

# From “Fiscal-Military” State to Laissez-faire State, 1760–1850

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The recent historiographical revolution in our understanding of the eighteenth-century state has broad implications, analytical as well as empirical, that are only beginning to be plumbed. Due largely to the work of Patrick O’Brien and John Brewer, the old picture—of a small, amateurish, corrupt central apparatus largely maintained (between sporadic wars) to dignify the crown and assist gentlemanly (i.e., parliamentary) plunder—has been pretty completely effaced. We now see that by the end of the French wars the British state was one of the largest and most efficient in Europe; certainly it engorged the largest proportion of national product by means of a ruthlessly regressive tax system. The French wars were the climax, not the sole begetters of this system, which had been spawned by a chain of wars mounting in scope and sophistication since the late seventeenth century and requiring commensurate improvements in fiscal policy: thus Brewer’s memorable naming of the system as the “fiscal-military state.”<sup>1</sup>

For historians of the early nineteenth century, this revision raises a host of questions about the relationship of social change and social class to government growth. Particularly, it casts doubt on the customary association made between growth in the size or scope of government and the rise in the Industrial Revolution of new social and eco-

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<sup>1</sup> John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (London and Boston, 1989), p. xvii. Brewer’s treatment of the growth of indirect taxes in the eighteenth century owes much to Peter Mathias and Patrick O’Brien, “Taxation in Great Britain and France, 1715–1810,” *Journal of European Economic History* 5 (1976): 601–50; and to Patrick O’Brien, “The Political Economy of British Taxation, 1660–1815,” *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 41, no. 1 (1988): 1–32.

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conomic questions and a bourgeoisie to answer them; that is, it casts doubt on the implicit "modernization" model that hitches together economic growth, government growth, bureaucracy, professionalism, and *embourgeoisement*.

We see the persistence of this "modernization" model in a recent sketch of British government between 1780 and 1830 by Peter Jupp and in the categories adopted by the *History of Parliament* volumes on the Napoleonic era with which he has been associated.<sup>2</sup> In Jupp's scheme, a transformation of the "framework of governing" was effected in this half-century by "men of business . . . not those who were chiefly distinguished by their high rank or landed interest."<sup>3</sup> The state's responsibilities increased dramatically in all spheres—social, economic, military and imperial—and new, "professional" mechanisms sprang up to meet them: prime ministerial and cabinet government, Commons select committees and royal commissions, and above all "a more professional and efficient bureaucracy."<sup>4</sup> That new responsibilities engender a new professionalism is taken as axiomatic; thus Jupp contends that "as the volume of business increased . . . the arrangement of business in individual departments was streamlined, functions were redefined, and a premium was placed on greater efficiency."<sup>5</sup> Along similar lines, a complexity of interests implicated in governing decisions is assumed to stimulate "a spirit of pragmatism and reconciliation" among the governors.<sup>6</sup>

The agents of this transformation—the bearers of professional skills and the diffusers of pragmatism and reconciliation—were "men of exceptional talent and aptitude," well educated and with "a talent for business rather than a high station in landed society,"<sup>7</sup> capable of grappling with the new "complex and usually highly technical subjects, many of them concerned with interests other than land."<sup>8</sup> The pressure of business "on assiduous members with estates to manage became

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Jupp, "The Landed Elite and Political Authority in Britain, ca. 1760–1850," *Journal of British Studies* 29 (1990): 53–79; R. G. Thorne, ed., *The House of Commons, 1790–1820*, 5 vols. (London, 1986). For the origins of the modernization model, and a cautious restatement of them, see also D. E. Schremmer, "Taxation and Public Finance: Britain, France, and Germany," in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, ed. Peter Mathias and Sidney Pollard (Cambridge, 1989), esp. 8:360–63, though Schremmer elsewhere grants that the model has only dubious applicability to the British case—cf. pp. 356–57. As we will be arguing, much depends on what time periods and criteria of growth are considered.

<sup>3</sup> Jupp, pp. 55, 65.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58–64.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

severe,”<sup>9</sup> and “there was a gradual change in the composition of the House [of Commons]. . . . The number of members who possessed personal interests other than in land—and often, in this difficult period, conflicting with it—drifted upwards.”<sup>10</sup> A quarter of the “most active” M.P.s were either self-made, or children of merchants, or merchants themselves.<sup>11</sup> These men are presumed better able to spare the time required, better able to grasp the technicalities of the time, better able “to conciliate interests and cultivate public opinion” than were landed men.<sup>12</sup> And yet, having made the case for a virtual bourgeois revolution in government, Jupp concludes that these processes reflect instead a successful “adaptation” on the part of the ruling elite.

On this last point—that changes in the structure of government between 1780 and 1830 reflect a process of adaptation by a traditional ruling (and predominantly landed) elite—we are in hearty agreement with Jupp. But we differ from him on the matter of what those changes were, and why they occurred. In this alternative sketch, we propose three related critiques of the implicit modernization thesis, critiques that seek to carry over the implications of the “fiscal-military state” to a better understanding of the “laissez-faire state” that was its successor and consequence. First, we deny that the motors of government growth in the period under question were principally social and economic issues; rather, they were the traditional eighteenth-century factors of war and foreign policy, in the Napoleonic era reaching their peak with the traditional eighteenth-century implications for trade and tax policy. Second, we argue that the new elements of professionalism and efficiency evident in government especially after 1815 were a reaction against rather than a consequence of government growth. The effect of professionalism and efficiency was to halt government growth; in other words, to usher in the minimal, laissez-faire state of the nineteenth century. Finally, we deny that the agents of this transformation were appreciably more “self-made,” bourgeois, or commercial than were active M.P.s of earlier generations. We see little reason to accept the assumptions that landed men were more preoccupied with narrow, sectional interests than nonlanded men, that issues such as “combinations, the poor laws, education, and penal reform” were of more interest to merchants than landlords,<sup>13</sup> or that

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68–69.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

self-made men were necessarily less self-interested and thus made better pragmatists. To the contrary, we offer reasons for thinking that landlords would themselves be better suited to professional, bureaucratic governance in the early nineteenth century than earlier. We conclude by suggesting that the new state arrangements of the nineteenth century may well have served “landed interests”—interests themselves redefined in the interests of professionalism and efficiency—just as effectively as had the old state arrangements. Thus we will be arguing for a successful adaptation in the business of government by the landed elite, but we will offer a different characterization and chronology of this transformation that does not rely on those linkages between social change and bureaucratization, government growth, or even interim *embourgeoisement*, which the new understanding of the eighteenth-century state calls into question.

## I

It was primarily the need to wage war on an unprecedented scale that fueled government growth up to the late 1810s. Waging war did not require a shift of the state’s responsibilities since it fell squarely within the traditional locus of state authority. In this respect, the pattern of government growth in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries differed from that of the previous hundred years only in degree, not in kind. For the eighteenth-century British state was first and foremost a war machine that met with great success in a series of enormous struggles with the Bourbons. Throughout the eighteenth century, the core of the central government’s duties remained the maintenance of a modicum of public order, the conduct of foreign policy, and the defense of the realm. But in an era dominated by dynastic and imperial conflicts, the last of these duties assumed vast proportions. State structures developed in response to the enormous financial and administrative demands of global warfare. The government’s credit requirements spurred the development of the funding system; keeping government securities an attractive investment necessitated a high tax regime to ensure the prompt payment of the interest on the funds; the excise emerged as a potent revenue extractor and a model of administrative efficiency.<sup>14</sup> The fiscal-military state outperformed its Continental counterparts over the course of the long eigh-

<sup>14</sup> See Brewer (n. 1 above), pts. 2 and 4. It is precisely against such a picture of the eighteenth-century state as Jupp has provided—limited, casual, clubby—that Brewer is writing. See also Mathias and O’Brien (n. 1 above); and O’Brien (n. 1 above).

TABLE 1  
PERCENTAGE BREAKDOWNS OF WARTIME PUBLIC SPENDING IN REAL TERMS

	Total Net Expenditure (in Millions of Pounds)	% Defense <sup>a</sup>	% Debt	% Civil Government
1701–13	94.7 (7.3)	69	22	10
1739–48	88.7 (8.9)	64	26	11
1756–63	118.7 (14.8)	70	22	8
1777–83	121.7 (17.4)	63	28	6
1793–1815 <sup>b</sup>	671.95 (29.2)	61	31	6

SOURCE.—Percentages are based on expenditure figures in B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 578–80, 587, adjusted using deflator provided in Patrick O'Brien "The Political Economy of British Taxation, 1660–1815," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 41, no. 1 (1988): 3. Figures in parentheses are expenditures per year.

<sup>a</sup> Army, navy, and ordnance spending inclusive.

<sup>b</sup> Spending figures after 1800 do not include the net cost of collection.

teenth century,<sup>15</sup> and the growth in public spending reflected the sustained military effort. Expenditure on the armed services and the public debt escalated while that on civil government grew very modestly by comparison. Taken on average, military and naval spending and debt service never accounted for less than 85 percent of net public expenditure in any wartime period between 1700 and 1815 (see table 1). During the Seven Years', American, and French Wars, these components never accounted for less than 90 percent of net public expenditure. At the same time, the average share of spending on civil government declined from a peak of over 10 percent in 1739–48 to only 6.2 percent during the American War and 6.5 percent during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.<sup>16</sup>

Expenditure on the armed forces and the debt thus accounted for the overwhelming percentage of an enormously expanding total. Whereas net public expenditure in real terms came to a bit under £95

<sup>15</sup> This is not to imply that it was a model of bureaucratic rationality. As we shall see below, administrative and financial reforms preoccupied British ministries well into the 1840s precisely because it was not. The eighteenth-century state is best described as "an extraordinary patchwork" that brought together old and new procedures, useless and efficient offices, and corrupt and honest officials (G. E. Aylmer, "From Office-holding to Civil Service: The Genesis of Modern Bureaucracy," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 30 [1980]: 106). Auditing procedures were cumbersome and wasteful; the other revenue departments were not nearly as efficient as the Excise, and sinecures and other "irregular" emoluments abounded, especially in the older departments of state.

<sup>16</sup> Figures based on B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 580, 587. The percentage for the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars is somewhat anomalous because it does not include the net cost of tax collection.

TABLE 2  
PERCENTAGE BREAKDOWNS OF PUBLIC SPENDING DURING SELECTED INTERVALS OF PEACE

	Total Net Expenditure (in Millions of Pounds)	% Defense	% Debt	% Civil Government
1721–35	86.6 (5.8)	38	44	18
1764–74	93.2 (8.5)	40	47	11
1786–92	83.9 (7.6)	31	56	10
1822–31 <sup>a</sup>	325.4 (32.5)	30	59	11

SOURCE.—Percentages are based on Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 580, 587, adjusted using deflator provided in Patrick O’Brien, “The Political Economy of British Taxation, 1660–1815,” *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 41, no. 1 (1988): 3; the deflator for 1822–31 is estimated from a comparison of post-American War and post-Napoleonic War price levels; it is therefore less accurate than the other total expenditure figures in the series. Figures in parentheses are expenditures per year.

<sup>a</sup> Excludes net cost of tax collection.

million during the War of the Spanish Succession, it came to over £670 million during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, including the fourteen-month interval of peace between them.<sup>17</sup> In real terms, this amounted to a net spending increase of some 400 percent in real cost per year between the Peace of Utrecht and the Congress of Vienna.<sup>18</sup> War was the motor behind the rapid growth of public spending during the long eighteenth century. This was even the case during intervals of peace. For although spending on civil government increased considerably as a proportion of net public expenditure in peacetime, military and naval spending remained three to four times greater. Even more revealing, spending on the national debt (largely necessitated by war-time borrowing) substantially increased as a proportion of the whole in the years immediately following each war, rising from over 44 percent of aggregate expenditure in 1721–35 to almost 59 percent in 1822–31 (see table 2). The cost of war thus became evident after the fact. Spending on civil government rose some 350 percent between the 1720s and the 1820s, but military spending rose about 450 percent, and spending on debt service rose about 750 percent over the same period. In short, the fiscal-military state’s spending priorities did not shift in the decades after 1780. Fighting the American and French Wars not only put a premium on the state’s customary responsibility to defend the realm but made the fiscal-military apparatus far more expensive than the first several wars of the long eighteenth century had made it.

<sup>17</sup> Figures based on *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Prices adjusted according to the deflator provided in O’Brien, p. 3.

TABLE 3  
QUINQUENNIAL AVERAGES OF PUBLIC STATUTES

Average		Average	
1783–84/1787–88	68	1824/1828	100
1789/1794	69	1829/1833	92
1794–95/1798–99	102	1834/1837–38	102
1799–1800/1803–4	122	1839/1843	101
1805/1808	115	1844/1847–48	122
1809/1812–13	141	1849/1852–53	112
1813–14/1818	152	1854/1857–58	119
1819/1823	124		

SOURCE.—Figures are based on the *Statutes at Large* and the *Statutes Revised*. Statutes that would later have been subsumed under the rubric of “local and personal acts”—town improvements, canals, and the like—were designated “general acts” from the 1783–84 session through the 1797–98 session. We have excluded them from this series.

Accordingly, the transformation of the “framework of governing” in the decades after 1780 was precipitated not nearly so much by the state’s assuming new responsibilities in social and economic spheres as by the fiscal and administrative difficulties of waging war on a hitherto unimaginable scale.<sup>19</sup> An analysis of the growth of parliamentary business further bears this out. The number of public statutes passed by Parliament lurched upward from around seventy per session in the late 1780s to over 150 by the mid-1810s. After Waterloo, the volume of public statute making lurched downward once again and only began to climb by the late 1840s (see table 3). These figures suggest that the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars prompted the growth of public legislation far more than any other factors.<sup>20</sup>

A breakdown of the public statutes according to their spheres of reference further supports the point (see table 4). Throughout the

<sup>19</sup> Jupp acknowledges the centrality of warfare in the growth of state activity toward the end of the eighteenth century, but he takes the management of traditional wartime business to indicate the extension of government influence in social and economic relations; see Jupp (n. 2 above), pp. 58–59, 69. As we argue, the retraction of government in peacetime indicates that primarily the former and not the latter process is operating.

<sup>20</sup> The volume of private and local/personal statute making roughly parallels that of public statute making throughout this period, peaking in the last five years of the Napoleonic War. Enclosures, turnpikes, general town improvements, and private property transactions such as charters, leases, and wills, account for the vast majority of such legislation. This sort of statute making kept M.P.s very busy in committee, but since it was initiated by private citizens and local agencies, it is a better index of entrepreneurial and local regulatory activity than of central government growth.

TABLE 4  
QUINQUENNIAL AVERAGES OF PUBLIC STATUTES BY CATEGORY, SESSIONS OF 1780–1819 (in %)

	Revenue/Finance and Trade	War/Military	Total	Trades/Commercial Regulation	Civil/Local Government	Legal
1780–81/1785	44	15	59	8	6	7
1786/1790	38	7	44	8	5	8
1790–91/1795	38	13	50	8	4	6
1795–96/1799–1800	43	18	61	12	5	7
1800/1803–4	44	17	60	9	5	8
1805/1809	44	16	60	9	8	6
1810/1813–14	42	14	56	10	7	9
1814–15/1819	38	11	49	7	8	13

SOURCE.—Figures based on the *Statutes at Large* and the *Statutes Revised*.



French wars, well over half of all public statutes were enacted in order to raise and manage public revenue, to regulate trade (both to protect certain industries and to bring in excise and customs revenue), and to prosecute war directly—through the raising and equipping of troops and the like. The remaining 40–50 percent of public acts fell under a variety of headings. Acts regulating the practice of trades and industries constituted 8–12 percent of all statutes passed in every five-year interval during the wars; those pertaining to the maintenance of public order and the courts of justice, 5–9 percent; those relating to the administration and composition of civil and local government, 5–8 percent. In sum, these legislative breakdowns indicate that the preoccupations of the fiscal-military state dominated parliamentary business. Once we move beyond the spheres of financial, trade, and military policy, the legislative agenda seems diffuse. While it is possible to isolate certain early interventions in such areas of social policy as workplace conditions and child-labor restrictions, these were fitful at best and did not shift legislative priorities away from the need to meet the state's requirements as a war machine.

## II

While the growth in public spending and public statutes at the end of the eighteenth century attests to the pressures on the fiscal-military apparatus, their diminution after 1815 attests to the dismantling of the British war machine. The fiscal-military state was the ultimate casualty of the French wars because the public was no longer willing to pay the price of maintaining it. An assortment of political interests from popular radicals to country gentlemen felt that the high tax regime necessitated by decades of practically continuous warfare had not only bled them dry but wasted a good deal of their tax money by channeling it into what they deemed the wasteful and inefficient—and thus, in contemporary parlance, “corrupt”—mechanisms of the central government. The postwar Tory ministries embarked on a program of financial and administrative reform both because public opinion compelled them to do so and because they themselves saw minimal government as a fillip to executive authority in an age when almost no one could find any redeeming social value in “big government.”

The subsequent transformation of the fiscal-military state of the French wars into the *laissez-faire* state of the mid-Victorian era is a long and complicated story of great significance to the history of British

political culture.<sup>21</sup> It is sufficient at present to suggest that, pace Jupp, the professionalism and efficiency of the fiscal and administrative structures of the mid-Victorian state were largely products of the post-war minimalizing effort. Retrenchment, rather than an extension of government responsibilities, accounts for a good deal of the increase in the length of parliamentary sessions since the opposition began to contest in detail items of government expenditure in the House of Commons. This sort of contestation meant that it took the Commons considerably longer to get through traditional, routine business. Joseph Hume, for instance, habitually kept himself and his cabinet opponents sitting into the wee small hours as he challenged the estimates virtually line by line. In short, professionalism and efficiency largely constituted a reaction against the fiscal-military state, rather than an outgrowth of it.

How did professionalism and efficiency manifest themselves? In the fiscal sphere, they did so through the effort to keep the state credit-worthy and to preserve the tax base while substantially reducing revenue and spending. The return to gold in the early 1820s was designed to do away with the government's reliance on large loans at high interest and to facilitate debt servicing in order to keep the funds attractive to investors. The pressure to retrench forced the Liverpool ministry to give up the property tax in 1816. After temporarily depending on indirect taxes to make up the loss of revenue, the ministry took advantage of a trade boom after 1822 and gradually scaled down the tariff system, more than making up for the downward revision of customs and excise rates with the higher volume of trade. The Whigs continued this trend of retrenchment and tax remission in the 1830s, and Peel consolidated it through the free trade budgets and the repeal of the Corn Laws. He likewise made the tax structure more secure and the tax burden more equitable (and therefore less onerous) by reintroducing the income tax at a lower rate in 1842. These postwar efforts to pare down and stabilize the financial structures of the state resemble Pitt's efforts of the 1780s. He too had sought to liberalize the tariff, promote trade, and create mechanisms to keep the national debt from becoming too burdensome. But the French wars had led to an enormous increase in the debt and taxes, and the financial efforts of post-war ministries focused on cutting them down to size.

<sup>21</sup> This is the subject of a 1992 Princeton University Ph.D. dissertation by Philip Harling, “The Rise and Fall of ‘Old Corruption’: Economical Reform and British Political Culture, 1779–1846.”

Much the same can be said of the effort to improve the efficiency of the administrative structure. Pitt had endeavored to centralize the bureaucracy and make it a more effective and less expensive instrument of executive authority. He shared the belief of the Commissioners for Examining the Public Accounts, who looked into the administrative structure in the 1780s, that public offices should serve the needs of the state rather than the pecuniary needs of officeholders and their kin. "The Officer is a Trust for the Public," the commissioners affirmed. "As such, he is bound to husband the Public money with as much Frugality as if it were his own." Accordingly, "he ought not to be permitted . . . to carve out for himself an interest in the Execution of a public Trust."<sup>22</sup> Although Pitt was not this outspoken, he did take steps to cut down on sinecures and reversions in departments under his control, especially in the Customs. He likewise sought gradually to replace such "irregular" forms of emolument as fees and gratuities with salaries and primitive superannuation arrangements, to patch up leaky auditing procedures in the revenue departments, and to consolidate departmental staff into hierarchies of graded levels, simplifying the division of labor and enforcing the principle of equal pay for equal work. All these efforts were designed to turn officeholders into servants of the state and, through the state, of the public. They were likewise meant to cut down on the administrative costs of central government.

The French wars brought administrative reform to grief much as they did financial reform. The increase in the civil establishment made the bureaucracy more expensive. There had been 16,267 public officers in 1797; there were 24,598 by 1815.<sup>23</sup> Sinecurism and other forms of "irregular" emoluments continued and spread to such new departments as the barracks and transport offices. Unreformed auditing procedures in the civil departments of the armed services led to considerable waste of public money. The absence of centralized command structures in such crucial areas as dockyard administration spawned inefficiency.

There were several wartime efforts to come to grips with the administrative deficiencies that the war itself had made obvious. Indeed, some of the most important of the commissions and select committees

<sup>22</sup> Seventh report of the Commissioners for Examining the Public Accounts, June 18, 1782, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Sheila Lambert, 145 vols. (Wilmington, Del., 1975–76), 41:430.

<sup>23</sup> "Return of Persons Employed [in the Public Service]," December 30, 1830, *Parliamentary Papers, 1830–31*, 7:299, no. 92.

that Jupp describes as “professional” mechanisms largely designed to meet the state’s new responsibilities were actually designed to facilitate an old one—war making.<sup>24</sup> Thus the 1797 Finance Committee issued thirty-six reports highlighting the myriad administrative lapses of wartime and how they could be rectified, and the Select Committee on Public Expenditure of 1807–12 issued thirteen follow-up reports; Commissions of Naval and Military Enquiry and a Commission for Revising and Digesting the Civil Affairs of the Navy issued a total of forty-six reports from 1803 to the end of the war that did the same for the civil departments of the armed services. Several of these inquiries reiterated the main goal of the Public Accounts Commission of the 1780s: to convince the public that the state was not wasting their money. “The Subject must place Confidence in the Integrity and Wisdom of the Government,” the commissioners had declared. “He should have no Doubt but his Contributions to the Public Service find their way, undiminished, without Deviation or delay, to their proper Object. So long as this is made evident, let him no more seek for Shifts and Subtleties to evade the Payment of those Duties and taxes which . . . the necessities of the State fully justify.”<sup>25</sup>

The successors to the Public Accounts Commission, and a variety of other civil inquiries in the last decade of the war and the first decade and a half of peace, prepared the way for a series of administrative reforms that made the central bureaucracy a more effective and less expensive instrument of executive authority. These reforms secured the eventual abolition of practically all sinecures and reversions, replaced most fees and gratuities with salaries and superannuation schemes, established a substantial degree of Treasury control over official emoluments in the other public departments, and revamped the structure of the revenue departments to make tax collection more efficient. It was reforms such as these that secured “a more professional and efficient bureaucracy,” and they entailed a rejection of the perceived wastefulness of the overgrown fiscal-military apparatus.

<sup>24</sup> In the decades after 1780, the central government did indeed increase “the quality and range of its social statistics,” improve its information-gathering techniques, and “deploy its new resources of information to considerable political effect,” as David Eastwood points out (“‘Amplifying the Province of the Legislature’: The Flow of Information and the English State in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Historical Research* 62 [1989]: 284). But it is telling that he should take as his point of departure for these trends the appointment of the Public Accounts Commission in 1780. Lord North appointed the Commission in order to quiet criticisms of the expense and (ostensible) mismanagement of the American War.

<sup>25</sup> Eleventh report of the Commissioners for Examining the Public Accounts, December 5, 1783, Lambert, ed., 43:35–36.

TABLE 5  
PER CAPITA PUBLIC SPENDING, 1781–1851

	Expenditure (in Millions of Pounds)	Population (in Millions)	Total Spending per Capita (in Pounds)	Spending on Civil Government per Capita (in Pounds)
1781	25.8	8.6	3.00	.16
1791	18.0	9.3	1.94	.20
1801	51.0	10.5	4.86	.20
1811	81.6	18.1	4.51	.28
1821	58.4	20.9	2.79	.26
1831	51.9	24.1	2.15	.20
1841	53.2	26.7	1.99	.20
1851	54.7	27.4	2.00	.25

SOURCE.—Based on B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 9–12, 580, 587. Net public expenditure to 1801, gross from 1802; categories change between series, so civil government costs jump anomalously. Population includes Great Britain only to 1801, United Kingdom from 1811. Figures have not been adjusted because there is no price index available for the entire period. See n. 30.

Financial and administrative reform combined with retrenchment to reverse the wartime trend toward central government growth in the postwar decades. Net public expenditure plummeted to its nineteenth-century low of £45.1 million (excluding tax collection costs) in 1834.<sup>26</sup> In real terms, public spending was reduced a full 25 percent in the two decades after Waterloo.<sup>27</sup> A drastic reduction of military and naval spending in the intervening nineteen years accounts for the difference, but expenditure breakdowns do not indicate that the minimal state reallocated public resources to meet new responsibilities in other spheres of governance. Any such reallocation would have to fall under the rubric of civil government spending, and per capita spending on civil government was exactly the same in 1841 as it had been in 1791 (see table 5). In the intervening period, it had waxed and then waned at a lesser rate than per capita public expenditure as a whole. Furthermore, expenditure on poor relief, which had hitherto fluctuated at local discretion, came in 1834 under central control and was thus subject to

<sup>26</sup> Based on Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (n. 16 above), p. 587. If historians have neglected a “revolution in government” before 1830, the fact of declining state expenditures may have given them good reason.

<sup>27</sup> From £76 million in 1815 to £51 million in 1834 (monthly average of 1821–25 equals 100). Figures based on the price index in A. D. Gayer, W. W. Rostow, and A. J. Schwartz, *The Growth and Fluctuation of the British Economy, 1790–1850*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1953), 1:468–70.

the same harsh retrenchment program. The result, notoriously, was that as late as the 1870s Britain had still not returned to Napoleonic-era levels of poor law expenditure in absolute terms, much less relative to any measures of national growth.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, per capita spending on civil government did not begin to rise at all until the 1840s. Civil government spending as a proportion of gross public expenditure remained within the eighteenth-century parameters of some 6–11 percent until the late 1840s. Between then and 1880 it almost doubled and remained a little over 20 percent for the rest of the century.<sup>29</sup> These figures suggest that the real shift in spending priorities to such new areas of government responsibility as education, public health, and public works was largely a consequence of the much-maligned “Victorian revolution,” triggered by Whigs and Benthamites, which Jupp has attempted to prefigure.<sup>30</sup>

We do not mean to distract attention from the critical period of professionalization and minimalization between 1815 and 1830, however. Above all, this period of liberal Tory hegemony evinced a preoccupation with consolidating what little remained of the fiscal-military apparatus. The breakdown of public statutes into specific spheres of reference once again provides supporting evidence for spending figures (see table 6). The substantial downward trend of legislation in the hitherto dominant categories of revenue/trade and military statutes in the fifteen years after 1815 indicates the success of the liberal Tory effort to minimize and consolidate the traditional sectors of central governance—especially through the simplification of the tariff structure and the process of voting supplies. Indeed, much the same can be said of sectors of increased legislative activity—especially the legal system, where Peel’s efforts at the Home Office were designed to consolidate and simplify the sprawling legal code bequeathed by the eighteenth century.

With the Whigs, we move into a period of legislative extension as well as consolidation. The dramatic increase in statute making in the areas of civil and local government, the legal system, and religion reflect their reforming impulses. Though Whig ministers often sold extensive legislation as consolidatory, many of them had no qualms

<sup>28</sup> Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics*, p. 605.

<sup>29</sup> Figures based on *ibid.*, pp. 587–89.

<sup>30</sup> Adjusted figures for per capita spending on civil government in the postwar decades would show a slight increase to the early 1820s (reflecting the stickiness of expenditure levels in a period of sharp deflation), a gradual decrease through the 1830s, and a sharp increase in the 1840s. In other words, adjusted spending figures strengthen the argument for a *Victorian* revolution in government.

TABLE 6  
QUINQUENNIAL AVERAGES OF PUBLIC STATUTES BY CATEGORY, SESSIONS OF 1814–49 (in %)

	Revenue/Finance and Trade	War/Military	Total	Civil/Local Government	Legal	Ecclesiastical
1814/1819	38	11	49	8	13	2
1819–20/1824	34	8	42	8	18	5
1825/1829	24	9	33	8	19	6
1830/1834	24	7	31	12	16	4
1835/1839	17	6	23	16	25	10
1840/1844	19	6	25	11	19	7
1845/1849	12	7	19	12	15	4

SOURCE.—Figures based on the *Statutes at Large* and the *Statutes Revised*.

about extending the range of government action and expanding the central bureaucracy to facilitate it. Nevertheless, the important point is that, for all their activism, the Whig ministries of the 1830s were hardly able to shift the trend of government expenditure away from retrenchment. The most that can be said is that they carved out a larger piece for domestic services out of a much smaller pie. The Whigs' social activism, in fact, coexisted uncomfortably with the liberal Tory objective of keeping taxes low in the wake of a war that had convinced most sectional interests that the fiscal-military state was an unacceptable drain on national resources. Thus, while the Whigs acted to extend the range of state activity, liberal Tory reformers sought to legitimate central authority by making it less expensive.

\* \* \*

The upshot of this longer-term perspective is that professionalization and minimalization after 1815 represent more than just another postwar "return to normalcy." These processes evince a determination not to let wartime expenditure permanently ratchet state expenditures upward and, indeed, to impose fiscal disciplines that would otherwise prevent the state from growing by inertia or via pressure-from-without. A comparison of the British experience with the sketchy figures available for the experience of Continental states in the nineteenth century bears this out. French state expenditures, for instance, may have shrunk in the immediate postwar years, but they then immediately resumed a rapid upward trend: up 50 percent between 1822 and 1842, a period in which British expenditures continued to decline, they had quadrupled from postwar levels by 1880. Swedish and Belgian expenditures trebled over approximately the same span. By contrast, British expenditures only managed to reach a level 50 percent above immediate postwar levels by 1880. Of all the European nations for which comparable figures are available, only Austria-Hungary experienced a prolonged postwar deflation, after which it resumed the normal course, more than trebling from its low point by 1880.<sup>31</sup> Of course,

<sup>31</sup> These rough estimates are drawn from expenditure series in Peter Flora et al., *State, Economy and Society in Western Europe, 1815–1975*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt, 1983), vol. 1, chap. 8, augmented by similar series in B. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics, 1750–1975*, 2d ed. (New York, 1981), pp. 733–41. Making the comparisons on the basis of public expenditure as a proportion of gross national product gives somewhat different results, but the general trends between 1820 and 1914—downward for Britain, upward for France and Germany—are the same. See Schremmer (n. 2 above), p. 362. Note also that Schremmer's figures include military expenditure; among other distortions, the Crimean War lends an upward bias to what would otherwise be a steadily declining British graph at midcentury.



expenditure is only one measure of state capacities.<sup>32</sup> But we see no reason to doubt H. C. G. Matthew's conclusion that "no industrial society can ever have existed in which the state played a smaller role than that of the United Kingdom in the 1860s."<sup>33</sup>

### III

Let us recap the argument so far. Government expenditure did increase rapidly in the 1790s and the 1800s, not in reflection of great social transformations but in the conventional eighteenth-century context of war fighting. In the immediate postwar period, there was consequently a considerable deflation of government expenditure in absolute terms, reaching its nadir in 1834; relative to the population, spending shrank rapidly. The professionalism and reform consciousness that Jupp detects stemmed from a very broad popular demand, first for as economical a war as possible, and then for an absolutely economical peace. Even the extension of parliamentary business was in part caused by the closer scrutiny applied to expenditure by all parties. A similar result is obtained from examining another measure of government activity, the pace and type of legislation.

Having suggested the pattern of government growth (and shrinkage) in this period, we now turn to the question of agency. If government activity in wartime followed predictable eighteenth-century patterns, we might expect that the agents of this activity would be the traditional agents of eighteenth-century politics; that is, there would be no reason from the evidence of growth alone to assume an *embourgeoisement* of personnel. Even if *embourgeoisement* might be attributed to the unusual scale of Napoleonic wartime growth (in contrast to earlier, less costly wars), still the same argument could not be applied to explain some further *embourgeoisement* in a period of actual deflation after the war.

We consider the question of agency, therefore, an open one, not to be deduced from the pattern of growth, but first to be ascertained empirically, then to be explained on the basis of any revealed parallels with the pattern of growth. Of course, it is perfectly possible that the relative continuities we have documented in the nature of government growth before 1830 might be accompanied by rupture in personnel.

<sup>32</sup> Though it is not the case that the pattern differs much if local government or social insurance expenditures are taken into account; compare the figures for "central government" and "general government" in Flora et al.

<sup>33</sup> H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809–1874* (Oxford, 1986), p. 169.

Since we can make here only a very limited empirical inquiry, we take as our object of scrutiny the same list of 180 "most active M.P.s, 1790–1820" as compiled by Jupp from the relevant *History of Parliament* volumes edited by R. G. Thorne.<sup>34</sup> Thorne and Jupp distinguish from this list twenty-four "self-made men," eleven sons of merchants, and thirteen "with substantial trading interests," who together make up one-quarter of the most active M.P.s. We leave aside for the moment the questions of how to judge whether one-quarter is a lot or a few, and how to deal with overlaps among these categories, to assess instead the accuracy and import of Thorne's designations.<sup>35</sup> We take the categories one at a time, but our general points are these: first, that the avenues of promotion for "new men" in this period lay along conventional eighteenth-century lines, that is, the land, the law, and government service; second, that trade and commercial interests do not particularly distinguish those designated M.P.s from others who might otherwise be described as "landed."

Of the "self-made men," for instance, some were "made" by their connections—often quite intimate—with the landed gentry and aristocracy. William Huskisson, for example, is often cited as an example of "the new man of business."<sup>36</sup> Yet Huskisson was a landlord, a small one at first—his inherited family estate was worth only £13,500—but by the same token his political career was limited at first, as well; only his marriage to an heiress and inheritance of a great-uncle's sizeable Sussex estate in 1800 "rendered his position in public life unembarrassed," as the *Dictionary of National Biography* delicately puts it.<sup>37</sup> Thomas Creevey, the Whig society man, was undoubtedly humble by birth, but it was his marriage to a landed widow and cousin of Charles Grey that set him up for a political career. George Canning,

<sup>34</sup> The biographical information on M.P.s in the following pages comes from the relevant entries in Thorne, ed., (n. 2 above), vols. 3–5, supplemented by the *Dictionary of National Biography* and *Burke's Peerage and Burke's Landed Gentry*, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>35</sup> "There were many more members who might be described as self-made in this period than in the preceding one," says Thorne (1:290), but this may well be an artifact of the way in which Thorne defines "self-made." Among other objections, we would point to the inclusion in the category of many who inherited substantial trading fortunes. In any case, we are still only concerned with something over 100 of 2,100 M.P.s. In general, we feel that "statistical" surveys based on *House of Commons* biographies tend to be hazardous, for the biographies are not compiled with a keen eye for socioeconomic status.

<sup>36</sup> In addition to his deployment by Thorne and Jupp, see the typical reference to Huskisson as a "bourgeois radical" in Geoffrey Ingham, *Capitalism Divided? The City and Industry in British Social Development* (New York, 1984), pp. 106–7, 116.

<sup>37</sup> Huskisson's family holdings are identified in C. R. Fay, *Huskisson and His Age* (London, 1951), chap. 10.

though his mother was an actress, was closely connected to the Irish gentry and adopted by his uncle Stratford Canning, a prominent City figure; it is hard to consider someone with this pedigree, and an Eton education to boot, “self-made.”

Other “self-made men” actually inherited property or position from parents that might make them “commercial or industrial” but hardly self-made. David Ricardo was set up on the exchange by his father, though the son’s later marriage to a Quaker got him disinherited. Pascoe Grenfell entered a family business in tin and copper and actually inherited his parliamentary seat from his brother. J. W. Croker’s father was the surveyor general of the Port of Dublin, who passed on to him the revenue cases that helped build his own career as a barrister.

Almost by definition, since Jupp designates M.P.s as either “commercial and industrial” or “self-made” but not both, most of the genuine “self-made men” ascended via the classic eighteenth-century ladders of promotion. Charles Grant I, Joseph Hume, and James Mackintosh made fortunes in the East India service, while Peter Moore made a trading fortune in the same theater. J. S. Copley, Patrick Duigenan, French Lawrence, Arthur Piggott, William Plunket, Samuel Romilly, and John Scott were all barristers.<sup>38</sup> Like Ricardo, many of these men purchased sizeable estates before they entered Parliament. Edmund Burke and Francis Horner were brought into Parliament by Whig patrons who admired their talents as scribblers and savants. These patterns of promotion appear to us quite similar to early eighteenth-century patterns, and the numbers involved—perhaps fifteen “self-made” men—do not betoken a flood of “new men” into Parliament, either. In any case, as Jupp’s source Thorne acknowledges, “few [self-made men] . . . aspired to statesmanship.”<sup>39</sup>

Self-made men do not appear very numerous, very distinguished, or, for that matter, very novel; they ascended traditional ladders. What about the “commercial and industrial” M.P.s who are alleged to be entering Parliament in ever-greater numbers? First, some of those described as commercial and industrial could just as easily be categorized as landed, particularly if (as in the case of Huskisson, above) their political careers derived from their purchase of or marriage into es-

<sup>38</sup> Men like these appear as “most active” because they held legal offices, necessary for carrying on the business of the crown. Thorne calls them, on the whole, “plodding, if conscientious, professionals.” See Thorne, ed., 1:302.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:290. Interestingly, neither of the two exceptions cited by Thorne—Canning and Huskisson—can in any case be considered truly self-made.

tates. Charles Ellis inherited a Jamaica plantation worth £20,000 a year and married a daughter of Lord Hervey. Richard Hart Davis married a Lincolnshire heiress and acquired a Gloucestershire estate. “Bear” Ellice was so called because of his connections with the fur trade, but his political fortunes were linked to his marriage to a sister of the second Earl Grey. John Courtenay’s father was a revenue officer (not a merchant) from County Down, but his mother was Lady Jane Stuart, daughter of the earl of Bute. William Holmes was the son of a brewer, but married the relict of the Reverend Sir James Stronge, first baronet. Rowland Burdon was the heir of a Newcastle merchant and banker, but his father purchased the Castle Eden estate in Durham, on which the son founded his career as M.P. for the county. Robert Biddulph, the son of a barrister, made his fortune in Bengal, but was politically empowered by his inheritance of a cousin’s Herefordshire estate. Sir Francis Baring, a banker, bought enormous estates and passed them on to his son Alexander, yet both are denominated “commercial and industrial.” Robert Peel the elder was the son of a calico printer, who maintained the family business but used portions of his profits to buy the Tamworth estate from the marquess of Bath in 1790, entering Parliament as M.P. for Tamworth in the same year. Samuel Whitbread I was a brewer who bought enormous estates in Bedfordshire and seven other counties, as brewers had been doing for centuries (if on a smaller scale).

Again, no early eighteenth-century M.P. would be surprised to find himself sitting next to men who had made fortunes in banking, the Indies, or the marriage market and who had used their fortunes to buy land or family connections to win a seat.<sup>40</sup> As Lawrence and Jeanne Stone have recently argued, throughout the early modern and well into the modern period, a trickle of “entrants” into the landed elite have appeared in every generation, and many of them have entered Parliament as well in order to put a seal on their new status.<sup>41</sup> Entrants to the landed elite in the eighteenth century, say the Stones, made their fortunes in the law, the army and navy, brewing, the West and East Indies, and overseas trade.<sup>42</sup> The self-made commercial and industrial men identified by Jupp and Thorne represent just such a trickle in the

<sup>40</sup> The Parliaments of 1715–54 included 198 merchants plus twelve “nabobs” who made fortunes in the East Indies. See Romney Sedgwick, *The House of Commons, 1715–1754*, 4 vols. (New York, 1970), 1:136–55.

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England, 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1986), p. 221.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

1790–1820 generation, into the political elite and (by purchase) into the landed elite as well.

There are good reasons to suppose that this constant trickle might have been augmented somewhat in the early nineteenth century, as Jupp suggests, simply because the structure of national product changed in this period; but in fact the composition of the political elite changed only marginally. The various “new men” or trading categories are said to account for less than 19 percent of M.P.s before 1790, 19 percent in the Thorne period, 22 percent in 1830, and 27 percent in 1831—hardly a dramatic shift—and these categories take no account of the substantial overlap between land and trade. In the Parliament of 1841–47, for instance, 61 percent of M.P.s were businessmen or barristers, but 81 percent were in or closely related to the peerage, baronetage, and gentry.<sup>43</sup>

For if commercial interests are supposed to carry with them some special capacity for the new social and economic agenda of the early nineteenth century, then traditional landed families must have been so equipping themselves throughout this period. The involvement of landed gentlemen in financial, commercial, and even industrial interests in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries surely needs no further comment, given the enormous literature piled up on the subject. We are certain that many of the (landed) M.P.s not designated as having commercial interests did have such interests. Does this make them “new men,” representing a challenge to the landed interest? Does, for example, the fact that nearly all M.P.s must have had holdings in the funds make them part of a “financial interest”? Or does it just indicate the changing economic involvements of the landed gentry in the eighteenth century?<sup>44</sup>

These involvements were paralleled by an increasing sophistication in land management and agriculture—“complex and usually highly technical subjects” like those with which M.P.s are now seen to be dealing—and in educational attainments among the landed elite. There is no need to counterpose “a high level of education coupled

<sup>43</sup> W. O. Aydelotte, “On the Business Interests of the Gentry in the Parliament of 1841–47,” appendix to G. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 290–305.

<sup>44</sup> Boyd Hilton argues that “the social basis of the Pitt/Liverpool/Peel regime” is best described as “rentier,” a description that may undervalue the centrality of landowners in the rentier interest as well as the continuing social and political prestige to be derived from landownership, but which incorporates the notion of common interest between land and finance that we wish to emphasize here. See Boyd Hilton, “The Political Arts of Lord Liverpool,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 38 (1988): 153.

with a talent for business” to “a high station in landed society”; increasingly, they went together.<sup>45</sup> This remaking of the English landed elite was what made possible the emergent spirit of “pragmatism” that seems to manifest itself from the time of the younger Pitt; on this we agree with Jupp, though we think that the implicit ideological content of this “pragmatism” requires closer scrutiny. It also made possible the deft, technical handling of the new social issues that did present themselves to Parliament and government; it is peculiar that Jupp should consider these issues—combinations, poor laws, education, penal reform—difficult for or alien to landlords since much recent research has been devoted to demonstrating the sophistication of landed debate in each of these areas.<sup>46</sup> Thus the institutions of the political center within which this “pragmatic” policy-making and its accompanying out-of-doors gestures took place were, as Jupp says, meeting places for men of talent and intellect, but places where landed and nonlanded men met on the basis of common capacities and interests.<sup>47</sup> There was consequently little pressure on either Whig or Tory parties to become less “aristocratic” in the 1820s.<sup>48</sup>

This retooling of the landed elite was gradual and protracted; it began long before 1790 and was by no means over by 1830. The Stones speak of a cultural and economic alignment—not a merger—of landed and trading elites beginning in the seventeenth century. By the 1840s,

<sup>45</sup> The list of thirty-two “best-known individuals” provided by Jupp includes many known for all these qualities, including a high station in landed society.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, on combinations, Maxine Berg, *The Machinery Question and the Making of Political Economy, 1815–1848* (Cambridge, 1980), chap. 9; on poor laws, Peter Mandler, “The Making of the New Poor Law *Redivivus*,” *Past and Present*, no. 117 (November 1987), pp. 131–57, “Tories and Paupers: Christian Political Economy and the Making of the New Poor Law,” *Historical Journal*, 33 (1990): 81–103; Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement* (Oxford, 1988), chap. 3; on education, D. G. Paz, *The Politics of Working-Class Education in Britain, 1830–50* (Manchester, 1986); Richard Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics* (Oxford, 1987), chap. 6; on penal reform, Robert D. Storch, “Policing Rural Southern England before the Police,” in *Policing and Prosecution in Britain, 1750–1850*, ed. D. Hay and F. Snyder (Oxford, 1989), pp. 211–66.

<sup>47</sup> This was certainly true of the Canningite and Huskissonite groups, and the Alfred and Weekly Clubs; Grillions was very socially exclusive, as its origin at Christ Church suggests: “self-made men” need not apply!

<sup>48</sup> Jupp’s claim (n. 2 above) that “the natural aristocratic leaders” of the Whig party, in whose number he includes Althorp, “virtually gave up the ghost in the 1820s, while Brougham and the philosophic radicals stole the show” (p. 74) would surprise almost any student of the Whig party in this period. See Austin Mitchell, *The Whigs in Opposition, 1815–1830* (Oxford, 1967); Ellis A. Wasson, *Whig Renaissance: Lord Althorp and the Whig Party, 1782–1845* (New York, 1987); Brent, chap. 1; Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830–1852* (Oxford, 1990), chaps. 1–3. Jupp’s mention of the *Westminster Review* confuses the matter; Brougham’s journal was the highly respectable *Edinburgh*, which was influential, while the more bourgeois *Westminster* made little political impact.

this process had reached a point such that, of those 81 percent of M.P.s related to the peerage, baronetage, or gentry, almost half were businessmen or barristers, and surely most of the rest had business interests.<sup>49</sup> We prefer this model of convergence to the one suggested by Jupp, whereby a landed elite threatened by competing interests before 1830 returned to the fray thereafter and “adapted” to those interests. As argued above, there is certainly no reason to see in government growth any evidence for a sudden intrusion of “new men” into government in the early nineteenth century. Instead, our argument about continuities in the motors of government growth to 1815 finds confirmation in the substantial continuities in patterns of government recruitment. If we were to look anywhere for “new men,” it would have to be in the postwar world, where government did shift gears; yet that shift did not proceed in the direction suggested by Jupp, so that a “new man” argument would have to be assembled anew. But our suggestion that “new men” continued to be recruited along the same lines and at about the same pace as in the eighteenth century suggests indeed that a social interpretation of government growth is not really possible. The *laissez-faire* state was not, in our view, forged by the processes of modernization and *embourgeoisement* on which Jupp implicitly relies.

#### IV

What did produce the *laissez-faire* state? The primary motor, we believe, was the widespread conviction that the British war machine was unacceptably expensive and wasteful and that it acted as a broker for parasitical interests—contractors, sinecurists, speculative investors, and the like—who robbed the “productive” classes of their hard-earned money. During the French wars, a great many Britons viewed the state as little more than a parasitic system that taxed the wealth of the nation and diverted it into the pockets of a narrow political clique whose only claim to privileged status was its proximity to the sources of patronage. William Cobbett memorably summed up this

<sup>49</sup> Here we have conflated Aydelotte’s category of “businessmen,” i.e., practicing bankers and merchants, with his category of “business connections,” i.e., company directors and owners of docks, canals, mines, etc., to accord more closely with the loose categories used in the *History of Parliament* volumes. Aydelotte stresses that he makes no attempt to assess the penetration of business investments, which must have been more widespread still. How many landowners passed up the chance to invest in railway shares?



perception of the state as "Old Corruption,"<sup>50</sup> but many observers who did not embrace a radical political agenda would have agreed with his assessment. Cobbett and other popular radicals assailed the wartime tax burden and the mounting national debt as particularly oppressive and wasteful means of perpetuating unjust social and political privileges.<sup>51</sup> Most country gentlemen rejected the radical political critique but agreed that taxes were unacceptably burdensome. They recognized the value of central government as a prop to the social hierarchy but felt that its wartime "extravagance"—which put a disproportionate share of the tax burden on land and led to the Bank Restriction and subsequent return to cash payments with all their nefarious social consequences<sup>52</sup>—threatened to subvert that hierarchy.

Merchants and manufacturers were not as united in opposition to a high tax regime and the purposes of government it was supposed to advance, but they could not agree among themselves what the state's proper role should be in the promotion of trade and production. Weaker industries tended to endorse protectionism as a means of insulating themselves from the rigors of international competition, while stronger ones were often eager to exploit their competitive advantage through downward tariff revisions and reciprocal trade arrangements. The pursuit of these contradictory goals effectively blocked efforts to orchestrate trade and manufacturing lobbies across industry lines and left the central government with much discretionary power in the formulation of tax and trade policies.<sup>53</sup> Some industrial and mercantile interests, such as the sugar and timber lobbies, had the parliamentary clout to preserve trade restrictions more or less intact when they felt these to be advantageous—during the postwar trade slump, for instance.<sup>54</sup> Major exceptions to the lack of collective force of industrial and mercantile interests arose when manufacturers and merchants

<sup>50</sup> See esp. George Woodcock, ed., *Rural Rides* (1830; New York: Penguin Classics ed., 1985), pp. 115–20, 159–62, 200–220.

<sup>51</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, "Rethinking Chartism" (1982) in his *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>52</sup> Boyd Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce: The Economic Policies of the Tory Governments, 1815–1830* (Oxford, 1977), chaps. 4–5.

<sup>53</sup> J. M. Norris, "Samuel Garbett and the Early Development of Industrial Lobbying in Great Britain," *Economic History Review*, 2d ser., 10 (1957–58): 450–60; Vivien Dietz, "Before the Age of Capital: Manufacturing Interests and the British State, 1780–1800" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1990), chap. 3. The point here is that landed gentlemen were not systematically prone to "corruption," nor merchants and manufacturers to "disinterestedness"—often to the contrary.

<sup>54</sup> See Lucy Brown, *The Board of Trade and the Free Trade Movement, 1830–42* (Oxford, 1958), chaps. 10–11.



could trace adverse economic policies directly to a political structure that benefited the landed elite. The agitation in the northern industrial districts for the repeal of the Orders in Council,<sup>55</sup> the Birmingham Political Union,<sup>56</sup> and the Anti-Corn Law League<sup>57</sup> provide the obvious examples. They also indicate that the sporadic demands for parliamentary reform emanating from commercial and manufacturing circles stemmed from a critique of the wasteful consequences of landed privilege enshrined in the constitution.

City men were much more apt to favor the fiscal-military state than these other sectional interests, for it provided them with investment opportunities. The government's immense credit needs during the French wars clearly gave them much influence over economic policy.<sup>58</sup> But after the war, the City grudgingly acquiesced in financial reforms—probably because it realized how imprudent it would be to resist its biggest client, the central government, and because it could take solace in mercantile investment.<sup>59</sup>

A social interpretation of government growth would have to take all these sectional interests into account.<sup>60</sup> The important point is that landed gentlemen were far from unanimously in favor of preserving the fiscal-military state as a broker of special, "corrupt" privileges. Nor were other interests anything like unanimously in favor of divesting the state of its capacity to extend such privileges.

In any case, from Pitt's accession to Peel's resignation in 1846, Tory and Conservative ministries generally sought to uphold executive authority by distancing it from the clash of social interests. This was because they, like most of their influential opponents, thought of the state as the ultimate safeguard of property and, thus, of the social hierarchy that rested on its possession. Activist policies would only encourage dangerous expectations and provoke unrest among social

<sup>55</sup> J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-war Liberalism in England, 1793–1815* (Cambridge, 1982), chap. 9.

<sup>56</sup> Carlos Flick, *The Birmingham Political Union and the Movements for Reform in Britain, 1830–1839* (Hamden, Conn., 1978).

<sup>57</sup> Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838–1846* (London, 1958); Norman Longmate, *The Breadstealers* (New York and London, 1984).

<sup>58</sup> Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce*, chap. 2; F. W. Fetter, *The Development of British Monetary Orthodoxy, 1797–1875* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), chaps. 2 and 3; Barry Gordon, *Political Economy in Parliament, 1819–1823* (London, 1976), chaps. 3–5.

<sup>59</sup> See Ingham (n. 36 above), p. 107.

<sup>60</sup> John Brewer has pointed out to us another: the internal pressure exerted by bureaucratic dynasties for professionalization and reform. Certainly more research needs to be done into the personnel of the government machine. Here we would only emphasize, again, that bureaucratic professionalization had evidently only a limited impact in multiplying the functions and size of the bureaucracy.

groups who felt they were being disadvantaged by them; far better to legitimate the mechanisms of the state by cutting down on the perceived “extravagances” within them.<sup>61</sup> Fiscal reforms went far to placate the antitax sentiment at the root of “Old Corruption.” They preserved the funding system, but at a lower cost to the public. Pitt’s and Peel’s income taxes broadened the tax base and took pressure off the price of consumer goods. Tariff liberalization brought in more revenue at a lower cost to the public and divested the state of its reputation as a broker of special privileges—to the landed interest, through the Corn Laws; to the commercial interest, through the Navigation Acts, and the like.<sup>62</sup>

Administrative reforms gradually replaced highly controversial “irregular” emoluments, such as sinecures and fees, with salaries and superannuation arrangements that made officeholders more effective servants of the state and less obviously parasitic on the public. Such reforms also helped to procure for ministers themselves an image of disinterested men of political business who used office to promote the commonweal rather than their own fortunes.

Pittites and Peelites were primarily able to preserve their authority because they shared with their adversaries a very limited notion of the uses of the state. It would be facile to label the *laissez-faire* state as just a particularly clever manifestation of “elite hegemony,” at least in the commonplace sense of the term as a form of social control. The dismantling of the fiscal and military apparatus after 1815 was an immensely popular exercise because few constituencies could yet conceive of much use for a powerful state. There was little expectation even as late as the 1840s that the central government should use a very significant proportion of national resources to attempt to ameliorate social injustice or even to promote economic growth; an expensive state was still usually equated with “extravagance” and the perpetuation of unfair privileges.

<sup>61</sup> Of course, it was not always possible for them to avoid activist policies. The Liverpool ministry could not afford to ignore the clamor of special interests for protection during the postwar slump, as Boyd Hilton has shown (“The Political Arts of Lord Liverpool” [n. 44 above], pp. 150–53). But the ministers were grudging interventionists, and they justified intervention as a means of returning society to the status quo ante.

<sup>62</sup> Here, we must distinguish between the notion of *laissez-faire* held by many members of the Liverpool cabinet—“not yet an intellectual ideal so much as a political tactic of doing nothing . . . indicat[ing] an unwillingness to interfere with established restrictions on trade, rather than an active desire to release trade from such trammels”—as Hilton puts it (*Corn, Cash, Commerce* [n. 52 above], p. 74), and the heightened rhetoric and ideological commitment of Peelites such as Gladstone. See H. C. G. Matthew [n. 33 above], p. 115.

As it happened, a ruling elite largely composed of the landed gentlemen who had dominated Parliament for centuries proved to be very effective in cutting away at this “extravagance.” They were able to do so precisely because the majority of those who were “most active” did not function as representatives of a landed “interest” but as members of a governing elite who possessed landed as well as other varieties of personal property and who agreed that it was the chief responsibility of the state to protect all such varieties. The best way for the state to protect property, most of them agreed, was for statesmen to do away with policies that were widely believed to privilege the interests of the propertied over those of the dispossessed or the interests of one bloc of property holders over those of others. “It is not . . . inconsistent with true conservative policy, that we should increase the trade of the country by removing restrictions,” Peel announced to the Commons while committing himself to act against the Corn Laws, “nor is it inconsistent with sound conservative policy, that we should reduce the taxation of the country whilst we increased its revenue.”

“It is not, in my mind, inconsistent with true conservative policy, that we have extinguished agitation and discouraged sedition, not by stringent coercive laws, but by encouraging the idea amongst the great body of the people, that we, the rich and powerful, are willing to take a more than ordinary share of the public burdens, and to remove those burdens from the people as far as possible.”<sup>63</sup> So spoke a manufacturer’s son who was the lord of Drayton Manor, and a majority of the gentlemen of (landed, funded, commercial, and industrial) property who sat on either side of the House agreed with him. Together they had constructed a state that was unique in nineteenth-century Europe for curtailing its expenditures and involvements with economic interests and thereby protecting its political elite from one avenue of assault.

<sup>63</sup> *The Speeches of the Late Right Honourable Sir Robert Peel, Bart., delivered in the House of Commons*, 4 vols. (London, 1853), 4:581 (January 22, 1846).