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## **UNIT 5    POLITICAL TRANSITION IN BRITAIN: 1780-1850**

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### **5.0 OBJECTIVES**

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After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- discuss the nature of British polity and various political institutions,
- learn about the concept of liberty and the background for the growing demand for reforms,
- explain the initiatives taken by the state to meet the people's demands, and
- analyse the dynamics of the working class movements and its consequences.

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### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

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The study of modern Britain has been of interest to students of history for a variety of reasons. You may be aware that roughly between 1780 and 1850, Great Britain— comprised of England, Wales and Scotland—went through a sweeping transformation brought about by the Industrial Revolution. This momentous change not only revolutionised manufacturing by introducing the factory system but also had long-lasting impact on the rest of the world.

By taking a lead in this process, Britain emerged as the greatest imperial power as it exploited its captive markets and resources to stay ahead in the race for industrialization until the beginning of the twentieth century. We shall talk more about this in Unit 9.

The same years interestingly saw the crystallisation of a 'liberal polity' in Britain which has served as a model for a number of capitalist states till today. Such a polity guarantees to its citizens rights to free speech, assembly, religious belief, the right to dissent and to equal treatment before the law. But it also protects the inequalities based on property and the wastefulness of the 'free' market associated with artificial demands generated by profit maximising entrepreneurs. In this Unit, we shall closely examine the emergence of such a state in Britain between late eighteenth and mid nineteenth centuries.

The same period in British history is also memorable for the growth of a new kind of politics centred on parliamentary elections and electoral competition between organized parties as well as struggles for a democratic order granting equal say to all (excluding women) in governance. While the rising middle classes were particularly concerned about the former, the industrial working class played an important role in the development of the latter. In the following sections, we shall try to explain the peculiar way in which these political traditions competed in Britain and their wider implications for its modern polity.

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## 5.2 NATURE OF BRITISH POLITY

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It may be useful to review our understanding of the terms 'politics' and 'state' and the ways in which they have generally changed in modern times. Politics refers to the struggle for power. Those who have power try to maintain it while those who are out of power may resist the exercise of power by the powerful or they may strategise and try to capture power. In a sense, this tussle pervades all forms of social relations and institutions. At the level of the state, however, its intensity is particularly marked in the form of factional clashes within the ruling classes and in wider struggles between rulers and ruled, (could be read as rich and poor), which may erupt overtly from time to time.

Secondly, ideological conflicts also play a significant role in the politics which centres around the state. The rulers may seek to justify the existing system in terms of religious or secular ideals while those out of power may look forward to changes which may be radically new (leftist) or reactionary (rightist) in their aims. In general terms, such political impulses may be described as centrist, leftist and rightist respectively. But their content can vary according to context. And, it may be useful to view them as relative positions only.

In modern times, however, the notion of the 'left' has been associated more with egalitarian movements of/for the working classes while centrist politics has been mostly ascribed to the bourgeoisie which champions individual rights but not social equality. 'Rightist' politics has further assumed various forms in recent times ranging from different types of revivalist movements to secular dictatorships and fascist states.

Apart from generating new spectrum of political ideologies, the modern period has also witnessed significant transformations in the methods by which power has been legitimated and resisted by various factions and classes. The rising middle class favoured the maintenance of 'law and order' through a representative state which would facilitate maximum productivity and mobilization of resources without giving up the basic right to property which perpetuated inequality in the distribution of wealth and resources. The mobilization of popular consent through

organized parties and propaganda and winning electoral support and parliamentary majorities are its main concerns. The leftist movement, on the other hand, questioned the validity of parliamentary politics within a highly unequalitarian social order. It even supported violent assertions of proletarian rebellions against oppressive states which protected class divisions. While these political impulses have been common to most societies undergoing modernization yet their precise shape and character have obviously varied from country to country.

In this context, the history of modern Britain offers a special case of a stable polity which underwent liberal democratic transformation without a violent overthrow of its ruling class. This was in marked contrast to some countries on the European continent which saw frequent outbreaks against feudal regimes and their successor bourgeois states as well. On the other hand, the British Isles (apart from Ireland) were transformed in this 'Age of Revolution' more by industrialization than by violent political upheavals.

This is not to say that radical alternatives to parliamentary politics such as a workers' convention and an economy dominated by workers' cooperatives were not tried out in Britain. But, as 'left' alternatives, they either failed to gather substantial support or their aims remained relatively moderate. As a result, by the middle of the nineteenth century, Britain's rising middle class and ruling aristocracy managed to arrive at a compromise and also to contain the growing working class movements within the confines of parliamentary politics committed to the protection of private property. How was this achieved? And what factors shaped the peculiar transition of Britain to modern politics deserve to be studied systematically.

But before turning to that account it may be relevant here to consider briefly the nature of political institutions inherited by Britain at the beginning of our period.

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### 5.3 NATURE OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

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During the early modern period (circa 1500-1800), a number of states in Europe emerged as sovereign political entities laying claim to the allegiance of all the subjects within their territories and also rapidly expanding their administrative and economic functions under absolutist monarchs such as Louis XIV of France and Frederick the Great of Prussia.

In countries like Britain and the Netherlands, however, the rise of a sovereign nation-state was also accompanied by a system of constitutional government based on a rule of law as enshrined in parliamentary statutes and legal conventions rather than the arbitrary will of the monarch. In Britain particularly, this was achieved after revolutions during the seventeenth century against the absolutist ambitions of Stuart kings who were replaced by a new dynasty as well as a new constitution ensuring a division of powers between the monarch, parliament and a more independent judiciary. Parliament was indeed the distinctive organ of Britain's government. It consisted of two houses. The upper one, called the **House of Lords**, represented the higher clergy and the hereditary nobility and the lower one, called the **House of Commons**, was elected on the basis of a limited franchise. After the revolutions of the seventeenth century, the lower house introduced some important checks on the monarch's political powers and acquired a crucial role in governance. For example, the crown's finances including its

right to raise fresh taxes and spend on all state departments including the army were controlled by the House of Commons through the mandatory annual budget. Similarly, all new laws were first passed by the parliament and only then sent for royal assent. The legislative and budgetary powers of parliament, moreover, put important checks on the executive authority of the monarch who was in practice compelled to appoint his ministers largely from those who had a following in the House of Commons. This significant convention opened the path to the future development of the modern 'cabinet system' in which the council of ministers is held collectively responsible to parliament and holds office as long as it commands a majority in the House of Commons.

Until late eighteenth century, the unwritten constitution of Britain had few parallels in the rest of the world. Yet, its celebrated division of powers as well as its checks and balances were not without serious limitations and problems. The powers of the House of Commons were clearly circumscribed by those of the monarch and the Lords. Moreover, within the House of Commons, factions and influence dominated the proceedings rather than well organized political parties with defined programmes and ideologies. Thus, the Whigs and the Tories, which were the principal political groupings in British parliament since the Glorious Revolution of 1688, represented by and large the same aristocratic interest with minor differences on questions of religious and political dissent. The Tories were political conservatives and firmly geared towards the ruling Anglican aristocracy while the Whigs supported the organised body of religious dissent in England as well as Scotland and were more open to middle class demands for greater political equality and freedom. On the whole, party discipline and organization in parliament were, however, still weak. This further opened the path for undue influence of the crown in parliament through patronage.

Thirdly, the electoral base of the Commons itself was extremely limited and the landed interest dominated the lower house as well as the House of Lords. Thus, at the close of the eighteenth century, a mere 2% of the population of England had the right to vote. In the rural counties the franchise was restricted to those men who held freehold property worth 40 shillings while amongst the urban boroughs there existed wide disparities between constituencies. Some large centres like Westminster had several thousand voters while a few ghost towns like Old Sarum had as few as seven. The restricted character of the franchise was further vitiated by widespread use of influence and bribery in the electoral process.

While such 'corruption' in the political process was noted and criticized by a number of contemporaries it is equally interesting to note that the narrow social base of Parliament was actually defended by most ideologues of the eighteenth century. The leading parliamentarians of the times in fact claimed that only landowners had a stake in the country and hence their right to be represented in parliament. Even reformers such as Edmund Burke, as we shall note below, instead of viewing mass resistance and initiative as a resource for reform, displayed considerable contempt for the poor and feared popular action.

No account of the British state would be complete without a discussion of the nature of local government in those times. At a time when daily papers did not carry the news of central government's decisions to every household, the actual government with which most citizens were familiar was that of the vestry or the village council, the municipal bodies and the lower courts. It was the mayor and the alderman in the towns and the Lords Lieutenants and the magistrates (also

called the Justices of Peace) maintaining law and order in the counties who personified the state to an average British citizen. The Justices of Peace in fact carried out a number of functions at the local level including those of a revenue official and the organizer of welfare or relief for the poor. It is notable that until the late nineteenth century there was in fact no regular police in Britain to assist these unpaid local officials apart from the small army garrisons which could be called for help during times of unrest. Another key official who played an important role during this period was the Improvement Commissioner. These were appointed through acts of Parliament to supervise the development of roads, bridges, canals, etc. in the counties.

While it is apparent that representative institutions played an unique and important role in Britain both at the central and local levels in fixing taxes and regulating state expenditure alongwith poor relief, it is worth noting that the dominance of the landed aristocracy at all levels remained unassailable till the beginning of the twentieth century.

The British aristocracy was headed at the top, by a powerful group of some 350 families who owned huge landed estates, usually with titles (of nobility). A seat in the House of Lords was their special privilege alongwith a hold on other influential offices of the state. Below this exclusive group of peers or nobles in Britain's ruling elite, came the 4000 odd families constituting the gentry. They also owned substantial landed estates. A few amongst them in terms of wealth were comparable to the Lords, but their title was that knight or baron and the offices they could aspire to were either unpaid Justices of Peace or a seat in the House of Commons.

Another peculiar and significant feature of the British aristocracy was its fairly compact character. While in most European nations the ruling elite was supposed to include all scions of noble families, in Britain on the other hand, owing to the practice of primogeniture and the regular outflow of younger children of the title holders into the armed forces, the diplomatic corps, the church and high finance, the number of titleholders remained fairly restricted. Even successful members from the trades and the professions could always purchase substantial estates and aspire to titles over time. Lastly, it may be noted that the cessation of feuds and intra-class violence within the British aristocracy, specially during the eighteenth century, was accompanied by the development of the gentlemanly ideal and increasing attention being paid to improvement of estates and to learning rather than to martial display.

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## 5.4 NOTION OF LIBERTY

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Another characteristic of the British polity which needs to be noted at this stage is its claim of promoting 'liberty' for its subjects. Apart from numerous British commentators, a number of foreign observers (including thinkers such as Montesquieu and Voltaire) also stressed during the eighteenth century that the British polity was distinctive not only due to its powerful parliament but also by virtue of the freedom of expression and the security of person and possessions enjoyed by its citizens in general. Some modern thinkers have also noted that by the beginning of nineteenth century Britain was being increasingly governed through the rule of law in place of direct use of force to extract surplus out of the labouring classes.

It is certainly true that parliamentary checks on the executive's right to impose new taxes, the sanctity of private property, the independent tradition of the English common law and the force of legal provisions such as Habeus Corpus along with a relatively free press guaranteed some important rights to the upper and middle classes in Britain at a time when similar liberties were unknown elsewhere. At the same time it is important to remember that these freedoms could be enjoyed in practice only by the wealthy who could take recourse to the lengthy procedures of law. Indeed the British courts as well as political thinkers from Hobbes and Locke to Bentham and Bagehot went out of their way to champion the sanctity of private property while the laws remained extremely harsh against the poor.

It is well known that in all inegalitarian societies laws, customs and dominant values are biased infavour of the ruling classes. While the owners of land and capital derive super normal profits and rents with little effort, the labouring classes— the real creators of wealth— often survive on low wages. Women are often confined to unpaid domestic work. Political and legal discrimination against the lower orders further worsen their economic deprivation.

British society was no different on this count. Indeed, the law makers as well as those implementing the law were almost entirely drawn from the landed aristocracy. It is hardly surprising that the government was also biased towards this class. Apart from with holding political and voting rights from women, workers and religious minorities, the eighteenth century British state also put numerous restrictions on the free movement of workers and sought to regulate prices and wages in favour of the landed elite. Some of these restrictions were later seen as obstructing industrial capitalism and hence progressively removed in the nineteenth century as we shall see below.

Throughout the eighteenth century, however, maximum focus of the British state was on strengthening the agrarian gentry at the cost of independent farmers and labourers. The enclosure movement under which large estates were created by the rich for commercial farming out of the common land of the rural communities and by ousting the poor farmers was well supported by parliamentary legislation. On the other hand, the same parliament went to the extent of passing death penalties for petty offences such as hunting in the common lands or 'theft' from forests etc. In order to instil awe of propertied classes in minds of poor public hangings of such offenders was also prescribed. And those given the death penalty in eighteenth century Britain included children stealing goods above forty shillings and starving labourers trying to hunt rabbits in the forests. The claims of 'liberty' obviously had little value for the ordinary folk of Britain.

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Write in brief on the nature of political transformation in Britain. Answer in 5 sentences.

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- 2) Explain the composition and nature of the British Parliament. Answer in 100 words.

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- 3) Explain the role of aristocracy in the British polity? Answer in five sentences.

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- 4) 'British law was beyond the reach of the poor.' Explain in 50 words.

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## 5.5 DEMAND FOR REFORMS

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Throughout the eighteenth century, Britain saw a considerable expansion of population as well as agricultural production and trade and commerce. Such sustained economic growth in turn unleashed new social and political forces in the country by the close of the century. England, Scotland as well as Wales were getting rapidly urbanised and witnessing the rise of a new social order dominated by the middle and working classes in place of the old clergy, landowners and agricultural workers. Moreover, the relations between the new social groups were qualitatively different from those of the old. A much greater degree of competition and conflict informed the relations between these classes as deference to hierarchical differences was now considerably reduced.

An important dimension of the ferment now visible on the political scene was the growth of informed public opinion, the growing numbers of newspapers and the rise of numerous associations and pressure groups dedicated to various public causes including electoral reform, fiscal discipline, the abolition of slavery and free trade etc. The arrogance of George III, who ruled Britain from 1760 to 1820, the fight for liberal rights during his reign led by leaders such as Fox and Wilkes, and the issues raised by the liberation of British colonies in America after 1776 further stoked the embers of such discontent. Not surprisingly, the last decades

of the eighteenth century were marked by major protests against unnecessary monarchical influence in the working of the parliament and also against the violation of individual liberty by the government.

Britain had a tradition of liberal thought going back to the revolutionary decades when philosophers such as John Locke had espoused a new theory of state bound to safeguard persons and property. The new controversies generated by the Wilkes' case centreing on the freedom of press and protection against arbitrary arrest during 1760s and 1770s further brought to the fore issues of civic rights in British politics. The formation of the Society for the Defence of Bill of Rights in 1769 and the Society for Constitutional Information in 1780 gave organized shape to such struggles.

However, most middle class leaders of the time thought of liberty from the perspective of the propertied classes alone. Some pioneering feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft and early socialists such as Robert Owen tried to question the sanctity of private property and the subordination of women under patriarchy. But, more generally, the interests of the workers, the religious minorities and women continued to be ignored in the liberal ideology which held sway in Britain during this period.

The most important concern of the liberal agenda during these years was of high taxation and waste in public expenditure. The parliament as well as the press was important forum through which the demand for the 'economical reforms' against these ills was raised. In 1779, influential sections of the gentry led by Reverend Christopher Wywill gave further support to such demands. Consequently, Conservative leaders such as Edmund Burke as well as liberals such as Pitt the Younger embarked upon a series of reforms which led to the abolition of crown patronage and the introduction of modern budgeting in Britain.

Apart from economy in state expenditure, the rising middle classes were also interested in market reforms at a broader level. This demand was particularly raised by the bankers and traders of London and the manufacturers of growing industrial centres such as Birmingham and Manchester. They became ardent champions of free market principles and campaigned for the abolition of high tariffs as well as state supported monopolies in trade and manufacturing. Adam Smith's famous treatise, *The Wealth of Nations*, which gave the theoretical justification for freedom of economic enterprise and minimum state interference in the market became an influential text in support of their views.

While the rising bourgeoisie (consisting of capitalist manufacturers and traders as well as educated professionals) demanded minimum state interference in the market at the same time they put new demands for a lean but efficient state machinery which would run on rational principles and ensure the smooth functioning of private enterprise in the country. The doctrine of 'utilitarianism', coined by another influential thinker of the age viz. Jeremy Bentham, offered a philosophical justification for such demands. According to this doctrine all laws and institutions of society were to be judged on the basis of their utility to furthering the greatest good of the greatest number and not by their traditional sanctity or textual authority.

Other causes of public concern during this period were: the issues of public health and education, crime and morality, the treatment of prisoners, condition

of the poor in sprawling industrial slums and the rights of dissenting religious groups. Apart from the Liberals, Utilitarians and the Utopian Socialists, the religious movements of the Evangelicals and the Methodists also played an important role in raising these issues in contemporary British politics.

The demand for electoral and parliamentary reforms was, meanwhile, gaining momentum amongst sections of the middle class as well as artisans and working classes. The writings of radicals like Tom Paine and Major Cartwright acted as powerful catalysts in this respect. The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 also had a positive impact on the radical movement in Britain as it brought to the fore interest in democratic reforms which had been marginalized after the infamous Gordon riots against Catholics in London in 1780. The Society for Constitutional Information was now revived along with the opening of a number of Republican Clubs in the provinces. One of the most radical of these was the London Corresponding Society which, under the guidance of London shoe maker, Thomas Hardy, sought to organize a nation-wide protest for parliamentary reform as well as workers' rights and also established contacts with the Revolutionary Convention in France.

Even though the demands and aspirations of the British radicals were moderate yet, the example of revolutionary violence in France greatly alarmed British authorities. Between 1793 and 1815, Britain, in alliance with other monarchies of Europe, was at continuous war with Revolutionary France. During this period, the British state not only used nationalist sentiment to buttress its authority but also unleashed unprecedented repression against the radicals and the nascent working class movement. This included the suspension of the Habeus Corpus in 1794, the introduction of anti-combination laws in 1799 as also a series of treason trials and bloody suppression of all radical organizations. Yet, repression failed to suppress the radical movement in Britain. Under the guidance of old stalwarts such as Cartwright as well as new leaders such as Cobbet, the famous Hampden Clubs were formed in a number of towns to press for extension of franchise and parliamentary reforms specially after 1809.

Meanwhile the working class was maturing in Britain. The initial phase of industrialization was full of misery for the proletariat which worked and lived in extremely hostile conditions for long hours on meagre wages and with few rights or social security. It is hardly surprising that in the face of these brutal conditions, in several places, the workers responded by systematically breaking the machines which symbolized the new order to them. These early machine breakers were nicknamed Luddites after their mythical leader Ned Ludd.

But the working class movement in Britain actually consisted of a variety of strands ranging from self help credit societies and workers' cooperatives to more radical democrats and early socialists. The democrats reposed faith in universal franchise and parliamentary reforms besides workers' rights to form unions and to strike for better conditions. Socialists such as Robert Owen (1771- 1858) argued that all wealth is created through labour and therefore the labouring classes should claim the full fruit of their work. In the emerging capitalist system, however, maximum share of the wealth produced was appropriated by a miniscule minority of the owners of capital.

The question then was how to change this unjust order? This was the major issue before socialists everywhere. Owen himself emphasized workers' cooperatives

and self help rather than a direct confrontation with the state. To realise these ideas, he first founded the New Lanark Spinning Mill at Glasgow and later the New Harmony Society in Indiana, USA in the initial decades of nineteenth century. We shall learn more about the labour movement in Britain in the following sections.

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## 5.6 RESPONSE OF THE STATE

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The British state, meanwhile, responded to these different demands in diverse ways. Some economic and administrative reforms were accepted to accommodate the aspirations of the rising middle classes. Indeed such 'reformist conservatism' of the British oligarchy distinguished it clearly from the 'rightist' forces in most Continental regimes of the period and helped in forging an early alliance between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. But the demands of the workers were viewed with general suspicion and suppressed unequivocally in the initial years of industrialization.

The defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 was celebrated all over Britain. However, for the workers of Manchester and Birmingham who were awaiting reforms, the end of the war actually brought more unemployment and economic difficulties. Yet, the Tory government of Lord Liverpool (1812-27) continued its repressive policies. In 1816, the 'March of the Blanketeers' protesting government policy led by the weavers of Manchester heading towards London was beaten back. The revolt of the Spenceans who asked for redistribution of land, was seen as treason and crushed brutally.

But the most brutal state action was in 1819 at Peterloo Park, in Manchester, where a crowd of 60,000 gathered to listen to Orator Hunt on democratic reforms. It was indiscriminately fired at. Eleven persons lost their lives and more than four hundred were injured in this bloodbath. Peterloo is remembered as the domestic Waterloo of the old guard which panicked and passed the infamous Six Acts putting fresh restrictions on press and political assemblies.

After 1820, however, some shift in the attitudes of the Liverpool ministry, especially towards middle class demands for economic and administrative reforms, was evident. A band of new ministers, including Canning, Huskisson and Robert Peel, now started a series of reforms in state finances, tariffs, police and courts etc. The Whig governments of Lord Grey and Lord Russell brought further constitutional and administrative changes during the 1830s. These reforms played an important role in orienting Britain towards a modern economy and administration. It is important to note that the readiness to introduce such reforms went a long way towards forging a tie between the landed and capitalist classes in the country.

Yet, the period was not entirely free of conflicts. Two striking events which convey the depth of tensions between different social classes in Britain were the struggle over parliamentary reform in 1831-32 and the Chartist movement which surfaced between 1839 and 1848.

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## 5.7 REFORM ACT OF 1832

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The passage of the Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832 was indeed one of the most crucial events in Britain's transition to modern politics as it ensured a

prominent place to the rising middle classes a stake in the stability of the British polity.

Demands for reform in Britain's parliamentary system were growing with industrialization since the late eighteenth century. A number of bills were introduced in Parliament, especially after the 1780s, to enhance representation of new industrial centres. But none gathered sufficient support. While radicals under the leadership of Burdett and some Whig leaders such as Brougham and Russell were committed to reform, the ruling Tories were still against any constitutional innovation. Both the major parliamentary factions were, moreover, united in dismissing democracy or extension of franchise as radical and dangerous for the country.

The accession of the liberal monarch William IV, in 1830, brought the Whigs to power after a long gap. This was under the leadership of Lord Grey. This brightened the chances of limited parliamentary reform. The same year revolutions broke out in a number of countries in Europe, this gave a further fillip to reform efforts in Britain. Under such pressures, the House of Commons passed two successive reform bills. But both were thrown out by the House of Lords. Meanwhile, pro-reform associations were formed in several cities of Britain and leaders like Thomas Attwood in Birmingham and Francis Place in London tried to mobilize shopkeepers, artisans as well as workers in support of parliamentary reform. In the elections of 1831 which were called to end the deadlock in Parliament, the reformist Whigs were again returned in majority. Ultimately, the House of Lords also bowed to popular demands and the first Reform Act came into force in 1832.

The aim of the Act, however, was to preserve the existing constitutional traditions of Britain; not to change it. For this it tried to introduce some reforms in election to the House of Commons. While providing for a redistribution of 143 seats of the lower House to accord with the new demographic pattern of industrial Britain, the Act also abolished a number of 'rotten' boroughs (parliamentary constituencies with few members) and extended the franchise marginally both in the counties and the boroughs. In the counties, all men who were 10 pound copy holders and 50 pounds 'tenants at will', in addition to the 40 shilling free holders, now had the right to vote. In the boroughs, on the other hand, all householders occupying residences worth 10 pound per annum, or more, were enfranchized. The new electorate still consisted of less than six lakh men or a mere 3% of the total population of Britain then.

Thus, the Act ensured that the rule of property would continue in Britain. But, alongside the established aristocracy, it granted representation to the rising middle classes in the country's parliamentary government. This went a long way towards forging a compromise between the bourgeoisie and the landed elite, thus enabling a peaceful transition to a modern liberal polity in Britain.

Apart from redefining the class character of the state, the Act had some other long- term implications which are important to note at this stage. First, the very manner of its passage enhanced the significance of the House of Commons in relation to the upper House and also set an important precedent of extra parliamentary pressures on legislators. Second, the reformist agenda within parliament became extremely strong after 1832 as more radicals entered parliament from the industrial centres which had gained representation and the

Whigs and the Tories were also forced to develop new programmes to broaden their appeal amongst the middle classes.

The emergence of modern political parties geared for electoral competition and the mobilization of public opinion also had an important bearing on politics now. Until 1832, the Whigs and the Tories had functioned more or less as factions lobbying for influence in the king's government but with little organization or discipline in or outside parliament. After the Reform Act, they were forced to transform themselves into modern parties and compete for power in the parliament on the basis of declared programmes and an organizational network extending to each locality in the country. Party discipline would operate within parliament through whips and in the constituencies through provincial associations operating under the direction of central clubs and committees.

Thus the Tories founded the Carlton Club and, with the Tamworth manifesto of 1835, adopted the policy of reformist conservatism. In the same year, the Lichfield House agreement between Whigs, radicals and the Irish representatives laid the foundations of the Liberal Party of the nineteenth century. The new members of parliament were also exposed to greater pressure both from the constituencies as well as the parties. By 1841, it was common practice for newspapers to classify election results in terms of Liberal and Conservative gains. This was an outward manifestation of a revolution in politics which had been in the making for almost two centuries.

The maturing of parliamentary politics in Britain also depended on the growth of political conventions regarding the conduct of parliamentary proceedings, the role of a responsible opposition, the collective responsibility of the cabinet and the dependence of governments on a clear parliamentary majority with which the smooth functioning of the liberal polity is associated. In the absence of a written Constitution their general observance and acknowledgement by all political players stand out as a unique feature of Britain's polity. Although such conventions and procedures took a number of years to evolve and are difficult to identify with any single event in its history yet, the middle decades of the nineteenth century may be regarded as a critical period in their evolution when leaders like Robert Peel and William Gladstone brought greater emphasis on their observance both in power and in opposition.

One important evidence of the maturing of a liberal polity in Britain during this period was the resolution of the Corn Law controversy within the ambit of parliamentary politics in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Corn Laws had been passed in 1815 to ensure good returns to the landed classes of Britain on their staple produce with the help of high tariffs on cheaper grain coming from overseas. They obviously hurt the interests of all who had to purchase grain from the market including the workers and the middle classes. The industrialists also viewed them as a serious burden since they compelled them to pay higher subsistence wages to workers. In an era of progressive liberalization of the market, these laws indeed stood out as an anomaly and were widely regarded as a symbol of rapacious exploitation by the state on behalf of the 'bread taxing oligarchy'.

Protests against the Corn Laws grew during the second quarter of the century. In 1839, the middle classes, led by Richard Cobden, founded the Anti-Corn Law League and launched a nation-wide campaign for the abolition of the hated laws. The campaign was a remarkable illustration of a political movement employing

modern means of propaganda for a well defined objective to be achieved through parliamentary legislation. Even though the League enlisted the support of the workers in several areas yet it confined itself to the single objective of the abolition of the Corn Laws and refrained from throwing a wider challenge to the wealth and privileges of the aristocracy. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the abolition of the laws was actually carried out, not by a liberal, but by a pro-landlord Tory government of Robert Peel in 1846. This again established the spirit of accommodation between the landed and capitalist elites in Britain now committed to operate within the frame work of parliamentary politics.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) List some major demands of reform.

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- 2) What were the major landmarks of Reform Act of 1832? Answer in 100 words.

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- 3) What was the Corn Law? Answer in words.

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## 5.8 THE STATE TOWARDS MODERNIZATION

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The liberal state has been taken as a model by a number of capitalist countries. Britain was one of the first to undergo such a development. One reason for its leading position in this regard was its success in early industrialization. Secondly, the eighteenth-century British state was already marked by certain distinct features which served as a strong foundation for the emergence of a modern liberal polity there.

For example, Britain was among the first countries to emerge as a nation-state in the early modern period. Under the Tudors and again under the Hanoverian dynasty, it acquired political stability (cessation of wars amongst feudal factions, a strong defence against external invasions and pride regarding its 'mixed constitution'). The relative decline of widespread political violence, whether in the form of factional wars within the ruling classes, large scale popular disturbances, or brutal state suppression (or even organised crime) in the century after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, was a significant feature of the British polity. This was accompanied by the growth of the sovereign authority of the 'King in Parliament' and the subjugation of church, lords and autonomous communities within Britain. The growth of a nationalist identity amongst its citizens (outside Ireland) was of great significance.

As noted above, the British polity, meanwhile, was also evolving checks on the arbitrary authority of monarchs, which distinguished it from the absolutist states of Europe. These included, among other, division of powers and parliamentary control over legislation, the Common Law tradition and a fairly independent judiciary, and the promise of liberal 'rights', at least for the propertied classes.

Despite these special characteristics, the British state in the eighteenth century could still not be described as modern. It lacked a professional bureaucracy, police, fiscal and monetary systems, and it needed further development of a 'free market', electoral reforms and extension of civil rights to minority groups such as the Catholics, workers and women. The optimum mobilization of resources and capital under a modern liberal polity depended not only on the growth of a professional administration but also the evolution of parliamentary government to accommodate the rising middle classes and the containment of the working class. It also required a careful balancing of bureaucratization with democratization; centralization with reform of local government and extension of civil liberties; the growth of the free market with social services and welfare schemes, and above all, new and more subtle ways of maintaining the state's ideological hegemony.

### **5.8.1 Constitutional Reforms**

The development of representative institutions and a democratic order was a basic feature of the emerging modern state in Britain. The gradual and evolutionary nature of this process is particularly noteworthy. Britain has been remembered as the mother of parliamentary governments and the development of the powers of the British parliament can be traced far back into the feudal era. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the country still retains the monarch as its formal head and hereditary lords in the powerless upper house of legislature. Similarly, civil liberties are supposed to have a long history in Britain, but the British state does not claim to be secular and the Church of England symbolises the official religion till today. However, the substance of political power was changed radically even as the outer form of tradition was retained.

It has been noted how the development of the cabinet system, the abolition of crown patronage and the influencing of parliamentary proceedings, electoral reforms, and the evolution of political parties, all underwent a crucial transition between 1780 and 1850. In most of these respects again the gradual approach to change was maintained. Democratic reforms were introduced in instalments through parliamentary reform acts in 1832, 1867, 1870, 1884, 1911 and 1918.

### 5.8.2 Administrative Restructuring

Along with constitutional reforms, the overhauling of the administrative structure was another major aspect of the modernization of the state during our period. The major focus of the new administrative approach was centralisation and regulation through Commissions of enquiry and inspectorates attached to each department under the central government.

Demands for fiscal and tariff reforms also ranked high on the agenda of the rising middle classes. All major political groups including the liberals, radicals and utilitarians, as well as the conservatives, supported this process in different ways. The government of William Pitt (1783-1801) took some important steps in this regard. Again, in the 1820s, Huskisson and Gladstone, who were ministers in the cabinet of Lord Liverpool, speeded up tariff reduction and introduced greater fiscal discipline.

The same period saw the introduction of reforms in penal laws and prisons, the creation of a regular police force, and reforms in the armed forces. But the most significant change was the development of a professional bureaucracy working on the basis of 'rational' procedures and appointed and promoted on the basis of continuous examinations and merit rather than patronage or factional loyalties. Its continuous expansion was, however, noted with concern in nineteenth century Britain.

### 5.8.3 Market Reforms

Another significant concern of the emerging modern state was the creation of a 'free market' for rapid industrial development. The state now adopted the aim of facilitating growth in the economy as a whole by providing a general climate of order and legal protection to contracts, property and private enterprise rather than supporting particular companies or business groups directly. At the same time, laws and the coercive apparatus of the state were used to subjugate labour to the needs of capital. Various measures were required to establish such a 'free market' beginning with a series of abolitions from the closing years of eighteenth century, of price and wage controls, of state-supported monopolies, and of subsidies and restrictions on business. It also demanded the unification of the internal market and the tariff reforms of 1786 and 1820s culminating in the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846.

The New Poor Law of 1834 played a critical role in establishing a free labour market by making conditions for local welfare (or relief) for the poor very strict. Other significant aspects of economic reforms were the Currency and Banking reforms of 1797 and 1844, the Company law of 1844, and the abolition of the Navigation laws in 1849. A free trade regime in international trade was largely accomplished with the Cobden-Chevalier treaty of 1860.

### 5.8.4 Towards a Welfare State

The removal of traditional support systems after the establishment of a free market regime had to be counter balanced with new welfare measures promoted by the central and local governments. Miserable conditions in the new industrial cities and the growing demands of the working classes compelled the modern state to move in this direction. The beginnings of a public education system were made

with the Act of 1833 when grants-in-aid and school inspection were also started. But disputes between religious groups slowed the pace of change on this major issue.

Similarly, a public health policy evolved after Chadwick's energetic but controversial efforts at enforcing sanitation schemes through the Public Health Board established in 1848. The development of public utilities were assigned to local bodies by the municipal reform act of 1835 but it gathered momentum only from the late nineteenth century when 'gas and water socialism' was championed by leaders like Chamberlain.

Apart from general welfare schemes, the modern liberal polity faced the challenge of fulfilling specific demands of different social groups. The problems of labour were particularly acute in this context. But the early industrial state was slow to grant even basic workers' rights to form unions or to strike peacefully. The anti-combination act against unionisation was passed in 1799 and early labour movements were suppressed violently. The existing system of poor relief was also considered wasteful and scaled down by the New Poor Law of 1834. The growing misery of the proletariat and pressures from humanitarian groups and the labour movement itself forced the state to take limited ameliorative measures subsequently. The anti-combination laws were repealed in 1824. The first factory act was passed in 1833 only to provide some protection to children under the pressure of the Evangelicals (one of the reforming religious groups). Further reforms came in small doses, e.g. Mines Act (1842), Ten hours working day (1847), legalisation of unions (1871) and of peaceful picketing (1876).

Apart from labour, other social groups which demanded reforms were religious minorities and women. Despite the advocacy of women's rights by Mary Wollstonecraft and some liberals like John Stuart Mill, female franchise was conceded only after the First World War. We have stated that the British state is formally not secular even today though it practises cultural pluralism. Before our period, however, negative discriminations against minorities, in particular Catholics were frequent. The Test and Corporation Act of 1828 and the Catholic Relief Act of 1829 brought a greater measure of civil equality. Civil registration of births, marriages and deaths also began in 1836.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) What were the major characteristics of the British state in the 18th Century? Answer in 100 words.

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- 2) Discuss the measures taken by the British state towards the welfare of its subjects. Answer in 10 sentences.

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## 5.9 WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT

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The state failed to meet the demands of the working class. Indeed, the labouring classes were quick to realise that a parliament which rests on limited franchise linked to the ownership of property will never be sympathetic to their sufferings. As a result, many turned towards the creation of non-parliamentary institutions such as an independent workers' convention, cooperatives or to radical demands for universal franchise, secret ballot and stipends for all members of parliament. A few even propagated the redistribution of land, workers control on factories and a socialist order more generally which would rest on the collective ideals of equality rather than economic competition between individuals.

The upper classes, however, were determined to thwart all such demands in order to extract a heavy price from labour for the rapid development of capital in the initial phase of industrialization. There were radical movements led jointly by artisans and some middle class activists at the turn of the nineteenth century. The British state adopted repressive measures against them which culminated in the Peterloo massacre of 1819. During the same period, an independent working class movement with its own cooperatives, friendly societies, newspapers and stores as well as striking unions was also coming into being. It was distinct from the earlier radical tradition by virtue of its own proletarian leadership, an independent agenda of economic demands and more sustained organization.

The first attempts to link all labouring men together in general trade union and also to forge unity for a General Strike acquired momentum during the 1820s and 30s. In 1834, the Grand National Confederation of Trade Unions or the GNCTU was formed to give concrete shape to a broad working class movement to demand better wages and working conditions including a ten hour working day. Some of the members also looked forward to an Owenite millennium in which workers would enjoy the full product of their labour by organizing industries under their own cooperatives. Owen's own ideas also changed over time. After his return from the New World in 1829, he was accepted as a major spokesman of the budding trade union movement in Britain. However, differences soon cropped up between him and the younger generation of leaders as we shall note below.

At the same time, the state also swung into action and widespread arrests were ordered against all unions. In Dorsetshire, for example, the Friendly Society of Agricultural Workers was disbanded and six of its organizers convicted for seven years transportation simply on the ground of 'taking secret oaths'. These became famous as the Tolpuddle martyrs and only after a prolonged agitation by workers they were repatriated in 1839.

Meanwhile economic depression had set in leading to further lowering of wages and large scale unemployment. As there was little provision for social security from the employers or the state, the workers were badly hit all over Britain. Even the governing classes were now forced to admit that industrial Britain was beginning to look like 'two nations', divided between the rich and the poor inhabiting two different worlds between which there was little intercourse, similarity or sympathy.

While the rulers thus debated the 'Condition of England' question in the disturbed

thirties, some working class leaders were beginning to question the Owenite stress on self help and cooperatives and demanding political rights for workers instead. In 1836, the London Working Men's Association was founded by men like Lovett to demand universal suffrage. Radicals like William Morris and Smith O' Brien also called for a new awakening amongst workers for building a society in which they would be 'at the top of society instead of the bottom or, one in which there would be no top or bottom'.

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## 5.10 CHARTIST MOVEMENT

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The Chartist Movement was the most significant outcome of the growing focus on political power which the British workers evinced in 1830s and 40s. It derives its name from the six point Charter it presented before the parliament demanding universal manhood suffrage, secret ballot, annual parliaments, equal electoral districts, abolition of property qualification for the members of House of Commons and payment of regular salaries to them. In 1839, the first-Chartist Convention met in London but despite the collection of a million signatures for its petition it was rejected outright by the parliament.

Such a rebuff shook the faith of a number of Chartists in the method of petition and some like Feargus O'Connor and Smith O'Brien now wanted to spread the agitation to the countryside or to call for a general strike and also use force if necessary. In November 1839, thousands of Welsh colliers led an armed march on the town of Newport. However, unity could not be sustained on these radical options and though another Chartist petition was presented to the parliament in 1842 yet, the economic recovery of the mid forties again turned the attention of most workers away from radical politics and towards wage improvements through trade union activity.

The last flicker of Chartism glew again in 1848— which was the year of revolutions all over Europe. A demonstration of five lakh Chartists was called at Kennington Commons in the heart of London to present a mammoth petition of six million signatures to the parliament. But poor organization, combined with untimely rain, helped the government in diffusing the crisis and finally rejecting the demands of the Chartists. The economic prosperity of the ensuing period further turned the attention of British workers from political demands to economic self help of which the growth of the Rochdale store, founded in 1844, was an important symbol. The indifferent response to Karl Marx's efforts to lead the International Working Men's Association from London was another.

**The Six Points  
OF THE  
PEOPLE'S  
CHARTER**

- 1) A VOTE for every man twenty-one years of age, of sound mind, and not undergoing punishment for crime.
- 2) THE BALLOT - To protect the elector in the exercise of his vote.
- 3) NO PROPERTY QUALIFICATION for Members of Parliament - thus enabling the constituencies to return the man of their choice, be he rich or poor.

- 4) PAYMENT OF MEMBERS, thus enabling an honest tradesman, working man, or other person, to serve a constituency, when taken from his business to attend to the interests of the country.
- 5) EQUAL CONSTITUENCIES, securing the same amount of representation for the same number of electors, instead of allowing small constituencies to swamp the voters of large ones.
- 6) ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS, thus presenting the most effectual check to bribery and intimidation, since though a constituency might be bought once in seven years (even with the ballot), no purse could buy a constituency (under a system of universal suffrage) in each ensuing twelvemonth; and since members, when elected for a year only, would not be able to defy and betray their constituents as now.

**Fig: Charter**

As a matter of fact, Marx and his famous associate— Frederick Engels— published the Communist Manifesto at the first convention of the **IWMA** in London in 1848. It imparted scientific basis to socialist thinking and gave a call to workers of the world to unite in the struggle for a new egalitarian society which would transcend the exploitative capitalist order. The Manifesto also upheld the vision of a classless society based on the abolition of private property.

You will learn more about the historic struggles which this revolutionary manifesto inspired amongst the workers in several countries of the world. In the context of Britain, however, it is important to remember that liberal rather than revolutionary politics remained the preponderant concern of workers there. The growth of the Labour Party committed to parliamentary politics at the turn of the present century further ensured this pattern.

One major factor which led the working class of 'the first industrial nation' towards such politics was the rise of the 'labour aristocracy' there. These were men whose specialised skills in the expanding industrial economy coupled with the growing benefits of Britain's large empire enabled them to maintain a comfortable standard of living. As a result, the 'labour aristocracy' put faith in 'improvement' within the Capitalist order rather than its overthrow. They also aspired for voting rights on the same grounds that appealed to the middle classes i.e. as a 'respectable' class playing its due role in preserving the Constitution. These skilled workers of Victorian Britain, more over, emphasized self help and developed their own friendly societies and cooperatives as well as 'New Unions' to improve their conditions and abjured the path of revolution.

Such an attitude also resulted in the formation of the Reform League in 1865 by the labour aristocracy jointly with middle class leaders to demand further parliamentary reforms. Its efforts bore fruit two years later when the urban workers finally got their voting rights. It is important to remember, however, that the Reform Act of 1867 which granted this right was a product not of a radical mass movement but of party politics in which the Conservatives led by Disraeli took the lead to outmanoeuvre Gladstonian Liberals in the mobilization of votes. Such politics was indeed becoming the mainstay of the evolving capitalist order in general.

During the decade or so, following the passage of the Second Reform Act, the urban working class was thus accommodated within the liberal polity with further enactments to recognize their right to form trade unions (1871), to go on strikes (1876) and some steps towards educational and health reforms (1870 & 1875) respectively. None of these measures, however, mitigated the growing inequalities in the economy as the sanctity of private or even inherited property was never brought under question. Even democracy and welfare were still a distant dream for the lower classes in Britain. And fresh bouts of agitation would be necessary in the present century before the liberal polity would really fulfil these fundamental aspirations of workers and of the 'second sex'.

While these developments were still in the future, a crucial benchmark had, however, been crossed by mid-nineteenth century in Britain with the largely peaceful resolution of the class question thrown up by the Chartist movement. The acceptance of parliament and electoral politics as the central mechanism for the resolution of such conflicts was significant in shaping this compromise.

The principal factors which led to such a political resolution in the first industrial nation were: the unity displayed by its upper classes *vis-a-vis* workers, the economic benefits of the expanding British Empire, the relative weakness of revolutionary politics in nineteenth century Britain and the subsequent growth of welfare legislation in the country.

However, several other institutional changes besides the extension of franchise had to be introduced in the Constitution of Britain in order to effect this transition on a sustained basis. In what ways this was achieved and what shape the British state finally acquired in the process would be the subject of our next enquiry.

#### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Discuss the major grievances of the working class in 10 sentences.

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- 2) Write a brief note on the Chartist Movement.

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### 5.11 LET US SUM UP

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In the 1750s, Britain's political, social and economic life was dominated by the landed aristocracy and agriculture was the basis of the economy. Government had little active role in the lives of the people. But by the 1760s Britain became the first nation which brought about significant changes in her polity, society and economy, thus beginning the process of industrialization. We have discussed

in this Unit, how new shades of political ideologies developed in Britain and how Britain became modern through a liberal and democratic transformation. We have also explained how Britain's rising middle class and ruling aristocracy through reforms managed to restrict the working class movements within the broader framework of parliamentary politics.

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## 5.12 KEY WORDS

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|                              |   |                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Industrial Capitalism</b> | : | Industrial capitalism is that phase of capitalism which was marked by generation of new wealth, a new class of big industries, greater mechanization, search for new markets. |
| <b>Oligarchy</b>             | : | A form of government in which a small group of people hold all the power.                                                                                                     |
| <b>Patriarchy</b>            | : | Society or country governed by men.                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Proletarian Rebellion</b> | : | Rebellion by workers who earn their living by working for wages.                                                                                                              |
| <b>Universal franchise</b>   | : | Right to vote by all members without any pre-qualification.                                                                                                                   |

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## 5.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Compared to other European countries political transformation in Britain took place without violence. Establishment of parliamentary control over the ruling dynasty. Read Sec. 5.2.
- 2) See Sec. 5.3.
- 3) See Sec. 5.3.
- 4) Law makers and executors in Britain belonged to the upper strata of the society. Government was also biased in favour of this class. Read Sec. 5.4.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sec. 5.5.
- 2) See Sec. 5.7.
- 3) See Sec. 5.7.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) See Sec. 5.8.
- 2) See Sec-sec. 5.8.4.

### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Limited franchise, non-representation of workers in parliament, low wages, unemployment, etc. Read Sec. 5.9.
- 2) See Sec. 5.10.