

The Case of the Tamworth Reading Room:
Sir Robert Peel and Civil Disorder in Early Victorian England

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In a typical example of the Victorian desire to aid in the self-improvement of the lower classes, a committee formed in the Staffordshire town of Tamworth to promote learning among those who had not, unlike Sir Robert Peel, earned a double first at Christ Church, Oxford, and to provide an alternative to drink as a way to employ their leisure hours. The intention was to establish a library and reading room that would be open to those who paid a nominal fee of four shillings per year. Peel's estate, Drayton Manor, lay just to the south of Tamworth, and he served as the local MP, as had his father before him; moreover, he was the largest landowner in the area; indeed, he was accounted by some as the richest commoner in England. It was natural, therefore, that Peel would be asked to serve as chair of the board charged with drawing up the articles of the governing charter of the library and subsequently operating the new institution. Thus it was that in January 1841, some nine months before he became prime minister, Peel was in Tamworth for two days of business meetings of the board, which concluded with a public ceremony formally opening the library on January 19. Peel presided at both the business meetings and the ceremony, and at the latter his task was to deliver the main address.

Sir Robert's wife, Lady Julia Peel, described the speech as "beautiful" when she wrote to their son Frederick at the end of the month, adding, "It is, by all accounts, considered first rate." She did warn him, however, to wait for its appearance in pamphlet form, since "the one which you have seen advertised [presumably in newspaper accounts] is not the true one", and Peel does seem to have modified somewhat his original remarks before authorizing their formal publication, so as to avoid any controversy that the reporters' version might have engendered.

He need not have bothered. Writing on the basis of the address as reported in the press, John Henry Newman composed not one, not two, but seven extended letters to the *Times*, denouncing it in sorrowful but sufficiently vigorous terms as Benthamite in inspiration and “infidel” in consequences.

Newman presents a broad array of criticisms. (For example, he has a good deal of fun with Peel’s recounting of the rule that the library should be open equally to both sexes, though only to “*virtuous* women”. Did this mean that men who were not virtuous would be allowed to enter the library and peruse its contents? And if the purpose of the library was to make its users virtuous by exposing them to learning that would elevate their minds, were not bad women the very persons who should be encouraged to avail themselves of this opportunity? Tongue firmly in cheek, Newman laments, “Alas, that bigotry should have left the mark of its hoof on the great ‘fundamental principle of the Tamworth Institution’!”) His primary objections, however, come under two broad headings.

First, in his remarks, Peel argues that the library will inevitably encourage not simply an increase in the material knowledge of its patrons but also, and more importantly, perhaps, their religious belief, for no one could observe the intricacy, immensity, and beauty of nature without being imbued with a sense that it owed its existence to a beneficent and all-wise creator. “I can hardly conceive a mind,” Sir Robert declares, “that being familiarized, with the wonderful discoveries that have been made in every department of experimental Science—that seeing the proofs of Divine intelligence in every object of contemplation, from the organization of the meanest weed that we trample on, or of the insect invisible to our eyes, up to the magnificent structure of the Heavens, or the still more wonderful Phenomena of the soul and reason of man—can retire from such contemplations, without more enlarged conceptions of God’s Providence

and a higher reverence for His Name.” Newman readily concedes that in a mind and character such as Sir Robert’s these evidences of natural theology may have just such an effect, provoking a greater appreciation for (in Peel’s words)“the constitution and course of nature, and the moral government of a Creator and Ruler of the world.” That a natural theology resting religious faith and morality on the awe and wonder evoked by an understanding of the created world will *inevitably* have the effect on all that it would have on Sir Robert, though, Newman wholly denies. Rather, he insists, acceptance of the truths of Christianity must come first; without it, increased scientific knowledge may produce only pride in humanity’s unassisted ability to penetrate these mysteries. The “*gratification of a more learned curiosity*” leads to “*diversion of mind*”, not the devotion of the soul, and a system of education that takes up the increase in secular knowledge before inculcating religious doctrine is likely to be, not simply useless but positively harmful.

This line of attack brings Newman to his second and even more pointed assault, which aims not at Peel the amateur student of natural science but at Peel the accomplished practitioner of politics. In his remarks at the opening of the library, Peel observes that it will offer on its shelves only books of useful knowledge, such as studies of geology and pamphlets on farming techniques. He notes in particular that the policy of the library will exclude all works of “Controversial Divinity”, and he defends the new institution against any charge that it would become sectarian, pointing out that “no discussion on matters connected with religious differences [will] be permitted to take place in the Reading Room” and that “in the formation of the Library, and in the selection of the subjects for public Lectures ‘everything calculated to excite religious animosities shall be excluded’.” An attention to “science and knowledge” would have the effect of “suspending for a time the disturbing influence of religious or party

differences". True, the vicar and one of the curates of Tamworth were to be members of the Book Committee, and the vicar was to be one of three *ex officio* Trustees, but Sir Robert pointedly remarks that laymen will form a majority of the governing body of the library and that the subscribers have the power to alter the regulations that he and his colleagues have just drawn up, presumably meaning that these ministers of the Church could be deprived of their posts at the library "in case of manifest abuse."

This cautious approach to religious influence over public institutions (that is, not state or government institutions, but merely private institutions open to the general public) provokes Newman's scorn. In implicitly asserting that the primary task of political leadership is the preservation of civil peace, in warning that doctrinal disputes among differing adherents of Christianity endanger that peace, and in concluding that those entrusted with any kind of public power should not encourage such contentions but should rather promote a more general creed, such as natural theology, on which all could agree, Peel is, in Newman's angry phrase, ranging himself on the side of the dangerous fallacy that "a Statesman's praise lay in preserving the mean, not in aiming at the high; to that to be safe was his first merit, and to kindle enthusiasm his most disgraceful blunder!" For Newman, the first duty of the statesman is precisely to inculcate the eternal truths of Christianity, and Peel's equating of doctrinal differences with partisan wrangling as threats to public order constitutes a "hankering after what was heathen". Newman's question for "glory, science, knowledge, and whatever other fine names we use" is "[C]an it create a polity?" and his answer is that whatever temporary order is produced by a suppression of ultimate verities, however controversial they might be, rests on error and is doomed to fail. In that sense, Peel's project of substituting a new creed of tolerance for the old

creed of Christianity is self-defeating: “How pitiable that such a man should not have understood that a body without a soul has no life, and a political party without an idea, no unity!”

For Newman does suggest that the end result of Peel’s wish to quiet doctrinal differences in the interest of civil peace is not the decline of doctrine but the imposition of whatever doctrine is held by those who have the power to suppress the rest. In making this case, he charges Peel with—in theological terms—the heresy of Erastianism, or the belief that the Church should be subordinate to the State, in matters of doctrine as well as law, and with—in political terms—the philosophy of Hobbesianism, or the belief that civil peace is the highest good and that the sovereign must be entrusted with the power to declare and enforce the limits of acceptable belief, as determined by the will of the sovereign in its determination to put down all challenges to its rule. It is to this line of argument that I wish to devote the remainder of my remarks.

Peel would of course strongly deny that he was an acolyte of the “monster of Malmesbury”, as Hobbes has come to be known by critics of his advocacy of a leviathan, a sovereign of almost unlimited power. Yet, in his belief that the maintenance of civil order was the primary responsibility of government, and in his worry that domestic order was less firmly rooted than optimists tended to assume, Peel was indeed to a degree in the Hobbesian tradition. Peel had come to political maturity in the era of the Napoleonic wars, and he was, with many of his contemporaries, acutely aware that a society which appeared on the surface to be prosperous and stable could surprisingly quickly fall into chaos, as had France in the period 1789-1795. The French foreign minister during the entirety of Peel’s premiership, Francois Guizot, recalled, “I more than once remarked the influence . . . which was exercised over his mind by our great revolution of 1789 and by the ideas and social forces which it has called into play.” Peel owned a set of eighty volumes of documents from the French Revolution, among a collection of some

two hundred works on the period. On holiday in the late summer of 1836, he took with him the memoirs of Bailly on the events leading up to the Terror and wrote to a friend that they “made me doubt for a moment whether I was not reading the Annual Register of 1836.” Peel’s grandson years later recalled, “Behind him the fires of 1789 still burned on the horizon; before him, seen as in a glass darkly, was 1848.” Revolution, then, was a preoccupation of Peel’s, and the avoidance of the breakdown of civil order a constant real, not theoretical, concern.

In September 1841, when Peel assumed office, he would enter power recognizing that the focus of discontent in the country had shifted somewhat from the overtly political issues, such as the popular agitation in favor of the Reform Bill or the Chartist’s demand for annual parliamentary elections, to economic ones; at least economic distress fueled political unrest. A significant economic downturn had begun in the late 1830s that extended across Europe and to North America, and it has been said that of all the times to be working class and unemployed in England in the nineteenth century, the winter of 1843-44 was the worst. This type of dissatisfaction, too, could shake the social order and lead to leveling, egalitarian pressures just as fatal to society as the crises of the preceding decade. More generally, industrialization was propelling the creation of an urban working class with almost no margin of economic security.

Peel’s response was to attempt to defuse the revolutionary political potential of these circumstances by ameliorating the economic lot of those whose difficulties made them most susceptible to demagoguery. In particular, he grew increasingly determined to remove barriers imposed by government, through tax or regulation, that raised the cost of living artificially; his professed aim was “to make this a cheap country for living”. Ultimately, this line of thinking would lead him to undertake repeal of the Corn Laws, provoke a confrontation with the bulk of his party, and force him from power. Well before that time, though—beginning in 1842, not

1846—Peel moved to reduce or eliminate duties on a wide range of imported goods, with the aim of reducing the cost of living, improving the standard of living, and calming working-class discontent that might otherwise become politically explosive. If the poor saw that the aristocracy made sacrifices to its own wellbeing in order to ameliorate their harsh lot, they would be confirmed in their deference to the political lead that they were given by the few; if legitimate grievances were assuaged, illegitimate agitation against the fundamental institutions of the country would lose force. Few political figures are capable of even-handedly evaluating their own accomplishments, but Peel was very clear in 1845 on the grounds on which he hoped to be judged, saying of his critics:

They cannot deny that trade is prosperous, that the people are contented, that the labourer has a greater command than he ever had over the necessities and comforts of life, that Chartism is extinguished—at least fast asleep—that the Church is stronger than it ever was, except for its own internal stupid differences and controversies, that any wish for organic change in the Constitution—for addition to popular privileges—is dormant (letter to Hardinge).

In its concentration on prosperity as the balm for political discontent, this way of measuring success certainly is consonant with Hobbes' materialism. The middle phrase, though—"that the Church is stronger than it ever was, except for its own internal stupid differences and controversies"—is worthy of remark, because it illustrates Peel's second method of dealing with the danger of civil unrest, and the one that attracted Newman's hostility.

During that early era in Peel's political career, he had served as Chief Secretary for Ireland. This post was not the highest representative of English government—that was the Lord

Lieutenant—but the Chief Secretary was second in authority in Dublin and was the chief liaison between the government of Ireland and Parliament back in London. In this position, Peel came face to face with the problem of maintaining order in a society deeply divided by sectarian differences. He was shocked by the widespread extent of casual violence, and in later life he remarked that the memory of some particularly brutal crimes against innocent and unoffending parties never left him. It was in Ireland that he first attempted the innovation for which he later became known in England while Home Secretary, the creation of a non-military police force (the Bobbies or Peelers). It was in reference to Ireland that he wrote, “Coercion is not a cure but continued insurrection is positive death.”

Given this first-hand experience of the fragility of human society (just as Hobbes had experienced it when he had been made a refugee by the English Civil War), Peel sought any expedient to maintain peace. In doing so, he believed that standing on principle was a dangerous luxury. Thus, when Newman accused him of believing that “a Statesman’s praise lay in preserving the mean, not in aiming at the high; that to be safe was his first merit, and to kindle enthusiasm his most disgraceful blunder”, Peel would plead guilty. Hobbes, it must be remembered, was a seminal figure in the development not only of authoritarianism but also of liberalism, if by liberalism is understood a rejection of the ancient belief that the task of the regime was to shape character, and its replacement with the lower but safer goal of maintaining civil peace by ending conflicts over the most profound questions.

All of this is not to say that Peel was correct in seeking to limit the holdings of the Tamworth Reading Room by excluding all works of “controversial divinity”, or that Hobbesianism’s priority of civil order over the salvation of the immortal soul constitutes the epitome of statesmanship, or that the Erastian heresy should be endorsed. It is to say that,

between them, Peel and Newman identified and explored one of the fundamental questions in the relation between civil and religious authority, as well as one of the primary differences between ancient and modern political philosophy. The seemingly small occasion of a modest ceremony in an out-of-the-way market town laid bare the largest of issues—one that remains constantly with us today.