his speech seconding the petition the Reverend Robert Walker said to the yeomanry of the county,

It has been our [the reformers] great ambition to instil into their minds a conviction of the necessity of a Reform in the Representation of the People, for the salvation of the county: and I think we have succeeded; for previous to this meeting being called, I was informed, that if we did not call the Yeomanry together, as we have been accustomed to do, they would assemble of themselves without us.²⁹

²⁹*West Briton*, 26.3.1830, p.2.

This then was a meeting of the farmers, so it was farmers' concerns to which speakers had to address themselves. Undoubtedly this was to be a public reaffirmation of the farmer-reformer alliance.

The proceedings were chaired by Richard Bennet J.P., a gentleman landowner who was regularly identified with Rashleigh's reformers in the 1820s. Colman Rashleigh could not attend as he was out of the county, but in his stead the Reverend Robert Walker, Penhallow Peters, William Peter, his brother Robert, and John Rundle, a Devonshire reformer, were the principal speakers.³⁰ With the exception of Peters, the acknowledged leader of the yeomanry, all were minor country gentry and well known reformers. Their speeches drew attention to the widespread distress endured by agriculture and trade, the cause of which, they believed, was the accumulated debts and taxes plus the contracted currency. The petitioners agreed on the need for reductions in government expenditure and rigid economy, then concluded their appeal with the statement that,

they cannot look at the present situation, or reflect on the past history of their country—its wars, its debts, and its taxes,—without ascribing the far greater portion of its calamities to the very defective and inadequate state of the Representation—to the want of a House of Commons created by—responsible to—and having no interest distinct from—the great body of the People.³¹

This had been a catchcry of Colman Rashleigh and the Whig reformers for two decades, and as such was completely familiar to the farmers. However Peter and Walker spent most of their time discussing the unfortunate outcomes of a deflated currency—a topic never before raised on such an occasion. What prompted this unusual emphasis?

Peter and Walker contended that the return to a gold-based currency and the suppression of small notes meant a call on the people, “to bear the burthens of 1830 with the means 1792 (sic) to compel them to pay in gold the interest of an enormous Debt contracted, for the most part, in depreciated paper. . . .”³² Each argued that a reduction in the amount of circulating currency was a prime cause of depressed agricultural prices, the relatively low return to the producers then exacerbating their assorted financial difficulties. Could any government, they asked, act in this way without seriously considering a corresponding reduction in taxation? Other speakers too referred briefly to the currency issue, but it must be emphasized that all were Whig reformers—not ultra-Tories. All had publicly supported Catholic Emancipation, all except Rundle had long been identified with the Cornwall reform movement, and all agreed that

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.* It was Peter who made this statement in the course of developing his currency arguments at great length.

parliamentary reform would eventually curb the deflationary monetary policy.

It is very apparent that Peter and Walker's opinions were directly influenced by the February 1830 Speech from the Throne, and the Amendment to the Address moved by Sir Edward Knatchbull and the Marquis of Blandford. By suggesting that distress prevailed only "in some parts of the Kingdom" the ministers stirred many agriculturists, particularly those in Cornwall.³³ Both speakers at Bodmin carefully quoted the government's viewpoint, then drew a distinction between the relative prosperity in the western mining districts of the county and the near desperate plight of the farming regions farther east. They also adapted Knatchbull and Blandford's opinions—that a prime cause of the existing distress was a contracted currency. The solution offered was, as always, straightforward—parliamentary reform resulting in a more representative and responsive House of Commons. Thus the reformers gave their farmer allies the well known "cause and cure" analysis, substituting national for local causes of distress.

The evidence of the Bodmin meeting and political developments preceding it leave few doubts that Cornwall's Whig gentry, supported by many yeoman and tenant farmers, were at the center of this county reform movement just as they had been for years. Despite the speeches of Walker and Peter at Bodmin it would be true to say that the currency issue made little impact on this farmer-reformer alliance. Penhallow Peters's unhappy experience in 1828 proves that. Nor did the government's tampering with the Corn Laws move them into action. These reactions underline an important similarity between Cornwall and Bucks; another, with ramifications for Professor Moore's model, is the total absence of embittered ultra-Tories (and therefore of anti-liberalism) at these meetings. In Cornwall the Whig gentry were pre-eminent at the Bodmin meeting while at Aylesbury their counterparts were farmers and the urban middling class. The major difference between the reform movements in the two counties was in their leadership, which in the case of Cornwall had long been publicly recognized. In neither county was there a "country party" alliance along the lines suggested by Moore.

III

Before stepping clear of the ring, leaving "another face of reform" to fend for itself, some attention must be paid to two obviously related developments in the Cornwall of 1829-32. The first was the gradual appearance (as in Aylesbury) of a small town reform movement, Truro being one example. The second was the desperate last ditch efforts of one segment of the ultra-Tories to win support for a "plan for reform" in 1831-32.

³³This suggestion provoked the farmers to summon a county meeting in the first place.

Truro was the Boscawen family's pocket borough from the mid-eighteenth century. Because of their often high-handed treatment of the Corporation the family was rarely popular. Occasionally various Boscawens were forced to use all the means at their disposal to fend off challenges to their hegemony, and with the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars plus the well publicized activities of the county reformers, these occurred frequently after 1815. Until 1832 all were unsuccessful, but from 1822 onwards there was a marked change in the nature of the challenges. Before that year they were ad hoc affairs, more often than not springing from the midst of rebellious members of the Corporation. After 1826 it became increasingly evident that many middle class shopkeepers and professional men, some of whom were Dissenters, were becoming convinced of the long-term benefits to be derived from parliamentary reform. It was their membership of the town's Anti-Slavery Society which was the catalyst in a growing unity of opinion. Furthermore, it appears that it was the rural Whig reformers (Colman Rashleigh's group) who encouraged the process. By doing so they were cleverly broadening their support beyond the rural middle classes.

During 1823 the *West Briton* began publicizing the evils of Negro slavery in British colonies. Within a year a series of meetings erupted, county-wide, most demanding an amelioration of the slaves' conditions or abolition. In December 1825 at Bodmin there was a "Meeting of Friends to the Cause of the Mitigation and Abolition of Slavery," with several Whig reformers assuming prominent roles.³⁴ Soon anti-slavery associations sprouted in Penryn, Falmouth, Camborne, Redruth, Truro, St. Ives, Bodmin, Penzance, Wadebridge, and Launceston, often with well known reformers chairing the meetings or being the principal speakers—with generous support from Dissenters. Edward Pendarves made abolition an integral part of his campaign for the county in 1825-26, besides appearing at many anti-slavery meetings. By doing so he publicized the issue, identified the reformers with it, and forced a polarizing of opinions because Sir Richard Vyvyan and the Tories were forced to state their opposition to abolition.

Following the 1826 general election, comparative rural prosperity temporarily deprived the reformers of their bandwagon of farmer discontent (although the alliance remained secure). So, they energetically threw themselves into a campaign designed to gain the support of the small town middle classes via the anti-slavery associations. Peter, Rashleigh, Walker, the Reverend Darrell Stephens, and Edward Budd, Wesleyan lay preacher and editor of the reformer's paper the *West Briton*, realized as Pendarves had done that here was a further opportunity to offer parliamentary reform as the ultimate solution to a moral blot. Consequently in Truro they encouraged William Tweedy, a Quaker banker, Edmund Clarke and William Moore (Baptist and Independent ministers), N.C.

³⁴*West Briton*, 30.12.1825, p.3.

Stephens, dentist, Samuel Milford, draper, Thomas Whitford, mercer, John James, druggist, William Michell, coal merchant, and many others to work for abolition and to take a stand against the Boscawens. While the anti-slavery group splintered over Catholic Emancipation, unity was soon restored, and many among them headed the list of free burgesses of Truro who persuaded two reformers, Sir John Lubbock and William Tooke, to oppose the Boscawen nominees in the 1830 general election. They also headed those who voted for them, although the votes were rejected. Later, in December 1832, they were responsible for sweeping aside the Tory candidates for Truro.³⁵

By comparing the lists of those who attempted to vote for the reformers in 1830, and successfully elected William Tooke in 1832, with the names of the leading participants in Truro's Anti-slavery Association after 1828, it is clear that the town's reformers were, like those in Aylesbury, middle class men receiving some stimulus from the Whig reformers as well as from such prominent farmers as Penhallow Peters and George Simmons. Never did ultra-Tories intrude into this pattern; instead Lord Falmouth's acolytes lay low, avoiding confrontations. Much the same pattern of middle class politicization via an anti-slavery association, and with frequent encouragement from the reformers, also occurred in Lord St. Germans's pocket borough of Liskeard—with the same triumph of liberalism in December 1832.³⁶

The wider significance of these small town reform movements must not be disregarded. In 1972 Professor Davis contended that, "Reforming sentiment in Bucks, then, far from being a product of the discontents of the landed classes, was rather largely a product of discontent *with* the landed classes, springing from an intense resentment against landed influence."³⁷ Aylesbury, Buckingham, and Marlow were three boroughs which demonstrated this point. Truro and Liskeard followed similar patterns of political development, even though one had a compliant corporation managed by the Boscawens and the other was held in an electoral vice by approximately fifty freemen, all handpicked by the Eliots of St. Germans. The common feature was ruthless aristocratic control. As in Bucks this aroused intense resentment among many independently minded small businessmen, shopkeepers and professional men, resentment which had periodically flared up in earlier years in both towns. In fact it seems to have sustained the sporadic Truro reform movement from the 1780s.

Furthermore it was inevitable that, after 1809, Colman Rashleigh's gentry reformers would frequently use the most notorious Cornish exam-

³⁵The various phases of this process are discussed in Jaggard, "Patrons, Principles, and Parties", chapter v.

³⁶The emergence of the Liskeard reformers was particularly obvious at the Hundred meeting mentioned earlier. See the *West Briton* 13.3.1830, pp. 2-3. As in Truro they seem to have been particularly active after 1827.

³⁷Davis, *Political Change*, p. 87.

ples of borough manipulations to reinforce their arguments about the corrupt and unrepresentative nature of the House of Commons. Because landed influence was so well known and so blatant these examples were always greeted with knowing applause. Thus in June 1826 when speaking from the hustings in support of the reformer, Pendarves, William Peter asked his listeners to,

Look at the greater number of Boroughs in the County—look at Truro, completely under the beck of a certain noble Lord in the neighbourhood,—look at Mitchell, under the same noble Lord and a Baronet,—look at Helston, St Mawes, St Germans, and many others in the County, under whose dominion are they? Would you reduce the County to this state?³⁸

He was shrewdly exploiting the anti-aristocratic spirit of many of the freeholders. It had long been present and by 1830 it was also re-emerging as a potent force in at least two towns. While reforming sentiments in Cornwall were not entirely a product of “discontent *with* the landed classes,” abhorrence of landed influence was a significant ingredient.

By 1831 it was apparent that throughout Cornwall the spirit of reform was gaining such a grip on the populace that most Tory borough patrons would be hard-pressed to retain their influence or control—if the boroughs survived disfranchisement. In that political climate several of the ultra-Tories who had offered no support for reform in 1829-30, now endorsed a plan which was doomed to failure.

The author of the scheme was an anti-Catholic “squarson” Francis Hext, rector of Helland, a sparsely populated moorland parish near Bodmin. His family were at best minor gentry, with some local influence as landowners and magistrates in the Bodmin-Lostwithiel area. Hext, just over fifty years of age in 1831, was closely related by marriage with the Kendalls of Pelyn. In fact, Nicholas Kendall (born 1800) one of Vyvyan’s most outspoken and extreme supporters, was his nephew.³⁹ The Hexts were on the fringes of local politics, at least until 1831 when Francis, through the columns of the *Gazette* and under the nom de plume “YZ”, addressed a letter to Vyvyan containing assorted proposal for reform. The proposals were expanded in successive letters and before long they aroused considerable discussion among the Tories.⁴⁰

According to Brian Elvins who discussed the Hext plan in his excellent thesis on nineteenth-century Cornish county politics, when the House of Lords rejected the Reform Bill in October 1831, “the opportunity was seized by the moderate section of the Cornish opposition to produce those concessions to reform which were considered safe and not an attack upon

³⁸*Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 17.6.1826, p.2.

³⁹Elvins, “Reform Movement and County Politics”, chapter 6, p.1.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

the constitution."¹¹ That explanation is confusing and even misleading. Hext and all his supporters, including Reginald Pole Carew, the chief among them, were dedicated ultra-Tories. On their past record this group could hardly be described as "moderate" in any sense. As for "concessions to reform" the plan was no more than a gesture. Unlike Professor Moore's ultras who apparently wished to purge the constitution, partly for revenge on Peel and Wellington, partly because even they could see some of the anomalies, the Cornwall group had a very different justification. Prompted early in 1831 by fear of far-reaching borough disfranchisement and the danger of mob rule, they drew up a chimerical plan designed, they hoped, to keep their party from an electoral abyss. Desperate and unprincipled, it was a last ditch bid so blatant in its motivation that with one exception all of Cornwall's principal Tories shied away. Even fears of disunity could not persuade them to make common cause with socially inferior gentry who were prepared to ignore principled opposition to reform. Rather than being fathered by moderate Tories, Hext's plan was a unique manifestation of ultra extremism.

Briefly the principal features were as follows: no existing boroughs would be disfranchised, the pecuniary qualifications of borough electors should vary according to local circumstances and the town or city's population, counties would not be split into divisions, and parliamentary candidates gaining pledges to "any specific measures of legislation" would be disqualified from taking their seats. The plan attracted some support in April-May 1831 but then it was shelved as Cornwall's Tories became preoccupied with their attempts to return two ultras (Vyvyan and Valletort) for the county in the general election. That was a debacle, the reformers Pendarves and Sir Charles Lemon finishing far ahead on the poll.¹² Afterwards, in November 1831, Hext decided on one last bid for approval of his plan. His aim was to resubmit it to the "gentry and magistracy" for their approval before addressing the king; what he achieved was rather less, and, most important, the Tories again split although not into ultras versus moderates as had occurred in 1829.

Hext's first object was to try and win support from Sir Richard Vyvyan. Vyvyan demurred; so did Lord St. Germans and his eldest son Lord Eliot, J.H. Tremayne the former county M.P., Lords Falmouth, Mt. Edgcombe, Valletort, and De Dunstanville, and Davies Gilbert. Apart from Reginald Pole Carew, Hext totally failed to gain any influential converts to his cause. The reasons were various; Eliot believed "it would divide and

¹¹Ibid.

¹²The final result was Edward Pendarves 1819 votes, Sir Charles Lemon 1804, Sir Richard Vyvyan 906 and Viscount Valletort 811. Afterwards G.W.F. Gregor, one of the leading Tories, wrote that the party received its death blow at the election, "when we chose to shew our weakness (of which Sir. R.V. was well aware) and that it (the Party) had been on the decline since the Election of 1826." C.R.O., DD.G, 1935/5, 27 August 1831.

weaken the conservative party;⁴³ Valletort was reluctant to put his name to anything so comprehensive and specific as proposed, while Lord Falmouth pointed to the necessity of “preserving the union in our already reduced ranks and the certainty of the contrary effect if he [Hext] should bring forward such plan.”⁴⁴ He added that, “the great object of those, we can alone depend upon if ever toryism is to raise its head again, has been simply to oppose the revolutionary bill of our unprincipled ministry, not to call for the thousand differences of opinion by suggesting any plan of our own.” Reginald Pole Carew cajoled, compromised, and made prodigious efforts to rally Cornish Tories behind the plan, with little success. The aristocracy and wealthy gentry were prepared for nothing less than total rejection, indeed to go to the wall for a principle, and no amount of pressure from lesser gentry would convince them otherwise. Finally in February 1832 Hext, with Carew’s help, gathered together “300 respectable signatures” to an address to the king, a pathetic anticlimax to almost twelve months’ labor.⁴⁵ The ultra-Tories had played their last card—and lost.

IV

Although one reviewer claimed that in his book Davis attacked Moore’s conclusions, “with the zeal of an inquisitor rooting out heresy,” nevertheless the latter’s arguments are so important that they must be tested against specific examples.⁴⁶ This Davis did; and Moore’s model was found to be inadequate, in that instance. Similarly the model is irrelevant to developments in Cornwall which, it must be added, do not dovetail with those in Bucks although there are several interesting similarities. At this stage with so few examples of rural politics in the half dozen years before the Reform Act it would be foolhardy to attempt any generalizations.

Certainly, when compared with Bucks and the more wide-ranging conclusions of Moore, Cornwall does present “another face of reform.” There was no “country party” because the county’s ultra-Tory faction knew an alliance would have been instantly repudiated by the well established farmer-reformer alliance. Therefore they made no commitment, temporary or otherwise, to parliamentary reform following Emancipation. Earlier the currency question had aroused little interest, alterations to the Corn Laws even less. Divided over Emancipation, Cornwall’s Tories at first maintained an uneasy unity against parliamentary reform. Unequivocal opposition was essential if the borough empires were not to be completely swept away. However, as revealed in

⁴³Antony (Cornwall) Carew MSS, CC/N/64, Lord Eliot to Pole Carew, 16 November 1831.

⁴⁴Ibid., Valletort to Pole Carew, 21 December 1831, and CC/N/65, Falmouth to Pole Carew, 13 January 1832.

⁴⁵Ibid., CC/Q/5, Hext to Carew, 8 February 1832.

⁴⁶John Cannon in the *American Historical Review*, 76, 4 (1973), 1460.

1825-26 and again in 1829, the Tory party was prone to splits between ultras and moderates, and in 1831-32 a new splintering occurred. This time it was on social lines, the greater and lesser gentry being at loggerheads. Together with the shattering county election defeat of 1831 it exposed the Tories as a strife-ridden and unhappy party whose ultra wing rarely behaved according to Moore's model.

With Colman Rashleigh leading them it was the rural Whigs who were the catalyst in Cornwall's reform movement, not Moore's "country party" amalgam. As we have seen, parliamentary reform was debated continuously in Cornwall after 1809. Eventually the farmers were enticed into an alliance with the reformers. Then, after 1826 the reformers openly encouraged small town anti-slavery societies, their members soon finding their way into the reform movement.

The growing political activism of the urban middle classes in Truro and Liskeard resembled that in Aylesbury, an important similarity to Bucks. Another was the anti-aristocratic feeling, Davis's "discontent *with* the landed classes" which first manifested itself among the small farmers before spreading to the middle classes in several of Cornwall's larger towns. Thus the growth of reform sentiment in the county after 1826 bears a great similarity to the traditional explanation for that phenomenon, and little to Moore's revisionist standpoint.

However rather than being something new in Cornwall, this was another cycle in a reform movement commencing two decades earlier. More important, and again unlike Bucks, that movement was gentry-led. Colman Rashleigh, Reverend Robert Walker, William Peter, and their friends were small landowners who became adept at advertising their cause in the county and a handful of the larger towns. Their success prohibited any thoughts of even temporary alliance which the ultra-Tories may have possessed. As for Cornwall's Tories in general, unwilling to confront the reformers and handicapped by various shades of opinion, they did little more than watch angrily as their political power slipped away, never to be wholly regained.

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