Lord Liverpool – A Reappraisal of the First Conservative Prime Minister

Synopsis

Lord Liverpool was Prime Minister for an unbroken period of almost fifteen years, having previously held other high offices for ten years. It is unarguable that his government had two great achievements to its name; the triumph in the Napoleonic Wars and the wide ranging reforms during the 1820s which were without precedent in our modern history. In spite of this, he was rather taken for granted in his lifetime, his reputation declined swiftly after his death, and for many years thereafter he was disparaged if he was not ignored. Certainly, a more generous view has been taken by some recent commentators, but it is arguable that full justice is still not being done to his lengthy tenure of high office. Of course there have been reasons for the muted assessments, some fair, some less so. There is no doubt that Lord Liverpool's performance as premier in the difficult years after Waterloo can be criticised, though the aftermaths of more recent victorious but costly wars provide evidence that political leadership in such periods is fraught with difficulty. He was perhaps fortunate to be able to call on the services of some very able people, Castlereigh, Canning, Wellington, and Peel to name a few, but it is strange that biographers and historians have extended the influence of these statesmen without real evidence into areas where they lacked interest, knowledge, or responsibility. It is of course inevitable that Lord Liverpool’s conservative outlook has reduced his chance of balanced treatment by liberal and Whig historians.

This book is neither the full modern biography that Lord Liverpool lacks, nor, I hope, is it just a favourable polemic, since I give attention to weaknesses and failings as well as pointing to strengths and achievements. After a brief account of Lord Liverpool's career, personality and beliefs, I consider different areas of government, with a view to identifying the extent to which Lord Liverpool was either the prime mover, or had a major input, and should accordingly be given credit or criticised. My main conclusions are that Lord Liverpool was a far more significant and capable figure than he has often been accounted, but that greatness probably just eluded him, as much because of the style as the substance of his lengthy premiership.
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1. Introduction

On the list of British Prime Ministers ordered by length of service, the first two entries, Sir Robert Walpole and William Pitt the Younger will be familiar to those with an interest in British history, not least perhaps because of fairly recent popular biographies. However, the next name, Robert Banks Jenkinson, 2nd Earl of Liverpool is less well known than theirs, and certainly than some of the following names which include, William Gladstone, Lord North, Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, and Winston Churchill. Lord Liverpool assumed the highest political office shortly after his predecessor, Spencer Percival, was shot dead by an assassin in the parliament building at Westminster, in June 1812, and remained Prime Minister until April 1827, resigning a few weeks after suffering a stroke, which disabled him emotionally, and to a large degree, mentally and physically, for the remaining year and a half of his life. Prior to accepting the chief office he had been in government for sixteen years, holding in that period each of the three offices of state which were then next in importance, Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary, and Secretary of State for War and Colonies, and he had already declined appointment as Prime Minister twice, in 1806 and again in 1809. All in all, Lord Liverpool held ministerial office for 33 years beginning as a member of the Board of Control for India in 1793 at the age of 23, and he led his ‘party’ in the House of Lords for 24 years from 1803, for all but a few months as chief government spokesman in that chamber.

Of course, to be in office for a long period is no proof of distinction as at least one name on the above list, Lord North, known to posterity with some justification, as ‘the man who lost America’, demonstrates. While not viewed as negatively as that premier, Lord Liverpool has been either ignored or denigrated by many writers about his times, not least as a consequence of Benjamin Disraeli’s description of him as ‘the Arch-Mediocrity’ in his political novel, Coningsby, written in the 1840s. I give a fuller quotation;

‘The Arch-Mediocrity who presided, rather than ruled, over this Cabinet of Mediocrities ... had himself some glimmering traditions of political science... In a subordinate position his meagre diligence and his frigid method might not have been without value; but the qualities that he possessed were misplaced; nor can any character be conceived less invested with the happy properties of a leader. In the conduct of public affairs his disposition was exactly the reverse of that which is the characteristic of great men. He was peremptory in little questions, and great ones he left open.’
The wholesale condemnation of a political generation rather than just Lord Liverpool, seems the more telling because Disraeli was at least nominally of similar political inclination to his targets, even if he had his own axe to grind in wishing to steer his party away from the direction taken by Lord Liverpool and the latter’s protégé and political heir, Sir Robert Peel. Nonetheless, though some of his specific points now come over as rather cheap jibes, (meagre diligence is a strange descriptor for a man who worked himself literally to death), there are others like the claimed attitude to ‘great questions’ which require attention from anyone seeking to provide a balanced assessment. Twenty years later, in Lord Liverpool’s first and most comprehensive biography, Professor C.D. Yonge attempted a rehabilitation, but for all his industry and perhaps excessive admiration for his subject, he failed in that objective, as is well illustrated by a damning contemporary review of his work to be found in the Times newspaper archives. In fact it was to be the best part of a hundred years after Lord Liverpool’s death before more equitable assessments began to receive consideration when produced by the likes of the military historian, Fortescue, the historian of the Tory Party, Feiling, and thereafter, in studies by Brock, and Gash. Their contributions made it possible to comprehend why those who were accorded more attention and respect by historians, if not by Disraeli, for example, Castlereagh, Canning, and Peel, came to regard Lord Liverpool’s leadership as indispensable, and were content to serve for long periods in subordinate roles. Indeed by the time Briggs wrote the following lines in 1974 it appeared that rehabilitation was complete

To his public life he brought qualities which, in aggregate, few prime ministers have equalled. In grasp of principles, mastery of detail, discernment of means, and judgement of individuals he was almost faultless. Cautious and unhurried in weighing a situation, he was prompt and decisive when the time came for action. In debate he was not only informed, lucid and objective, but conspicuously honest... He never dismissed a minister; he was never ungrateful or disloyal. Kind by temperament, he had an instinctive tact in dealing with others. His conciliatory manner smoothed away innumerable personal difficulties. He was a man whom it was almost impossible to dislike...

Liverpool was never a mere chairman presiding over a Cabinet of superior talents... It is clear that the guiding lines of policy were always firmly in Liverpool's hands, in consultation with an inner ring of ministers... Liverpool himself kept a close supervision of all the main departments, including the Foreign Office; and in matters of trade and finance was always the dominating figure...

Liverpool was a conservative statesman in the fundamental sense. He wished to avoid organic change by pursuing administrative reform. But he was neither a bigot nor a reactionary... The more the nineteenth century is put into perspective, the more
significant does Liverpool’s role appear. It was not merely that his political skill had kept an administration together so long or that his sheer professionalism as an administrator had enabled him to master all the diverse needs of government between 1812 and 1827. Even more important is that in the face of enormous practical difficulties he opened up the road along which early Victorian Britain was to travel with increasing certainty and profit in the next generation.

However, this glowing testimonial does not represent a new orthodoxy, perhaps rightly as it may be an over-correction. Many historians and biographers concerned with the early 19th century still find it easy to hark back to Disraeli’s words and accord Lord Liverpool little responsibility or credit for the successful actions of his government. I shall provide some examples and begin the task of explaining though certainly not justifying these rather sloppy analyses in the remainder of the introduction, whilst saving the main discussions for later in the book.

As Fortescue was perhaps first to imply, Lord Liverpool should be given at least as much credit as any other British politician, (if less than the military heroes, Nelson and Wellington), for the eventual victory in the Napoleonic Wars, since for the last six increasingly successful years of the struggle he was firstly Secretary of State for War and Colonies, and then continued to have the major role in directing the war effort as Prime Minister. It is argued later that the winning strategy owed much to him, even if paradoxically it did not accord fully with his concept of how Britain should best fight the war, and that his determination to pursue the struggle to a decisive conclusion regardless of cost did not falter through bad times and good. Yet some recent studies of those Wars, while not disparaging him as did Bryant’s readable if tendentious account, produced in the 1940s, mention him not at all, which is surely close to writing of Britain’s involvement in the First World War without mentioning Lloyd George. There have been some honourable exceptions, (such as the study by Muir, and to a lesser extent, another by Hall) but the dearth of plausible accounts of the political and strategic aspects of the successful British conduct of the later stages of the Napoleonic Wars makes it too easy to ignore the contributions of those not actually on the battlefields and high seas. As with the wars so with the peace negotiations which followed; the Prime Minister is hardly visible in some accounts. No-one would wish to underestimate the role of Lord Castlereigh, but any idea that he played a lone hand in the British interest can be discounted by reviewing the correspondence between his team and the Prime Minister; a stream of communications on personalities and negotiating positions came back to London, first from the allied army headquarters, as Napoleon was brought low, and then from
Paris and Vienna when formal discussions of peace treaties began. These were answered in detail by Lord Liverpool giving his views, endorsed by the Cabinet when he deemed it appropriate, advice, and on a few occasions, admonitions, and instructions for alterations in the British position. Webster, author of a magisterial account of Foreign Secretary Castlereigh’s activities, actually brought this correspondence fully into the public domain, but proposes that the Prime Minister was being humoured rather than consulted. A strange notion perhaps, but stated with such authority that many have followed his lead.

An understanding of the roles of Castlereigh, and later Canning in the Liverpool government is essential if a balanced judgement of Lord Liverpool’s premiership is to be made. George IV once fleetingly saw Castlereigh as a possible premier, when he was trying desperately to get rid of Lord Liverpool, and eventually resigned himself to Canning as the latter’s successor, but otherwise neither was ever in that particular frame. As successive Leaders of the House of Commons, they had the responsibility for justifying policy and carrying government measures through that House; as a result it has been easy to associate the policies with the spokesmen. This has enabled each of them to become identified with a raft of policies, different for the two men, which of course reflected the directions followed by the government while they were in office, ‘ultra-conservatism’ for Castlereigh, ‘liberal conservatism’ for Canning. Adding other evidence, which makes it very clear that the Foreign Secretaries were indeed following their own inclinations in speaking as they did, it is a short step to deciding that they must have had the major role in determining the policies. However, there are other explanations, which if more complex may be seen as more convincing, and I will devote much space in the book to detailing them. Sufficient here to point out that Lord Liverpool placed the individuals concerned in their influential positions, (against formidable opposition in Canning’s case) and must have known very well what he was getting in terms of attributes and opinions. I will also present evidence that neither Foreign Secretary was encouraged to stray into areas, which the premier regarded as his own territory, and that they were expected to keep him closely informed on matters within their own domain. All this is for later, but one further point is worth making now.

The focus on House of Commons leadership risks giving an unbalanced view of how politics and government worked in the early 19th century; this was still an age of deference, when most in public life were reluctant to match their views against those of their social betters. At the very top, the wishes of a king (and the deputising Prince
Regent) really mattered both as regards who should be in government, and what that
government should do. If ministers took insufficient account of the royal point of view,
they could soon find their ability to command support in Parliament dwindling.
Changes were afoot and whether deliberately or not, Lord Liverpool caused the
influence of the crown to decline, but he certainly did not destroy it. Social status also
mattered with regard to the influence of peers, both as members of the House of
Lords, and individually. Although normally amenable to the wishes of a government
with the confidence of the monarch, again largely a matter of deference, the Upper
House could not be taken for granted. If peers went un-persuaded, the fall-out could
be seen in the votes of members of the House of Commons, many of whom might
owe to their local aristocrat at least respect, and possibly their seats; so, Lord
Liverpool's role as leader in the Lords was far more important than the corresponding
position is now. Also, Cabinets still regularly included a majority of peers, and the
pecking order within that body depended almost as much on rank as the office held.
There was a tendency for those who did the work of running key departments, and
certainly those nominally responsible for finance, to be commoners, while those in
impressive-sounding but redundant offices like Lord President of the Council, or Lord
Privy Seal were peers, but if a decision was contested and came to a vote, as today
a simple majority won. In sum, the survival of a government depended then as now
on the ability to command a majority in the House of Commons, but achieving this
was not a simple matter of totting up party members, and freedom to pursue any line
of policy had usually been hard-earned by aligning those of status and influence
before a debate in that House.

It is clear from contemporary diaries and other records that Lord Liverpool frequently
did not attract all the consideration and respect due to his status and high office, but
that he was mostly oblivious to such slights. He lacked the grandeur of many of his
rank, and never acquired the mannerisms of self-importance which often become
attached to senior office-holders. This matter will be addressed more fully in a later
chapter, but for the moment it will suffice to say that his appearance was largely
nondescript and his personality was reserved, and modest. Although a very good
speaker in parliament his modus operandi was quiet reasoned argument rather than
fiery assertion or impassioned appeal. He was incapable of reaching the oratorical
heights of Pitt, Grey, and Canning, and occasionally this left him bereft of weapons to
persuade, and his listeners feeling short-changed. Indeed, it usually took great
provocation for him to abandon the pursuit of agreement and compromise in any
forum, saving the period in the early 1820s when under the pressure of coping with a
petulant monarch, and the final illness and death of his beloved first wife, he became uncharacteristically fractious in Cabinet. Otherwise, when he did impose his own views, his manner was usually courteous and apologetic. There was steel there, as those who pushed him past the limit discovered, but it was very well concealed. The diarists of the time picked up only on the characteristics normally on display, and commented unfavourably on the Prime Minister’s ‘weaknesses’. These observers rarely if ever evinced much curiosity as to why his government survived and even flourished for so long, in contrast to those before and afterwards, and whether this might owe something to unconsidered strengths of its leader. Inevitably, this source material produced by the likes of Greville and Hobhouse, has contributed a great deal to negative views of Lord Liverpool.

However, the major reason why Lord Liverpool’s reputation does not stand higher in the eyes of historians, a majority of whom seem to have been of the Whig persuasion, is that he was on the ‘wrong’ side in two great political debates of his age, and was successful in obstructing for a time, the measures which they have regarded as part of the inevitable march of history. This is also Disraeli’s most substantial criticism. Lord Liverpool was opposed to parliamentary reform, and to emancipation of Roman Catholics, (i.e. to allowing Roman Catholics to be elected to parliament, and to fill senior official positions), both of which occurred quite quickly after his removal from the scene by illness. Strangely, many of those who have seen him as of little consequence in other things have been willing enough to concede him a major influence in making his writ run in these areas, and in that at least they have been right. (Castlereigh and Canning were also opposed to parliamentary reform, but followed William Pitt as strong supporters of emancipation, yet neither was able to make headway.)

As regards parliamentary reform, from our standpoint with the House of Commons elected by universal adult suffrage, with a secret ballot and constituencies of near uniform size, it seems unarguable that anyone preventing progress towards this equitable situation must have been wrong-headed. Of course, we are mainly convinced that we have a fully realised democracy and that this is the only acceptable form of government, even if we do sometimes bemoan aspects of its working, but such was certainly not the prevailing view amongst what might be termed the thinking and educated classes in the early 19th century. The balanced system which had evolved, (and which was seen as close to perfect by such luminaries as Edmund Burke, and many of the framers of the American constitution,
who took much from it, while addressing what they saw as weaknesses), shared responsibility between a still influential king, and a legislature populated by the great landowners, (mainly peers), the lesser landowners, and other commercial interests in the kingdom. Only those who had a financial stake in the country were thought then to have a right to a say in its government, and the idea that a contribution of labour could be such a stake was not accepted by many, save a few radicals. That is not to say that governments of the time thought they could act only in the interests of the financial stake-holders. They were well aware that a failure to take any account of the needs of the majority could have dire consequences. The French Revolution was constantly in the minds of the governing class in the early 19th century, not least because some like Lord Liverpool and his ministerial colleague, William Huskisson, had actually been in Paris to witness its early stages. However, this was seen as a matter of what governments did rather than how they were chosen and Lord Liverpool was firmly in the mainstream in considering that the system then operating, with its pocket boroughs and limited franchises, was justifiable, because it provided the right sort of membership for the House of Commons. As we shall see he took the view that agitation for parliamentary reform was almost entirely a symptom of economic hardship, to be countered by firm application of the law, tempered only by such relief as could be afforded by very limited financial and economic measures.

Lord Grey who eventually presided over the first great measure of parliamentary reform did not actually disagree with Lord Liverpool on the fundamental point that the property owning classes should govern, certainly in his later years. Where the two differed was in the Whig leader’s conviction that the middle classes had to be enfranchised and associated with their social superiors, because he thought that otherwise, they would give leadership to the lower classes, as was perceived to have happened in France. In his mind, that was a recipe for revolution leading either to democracy, which he feared as much as his political adversary or to the rise of a populist autocrat like Napoleon. It can be argued that Lord Grey and his followers were right, though he would probably have been dismayed if vouchsafed knowledge of the eventual consequences of his beginning the process of reform, namely the same democracy that he had sought to forestall. However, the opposing position taken by Lord Liverpool of not even wanting to start down this road for fear of being unable to apply a brake was perhaps as logical. Nonetheless, the latter has suffered the fate of all conservatives opposed to a reform which is eventually made, namely the accusation of being reactionary and lacking in vision.
As regards Roman Catholic emancipation, the debate revolved largely around its consequences for Ireland. A minority of senior politicians would at that time have opposed the extension of the rights of Roman Catholics in England, though opinions were more evenly divided on whether similar relief should be granted in Ireland. Both Kings of the period found the idea repugnant, not least because of the potential effects of emancipation on the rights and privileges of the Anglican Church, which each of them took a coronation oath to safeguard. It is also likely that a majority of the population, especially those without the right to vote, remained vigorously anti-Catholic, as shown graphically by the Gordon Riots of June 1780 when, after days of complete disorder in London, the toll was 300 protesters killed by bullets, sabres, fire, and the hangman’s noose, and less violently by enthusiastic celebration every year of ‘protestant’ festivals like Queen Elizabeth’s birthday and the commemorations of 5th November, (the date which had seen both the thwarting of the plot of Guy Fawkes in 1605, and the landing of William of Orange at Torbay in 1688). Two of Lord Liverpool's predecessors, (Pitt and Grenville) had tried to press ahead with emancipation bills, but had been thwarted by the hostility of the King and the Upper House.

In this situation it had become accepted that government’s would have to take an ostensibly neutral line; the decision which most exasperated Disraeli. Members of the Cabinet were allowed to support either side when the issue was raised, and no government proposal was brought forward. When Lord Liverpool took office in 1812, he simply continued with this compromise. In practice this guaranteed that the status quo would be preserved, which was precisely the outcome desired by Lord Liverpool, since a majority in the House of Lords were as much against Roman Catholic emancipation as the monarch, and both could only have been brought to acquiesce by the strongest government pressure, as indeed was eventually to happen in 1829. Lord Liverpool hardly wavered from the ‘protestant’ view that emancipation meant the eventual loss of Ireland to the United Kingdom, because the majority Roman Catholic population, aristocrats and gentry as well as poor agricultural labourers, were largely committed to Irish independence. Though he grew to accept that emancipation would have to be conceded sooner or later, because the costs of resistance to increasing agitation would become too great an imposition on the rest of the country, he did not think that point had been reached in the mid-1820s, and was adamant in refusing to lead a government which brought in such a measure. Everything changed when he left office; agitation orchestrated by Daniel O’Connell mounted in Ireland, and the nerve of ‘Protestants’ like Wellington and Peel failed in the absence of Lord
Liverpool's leadership. Within two years Roman Catholic emancipation had been conceded, though as Lord Liverpool had predicted, any reduction of strife in Ireland was short-lived.

To the criticism of Lord Liverpool's entrenched positions on parliamentary reform and Catholic Emancipation, many historians on the left of the political spectrum have added condemnation of his government's failure to deal adequately with the difficult economic and social conditions which dominated the years after the conclusion of the wars with France in 1815. The issue is a subject for full discussion later, and the proposition I offer then for debate accepts that valid criticisms can be made, but that wholesale condemnation is simplistic and unfair, because there was no magic bullet. The combination of reduced demand due to the end of hostilities, and the disruption caused by industrialisation, (and also on-going agricultural 'improvement'), was bound to lead to a period of economic turmoil accompanied by social unrest. Lord Liverpool and his colleagues can be censured for failing to engage in any way with many blameless workers and their families, who bore the brunt of the resulting hardship, but they seem to have been largely correct otherwise in their responses, however heartless and repressive they sometimes appeared to be. The context was the then ever-present fear of a re-run of the French Revolution, a threat thought real by the great French analyst of this period of British history, Halévy, and the historian of the working class, Thompson. Obviously the nation's eventual emergence intact from the toils, into the boom conditions of the early 1820s, represented some vindication for the government, but opposing arguments can be focussed on the time taken and the price paid.

So far, I have raised a number of questions about the policies of Lord Liverpool's government in peace and war, and about the extent to which the leader should be held responsible for the outcomes, whether successful or not. I have probably conveyed a fair idea of my views on these matters already, but the chapters which follow will explore the issues in some depth. The book is not a biography, though it begins with two chapters which summarise Lord Liverpool's life and career chronologically, and a third which looks at how his persona, world view, and life-style influenced his exercise of power. It is indeed to be hoped that eventually, a political historian will process all the available information, and produce the satisfactory account of Lord Liverpool's life which does not yet exist. The period during which he presided over the British government saw momentous events and changes, and it is
unfortunate that he has attracted so little attention, while others like Pitt and Peel have had their careers and characters analysed over and over again.

In later chapters, I focus on different aspects of government and attempt to weigh Lord Liverpool’s impact on those. I have tried to assess the ‘value added’ by my subject where other notable figures also had responsibilities. I think that Lord Liverpool’s contributions fall into three categories. The first is easily over-looked, but was perhaps the most important, namely his general supervision of the activities of government on a day to day basis, rarely imposing his wishes on senior colleagues, but briefing, questioning, and advising, especially on political implications. There is little doubt that this activity was by far the most time-consuming and exhausting, as it required the premier to read masses of official papers, and to write many letters, apart from simply talking to colleagues and junior office-holders. Secondly, he had a role in the development of future policy sometimes dominant, sometimes relatively minor, and thirdly, almost always, a key role in implementation of changes which often required him to win arguments with the King, in Cabinet and in Parliament, by exerting authority, which was partly personal and partly conferred by his office. When I consider foreign policy I will highlight the dramatic changes which accompanied the replacement of Castlereigh by Canning as Foreign Secretary. There have been recent attempts to stress continuities, but I do not find them convincing. However, I do suggest that the fault line would have been even more abrupt had it not been for the moderating influence of a Prime Minister who was never as reactionary as Lord Castlereigh, and probably not as broadly liberal, and certainly not as impulsive, as George Canning. As regards implementation, Canning himself and his somewhat partisan biographer, Temperley, were willing to acknowledge that the great Foreign Secretary would have achieved much less without the premier’s steadfast support.

I consider in a similar way war and military policy, which requires me to give some attention to the often fractious dealings between Lord Liverpool and the Duke of Wellington. I will look closely at Lord Liverpool’s role in the implementation of a more coherent British strategy during the later stages of the Napoleonic War. In the field of home affairs and Irish policy which involved Lord Liverpool primarily with Lord Sidmouth and Robert Peel, I find him to have been a calming influence, steadying the former on a few occasions, and restraining the impetuosity of the latter. Financial policy is of particular interest, not least because so few seem to give enough weight to how difficult the British situation was by 1815, and here the key working relationship was probably with William Huskisson, rather than either of Lord
Liverpool's Chancellors of the Exchequer, the less than competent Nicholas Vansittart, and his indolent, if more able, successor, Frederic Robinson. There is incontrovertible evidence that as First Lord of the Treasury, Lord Liverpool, rather than any of the aforementioned, directed financial and economic policy, and so was required to take the lead, instead of being able to work off the ideas of others. I discuss the extent to which this contributed to the less than brilliant conduct of these matters in the years after Waterloo, but also point out that similar arrangements worked well enough in the 1820s.

There has been some acknowledgement, even from those historians who make a low estimation of his qualities that Lord Liverpool was a skilful politician. They can hardly do otherwise given the fact that he maintained his administration in power for almost fifteen years, without what would now be seen as the indispensable support of a majority party in the House of Commons. The contrast with the instability before, and after, his premiership is obvious, though the picture is obscured in some accounts by the tendency to project backwards from the tumultuous decade following Lord Liverpool’s resignation, portraying each Cabinet dispute in the 1820s as a major crisis, and harbinger of party realignments. This ground is covered in a chapter dealing with the political realities of Lord Liverpool’s premiership. Inevitably the subject requires consideration of his often fraught interactions with George IV, who was Prince Regent, then King throughout the period, and I look at how the deterioration in their working relationship played an important role in a wider constitutional development, the erosion of monarchical power. King George IV undoubtedly wanted to dismiss his Prime Minister in the early 1820s, but was unable to find a way of doing so. In a manner unprecedented until then, Lord Liverpool refused to depart voluntarily, even when the King’s lack of confidence in him was publicly demonstrated. Another major royal setback over Canning’s employment followed soon after, and the combined effect was to reduce permanently the political influence wielded by our monarchs.

I end the book with a fairly brief overall assessment of Lord Liverpool’s performance as Prime Minister, and an attempt to rate him in absolute terms and in comparison with some of his peers. The format I have chosen does make for some repetition between the narrative of the early chapters and the considerations of policies and personalities which come later but I have tried to reduce the instances to a minimum. Rather than interrupting the flow of the book with specific references for statements made, de rigueur for academic texts, I have removed them all, but mention some key
references in the same way as earlier in this chapter, and of course give a full listing of those consulted, at the end of the book. I have considered information from any source accessible to me, whether primary or secondary, but have not embarked on a quest to find new facts. My purpose was re-appraisal rather than discovery. As a final introductory comment, it is perhaps worth emphasising that although the letters and other papers attributable to the statesmen to be encountered in succeeding chapters constitute a large and useful body of information, there are significant gaps as compared with the evidence available to the biographers of contemporary figures. For example, only one front-line member of a government during the first third of the 19th century produced either diaries or memoirs, (Lord Brougham, Lord Chancellor in Grey’s government); although such enterprises can be self-serving (as were Brougham’s), they would have provided more evidence of the thinking and deeper philosophy which underlay decisions, and first-hand accounts of key Cabinet meetings. There is inevitably more conjecture in this book than would be necessary or justifiable if its subject had lived in modern times.
2. The Path to the Premiership, 1770-1812

2.1. Antecedents, Youth, and Apprenticeship

The road to national prominence followed by the Jenkinsons mirrored that of other families that reached the top in the 18th century, like the Pitts, Foxes and Grenvilles. Accumulation of money, by various means, and land, allowed able scions to make their way onto the political stage, and office and titles followed. The Whig oligarchy was open to those of merit, always provided that there was money in the background. Jenkinsons had been traders in Bristol in the 16th century but a century later the family had acquired lands in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, including the estate of Hawkesbury in the latter county, and a barony, so had ascended to the gentry. They had also taken some steps towards national prominence, providing members of parliament, army officers, and a bishop, but none became a real power in the land before the father of our subject, born son of a colonel, and nephew of a baronet, in 1727. Charles Jenkinson, (Figure 1), has not enjoyed a good press, and he does not seem to have been admired or liked by most of those who came into contact with him, but he certainly raised the status of his family. His path to the upper levels of government was neither quick nor easy; no doubt, an extra motivation for his efforts to ensure the smoother progress of his elder son’s career.

All that Charles Jenkinson achieved depended on the contact with King George III which he made through a position as private secretary to Lord Bute. The first Scottish Prime Minister of the United Kingdom rose spectacularly from Prince’s tutor to the chief office when the young King, followed his accession in 1860, by engineering the dismissals of his inherited Whig ministers, especially the elder William Pitt and the Duke of Newcastle. As a result of these machinations, which Lord Bute rather than the King was presumed to have orchestrated, the new Prime Minister attracted intense hostility from the displaced leaders, and added to his unpopularity with them and much of the country at large, by his determined pursuit of peace, to end the military successful but expensive Seven Years War. Undoubtedly some of this unpopularity rubbed off on his secretary, and the fact that Jenkinson quickly made himself useful to the King and became known as a faithful ‘King’s servant’ did not help his reputation with those political figures who claimed to be resistant to royal influence. However, he was set on the path he followed for the next 40 years; his career progressed to junior ministerial office as a member of the Treasury Board under Lord North in the 1770s, and he finally reached the Cabinet as President of the
Board of Trade and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in 1786 under William Pitt the Younger. He retained the positions until 1803, but there remained no doubt that he was the King’s man, and not Pitt’s. (It is unfortunate that Charles Jenkinson, whose career was at the very least, interesting, lacks a modern biographer.)

One reason for his attracting dislike was his acquisitiveness. He collected sinecures, becoming Master of the Mint, (then a lucrative position which imposed few demands on its occupant, though typically, Jenkinson took sufficient interest to make himself a recognised expert on the coinage, and authored books on the subject), Auditor of Accounts to the Queen Dowager, Irish Clerk of the Pells, and Collector of Customs Inward. Each position was worth a few thousand pounds per annum, in total well over £10000; (a multiplier of at least 60 is required to give any idea of present day equivalence). In 1786 he was ennobled as Lord Hawkesbury; three years later the family baronetcy and the Hawkesbury estate came into his hands by inheritance; finally in 1796 he was advanced to Earl of Liverpool, choosing the name of the great port because of his close contacts with commercial interests there. So, added to the dislike engendered by his early involvements with Bute and the King, was envy of the success of an upstart, not least because he was rated by political insiders as no better than reasonably competent, even if undoubtedly diligent. Indeed, his detractors pointed to unattractive personal characteristics, citing secretiveness, a lack of tact, and rampant snobbery. However, with his position, wealth, and proximity to the King, he could not be ignored by the time his elder son embarked on a political career in 1791, and for the remaining fifteen years of his life he exerted every shred of the considerable influence he possessed, to further that career.

In 1769 Charles Jenkinson had married Amelia, daughter of a former Indian administrator, William Watts. Amelia brought money to the marriage, and to her first, and as it transpired only, son Robert born on 7th June 1770, an infusion of native Indian blood because her mother was Eurasian. This blood-line almost certainly makes Robert, who was also given the name of the then baronet in the family, his uncle, Banks, unique amongst Prime Ministers, before or since, but perhaps surprisingly, it attracted no prejudice. The practice of marrying local women was quite common amongst the British rulers of India, who encountered few eligible Europeans during long tours of duty, and their progeny were accepted without question into the upper ranks of society. Amelia did not long survive her son’s birth, dying on the journey to convalesce at Hawkesbury. Charles Jenkinson did marry again, to Catherine Bishopp, widow and daughter of baronets, fathering another son and a
daughter, but not till twelve years after his first wife’s death and very shortly after that, Robert entered Charterhouse School as a boarder. It has been suggested that his early upbringing as a motherless, only child, had something to do with the development of a self-contained, withdrawn personality but as these were also characteristics of his father, either heredity or paternal example could also have played a part.

Surviving letters make it clear that the real burden of his childhood could have been the strength of his father’s ambitions for him, had he not shared them. Thus a parental letter dispatched to him in his early days at Charterhouse deals in detail with his academic strengths and weaknesses, warns him off the frivolity of novels, and then in tones appropriate to a twenty-year-old libertine, rather than a serious-minded fourteen-year-old, steers him away from ‘improper manners and tastes’. The positive aspect of this rather suffocating concern seems to have been a close attention to the detail of his education which ensured that Robert’s knowledge was much broader than that of a typical student by the time he went to Oxford University as a 17-year-old, in 1787. More surprisingly in the light of his later unassuming persona, he seems then to have had more than a touch of youthful arrogance in displaying this knowledge in high company, at least according to the not wholly unbiased Marchioness of Stafford who wrote comparing him unfavourably with the ‘paragon’ who was her own son, Granville Leveson Gower, (later a distinguished diplomat). Robert spent two years at Oxford, returning after a visit to France during which he witnessed the fall of the Bastille, to receive his MA degree in 1790, without as a peer’s son having had to undergo anything as common as examinations. Although he formed friendships at Oxford, not least with George Canning, the university experience seems to have had less impact on him than on many of his contemporaries, and the connection was of little importance to him in later life, judging by his reluctance to involve himself in university politics when the influence of a Prime Minister would have made a difference.

With the aid of his father’s contacts and money, Robert was elected to the House of Commons (for two seats, Appleby and Rye, taking up the latter) in the General Election of 1790, but since he was still under age it might have provoked controversy if he had attended immediately. Discretion left him free to travel more widely on the continent, to Italy by way of Holland and down the Rhine, nourishing what were to be lifelong classical and artistic interests, before he returned to begin his political career. His maiden speech was made in defence of William Pitt’s government during a
debate on the Orchakov affair, an incident which reflected little credit on Pitt and cost him the resignation of his Foreign Secretary, the Marquis of Carmarthen (later, Duke of Leeds), when Britain had to back down from injudicious threats against Russia over the occupation of a Turkish fortress. However, Robert’s speech was widely acclaimed for its scope and manner of delivery, not least by the Prime Minister, though in a way that he was occasionally to repeat in his future career, the debutant went a bit too far in stating that ‘the strength and influence of France are at an end’ as a result of the early stages of the revolution, and ‘that the present era is not calculated for invasion or conquests’. These words had a hollow ring a few years later and were not forgotten by opponents or indeed later traducers of his reputation. (He was not alone in misjudgement as William Pitt was guilty of similar imprudent remarks at this time.) Shortly afterwards, Robert made another speech which, if much remembered, would have done even less for his long term reputation, since he defended some aspects of the slave trade. Perhaps this dubious enterprise shows the extent to which he was still dominated by his father, who may or may not have been directly involved in the trade, but certainly had associates in Liverpool who were. At any rate, Robert soon changed his alignment on the issue, and began to give voice to strong abolitionist sentiments.

After his mainly successful beginnings in parliament, which may have conveyed a rather false impression of youthful self-confidence, Robert spent the summer recess of 1792 in the army camps of the European forces preparing to invade France to suppress the revolution. He met the Commander in Chief, the Duke of Brunswick, and in letters home, expressed admiration for the quality of the invading armies, which proved ill-founded if later events are taken as a measure, mixed with some shrewd assessments of the relative merits of the Austrian and Prussian forces. Unfortunately, his judgement deserted him again somewhat when he enthusiastically welcomed the Duke’s manifesto for the French people, now viewed as unnecessarily provocative, and his youthful indiscretions, in the political sphere, continued with a bellicose speech to the next session of parliament in which he recommended an immediate march on Paris. This appeared foolish when soon afterwards the French armies prevailed over the allied forces, and almost 20 years later, an easy response to government difficulties in the Peninsular campaign was to refer sarcastically, if usually sotto voce, to the need for a march on Paris. There can be no doubt that Robert learnt about the dangers of rushing to judgement from these episodes in his early career, but he never wholly shed a tendency to commit himself too far in the heat of debate. Nonetheless, he was viewed as highly promising by William Pitt, even
if mutual respect never developed into the sort of close friendships formed by his more dazzling university friend, Canning, or even Castlereigh, with the premier. The favour of the Prime Minister, together no doubt with his father’s influence with the King, brought him into the government in 1793, at the age of 23, as a member of the Indian Board of Control. This was not a very onerous position, as the power in the Indian administration was wielded exclusively by the then Home Secretary, Henry Dundas, but it was still very early recognition.

By this time, Britain had entered the war against revolutionary France, and invasion fears prompted an expansion of the militia. Robert, as a patriotic and well-to-do Member of Parliament for a nearby constituency, was an obvious choice as Colonel of a Kentish militia regiment, and though Canning, when refusing to become one of his officers, characterised his activities as playing at soldiering, they were a large part of his life for the next few years. In 1796 he went with his unit to Scotland for several months and while there, he had to provide a guard of honour for the funeral in Dumfries of Robert Burns, who died a government excise man, and even penned some patriotic verse in his last years. Nonetheless, it must be assumed that the first Conservative Prime Minister saw some irony later in life in having paid formal respects to a great radical poet. It is doubtful whether the militia would have given a very good account of themselves if a substantial French army had ever got ashore, not least because of a lack of weaponry, but the experience gained by Robert added to that obtained in the camps of the European armies will have been of some value to a future Secretary of State for War. The main event of this period of Robert’s life was his marriage in March 1795 to Louisa Hervey. Her father was the Earl of Bristol, who was also a bishop, but the family was neither wealthy nor known for mental stability. Probably for these reasons, Robert’s father mounted a strong and prolonged opposition to the match, and it took the best efforts of George Canning, William Pitt, and eventually the King, to persuade him to give his blessing, and provide the couple with the wherewithal to set up an appropriate household. The marriage, though childless, seems to have brought contentment to both parties over 25 years. It is at first sight strange, given Lord Liverpool’s large written output, that there are no surviving letters to or from his wife, to shed light on his personal feelings, but he and his wife were rarely separated for more than a day or two, so formed no habit of writing to each other.

On his father’s receipt of an earldom, Robert became known as Lord Hawkesbury, but since it was only a courtesy title, remained in the House of Commons, and in the
same year, 1796 he was promoted in the government to be Master of the Mint and a member of the Privy Council. His responsibilities remained light, and he had virtually nothing to do with the rather unsuccessful pursuit of the war with France. Although critical of some military decisions in private letters, discretion prevented him from taking sides openly in the long-running dispute between Dundas and the Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville, as to whether Britain should make war at sea and capture the colonies of France and her allies, the traditional 'blue water' policy, favoured by Dundas, or build European alliances and engage actively on the continent. Prime Minister Pitt largely preferred the latter course, propounded strongly by Grenville, but was unable or unwilling to exert decisive influence. Financial matters and the Irish situation demanded most of his attention, while his long years in office had taken a toll of his health and stamina. As a result, policy oscillated and military affairs did not prosper, in spite of a number of naval victories. It was Ireland rather than the uneven conduct of the war which brought down the government. A rebellion, accompanied by French attempts at invasion, in 1798, convinced Pitt that Ireland had to be brought under closer control and that this would be best achieved by suppressing its parliament in favour of Irish representation in the British Parliament in London, following the model of the so-called parliamentary union with Scotland in 1707. Unsurprisingly, many in the Irish parliament were not enthusiastic about voting for their own abolition, nor were the owners of pocket boroughs and other electoral interests in Ireland keen to lose their property, but the measure was pushed through the British Parliament easily enough, and by a combination of persuasion and bribery, through the Irish parliament at the second attempt, with the young Robert Stewart, later Lord Castlereagh playing a key role as Irish Secretary.

One inducement used to obtain Irish acquiescence was the suggestion that Catholic Emancipation would be granted in the near future, so that Parliament and other senior offices would be open to those of the majority faith in Ireland. Of course any gain for Roman Catholics could only mean a loss for the established Anglican Church, and Pitt must have realised that it would be difficult to get the King to accept this. Yet the Prime Minister proceeded in such an inept way that he almost guaranteed extreme royal hostility, and the contrast with his normal political skill has even led to suggestions that he was looking for an excuse to resign so that if the war had to be brought to an end, the responsibility would not be his, or more creditably, because he thought peace negotiations would be easier in his absence. Exhaustion and poor health are more likely explanations. At any rate Pitt made no effort to prepare the ground with the King before holding Cabinet discussions on the matter;
the content of proposed legislation was duly leaked to the King by the hostile Lord Chancellor, Lord Loughborough, so it seemed to the former that Pitt was going behind his back. Even when the King then made clear his total opposition to Catholic Emancipation in conversations with senior ministers like Dundas, Pitt still failed to engage with his royal master. For a Prime Minister whose whole career had been built on royal support, the outcome was inevitable and he resigned in March 1801.

Replacement of the government presented a serious problem because apart from the ‘King’s men’ and the followers of Pitt, the only other substantial grouping in the House of Commons, was the Whigs. They had been discredited by their ‘unpatriotic’ opposition to the war, and their leader, Charles James Fox, was held responsible by the King, for this and for debauching his son, George, the heir to the throne. Pitt found a way out of the impasse by arranging for his then close friend, Henry Addington, the Speaker of the House of Commons, to take over as Prime Minister, and seems to have intended that, apart from his own retirement, the government should continue much as before. However his senior colleagues, including Dundas and Grenville, who had been respectively War and Foreign Secretaries, refused to accept office under Addington, and others more junior, especially Canning, pursued a course of active hostility to the new premier. A weak Treasury (government) bench in the House of Commons was inevitable, but the wholesale retirements meant opportunities for some, and the first of Addington’s appointments was that of Lord Hawkesbury as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. At the age of 30 his career at the highest level had begun.

2.2. Senior Office under Addington and Pitt

One of Pitt's legacies to the new government was a memorandum setting out possible peace terms, and this served as a template for the new Foreign Secretary, who also had access to advice from his predecessor, Lord Grenville, and from William Pitt, as he settled into his new position. The peace negotiations were handled mainly by experienced envoys sent to France, firstly Lord Malmesbury, and later, Lord Cornwallis, but Lord Hawkesbury was responsible for putting together a list of British requirements and aspirations and getting the agreement of the Cabinet to those and in future, to any resulting agreement. Neither the government, nor indeed Pitt, were under any illusions that the military situation would allow Britain to obtain terms bearing much resemblance to the war objectives formulated eight years earlier at the outset of the struggle, and an earlier peace agreement between France and
Austria dictated by Napoleon at Lunneville was generally accepted as having settled the outcome on the continent, in France’s favour. Britain wished to ensure that Egypt was evacuated by France, though as negotiations began, news came through that General Abercrombie’s victory at Alexandria had shattered the French army there anyway, and that Holland and the Kingdom of Naples, (Southern Italy), remained free of French influence. In return Britain was willing to sacrifice almost all the colonial gains made during the war with the exception of the Cape of Good Hope (later exchanged for Trinidad), Ceylon, and Cochin. Essentially, these became the terms of the preliminary agreement signed in London in the autumn of 1801, though Napoleon, exploiting the mounting pressure for peace in Britain, was able to extract additional concessions in the final Treaty of Amiens agreed in the spring of 1802, not least a requirement for a British evacuation of Malta. Hawkesbury defended the Treaty in the House of Commons, and in spite of the less than glorious terms had an easy task, since there was universal acceptance that the country needed a respite, even if in Richard Sheridan’s words ‘it was a Peace everyone was glad of but no-one was proud of’.

The truth of Sheridan’s epigram was borne out by the ensuing wild celebrations in the country at large, and many of the social elite set out to visit Paris; Charles James Fox was one, and his trip assumed some of the trappings of a state visit. Things soon began to go wrong. Scurrilous reports of Napoleon’s activities appeared in the British press, the French envoy, Otto complained, and Hawkesbury had to write to him pointing out that the government did not control the press, but in turn protesting about an incendiary article in the Paris newspaper ‘Moniteur’ thought to have been written by Napoleon himself. Then there came demands from Paris that French émigrés should be banished from England, while negotiations to normalise trade between the two countries got nowhere. Shortly afterwards Napoleon annexed Piedmont, Palma, Piacenza and Elba to his puppet Italian state, and dissolved the constitutions of Holland and Switzerland, installing compliant regimes. Without a continental ally, Britain was powerless to intervene, and instead resorted to dubious attempts to bribe members of Bonaparte’s family to support permanent British occupation of Malta. Eventually, a new British envoy, Lord Whitworth, was sent to Paris to make a final effort to stabilise the situation and he offered recognition of French encroachments in Italy in return for French recognition of British occupation of Malta, but Napoleon with his Eastern ambitions still very much in mind, refused to accept the deal. So in May 1803, Whitworth left Paris, and war recommenced, after a fourteen month interlude. During a set-piece debate in the House of Commons, the government was criticised
for failing to keep parliament fully informed, for weakness in negotiations with France, and for beginning to disarm. The last of these charges was especially unfair, because in spite of the national euphoria which had surrounded the peace agreement, the government had made only a few token reductions to the army and navy, not the normal response of Britain to the end of a war, and had already begun to reverse even those measures. Actually, Fox was fairly half-hearted in his criticism because he feared Addington’s replacement by Pitt, while Pitt was still supportive, so a large government majority was obtained, (398-67), and the survival of Addington’s government seemed assured. However, Pitt nagged incessantly by Canning, moved towards opposition, and he, along with Grenville, attacked the government a few weeks later, mainly on financial grounds. Though Pitt was charged with being ‘willing to wound but not to strike’, and given pause for thought by a surprisingly large margin of defeat, (56-333), the writing was on the wall for Addington’s government.

It is unlikely that any Foreign Secretary could enhance his reputation if required to take responsibility for a peace which ends an unsuccessful war, and then to watch French encroachments with no power to intervene, but there are indications that Hawkesbury was out of his depth in such a role at this early stage of his career. Foreign Secretaries in the 19th century have usually been judged by the quality of the long, detailed, and fairly frequent communications which instructed ambassadors and envoys how to proceed, while seeking to keep them informed of the wider picture. The documents were customarily seen by the King and the premier, prior to dispatch, and the former at least seems to have been unimpressed by Hawkesbury’s early efforts. Perhaps he was making a slightly unfair comparison between the output of the long-serving, scholarly Grenville, and the work of a neophyte, and soon enough he became a staunch advocate for Hawkesbury when his career as a minister seemed to be under threat, but imputations of indecisiveness and limited understanding ring true. Certainly Hawkesbury’s handling of the admittedly problematic relationship with France before the war resumed cannot have inspired much confidence. It is difficult to evaluate Addington’s decision to move Hawkesbury into the House of Lords by issuing a Writ of Acceleration, which converted his courtesy title into a substantive barony, late in 1803. The ostensible reasons were to allow the new peer to confront directly his immediate predecessor as Foreign Secretary, Lord Grenville, and to give more effective leadership generally for the government in the Upper House, but it is not impossible that transfer to another office might have followed even if Addington had remained in power. Hawkesbury’s father was by then in his early seventies and frail, so it probably seemed that Hawkesbury
would soon have to leave the House of Commons anyway, but that in itself was not a reason for expediting the matter. Certainly that father, who in fact lived for another six years, saw the move as damaging to his son’s career, and Hawkesbury himself complied reluctantly.

Addington battled on, still refusing to accept that the resumption of the war had made the end of his ministry inevitable, boosted by the parliamentary victories referred to above, but support in parliament gradually leaked away. Such was Pitt’s residual prestige that a war-time government without him seemed unthinkable to most. He could probably have returned to office even sooner than he did, had he not been embarrassed by the prospect of destroying a government which was largely a personal creation. When these scruples were overcome, his normal imperiousness returned, and further delays arose from his refusal to consider compromises which would have seen him sharing power with either Addington or Fox. However, it became widely known that he was again available for office, and the government’s majority in the House of Commons quickly dropped to twenty, at which point Addington’s ministers prevailed on the premier to resign. Reluctantly, the King sent for Pitt who intimated that he wished to form a broad based government including Fox and Grenville. Perhaps he was sincere, but such an arrangement could only have worked if he had been willing to allow a more or less independent sphere of influence to his rival, a concession he seemed already to have ruled out; power rather than policies had always been the greatest issue between them, as each regarded himself as a Whig, albeit that their views had diverged after the French Revolution. At any rate the King demurred at the idea of Fox in government, though he was to accept him less than two years later. Pitt cannot have been at his most persuasive, though the fragility of the King’s mental health was an obvious inhibition. He was probably content with the outcome, though shaken when Grenville refused to serve without his new ally, Fox.

If a broad based government had been formed, it is possible that Lord Hawkesbury would have paid a full price for what was certainly seen by some of Pitt’s followers as an undistinguished term as Foreign Secretary. In fact, Pitt had not lost faith in Hawkesbury, and the talent actually at his disposal was so limited that no-one of competence could be overlooked. However, Pitt had his own ideas on the new continental coalition he wished to form, and how to obtain it, so intended to be his own Foreign Secretary de facto, and was content to employ near ciphers in that role, (first Lord Harrowby, then Lord Mulgrave). Hawkesbury had to move and was offered
firstly the position of Secretary for War and Colonies, and then at the insistence of the King, that of Home Secretary, and though reluctant, he again gave way and accepted the latter offer. There was a serious hiccup when Canning stated in parliament that he had only accepted the second position in the foreign office because Hawkesbury had been transferred, and as he implied, demoted, but Pitt smoothed this over by offering to dismiss Canning, probably judging that Hawkesbury, having had his hurt feelings assuaged, was very unlikely to insist, and he didn’t. Unsurprisingly, relations between the two university friends remained distant for some years afterwards. Hawkesbury may have found it difficult enough to forgive Canning’s indiscretion, but Canning almost certainly found it much harder to forget that he owed his continuance in office to his erstwhile friend’s charity.

A Home Secretary had broader responsibilities than now, when the focus is so much on law and order, since he dealt also with Ireland and home defence, and acted as a major channel of communication between the government and the King. Indeed, a Home Secretary usually had more contact with the King than any other minister, including the premier, and a good relationship was a vital building block for a lasting administration. Hawkesbury rebuilt his reputation in this period when as well as performing his ministerial duties he continued as government leader in the House of Lords. Especially in time of war, competent administration was the main requirement and to this his talents were well suited. The very fact that peace with France had been tried but found to be impossible to sustain meant that the country was more united than in the 1790s, and there was adequate food and work in the industrial areas, so political agitation was minimal for a year or two after war resumed. Hawkesbury’s main preoccupations were with planning to resist a potential French invasion, a very real threat given the assembling of boats at Boulogne, and the situation in Ireland where Daniel O’Connell was beginning his career as a political activist. The question of Catholic Emancipation remained near the forefront though Pitt had pledged to take no action, and in a debate in May 1805 Hawkesbury made clear his own view that if the Anglican religion was prescribed for the King, then it had to be the same for his ministers, advisers and MPs; a harder attitude than many who opposed change only on the temporary grounds that it would not be appropriate to legislate in time of war, and in opposition to the King’s views.

The government was generally perceived as weak, not least because of Pitt’s poor health, but Hawkesbury did manage to bring about a rapprochement between the Prime Minister and his predecessor, Henry Addington which resulted in the latter
entering the government along with some of his followers. This is probably the first clear example of Hawkesbury’s exercise of the political nous and conciliation skills which did so much to maintain stable government later. Addington assumed the largely honorific office of Lord President of the Council and moved to the House of Lords as Viscount Sidmouth, but Hawkesbury’s proposal to cement the rapprochement (and reduce his own heavy work-load) by surrendering to the ex-Prime Minister the government leadership in that house was swiftly vetoed by Pitt. In the event, the accession of strength to the government was almost immediately followed by a much greater loss. Henry Dundas, raised to the peerage as 1st Viscount Melville in 1802, had long been indispensable to Pitt as a ‘man of business’ who got things done, and had resumed this role in the new government along with the responsibilities of 1st Lord of the Admiralty. He was brought down by a parliamentary investigation of naval accounts during Pitt’s previous administration, when he had held the office of Treasurer of the Navy. The enquiry reported that his assistant in the role was guilty of irregular financial dealings, and that the possibility that Dundas had known what was going on, could not be discounted. The First Lord of the Admiralty had to resign, and though eventually cleared of all but a technical offence (due to ignorance), he had by then undergone impeachment and trial before the House of Lords. His career as a minister never resumed, though he was offered but refused an earldom a few years later. Initially, Pitt wanted Hawkesbury to replace Dundas, but the post was for some rather obscure reason not thought compatible with leading the House of Lords, so he remained Home Secretary, and the retired admiral Sir Charles Middleton, Lord Barham, became First Lord, with happy results since he successfully oversaw the naval campaign leading to the Battle of Trafalgar in the months ahead. However Pitt’s desperate attempts to save Dundas cost the government the support of Lord Sidmout and his supporters in the House of Commons, so the ailing premier was left even weaker in parliament than before. By the autumn of 1805 much depended on the military success of Pitt’s new coalition involving Russia, and Austria with the usual British financial support, but the French armies massed on the channel coast, while Napoleon had contemplated invasion, were marched eastwards, and the French Emperor dismantled the coalition by crushing the Austrian and Russian forces at Ulm and Austerlitz. Certainly the Battle of Trafalgar at much the same time removed all threat of French invasion, but the overwhelming national mood was gloomy, with the death of Nelson overshadowing the victory. Whether Pitt ever referred to the rolling up of the map of Europe may be doubted, but his fragile health deteriorated further and he died in January 1806 at the age of 46. His early death may have been attributable in part to the stress and
grinding workload of over twenty years in the highest office, and his over-indulgence in alcohol, but many of his forbears had been similarly short-lived. His great achievements are normally seen as concentrated in the early years of his premiership when he stabilised British finances after the damaging American Independence War, and he can be fairly criticised for indecisiveness as a war leader in the 1790s. However, he should be given the credit for putting in place the financial arrangements which enabled Britain to wage a twenty year war, funding not just her own forces but eventually those of most of Europe, and in a way not so very different from Churchill in a later war, he had become a symbol of British resistance, in Canning's words, ‘The Pilot who weathered the storm’. Such was the strength of his legacy that it was to be many years before Hawkesbury, Canning, Castlereigh, or even Grenville, saw themselves in a political sense as other than ‘followers of Pitt’.

2.3. Opposition, then Service in the Dysfunctional Portland Government

The King had no doubt as to what should follow Pitt’s death, and asked Hawkesbury to form an administration, but after discussions with his colleagues, the charge was declined and an approach to Lord Grenville was recommended. Showing considerable political courage, Hawkesbury also convinced the King that he would have to accept his bête-noir, Charles Fox in senior office. There is every reason to believe that Hawkesbury had agreed with the Cabinet’s opinion that rather than continuing under his leadership, they should demit office. Even with the benefit of Pitt’s prestige, the government had been tottering, and with his loss on top of the resignations of Dundas and Sidmouth, change seemed inevitable. Having refused to accede to the King’s wishes on the greater matter, Hawkesbury did become Lord Warden of the Cinq Ports, in succession to Pitt, probably in part because another refusal, however gracious, would have caused offence to the King. The appointment was prestigious and a public mark of royal favour, but it could have been argued that Hawkesbury was not yet sufficiently distinguished to be an appropriate recipient. Under those circumstances, the office could have been viewed simply as a valuable sinecure, carrying an official residence, Walmer Castle on the Kent coast, and a substantial honorarium, though it does not seem that colleagues or political opponents made much of the matter.

Lord Grenville’s government, with Fox as Foreign Secretary, is rightly famous for presiding over the passage of the measure which banned British involvement in the trading and shipment of slaves, but with that admittedly very honourable exception, it
failed in almost everything it tried to do. It is known without intentional irony as the ‘Ministry of All the Talents’, but the death of Fox in September 1806 left a huge gap, not least because the failure of his attempt to negotiate peace with Napoleon had finally convinced him that the war had to be fought, and it may not be fanciful to think that his great abilities turned to that end would have provided leadership sadly lacking in the next few years. Hawkesbury led what began as a ‘principled’ opposition, but more partisan feelings soon grew, especially when Grenville persuaded the King to dissolve parliament, in the confident expectation that this sign of royal favour would guarantee the return of more government supporters to the House of Commons. Hawkesbury, uncharacteristically, seemed to risk the displeasure of the King, by writing to suggest that the grant of an early dissolution to the Grenville administration was unconstitutional, as its parliamentary support had been decreasing in the months beforehand. He had in fact furnished the King with evidence that the erstwhile followers of William Pitt were willing to resume the responsibilities of government which they had previously refused to undertake, and, in the light of what followed, discreditable interpretations have with some justice been given to his letter. Put simply, it has been suggested that it was an answer to an unconstitutional, secret request for aid from the King.

However, when the election duly consolidated the government’s position in the House of Commons, Lord Hawkesbury and his colleagues may have anticipated a lengthy period in opposition, but the issue of Catholic Emancipation again confounded expectations. Catholic army officers up to the rank of colonel could hold commissions in Ireland, and the government proposed that they should be able to retain their status, when their unit was posted anywhere in Britain. The King appeared willing to accept this, but then widespread disappointment in Ireland at the limited scope of the measure prompted the Cabinet to extend the bill to include the most senior ranks, effectively removing a bar on promotions. Surprisingly, the King did not at first demur when the amended bill was shown to him but this was probably because, by then half-blind, he did not see the change. Soon enough, Lord Sidmouth, an opponent of the measure in the Cabinet, brought the extension to the King’s attention and he immediately withdrew his support. At this point, the government, still partially dependent on a tranche of royal supporters in parliament, either had to resign or to withdraw the bill, and rather abjectly, they indicated their willingness to do the latter. Of course, the King knew by then that Lord Hawkesbury and some colleagues were willing to resume office, so felt strong enough to further demand that the Prime Minister, Grenville, totally abandon his principles in like
manner to Pitt a few years earlier, and give an undertaking that he would never again bring forward any proposal for extending access to offices for Roman Catholics. Grenville and his colleagues were unwilling to go this far and resigned at once. The events, which did not reflect much credit on any involved, were significant in retrospect because this was the last time that a monarch unilaterally dispensed with a government which, albeit with support from the ‘King’s party’, commanded a clear majority in the House of Commons and wanted to continue in office. In addition, their understandably bitter memories of the events influenced the conduct of Lords Grenville and Grey, the latter, Fox’s successor as Foreign Secretary and Whig leader, in negotiations at moments of political crisis, for almost twenty years thereafter.

The government of William Henry Cavendish-Bentinck, third Duke of Portland, which assumed office, is rightly classed as one of the weakest in our history. The Duke was not a complete nonentity and had considerable administrative abilities, perhaps not much exhibited while Prime Minister as something of a figure-head for the Fox-North coalition almost quarter of a century earlier, but evident after that, when he had done much to organise Fox’s Whig opposition to Pitt, before becoming an adequate Home Secretary in the late 1790s. However he had no talent for leadership, and regarded speaking in parliament as a terrifying ordeal; most significantly for what was to happen to his ministry, he lacked the moral courage needed to address controversial issues, and adjudicate between those involved. The fact that by then, he was elderly and ill is only a partial mitigation, but in fairness most of the blame for the ministry’s failure should be attributed to those who installed him as a figure-head premier, namely Lord Liverpool, Lord Castlereigh, George Canning, and Spencer Percival. The gambit enabled the four just named to avoid a decision as to who should take the leading role, allowing them to keep equal status; any alternative would probably have led at least one of them to refuse to serve. The arrangements could have worked, because in that era, a ‘government of departments’ in which the most powerful ministers followed their own courses was not as far from the norm as it would be now, but success would have depended either on nothing much going wrong in any area of responsibility, an unlikely scenario during a demanding war, or great restraint from everyone if problems did arise. A government which, at least in retrospect, seems strong on paper with Hawkesbury, Canning, and Castlereigh as the three Secretaries of State, (respectively for Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, and War and Colonies), and Perceval in the then lesser post of Chancellor of the Exchequer, but also Leader of the House of Commons, was unstable, because in the
final analysis, no-one was in charge. Interestingly, amongst more junior ministers, Lord Palmerston, and Arthur Wellesley received their first experience of office, but of course had little influence at the highest level.

Perhaps, Portland’s inadequacy as a Prime Minister was made most obvious by the fact that there was never any question of Hawkesbury’s ceding the lead in the House of Lords to his own nominal superior. As a result, he was left to justify the new ministry’s willingness to give the assurances required by the King on Catholic Emancipation even though it was well known that some of its members, (including Canning and Castlereigh) were as much in favour of catholic relief as their predecessors. Even more embarrassingly, he had to turn a political somersault and provide justification for the dissolution of parliament which the new ministry requested to boost its numbers, in spite of his own recent strictures on such action. Otherwise, Hawkesbury was as much a prisoner in his own Department, as the rest of the ministers. In particular, with little semblance of Cabinet government, war policy was left largely in the hands of Castlereigh, to the great frustration of Canning who wished to follow the example of Grenville, who as Foreign Secretary in the 1790s, had exerted real influence on strategy, if not day-to-day operations. At a time when Napoleon was rampaging over central Europe, crushing the armies of Prussia and Russia, the Home Secretary was concerned mainly with matters of less apparent moment which included dealing with the repercussions of a secret report on the conduct of Caroline, Princess of Wales, and fixing the terms under which the Bourbon pretender to the French throne could live in exile in Britain. Ireland, though relatively quiescent was a cause of concern because widely expressed admiration for Napoleon there, fostered the belief that another rising could easily be engineered by France. Hawkesbury and Arthur Wellesley, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, working together for the first time, responded by fortifying Dublin and Cork, and boosting the strength of the rudimentary police service, but in addition tried to placate Catholic opinion by increasing the grant to the Maynooth College which trained priests. They also declared an intention to look at the controversial matter of tithes, the tax levied from the mainly Catholic population to pay for the Anglican Church establishment. Perhaps these were the first hints that the future Lord Liverpool was not a rigid conservative against all reform, and that the future Lord Wellington could be pragmatic, at least as far as Ireland was concerned. However they were stopped in their attempts to bring about modest reforms when opinions polarised as a result of an ill-judged effort by Grenville to push a Catholic Emancipation bill through parliament.
There are now mixed views of Castlereigh's tenure of the War Ministry, between 1807 and 1809, with most willing to give him credit for improvements to the army which bore fruit later in the war, but fewer have been convinced about his grasp of strategy or conduct of operations. Certainly the response to the Treaty of Tilsit which reconciled Russia with Napoleon's France was vigorous, leading to the capture of the Danish fleet to prevent its falling into French hands, but Canning had much to do with that, and it was probably only the cool head of General Sir John Moore that prevented a substantial British army becoming embroiled at the same time in Sweden. Castlereigh can be applauded for seeing the opportunity offered by the French invasion of Spain and for appointing his friend, Arthur Wellesley, to the initial command of the army sent to protect Portugal, (and safeguard that country's fleet). However he also has to take some responsibility for allowing Wellesley to be superseded, not by the able Moore but by Sir Hew Dalrymple, who duly threw away some of the potential spoils of Wellesley's victory at Vimiera, by agreeing the Convention of Cintra which allowed a defeated French army to be shipped home at British expense. (Unsurprisingly, Cintra has since been at the centre of much controversy and many myths. Dalrymple was not the complete deadbeat of some accounts, but a competent administrator albeit without recent experience of active command, and there is no doubt that in agreeing the Convention, he took more account of advice received from Wellesley than anything else. The aims of the expedition were indeed achieved by the Convention, but those on the ground seem to have been blind to the fact that following Wellesley's victory, much more was obtainable. After the event, the government knowingly sacrificed Dalrymple at least to some extent, to preserve Wellesley from the consequences of his misjudgements, certainly because he was a colleague, but also because they correctly saw him still as a hope for the future. Muir makes what seems to be a valid point that Wellesley owed his continuing employment to the eloquence of Canning more than anything else, and that even his closest political friend Castlereigh lost some faith in him.)

Continuing the commentary on Castlereigh's actions as War Secretary, the Walcheren invasion of 1809, although strategically justifiable as a means of supporting Austria which had re-entered the war against France, was not pushed forward nearly fast enough, so that the issue between France and Austria was already decided in favour of Napoleon before the expedition was launched, and for largely political reasons it was saddled with another inadequate commander, the Earl of Chatham. So Castlereigh's record with regard to operations was hardly distinguished enough to justify his determination to arrogate all responsibility to
himself, and even if Canning’s efforts to force his resignation owed much to the Foreign Secretary’s own ambition, and employed methods which proved disastrous for all involved, he had some justification for his discontent. The extra-ordinary but predictable blunderings of the Duke of Portland, Canning, and the Earl of Camden, which led eventually to the collapse of the ministry and the infamous duel between Canning and Castlereigh, hardly involved Hawkesbury, so need not be dwelt on further. He, along with most of the Cabinet, was kept in the dark till a very late stage, but with Spencer Perceval was left to pick up the pieces in the summer of 1809.

2.4. A Return to Effective Government under Percival

Given his strong relationship with the ailing King it is entirely possible that Hawkesbury who had succeeded his father as the 2nd Earl of Liverpool earlier that year could have secured the premiership after the crisis in 1809, but he shared the majority view of the remaining members of the Cabinet that Perceval was the better choice, because he was a member of the House of Commons, and he was also ten years older than Lord Liverpool (and Canning). Canning angled for the position, and tried to boost his claim by indicating that he would not serve under Perceval, but the duel soon afterwards ruled him out of contention anyway. Lord Liverpool replaced Castlereigh as Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, and so took over the direction of the war effort. By then, Arthur Wellesley was back in command of the British forces in Portugal and soon after assuming his new appointment Lord Liverpool made the critical decision to focus all available resources on the Peninsular Campaign. Thereafter, he and the Prime Minister, Perceval backed Wellesley, with men, munitions, supplies, and money, and as importantly, with ringing endorsements in parliament. No longer was Portugal ‘an auxiliary front’ as it had been described shortly before, by Castlereigh, it became the main, and for practical purposes the only, scene of British offensive effort, and the scale of that effort was to grow steadily over the next few years.

The strategic considerations associated with the Peninsular War are considered in detail in a later chapter, but here it can be said that the misconceptions surrounding the campaign are many. In particular, it is not easy for us knowing the outcome to perceive the Peninsular War as it appeared to those responsible for fighting and supporting it, and there is also a tendency to see the British contingent of the allied armies there as all that really mattered. At first, the majority of the French troops involved fought the Spanish provincial armies, garrisoned large areas, and lost many
lives trying to maintain supply lines in the face of fierce guerrilla warfare. In these early stages of the proceedings, the British contribution amounted to protecting their own base in Portugal, creating an effective Portuguese army, and relieving the pressure on the Spanish forces by threatening advances into Spain from that quarter. While Napoleon was free from serious military commitments in the rest of Europe, he was able to pour resources into Spain, and to spare his most able commanders, like Marshal Massena, though perhaps crucially he only once went there himself (in 1808). Not surprisingly, both the Spanish, and Wellesley, came under severe pressure and the campaign appeared to be failing. Throughout this period the government had to keep its nerve and defend the policy of fighting in the Iberian Peninsula against strong pressure from the Whigs in parliament, with Lord Liverpool facing frequent challenges from Grey and Grenville in the House of Lords. His response to the latter in 1810 would perhaps be remembered as great oratory had it come from the lips of a Pitt or Canning and he included the passage;

.........In Spain our armies had the support of the whole armed population, which throughout two campaigns had fought under every circumstance of adversity and disadvantage, and were still as resolute not to yield to the foreign invader as at the beginning of the struggle......... The noble baron (Grenville) had spoken as if war had not its chances and reverses, as if the risks in military operations were not always proportioned to the magnitude of the contest, and had triumphantly asked ‘What had we gained in the Peninsula?’ ........We had gained the hearts of the whole population of Spain and Portugal ........Whatever might be the issue of the contest, to this country would always remain the proud consciousness of having done its duty.........

Even as late as 1812, when Napoleon’s decision to move against Russia led to the withdrawal of some French forces, and paved the way for Wellesley, by then ennobled as Wellington, though as an Earl not yet a Duke, to advance far into Spain and win the victory of Salamanca, he was only able to occupy Madrid temporarily, again having to retreat to the frontier with Portugal when the French concentrated their remaining armies against him, but the determination of the government did not waver. Nonetheless there is no doubt that Lord Liverpool would have given much for decisive victory at this time as other options for the deployment of British forces would have become feasible, as we shall see.
The problems faced by the Perceval ministry were not confined to the military sphere, and there was particular concern over the deterioration in conditions inside the country. The Treaty of Tilsit signed in July 1807 had presaged a serious attempt by Napoleon to wage economic war, closing the ports of continental Europe to Britain, by means of the Berlin Decrees, later followed by the Milan Decrees. The British retaliatory measures, the Orders in Council, while hurting France, probably caused even more damage to her own trade. The consequences were the collapse of exports, unemployment and in some areas, near starvation, which led to protests, riots, and an outbreak of machine breaking, (Luddism). The government had no real answers at first, nor indeed did the opposition except to make a peace which at that stage would have amounted almost to surrender, but fortunately the situation eased as alternative routes, not excluding smuggling, replaced formal channels of trade in British manufactured goods. The government which had seemed so weak when it took office gradually increased in authority as Perceval dominated the House of Commons, while his deputy, Lord Liverpool, dealt comfortably enough with the more powerful opposition leaders in the House of Lords, and the leaders were able to surmount a second Regency crisis when the King's mind failed again in 1811. Recourse was made to the solution applied almost quarter of a century earlier by Pitt, which gave the Prince of Wales, as Regent, limited royal powers for a year, with the remainder to come to him after that period if his father remained ill. Even so, it was still anticipated that the Regent would replace the government by the Whigs but when he looked for compromise, and asked them to co-operate with Perceval rather than take over, the proposal was rejected almost contemptuously. Although their leader, Earl Grey, cannot have known it, he had taken the first steps towards condemning himself to almost 20 years of opposition by adopting a haughty manner with the Regent.

Early in 1812, the Marquis of Wellesley, (Wellington’s elder brother), with what proved unfortunate timing for his own ambitions, resigned office as Foreign Secretary, and attempted to displace Perceval, but he failed to attract significant support in parliament and was himself replaced in office by Lord Castlereigh. A few weeks later, Perceval was able to bring Lord Sidmouth back into the government, thereby securing the support of approximately fifty more supporters in the House of Commons. It appeared that for the first time in the century, a stable ministry was evolving, but that perception proved short lived because in June of the same year Perceval was assassinated in the lobby of the House of Commons by a mentally unhinged bankrupt called Bellingham who had conceived a grudge against the
government, and the Prime Minister in particular. The murdered premier had supplied effective leadership, absent since the death of Pitt, and although he had made mistakes, as for example by his rigid adherence to trade restrictions regardless of whether they were benefitting the United Kingdom, he had taken many more good decisions.

2.5. Lord Liverpool Assumes the Premiership, after a False Start

The Prince Regent, who very much under-rated Perceval, (as have many since), could see little problem in the government remaining in office with Lord Liverpool in the top position, and though the Cabinet had reservations, worrying especially about how to compensate for the loss of Perceval’s authority in the House of Commons, they decided to persevere. As with the previous administration they achieved unity by fudging the most divisive issue of the time, Roman Catholic Emancipation, agreeing that the government would bring forward no measure, but that members of the Cabinet were free to speak and vote as they wished if the matter was raised by others. As already noted this ‘compromise’ effectively preserved the status quo, even if it salved the consciences and saved face for those who wished to see reform. However, worries about the viability of the weakened government seemed well-founded when an independent member of parliament, actually a distant relative of Lord Liverpool, James Stuart-Wortley, immediately proposed a motion in the House of Commons asking the King to appoint a strong and efficient administration. He condemned the proposed government of Lord Liverpool as a rehashed version of that led by Addington and found wanting, a decade earlier, and the personnel were indeed similar, though all had learnt much in the intervening years. Stuart-Wortley also suggested that Catholic Emancipation should no longer be resisted by the government which, given the views of Lord Liverpool and many of his senior colleagues, was a thinly veiled attack on their continuing to hold any office. Stuart-Wortley secured a majority of four, though even if he had lost by say twenty or thirty votes, the implication would have been much the same, namely, that the new government did not command the support of the House of Commons. Lord Liverpool resigned his commission to form a government, immediately.

The Prince Regent turned to the Marquis of Wellesley, who was closely allied at this time with George Canning, and thought that he would be able to form a government including most of Perceval’s ministers, reinforced by Canning and his followers. However the criticisms Wellesley had made of Perceval when resigning a few
months earlier appeared in the London news-sheets at this time, and ensured that Lord Liverpool and his colleagues would not view kindly any approach he might make to them; there was also a major division of view over Catholic Emancipation, which Wellesley and Canning strongly supported. There is no indication that Lord Liverpool, from whom the office of Prime Minister had apparently been snatched away, made any great effort to persuade his colleagues not to co-operate, though he made clear his own unwillingness to serve. After the failure of the attempt to form an administration from Perceval's cohorts, Wellesley obtained permission from the Prince Regent to approach the Whigs, and he offered them one third of all government places, but was rebuffed, ostensibly on the grounds that such a government based purely on numbers would be devoid of principle. This ended Wellesley's attempts, to his great chagrin, as he had never doubted that he was destined to be Prime Minister. The Prince Regent then turned to a soldier/courtier, Lord Moira who in his turn made contact with the Whigs; this time they refused the offer of a place in government on the grounds that they required the Prince Regent to place himself entirely in their hands rather than dealing with them through intermediaries. Presumably, Lords Grey and Grenville were determined to eliminate the possibility of a rerun of the events of 1807, and thought their position so strong that the Prince Regent would have to give way, but they soon got a rude awakening.

On the 8th June 1812, the day after his 42nd birthday, Lord Liverpool announced to the House of Lords that he had again been charged with forming a government. Stuart-Wortley, whose sustained hostility to Lord Liverpool at this time and later, has never really been explained, re-submitted his motion to the House of Commons but this time it was defeated by 125 votes. By then, it could be argued that the Prince Regent had pursued all options in trying to form the broadly based ministry requested by parliament, but that the different parties had refused to co-operate. To vote against Lord Liverpool a second time would simply have made it impossible for the country to be governed in a time of war, so the independent members, however grudgingly had to come into line and they did. So, hesitatingly, began the life of a government which was to run the country for almost fifteen years. Looking back, we can see that the new Prime Minister had more top level ministerial experience than all but a very few of his successors in the office, (Palmerston, Churchill, and rather bizarrely, Callaghan are perhaps exceptions), but no premier since has been younger on appointment.
3. The Liverpool Government, 1812-1827

3.1. Securing Power

Although the House of Commons had eventually accepted the administration led by Lord Liverpool in the apparent absence of an alternative, the new government’s longer term survival was generally thought to be dependent on whether the ministerial team in that chamber could be strengthened. During the previous few years, only the abilities and industry of Spencer Perceval had compensated for the dearth of other speakers capable of winning support for policies and measures favoured by his government. The recruitment of George Canning seemed to the new leader, and at least some of his senior colleagues, to be the best way of addressing the problem, because of the ex-Foreign Secretary’s powerful personality and flare for compelling oratory. Their thinking was also influenced by the perception that Canning’s views, in the main not dissimilar to those of the ministers, but more liberal than the mainstream especially as regards Catholic Emancipation and foreign policy, would make him dangerous as a rallying point for moderate opinion on all sides if he remained a free agent. Another attempt to form a government along the lines first proposed by Lord Wellesley could not be entirely discounted. Canning knew all this, and his ego, reinforced by the admiration of his close associates, was such that his price for joining the government was set very high, especially with regard to his status vis-à-vis that of his long-time rival, Viscount Castlereigh. The latter had returned to office earlier in 1812 as Foreign Secretary and had a strong claim to remain in that position and to become Leader of the House of Commons, (he held a courtesy title only); effectively the second position in a government led by a peer. A few years earlier, Canning had refused to concede the first place in the lower House to Spencer Percival, so the new Prime Minister can have had no illusions as to how difficult it would be to persuade him to subordinate himself to the man whose competence he had criticised relentlessly, during the tenure of the Portland government, and whose master he was in all the parliamentary arts.

Lord Liverpool and Castlereigh had each suffered from Canning’s intriguing and penchant for scathing innuendo in the past, and it was probably as much a mark of their desperation to reinforce the ministry, as their forgiving natures that they worked so hard to accommodate his demands. He was offered the position of Foreign Secretary, and a waiver of Castlereigh’s right as Leader in the House of Commons to take the first place on debates on foreign affairs, but he could not be conceded all
that he wanted. He seemed to be demanding precedence over Castlereigh across the board, to be Leader of the Commons in all but name, and Lord Liverpool was unwilling to go this far. After much heart-searching, Canning refused a final invitation to join the government, a decision which he fairly quickly had to acknowledge as having almost wrecked his career, though his judgement looks worse in retrospect because neither he nor anyone else could have guessed that the government would survive for fifteen years, when none of its five predecessors had lasted for longer than three. The consolation that Lord Liverpool could take from the failed negotiation was that it effected the repair of his own relationship with Canning, who recognised the consideration shown to him, and the effort made to accede to his wishes. Thus, the new Prime Minister had secured one objective in neutralising Canning as a focus of opposition, at least in the short term. In fact, the charm offensive was soon to start, which in a few years brought Canning into the government, but it was to be ten years before he recovered the ground he lost in 1812. The consequences for the effectiveness of the ministry in that period may have been almost as serious as those for Canning himself, and certainly its case was not very well made in the House of Commons in the following years. Castlereigh was respected personally, but made speeches which were turgid and unclear, so was rarely able to sway his fellows on matters which were controversial.

In addition to the few expected to supply leadership in the two chambers of parliament, normally the Prime Minister, and maybe one or two other senior ministers, Cabinets had to include individuals capable of filling the main executive positions. There were also appointments which had little to do with the day-to-day running of the country but ensured that the Cabinet had the right balance in the eyes of the Prince Regent, the more influential peers in the House of Lords, and various interest groups in the House of Commons. The latter included members obligated to the Crown, or major land-owning peers, for the positions they held or the constituencies they represented, and prestigious independent members sent to parliament by larger electorates in counties and a few cities. For most of the key positions, Lord Liverpool had candidates of reasonable ability, including Castlereigh, Lord Sidmouth, (the ex-premier, Addington) as Home Secretary, Lord Eldon as Lord Chancellor and Lord Melville, (son of Henry Dundas) as First Lord of the Admiralty, (obviously an important office in time of war). However, the gap left by his own promotion, from Secretary of State for War and the Colonies proved more difficult to fill. The position, also of importance in wartime, was turned down by William Wellesley-Pole, (brother of Marquis Wellesley and Wellington), perhaps fortunately
because he was less able than his siblings, and the appointment had been intended largely to fix support from his increasingly powerful family, and their connections. After further deliberations, Lord Liverpool installed Earl Bathurst who was a competent and trusted administrator, of amiable disposition, if not of the stature of his two immediate predecessors, Castlereigh and Lord Liverpool himself. The appointment proved a success because Bathurst was always a good sounding board for his colleagues, and otherwise was content to deal mostly with the minutiae, and leave matters of greater moment to the premier. As we shall see, Britain’s war effort continued to be fairly well managed and strategically coherent until Napoleon was finally brought low.

Once Canning had refused the Foreign Office, the expedient of Castlereigh’s swapping that role for the Chancellorship of the Exchequer could be forgotten, and the latter position was given to Nicholas Vansittart, an appointment which further tied Lord Sidmouth’s grouping into the ministry. In those times the office was accounted less important than it is now, because the Prime Minister’s title of First Lord of the Treasury reflected where the real responsibility for financial policy lay. Nonetheless, the facts that Lord Liverpool sat in the House of Lords, and that all money matters were settled in the House of Commons, meant that justification of fiscal policy and financial measures fell to Castlereigh, who had neither knowledge nor interest in the topic, and Vansittart, who was of limited ability generally and often incapable of presenting his thoughts intelligibly. As we shall see, this was to be a constant source of weakness for the government, but in the absence of alternatives, Vansittart remained in post for eleven years. This longevity in office extended to the remainder of the Cabinet, including those in semi-honourific, ‘window-dressing’ positions like Lord President of the Council (Lord Harrowby), Lord Privy Seal (Lord Westmorland), Master of the Mint (William Wellesley-Pole later Lord Maryborough), and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Charles Bragge-Bathurst), none of whose occupation of a Cabinet seat for ten years or more had much impact on how the country was run, but whose appointments satisfied the criterion mentioned above, that Cabinets had to look ‘right’ to those whose support was needed.

One of the first actions of the new government was to give way to the agitation led inside and outside parliament by Henry Brougham for the withdrawal of the Orders in Council, first promulgated in 1807 in retaliation against Napoleon’s Continental System. The measures, strongly advocated and later reinforced by Spencer Percival, were doing little but enhance the effectiveness of Napoleon’s attempted blockade
...and infuriate neutral states, (and most British manufacturing and trading interests). With hindsight, their maintenance can be seen as one of the few false steps of the Perceval government; his assassination had removed the main obstacle to their withdrawal, but the change came too late to prevent war with the United States. The constraints on her trade had indeed caused hardship to that country, and the interception of her ships and impressment of her seamen, had offended her pride, but it is difficult to escape the notion that there was a large element of opportunism in her action. Clearly the United States, which had already purchased swathes of North America from Napoleon, expected to be able to take advantage of the British commitment to a European war to extend further her ownership of the sub-continent by annexing Canada. In the event her forces fell short of their performance in the War of Independence and in addition the complete British command of the sea ruled out any possibility of France replaying its crucial role in the earlier struggle. (In that war, the allied naval force assembled against Britain had held at least nominal superiority, and the outcome had been largely decided when a French fleet temporarily cut British supply routes to North America, and critically, prevented the evacuation from Yorktown of the trapped force commanded by Lord Cornwallis). As a result, the attempted invasion of Canada was defeated, albeit not before the fortress of York, the precursor of Toronto, had been burnt, but with its priorities elsewhere, the British government was unwilling to boost troop levels enough to take the offensive, so the war continued at low level as the later stages of the European struggle were played out.

The new war was only the final nail in the coffin of Anglo-American trade, which had initially taken up some of the slack left by Napoleon’s closure of European ports, but had already been much reduced by American measures retaliatory to the Orders in Council. The resulting plunge in British exports had led to sackings and wage reductions and in turn to industrial unrest in the Northern towns, including machine breaking, (Luddism), around Nottingham, in West Yorkshire, and in Lancashire. The Liverpool government took over in the midst of this strife and inherited new laws which prescribed the death sentence for those found guilty of destroying industrial machinery, or of other riotous acts. Neither for the first nor last time, repression seemed to work. Thirty-five rioters were hanged in the next eighteen months as magistrates backed by militias and the army crushed organised dissent, though their task was probably made easier by an easing of the economic situation.
Militarily, the government’s commitment to the operations in Spain remained strong, but in spite of Wellington’s summer successes in winning the Battle of Salamanca, and entering Madrid, they had to watch one last difficult retreat by his forces to the Portuguese frontier in late 1812. However, the catastrophic failure that winter, of Napoleon’s invasion of Russia began to reawaken opposition to France across the continent. British diplomacy became very active and subsidies were offered to the Russians, Prussians and Swedes with a view to building a force large enough to prevail conclusively over the weakened Emperor. Lord Liverpool seriously considered, then and later, whether the Peninsular campaign should be shut down, so that Wellington’s army could be transferred to northern Germany to take part in what looked like being the decisive struggle there, but circumstances and inertia conspired to ensure that Wellington stayed where he was, and any temptation to fight on two fronts was resisted. Austria, so often mauled by Napoleon, but by then with her Emperor’s daughter married to him, remained neutral, waiting to see if she could at last join a winning combination. Her hesitation was excusable in the light of previous humiliations, but Lord Liverpool for one, never forgot what he saw as her duplicity over the next few months.

For the same opportunistic reasons that have caused governments to call early elections up to the present day, Lord Liverpool requested the dissolution of parliament from the Prince Regent in September 1812, just after Salamanca, and before Wellington’s retreat, even though an election was not required for a further two years. His aims obviously included increasing the numbers of his own supporters, but he was as keen to reduce the sizes of the groupings attached to Lord Wellesley and George Canning. As was normal in elections at this time, the new government’s position was indeed strengthened in the House of Commons, probably by about 30 supporters, with the unlooked-for bonus that Lord Sidmouth’s following was also weakened, so reducing any chance of trouble from that faction, though in truth its leader was already demonstrating the total loyalty to the new premier that characterised his behaviour over the next decade. Wellesley’s small faction more than held its own, perhaps mainly because of the success of his brother. However, Canning’s followers fared badly, and this fed his growing chagrin over his recent decision to refuse Cabinet office, which characteristically he blamed on bad advice rather than his own excessive self-regard. His reaction was somewhat melodramatic, and he announced that his political career was over and released his supporters from any commitment to him in parliament, allowing William Huskisson, the most able of them, to enter the government, at a junior level. It was not to be long before
Huskisson had the ear of the Prime Minister across the whole spectrum of economic affairs. Canning himself had to wait until 1814 when he was appointed Ambassador to Portugal, to return to official life; as a sweetener, Lord Liverpool, with whom a friendly correspondence had started some time earlier, made sure that the remuneration was sufficient to repair Canning’s finances, at least in the short term. By the end of 1812, with his support boosted in parliament, and the ministry bedding down, Lord Liverpool, had put the hesitant start to his premiership behind him.

3.2. Winning the Napoleonic War

Perhaps because it had been clear to most that 1813 might be decisive in the war, the first session of the new parliament at the beginning of that year was relatively uneventful, and free from stress for the government. The monopolistic and thus controversial charter for the East India Company was renewed at the end-point of eighteen months of discussion, without the discord often provoked by that issue, and another episode in the unseemly struggle between the Prince Regent and his wife, Princess Caroline, this time concerning the access of their daughter, Princess Charlotte, to her mother, was defused before the parliamentary opposition could seize on it. In Spain, Wellington advanced again, this time leaving Madrid far behind, and reaching the French frontier, where he won a crushing victory at Vittoria, and moved through the Pyrenean passes into France. Napoleon suffered another major blow at this time, when Austria having first tried to broker peace, was persuaded by his intransigence, Wellington’s success, and a generous British subsidy, to take the side of the allies and added her armies to those opposing him. The French Emperor had managed to put another army in the field to replace the one he had lost in Russia but it was much smaller than the multi-national force opposed to him. Military historians acclaim his general-ship in 1813, and he won more battles than he lost, but his inferior numbers prevented him from following these victories up and so achieving anything decisive, though he certainly tested the resolve of the coalition. Eventually the loss of the hard fought battle of Leipzig compelled his retreat to the eastern French frontier.

In November 1813, at the instance of the Russian Emperor, Alexander, who still respected and feared the French leader, and dominated the councils of the continental allies, Napoleon was offered peace terms which included the frontiers which France had tried and failed to gain for over two hundred years, namely the Alps, the Rhine and the Pyrenees, and consideration for French commercial and
maritime rights. These were extraordinarily generous proposals in the light of the military situation, which Alexander might have had great difficulty in persuading all his allies to accept. (It is highly unlikely that Britain would have acquiesced in the incorporation of present day Belgium in France under any circumstances). However, as the allied position strengthened, Napoleon, still obsessed with his own past triumphs, foolishly bargained for even more. Inevitably, the allied posture stiffened and unsurprisingly he in turn refused out of hand the reduced offer of the 1792 frontiers.

Wellington, who had been puzzlingly lethargic during the latter half of 1813, finally moved forward in February of the next year, and captured Bayonne and then Bordeaux, France’s second city. At the same time, Lord Castlereigh departed for the headquarters of the invading armies, to the east of France, with the tasks of ensuring that the alliance held together (by applying the glue of more British subsidies), and gaining influence on any future negotiations with France. There had been a number of truces arranged by commanders in the field, in which Britain without an army in central Europe had no say, and at least one of them, as mentioned above, had come close to solidifying into a treaty which could not have been accepted in London. To his great credit, Castlereigh asserted himself amongst the other leaders to the extent that such side-lining became unthinkable. Soon he oversaw the formalising of the alliance by the Treaty of Chaumont, but the fate of France remained open. The option preferred by Britain was the deposition of Napoleon, and the reinstatement of the Bourbons in the person of the self-styled Louis XVII, a long-time exile in Britain, but the other allies, especially the Emperor of Russia were still willing to negotiate with the French Emperor.

Lord Liverpool made a substantial contribution to the achievement of the outcome desired by Britain. He played something of a double game by publicly eschewing direct government support for the Bourbon cause to avoid antagonising those allies, and many in France, who still hankered after a settlement with Napoleon. However, he also did nothing to impede either Bourbon actions aimed towards building a Restoration movement in England, or the movement of their agents between England and France, and instructed Wellington to accord the same freedoms in southern France. Additionally, the premier counselled Castlereigh to delay formal discussion of the issue with the allies in the hope that ‘spontaneous’ demonstrations in France would strengthen the Bourbon case. Such demonstrations duly occurred, and otherwise things began to favour the Bourbons with Napoleon’s refusal to accept
realistic terms, and Austria’s decision to give more weight to ‘legitimacy’ and her dynastic links with the Bourbons, than to the fact that Napoleon’s second wife, and the mother of his heir, was an Austrian princess. Eventually as the allied armies closed in on Paris, even Napoleon had to accept that all was lost, and it was agreed in the middle of 1814 that he would abdicate the throne of France, but that he could retain the trappings of an Emperor within the confines of the small Mediterranean island of Elba. This, together with widespread demonstrations of public support for a Bourbon return, paved the way for Louis XVIII to be restored to the French throne.

The fiction that Napoleon and not France had been responsible for more than twenty years of war allowed the relatively easy terms of a return to the frontiers of 1792, already offered to Napoleon, to be agreed with the great survivor, Prince Talleyrand, who had reappeared as head of a provisional French government, and the Treaty of Paris was concluded. So Castlereigh and the allied rulers were free to turn to the restructuring of Europe in Vienna, at the great Congress, which will be considered in detail in a later chapter.

Viewed in retrospect, the next few months were only a short break in the war before the final climax at Waterloo, but for the negotiators at Vienna and the governments of the victorious states, the conflict was thought to be over. In Britain, while Lord Liverpool had more than half an eye on Vienna, he also had to deal with another flare-up of the continuing dispute between the Prince Regent and his wife, Princess Caroline, which could easily have spilled over into public controversy leading to riots, and opportunities for the opposition to make trouble in Parliament. Invitations had been extended to the allied heads of state to visit London after hostilities ceased, and they were accepted by the Russian Tsar, the Prussian King, and the Austrian Chancellor, Prince Metternich, representing his Emperor. The rulers took part in lavish celebrations of victory, at parades, processions, and banquets, (including one given by the Prime Minister at his country residence, Coombe Wood). Embarrassingly, the events also supplied stark illustrations of the unpopularity of the Prince Regent who was abused as vigorously as the foreign leaders were cheered by the large crowds which followed them around London, and the Tsar aggravated matters by making contact with Princess Caroline, and meddling in other issues concerning the British royal family. In the months leading up to the state visits, the Prince Regent’s daughter, Charlotte, had become engaged to the Prince of Orange, who was heir to the crown of Holland, but notorious for his exceptionally dissolute life-style. Whatever the government thought of this, they preferred a tie-up to the British royal family to the alternative of the Prince marrying a Russian Grand
Duchess, so they were doubly angered when, after meetings with Tsar Alexander’s sister, who was part of the visiting party, Charlotte broke off the engagement and fled to her mother’s house, which she had been forbidden in an earlier settlement between the Prince Regent and his wife. Though all this may seem trivial beside the matters affecting the future of the continent, its impact on the government and its leader who depended on their relationship with the Prince Regent, was considerable. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that the Prince Regent’s attempt to obtain parliamentary approval for a royal divorce was still-born, and the best the government could achieve was to persuade Princess Caroline to live abroad by making her a large financial settlement with that as a condition, and she departed for Rome later in 1814; a problem deferred rather than solved.

The apparent ending of the European war meant that the war with the United States could be given more attention, and some of Wellington’s peninsular army was shipped to Canada. Perhaps more ominously for the Americans, Lord Liverpool began corresponding with Wellington about the possibility of his taking charge of the British war effort there. Apart from the obvious benefit of employing the successful general in the on-going war, there was an additional attraction for the premier, in that it would remove Wellington from Paris, where he was thought to be at great risk of assassination. However, the real British objective was to bring the United States to the negotiating table and in that context the threat to involve the Duke of Wellington was a powerful weapon. Lord Liverpool was anxious to end this war, because he knew that although Britain freed from continental distractions could probably impose her will, there was little support in the country for a long drawn out struggle which would require the continuation of a high cost, war establishment, and gain at most a few thousand square miles of territory. (It has been estimated that the cost of the American War, which lasted for two and a half years, was approximately £25 million; small compared with the expenditure on the struggle with France, but significant in the context of the annual tax take, which peaked at £60 million. As regards the value of territory, the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 had seen the United States acquire from France more than 800000 square miles of the continent for the equivalent of £3 million. There was some dispute as to whether the arrangement, which transferred a French claim of possession, acquired in a dubious manner from Spain, really amounted to outright purchase, and Napoleon undoubtedly pitched the price low because he saw himself as strengthening a potential maritime rival to Britain. However, the transaction had reinforced a widely held view that a few tropical islands, on which sugar cane thrived, were more valuable than half a continent to
colonial powers.) In addition there was a chance that other European nations, which disliked British naval dominance almost as much as the Americans did, would take the opportunity to meddle; the Russian Emperor had already offered his services as a mediator. Lord Liverpool discounted this risk in the document he prepared for the British negotiating team to define their remit, but may not have been as sanguine as his words suggested, since his attitude to disputes at the Congress of Vienna involving Russia toughened noticeably after terms with the Americans had been agreed.

When representatives of the two warring countries met in Ghent, Henry Goulburn, the senior British envoy, had been instructed, against his own inclinations, to take a conciliatory line on all matters saving the issue which had ostensibly caused the war, namely, rights of blockade. The burning of Washington, and a British setback when Andrew Jackson prevented them from taking New Orleans, probably helped in different ways to persuade the United States that this was a war she could not win, but that she could make an honourable peace. With Castlereigh in Vienna, Lord Liverpool necessarily had to direct the negotiations with a little help from Bathurst. The realism and statesmanship expressed in a letter of explanation of the terms, sent to Canning (then in Portugal) before parliament considered the treaty, showed that he had learned much since his less fortunate efforts in conducting foreign policy, a decade earlier. In particular, he understood that with the population of the United States growing fast and far greater than that of Canada, improved relations were essential if Britain was not to be drawn into future conflicts where the logistical balance would tilt more and more in favour of the United States. The outcome was a treaty (of Ghent) which altered little as compared with the situation at the start of the war, but which laid the foundations for a negotiated settlement of the numerous disputes about the location of the ever lengthening frontier between the United States and Canada, and paved the way for an eventual thaw in relations. It is hardly too much to say that Lord Liverpool's moderation in 1814 saved Canada from future absorption by its southern neighbour.

The ending of both wars in which Britain had been engaged meant that the task of returning the war-time financial arrangements, largely created by William Pitt in the 1790s, to a peace-time footing could begin. The question for the government was whether they could stay in control of the process and achieve an orderly transition, when parliament, and indeed the whole political class were certain to want very fast progress in reducing the tax burden. The next meeting of parliament, scheduled for
February 1815, was expected to provide the test, and some time before that date, Lord Liverpool began to remind Castlereigh of the need for him to return promptly from Vienna, not because his contribution to financial policy development was important, but because as Leader of the House of Commons he needed to understand fully the government's proposals in order to defend them effectively, after their tabling by Chancellor of the Exchequer Vansittart. Castlereigh, who enjoyed the role of councillor to emperors and kings, not least the social side, seemed at this time to give his parliamentary duties a lower priority, causing considerable agitation to the premier who eventually sent a fairly peremptory instruction for his return. The Duke of Wellington was deputed to take the Foreign Secretary's place in Vienna, which would have met another of Lord Liverpool's objectives of getting the Duke away from Paris. However, Napoleon was to interfere with that scheme.

The government was of course well aware of the expectations of many in parliament and the wider nation, that the victorious ending of the war would allow a large part of the armed forces to be disbanded, remove the need to subsidise the armies of most countries of Europe, and so give scope for large tax reductions. However, with the final peace not yet agreed, the ministers needed to persuade a majority that Britain should neither disarm too speedily, nor antagonise the allies whose support was still required in the negotiations, by abruptly cutting off all financial support. In truth, there was little scope for tax reductions, regardless of the policy followed unless even more money was going to be borrowed, because the government debts were so large that a large part of the tax take would have to be allocated to servicing them for the foreseeable future. It was accepted very reluctantly by the government, that the income tax which had been introduced by Pitt strictly as a war-time expedient would have to be sacrificed, but a whole range of taxes on artefacts from carriages to servants were proposed as substitutes to keep a reasonable, if reduced, revenue, without throwing an even larger burden on customs and excise. Parliamentary consideration of the proposals began early in 1815 with no guarantee that the government would get its way.

Another economic measure was much more to the liking of a legislative body, still dominated by the landed interest, namely a bill to restrict corn imports by imposing an embargo whenever the price fell below 80 shillings a quarter. During the war, with armies to feed and imports restricted, there had been strong encouragement to cultivate marginal land, and landowners had invested to achieve this, even though the extra corn so produced was relatively expensive. The prospective danger in the
eyes of the government, as much as the producers, was a collapse of the price of corn due to unrestricted imports, to a level below the cost of production of most British corn. In addition to the likely difficulties for both landowners and agricultural labourers which would have resulted from the failures of farming enterprises, the government foresaw a situation in which Britain would become far too dependent on foreign supply. Residents of the manufacturing towns disagreed strongly, seeing protection only as a device for enhancing the profits of the landowners at the expense of all those who would have to pay a higher price for bread. Lord Liverpool was a relatively late convert to the case that some measure was necessary to stabilise the supply and price of corn, not least because he had absorbed the theories of Adam Smith and believed generally in minimising restraints on trade. His change of mind did indeed owe much to political considerations. He knew that with parliament as then constituted, the agricultural interest was much stronger than the manufacturing lobby, so resistance to the strongly held views of the former would place at risk the government's survival. Accordingly, he felt compelled to initiate discussions with the leading proponents of a Corn Law; perhaps he hoped to soften their demands, but the bill eventually brought forward by the government showed little evidence of this. The fact that its easy passage into law was accompanied by some rioting in London and elsewhere just had to be accepted as a lesser evil.

The agitation over the Corn Law was soon overtaken by a different concern when, in February 1815, Napoleon left the island of Elba and landed in Southern France. Any initial optimism that the new French regime would be strong enough to deal with him evaporated swiftly, as both civil and military elements recognised him as their emperor. There was one positive effect for the allies, in that the minds of the negotiators in Vienna were wonderfully concentrated, and the almost interminable discussions were brought quickly to a conclusion. In Britain, after some Cabinet debate which had to embrace the serious financial situation as well as Napoleon's actions, the government expressed its determination to proceed by all means to prevent him re-establishing himself as ruler of France. There was opposition, inevitably led in parliament by Earl Grey, who sought to excuse Napoleon’s actions as prompted by the failure of the allies to pay his pension on time, and other slights, and declared himself against a renewal of the war, in which view he was surprisingly supported by the previously bellicose Marquis Wellesley. However, Lord Liverpool had little difficulty in persuading the House of Lords to support military intervention, achieving a majority there of 156-44. The House of Commons followed this lead and parliamentary consideration of the 1815 budget was temporarily shelved, meaning
that the wartime financial arrangements rolled over for another year. There was also unanimity amongst the allies, at least once it became clear that British funds would be available to support their armies, and it was agreed that Britain, Prussia, and Austria should move immediately against Napoleon, with Russian forces to be made available later if necessary, and that the Duke of Wellington should have the overall command.

Napoleon knew that he had to act quickly, before the full strength of the allies could be brought to bear, and if possible, defeat them separately. Accordingly he wasted no time after an acclaimed reappearance in Paris, and marched his reconstituted army into Belgium where Wellington mustered a hotchpotch of British, Dutch and German troops, and exerted looser control over the Prussian army under Blucher. The denouement was swift, although Napoleon began by demonstrating his undiminished skills as a commander by totally out-maneuuvring, or using Wellington’s word, ‘humbugging’ the allies at Quatre-Bras and Ligny, and seemed to have achieved his aim of splitting the armies opposed to him. Military experts and others have argued since, over what he should have done next, with the consensus perhaps being that he fought the right battle, but made too many tactical mistakes. Probably this view does scant justice to Wellington’s capabilities, especially in a defensive role, and to the Prussian general, Blucher’s resilience, which attributes contributed to their inflicting a crushing defeat on Napoleon at Waterloo, outside Brussels on 18th June 1815. This really was the end for him, not least because Wellington gave him no time to recover. The allied armies moved immediately to re-occupy Paris, rather than pausing to re-provision or mop up resistance, and the French Emperor abdicated for the second and last time.

The allies then faced a re-run of the arguments about what to do with Napoleon, and what to do with France. After his detention, the British preference was for a new French regime to deal with Napoleon as a traitor, but the government soon had to accept that in the eyes of most European rulers he had been a sovereign Emperor (of Elba), and could not under International Law be convicted of treason against a fellow ruler. Reluctantly, the British government took the responsibility for confining him and passed an act of parliament to allow this. As a result, Napoleon, who had confidently expected to be conveyed to the United States as an honoured guest of the Royal Navy, found himself on the isolated island of St. Helena to spend his remaining years as a prisoner. It was clear to all, that the lenient treatment of France a year earlier had backfired spectacularly, with the easy collapse of the Bourbon
regime, and the swift re-establishment of the Napoleonic state. Swathes of the citizenry, and especially the army had been complicit in this, so the themes of any new settlement were expected to be punishment and security against the same thing happening again. However after some Cabinet debate, and rather contrary to the Prime Minister’s wishes, the British voice along with that of Russia spoke still for relative moderation, so the boundaries of France were moved back only to the line of 1790, which meant relatively minor losses of territory in the North and East. It was decided that the security of the allies would be best served by temporary occupation of French frontier areas and fortresses by an allied army, 150000 strong under Wellington’s command rather than by permanent cession of territory traditionally French, as desired by Austria, Prussia, and some of the smaller nations of Europe which had suffered most from Napoleon’s rampages. By the terms of the 1815 Treaty of Paris, France was compelled to pay a total indemnity of 700 million Francs, (equivalent to £35 million) during the next five years, to compensate nationals of other countries for disruption caused by her armies, and to fund the occupying armies, so Britain could cease to be the paymaster of Europe; at Lord Liverpool’s personal instigation, the museums of Paris also lost most of the artefacts looted by Napoleon from across Europe, whose return had not been a condition of the 1st Treaty of Paris. Unsurprisingly, the Bourbon regime exacted some revenge for its humiliation, with Marshal Ney the highest profile casualty; his fate, shot for treason, was sealed when Lord Liverpool refused to intervene after sentence had been pronounced, disregarding a direct plea from the Marshal’s wife. This was to be his last decision relating to the war, because peace endured, at least for Britain. Lord Liverpool, whose twenty year ministerial career up till then had mainly proceeded against a background of war, was to spend the remaining twelve years of his premiership wrestling with problems associated with the transition to peace, and the industrial revolution, and then beginning the task of modernising the fabric of the nation.

3.3. Post-War Traumas

By the time Parliament met again in early 1816, the 2nd Treaty of Paris ending the war had already been signed by France, but this did not stop the opposition wanting its say, especially in the persons of Henry Brougham in the House of Commons, and Lord Grenville in the Lords. Not surprisingly, given his normally hawkish attitude, the latter criticised the territorial moderation of the treaty, yet somewhat inconsistently opposed both the financial exactions and the temporary occupation of northern
France, but the government achieved comfortable majorities in both Lords divisions, (64 and 70), and in the Commons by 240-77. In the House of Commons at least, this was just a preliminary skirmish, with the real battle certain to come when the government attempted to get approval for its budget. The need for retrenchment was accepted by all, but there was much less agreement on how far it should go.

For reasons discussed in a later chapter, the government, probably misguidedly, chose a different course from the previous year by proposing to retain Pitt’s income tax, albeit at half its previous levels, (reduced to a maximum of 5% levied on income greater than £200 per annum) rather than accepting its removal, at least temporarily, and compensating as far as possible with new direct taxes, the path chosen a year earlier. Other proposals were more aligned to public opinion; their budget pared expenditure by reducing the establishment of the army and the navy, by abolishing some sinecures, and by slowing work on the Prince Regent’s building projects in Brighton and Windsor. However, the perception that a promise to abandon income tax when hostilities ended was being broken, coupled with embarrassingly inept presentation of the proposals by Chancellor of the Exchequer, Vansittart, in the House of Commons led to a substantial government defeat, 238-201. Lord Liverpool had no choice but to give way and to instruct Vansittart to recast the budget without income tax, and a malt tax, which had also been imposed only for the duration of the war, and which was thought bound to attract the wrath of parliament, after the greater matter had been settled. More borrowing had to be arranged to bridge the gap. The surrender to the will of the House of Commons was almost total, yet the motion of no confidence which sought the dismissal of the government was defeated by only 29 votes. It was thought by some that the motion might have been carried if the leading Whig spokesman, Henry Brougham, had not completely misjudged the requirements of the occasion, by making a violently partisan speech rather than presenting himself as a potential senior figure in a new government. The loss of a key budgetary measure, followed by such a narrow victory on a confidence motion, certainly placed the future of the government in doubt, but the Prince Regent would not countenance their resignation, when Lord Liverpool immediately broached the matter with him. The Prince was probably in tune with the will of parliament; the members, especially the less committed groupings which had swung the outcomes, had sent the strongest possible warning to the government about the course to be followed, but had stopped short of willing the resignation of the ministers who had just secured victory in a war lasting a generation. A pattern for the next few years with regard to financial matters had been set, with the government hedged in by the demands of parliament for
reduced expenditure, lower taxes, and more protection against agricultural imports. In 1816, the government only got its way over one major financial issue, winning acceptance that consideration of a return to a gold based currency, which was supposed to be engineered within 6 months of the end of hostilities, could be delayed until 1818, nominally to give time for currency markets across Europe to stabilise.

In addition to the government’s difficulties in parliament in 1816, there was an upsurge of unrest in the country at large, especially in the large industrial towns. It was no surprise that the reduction in demand for war supplies had led to cut-backs in the numbers employed in many factories and smaller scale enterprises, and to those people without jobs as a result, were added others discharged from the army and navy. It was anticipated that employment would increase when reduced taxes allowed increased spending, but no-one expected the effects to be immediate, and the higher price of bread, widely blamed on the Corn Law of the previous year, acted in the opposite direction. It could be hoped that overseas markets closed during the war would re-open to exports, and perhaps that new markets might be found, but again these improvements could not be expected to happen over-night. In an age when the state made no social provision and locally raised funds were becoming insufficient in some regions to help all the destitute, high levels of unemployment meant widespread hardship, and it was not just those without work who suffered. Factory owners, some by necessity, others opportunistically, reduced wages, and while it can be argued that this, by allowing reductions in prices might have helped to stimulate demand, such a thesis makes the doubtful assumption that those buying goods were then mainly a different population from those making them. In turn, hardship led to unrest, whether strikes, machine breaking, mass demonstrations, or riots, and provided fertile ground for the propaganda of the advocates for change, whether unionisation, parliamentary reform or even revolution. The belief that measures like the much-hated Corn Law would only be abolished by a parliament drawn from the whole country rather than a narrow landowning class, was expressed by radicals as diverse as violent working class followers of Thomas Spence, and aristocratic parliamentarians like Sir Francis Burdett and Lord Cochrane, and appeared for a while to be gaining ever wider support.

Nowadays we would certainly expect a government to maintain law and order, but we would also expect attempts to ameliorate the worst aspects of hardship, and positive action to improve the economy. As already noted, in 1816 relief of hardship was seen as almost entirely a local matter, the responsibility of Overseers of the Poor in each
parish, a system in some disarray since some of the largest towns, with populations of tens of thousands, were parts of single parishes with rudimentary mechanisms for carrying out their functions. As for positive action by the government to improve the economy, the problem was that industrialisation and mass-migration into the towns had created conditions which no one really understood, and it was to be many years before theories allowing more or less rational action in such circumstances were to evolve, and their efficacy is disputed to this day. So there was a near-consensus in Parliament at least, that the government had power and knowledge enough to address only the visible symptoms, namely the unrest, to do which, at least in theory, it had the choice of repressive or conciliatory measures.

The manifestations of unrest were widespread, and included riots in the government’s backyard, in London; shots may have been fired at the Prince Regent’s carriage when he opened Parliament in early 1817. There was never any chance that the government approach would be conciliatory since that was seen as a first step on a path to revolution; rather the assumption was that until the economic situation improved, the populace would have to be held in check. The robust exercise of the powers of the local magistracy was thought key to managing the problems, but the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, had to provide support, moral and sometimes tangible in the form of detachments of troops, to back up the magistrates in their tasks of dispersing crowds and making arrests. The government also had to decide whether it was necessary to extend the powers of the magistracy, and to take other measures to suppress the spread of inflammatory and revolutionary nostrums. In general these decisions were taken in discussions between Lord Liverpool and Sidmouth, with Castlereigh involved sometimes, because he had to get any agreed measures approved by the House of Commons. It is an irony that Castlereigh, who was probably least responsible of the three, for the repressive policy followed, even if he fully agreed with it, was the subject of the greatest execration both at the time and afterwards, though he really did not help his reputation with his uncompromising public utterances. Lord Liverpool and the Home Secretary were more circumspect.

After wide consultations, the government decided later that year (1817) to suspend Habeas Corpus, thereby allowing magistrates to detain indefinitely without trial those suspected of criminal conduct, especially the planning and incitement of riots.,. The debates in the House of Lords, where most of the main figures sat, revealed that Lord Grenville, always hard-line on such matters was willing to support the government not least because Lord Liverpool had taken the precaution of consulting
him beforehand, and that the two opposition leaders were far apart on this issue. Lord Grey struggled to find a coherent position, indicating that he thought the danger arising from agitation was small but that he would have supported a clamp-down on meetings. However, suspension of Habeas Corpus was for him a step too far. In spite of Grey’s reservations, Lord Liverpool had little trouble in achieving a crushing majority of 150-35, and the House of Commons also strongly supported the measures. Just as in the 1790s, when a shared perception of the need to deal with unrest brought the ‘Portland Whigs’ into alliance with the government, the same issue in the years after 1817 again split the opposition, by causing the Grenvillites to part company with Grey’s Whig party and move slowly towards the fusion with Lord Liverpool’s followers which finally took place in 1822.

The mood of the country was further soured in 1817 by the death in childbirth of Princess Charlotte, who had married Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, (later to be King of Belgium) some two years earlier. Sadly, the child also died. Although seven sons of George III who reached adulthood had between them sired a good number of illegitimate children, (the Duke of Clarence, later King William IV had had ten), Charlotte had been the old King’s only legitimate grandchild, so the future of the dynasty, after the demise of the next generation, was placed in doubt, especially as the surviving sons were all over forty years old, (curiously, the five daughters who survived childhood had produced no children either, nor ever did so). Accordingly, with a great prize at stake, three Royal Dukes, Clarence, Kent, and Cambridge, hurried into marriages, and the succession did eventually pass to the issue of one of these arrangements, Victoria, the daughter of the Duke of Kent. The attendant problem for Lord Liverpool was that at a time when the government and parliament were pursuing every expedient to reduce expenditure, paying for the setting up of three new royal households was no trivial matter. Initial offers of £20000 each per annum had to be pared down, firstly to £10000, but under parliamentary pressure, the Prime Minister eventually had to suffer the embarrassment of settling for only £6000 each, and conveying this news to the disgruntled dukes. (Even allowing a factor of 50 or 60 to provide an estimate of present day value, these grants were a long way short of what was required. The profligate Prince Regent was unable to give much help, so the Royal Dukes in question had no option but to borrow heavily.)

In 1818, political attention turned again to the sphere of foreign relations with a conference of the allied powers scheduled for Aix-La-Chapelle, at which the condition of France would be the main issue. The French government led by the Duc de
Richelieu was desperate to get the allied army of occupation withdrawn from northern France, and disbanded if possible, to remove a continuing source of humiliation and a large charge on the French exchequer. Whether or not they agreed to the early withdrawal of the allied army, the likes of Austria and Prussia were certain to want to exact the full amount settled on them to fund their contributions by the Treaty of Paris of 1815. Castlereigh, Wellington and the Russian Emperor continued to preach moderation towards France, and Lord Liverpool reluctantly allowed himself to be persuaded to reduce the British claims in the hope that other countries would follow suit. The arguments that swayed the Prime Minister included the necessity of guarding against destabilisation of a relatively moderate French government, and concern that the financial uncertainty was impinging on Britain’s own raising of loans at a sensitive time. At any rate, the conference was successful in resolving the issues germane to France, though Lord Liverpool had to rein back Castlereigh who wanted to fix an on-going programme of such meetings. At a time of internal political agitation, the premier had no desire to draw more attention to the country’s involvement with absolutist foreign powers.

The sensitivity mentioned above was bound up with the fact that 1818 was the year set by Parliament for the return of the currency to the gold standard though the government had requested further delay, claiming that all necessary conditions had not yet been met. This view was most strongly opposed by the landowning interest in parliament who saw the restoration of the link with gold as essential if depreciation of the value of the currency, and thus effective devaluation of their assets, were to be halted. The confrontation was defused by the government’s concession of a parliamentary committee to consider the issue, and propose a way forward. The chairman, responsible for steering the deliberations and reporting the outcomes, was Robert Peel, who had recently resigned from the position of Chief Secretary for Ireland. The committee had been packed by the government with its supporters, so a fudge of some kind, which might have given the government most of what it wanted, would have been expected. However, the evidence presented for a return to the gold standard was more convincing than that in favour of a continuation of the status quo, and that was all that mattered to Peel. (As many were to discover over the next thirty years, neither loyalty to colleagues, nor considerations of personal advantage, carried much weight with Peel, if they conflicted with his judgement as to the best course of action.) The process began immediately, though some care was taken to adjust the price of gold gradually to the face value of the currency, over the next few
years. As things turned out, neither the hopes of the proponents, the bullionists, nor the fears of the opponents were to be justified in future years.

Otherwise, the parliamentary session of 1818 saw Lord Liverpool allocating funds for a program of church building in newly populous areas of England, a concession of sorts to the view that something more than repression was necessary to cope with unrest in the industrial cities. The personal initiative stemmed from the Prime Minister's strong Christian beliefs, and owed much to the influence on him of an Anglican pressure group, 'the Hackney Phalanx'. It becomes more significant with the benefit of hindsight, in the light of the conviction of the historian, Halevy, that intensity of religious feeling was a large factor in Britain's avoidance of revolution during these troubled times. The sum of a million pounds was set aside, (out of total government expenditure of £67 million in 1818) and a further half million pounds was added in 1824, so it was a significant commitment; by 1835, 212 'commissioner's churches' had been built, and a further 208 enhanced with repairs and extensions. The initiative also triggered private philanthropy which produced more new churches in the next few decades. At this time, Lord Liverpool also gave strong support to the factory bill introduced by Sir Robert Peel (father of the aforementioned Robert), which placed the first limits on the hours which could be worked by children. The first faint portents of the reforming government of the 1820s had appeared. A general election was held in June 1818; the future of the government was not threatened directly by the results, but its loss of about thirty seats accorded with a widespread feeling that it was not coping adequately with all the nation's problems, though that feeling did not extend to a belief that any other selection of ministers was likely to do better.

1819 was undoubtedly the most difficult year experienced by the government, both inside and outside parliament. It was a year of huge political meetings, of Henry 'Orator' Hunt, and Peterloo. Early in the year, the government suffered defeats in the House of Commons over measures to reduce the number of offences subject to the death penalty, and to reform the constitutions of Scottish burghs. Though neither measure was of central importance, Lord Liverpool became very concerned about what he saw as a lack of respect in parliament towards his ministry and expressed some doubt as to their continuing in office, but a substantial victory in what was essentially a vote of confidence restored his equilibrium. He had been Prime Minister for seven difficult years, bearing a crushing workload, and since the victorious conclusion of the war, there had been few obvious successes to cheer him, so it is scarcely surprising that he took some of the government's difficulties to heart.
Occasional talk of resignation became a safety valve during his later years in office, but only once was there any chance of its happening, and his colleagues learned to discount the warnings.

The ending of the parliamentary session saw the start of a summer of agitation, culminating in the infamous ‘Massacre of Peterloo’ in Manchester on 16th August 1819. The lamentable affair resulted from a botched effort by magistrates to halt a meeting and arrest ‘Orator’ Hunt who had come to speak for his usual programme of reform. A large crowd rioted and their behaviour panicked poorly trained mounted soldiers into advancing on them with sabres drawn, and in the resulting confusion large numbers of bystanders including women and children were ridden down and slashed, many were injured, and eleven died. A potent symbol of oppression had been supplied, and the release of the content of Lord Sidmouth’s promptly dispatched letter praising the conduct of the responsible magistrates, triggered further outrage. Clearly, the government was determined to ensure a firm response to any other incidents and thought that this required open and unconditional backing for law enforcers in all circumstances. The Home Secretary pressed for parliament to be recalled immediately to consider the state of the country, but Lord Liverpool withheld agreement, wishing to avoid any wider signs of panic. In a letter sent at the time to Canning he expressed the view that much of the country was growing in prosperity, although there remained areas of hardship; as always, he saw agitation for political change as an expression of this, and so transient, rather than the fixed will of the lower classes. Nonetheless, he gave way later in the year on the question of an early return of parliament, but insisted that rather than just placing reports in front of the members and seeking a consensus, Sidmouth must demonstrate the government’s resolve by tabling measures aimed at further restricting agitation and protest. The result was the much criticised, (at least, in retrospect), ‘Six Acts’.

Viewed now, the new laws actually seem relatively restrained, but this is rather misleading because they built on a structure which already incorporated severe sanctions; for example, agitators and pamphleteers could be charged not just with libel, which could be costly enough, but with sedition which carried maximum penalties of transportation or even execution. (The most famous pamphleteer, William Cobbett spent time in prison early in the decade, fled to the United States in 1817 to avoid arraignment for sedition, and after his return two years later, had to defend regular prosecutions for libel, before he more or less reversed his views late in life). The new powers included the prohibition of all but officially sanctioned
meetings, the banning of military training and exercising of ‘volunteers’, (such as the members of the burgeoning political unions, set up to agitate for parliamentary reform), and made provisions for seizures of arms. Additionally, stamp duty was applied to cheap newsletters produced as single page, hand-written leaflets, which was a format which until then had avoided taxation. It was thought better to try to prevent their content seeing the light of day and being read by those from the artisan and labouring classes, than to engage in unpopular prosecutions of the likes of Cobbett, after the event. All publishers at this time lived a hand-to-mouth existence, as is illustrated by the shortish life-spans of many of the most famous journals like the Edinburgh Review; consumers, especially at the low end of the social scale could not afford to pay much, so any increase in cost and sale-price almost guaranteed bankruptcy and closure. The restrictive measures contained in the Six Acts were topped off by an order which allowed for the recruitment of ten thousand additional soldiers, who would be added to those already distributed round the country and available to assist the magistracy. Lord Liverpool, who had seemed until then to tend towards moderation, as regards repressive measures, left no doubt as to his hardened attitude as he took the lead in getting the proposals through the House of Lords, and the widespread concern of the governing class is demonstrated by the large attendances which gave overwhelming support, (votes were won by 159-34 and 178-47). As always, stressing the economic factors, the premier placed the blame for unrest on population growth, the end of the war, and the introduction of machinery, and pointed out that conditions were worse in the United States where the form of government was closer to what the political agitators claimed to want. At the same time, some money for relief was given to the West of Scotland to avert famine, but the possibility of providing money to cultivate marginal land, so increasing food supplies and possibly reducing prices, was discussed, but rejected. The orthodoxy owed maybe to an overly literal reading of Adam Smith was that governments should only help in extreme cases, and eschew more general initiatives (mercantilism) interfering with the proper operation of the market.

The next year, 1820, saw a threat directed at the heart of government with the unmasking of the gruesome Cato Street Conspiracy in which Arthur Thistlewood and his co-conspirators plotted to overwhelm the Cabinet while they were dining together, murder them, and parade their severed heads through London to initiate a revolution. Lord Sidmouth’s spies detected the plot some time before its proposed execution, but Lord Liverpool and his colleagues were drilled in collective self-defence by the Duke of Wellington, with a view to letting the conspiracy proceed to a denouement to
ensure the capture of all the participants. At the last minute, common sense prevailed, and arrests were made before-hand, in February 1820. Thistlewood, for whom this was not the first essay at revolution, and three of his most prominent associates were publicly hanged and decapitated (after death), but far from this triggering an escalation of the unrest of the previous few years, it almost signalled the end of the current round. Shortly before these executions in late April, the events known now as the Scottish Insurrection had taken place in West and Central Scotland, in which weavers and metal-workers had marched and threatened violence. Although fertile in legends for future nationalist and working class traditions, and disastrous for some of the 88 arrested, (there were three executions and eighteen transportations), only a few of the various demonstrations had attracted as many as fifty participants, so the unrest hardly represented a serious threat to the state. Soon the measures introduced in the previous year, applied vigorously under the aegis of Lord Chancellor Eldon began to cow agitators of all types, and far more importantly, economic recovery gained real traction. The price of bread had been falling for some time, exports had begun to rise, feeding into new employment opportunities, and although conditions in the industrial cities (and many rural villages) remained dreadful by our standards, the worst seemed over to many people. As a result, reformers and protesters struggled to find mass support, and as the country calmed down, the government quietly allowed repressive measures to lapse.

3.4. The King, the Constitution and Ireland

Early in 1820, King George III died. The obligatory general election was held a couple of months later, but made little difference to the balance of support between government and opposition in the House of Commons. Given that the new King, George IV, had been exercising the monarch’s full powers as Regent for almost ten years it might have been expected that his formal accession would have had little impact on the government. However, such a view would not have allowed for the destabilising potential of the broken relationship between the new King and his wife, Queen Caroline. The ramifications were to dominate the political scene for more than a year, and come close to ending Lord Liverpool’s ministry. A more detailed account of the events which included the Queen’s return from Italy; the investigation into her conduct in the House of Lords, (effectively a trial) which produced such a small majority for a ‘guilty verdict’ that the proceedings had to be dropped; her exclusion from the King’s coronation; her death; and the final embarrassment to the King and his ministers caused by the passage of her funeral cortege through London; is
presented in a later chapter. One consequence was the resignation of George Canning from the government and his total if temporary alienation from the King. Those events, on top of disputes about the new King’s determination to give preferment to relatives of his latest mistress, had by late 1821 destroyed his working relationship with the premier, whom he then subjected to public slights. It was almost unprecedented for a Prime Minister to withhold his resignation in such circumstances, but Lord Liverpool did so, secure in the knowledge that he commanded the loyalty of the Cabinet and was supported by a majority in the House of Commons. (The only comparable previous event was the ministerial ‘strike’ of 1746 when a whole government resigned, one-by-one, because of a King’s conduct towards them, leaving that monarch no option but to invite them back into office, ‘cap in hand’.) Lord Liverpool achieved the same result with far less disruption and fuss, when the King was persuaded by everyone he consulted that he would have to backtrack, and relations between the two resumed some kind of normality, though there was to be another major confrontation soon afterwards. Though perhaps not obvious at the time, a significant shift towards our present arrangements, with a dominant Prime Minister and Cabinet, and a relatively powerless monarch, was part of the fallout from King George IV’s petulant behaviour in the early 1820s.

Before the affair of Queen Caroline began to dominate proceedings, Lord Liverpool responded to a Whig motion by giving voice to one of the main themes of the remaining years of his ministry, reform of conditions of trade. While cautioning reformers that Britain could not proceed unilaterally, he stated his own beliefs that protection should be minimised, and that the law should have as small a part to play in commerce as possible. This support for economic reform can be contrasted with his very different views on parliamentary reform which he expressed in a debate on the disfranchisement of Grampound, a rotten burgh just outside Truro in Cornwall, shortly after the death of Queen Caroline. Even those like Lord Liverpool, with the most rigid views of the inviolability of the franchise, did accept that action should be taken when corruption in a constituency became too flagrant, as in this case where some of the few burghers eligible to vote had been imprisoned for accepting bribes. So, when Lord John Russell, beginning his long career, brought forward a motion in the House of Commons to remove from Grampound its right to representation, the argument centred not on whether this should occur, but on what should be done with its two seats. Lord Liverpool and those of like-minded thought that the seats should simply be given to the county in which the disfranchised constituency lay, while Russell and his fellow reformers wanted the seats to be given to one of the large
industrial towns, which at that time had no representation even though in some cases their populations exceeded a hundred thousand. Manchester and Leeds seemed particularly deserving cases, not just on the grounds of their size, but because each had in the past sent members to parliament, before being disfranchised for electoral misdemeanours long forgotten. After vigorous debate in both Houses of Parliament, the matter was settled in favour of adding the seats to the county, but some of the arguments propounded by Lord Liverpool when supporting the winning cause in the House of Lords really do look archaic. He asserted that electors in large industrial towns could not be trusted to behave honestly or decently, and that candidates for such seats would be little better. Of course, there was plenty evidence of atrocious and corrupt behaviour at the contested elections of the period, but those most responsible were as often as not the agents of the aristocracy. It is also strange to consider the attention given to this one constituency in the context that ten years later the Great Reform Act, which also owed much to Lord John Russell, fully or partially disfranchised well over a hundred burghs at a stroke, but of course Lord Liverpool and his opponents were contending as much over a principle as the individual case.

Ireland had been relatively quiescent during the worst of the disturbances in the industrial towns of Britain, but this situation began to change in the early 1820s. A combination of food shortages and agitation led by Daniel O'Connell led to serious unrest. A wet summer caused a partial failure of the potato crop in 1821, and the government became sufficiently concerned to make some funds available to purchase extra food. Conflict between landlords and tenants escalated, with ‘Whiteboy’ gangs of thousands roaming the countryside, destroying farm buildings and haystacks, looting, and even murdering a few land-owners. The government reacted by passing an Insurrection Bill and suspending Habeas Corpus for 6 months, and succeeded in damping things down. Predictably, to follow repression, the conciliatory appointment of the Marquis of Wellesley as Lord Lieutenant was made, also during 1821, (his sympathy for Catholic Emancipation was well known), though the usual balance was preserved by appointing the ‘protestant’ Henry Goulburn as Chief Secretary. However, O’Connell’s skilful leadership during the next few years fed off an apparent weakening of ‘protestant’ resolve in Britain to nurture a growing movement for reform based on his Catholic Association.

George Canning, after his resignation from the government, introduced in 1822 a bill in the House of Commons to remove political disabilities from Irish Catholic Peers; which passed there, but was defeated, in large part due to Lord Liverpool’s efforts, in
the House of Lords. Thereafter, 1824 saw an attempt to remove Catholic disabilities on the British mainland, when a bill was brought forward in the House of Lords to give Catholics the franchise, on the same basis as everyone else, and to allow them to serve as magistrates. Rather confusingly, given his normal opposition to franchise reform and Catholic Emancipation, Lord Liverpool did not oppose this bill, but it also was defeated, this time mainly by the efforts of Lord Chancellor Eldon. It may have appeared to O'Connell that Lord Liverpool, one of the chief bulwarks of protestant supremacy, was wavering, though in reality he had probably judging the proposal narrowly as only affecting the rights of a small British minority, ignoring the Irish context. If so he was displaying rare political naivety. Lord Liverpool had few illusions about Ireland, thinking that measures to improve conditions for the mass of the population were appropriate on the grounds of fairness, but he had little hope that they would serve to eliminate agitation and unrest. In 1825 the government did move again to try to calm the Irish situation by passing legislation to improve the legal status of tenants but at the same time they banned O'Connell’s Catholic Association; the combination of ‘carrot and stick’ which was to be applied repeatedly without enduring success for the rest of the century. Pacification of Ireland was a major part of the case put forward by its supporters for Catholic Emancipation, and in that year (1825), yet another bill was passed in the House of Commons (248-227). When the bill reached the House of Lords it was strongly opposed by the King’s eldest brother, the Duke of York, heir presumptive to the throne, which suggested that a royal veto would extend beyond the current reign. Lord Liverpool confirmed that his attitude to Irish Emancipation had not changed. On this occasion, he chose to rehearse old arguments about split loyalties of Catholics, potential interference by the Pope, and the threat to the Irish (Episcopal) church. In reality, his main concern was that any concession would be a massive encouragement to those seeking to separate Britain and Ireland. Probably swayed at least as much by the Duke of York as the premier, the House of Lords threw out the measure (178-130). The next time the issue was destined to be debated there, the Duke was dead, Lord Liverpool disabled, and the outcome was very different.

3.5. A Slow-Motion Cabinet Reshuffle

By the middle of 1822 Lord Liverpool had been Prime Minister for ten years, and had held senior office for twice as long with only one short intermission. Although politics proceeded at a more leisurely pace than now, with Parliament sitting for less than half the year, and government responsibilities much narrower, it is hardly
surprising that the pressure of events and a heavy workload were beginning to take a
toll of his health. On top of this, he had recently suffered the personal trauma of
losing his wife who had died after herself suffering years of poor health. His own
determination to continue in office was unaffected, but there is no doubt that he had
begun to realise that some other ministers were aging, exhausted or otherwise less
able to cope, making fresh blood essential. Also, as I shall explain in a later chapter,
he wished to move the political centre of gravity of the Cabinet in the direction of
more liberal conservatism, and this could only be done by making changes in
personnel. He proceeded very slowly for two main reasons; the first was his extreme
reluctance to offend any of the ministers who had supported him loyally for a decade,
and the second was uncertainty over the future of Canning, which remained a
serious bone of contention between him and the King. As mentioned earlier, that
minister had seen fit to resign in early 1821 over the government’s policy towards the
King’s consort and, the King had taken this as a personal affront in the light of
rumours of an affair between Canning and the then Princess of Wales many years
earlier. Accordingly, the King refused out of hand Lord Liverpool’s request that
Canning should return quickly to his position of President of the Board of Control for
India. Lord Liverpool had to accept this, because the majority of the Cabinet thought
that Canning had behaved badly, but the premier warned that he would not accept a
permanent veto on Canning by the King, or indeed his own fellow ministers.

At least, Lord Liverpool was left with a vacant ministerial position with which he could
start his Cabinet reshuffle. However he suffered an immediate setback when Robert
Peel turned the job-offer down ostensibly on health grounds, but probably his real
reasons were that he had expected to be offered higher office after his successful
stint as Chief Secretary for Ireland, and that he doubted if the government would
survive in the light of the King’s openly expressed hostility to its leader. Peel’s
judgement of his claims, if not of the government’s longevity, proved correct because
he soon received the offer of the Home Office in succession to Lord Sidmouth, who
went into semi-retirement as a Minister without Portfolio, though still in the Cabinet;
this time Peel accepted the position, in January 1822. The problem of Canning
remained, but eventually Lord Liverpool reached a compromise with the King that
resulted in Canning being appointed as the next Governor General of India (strictly
then, of the Presidency of Fort William in Bengal), with the guarantee of a peerage at
the end of his term of office. The Prime Minister deserves credit for staunchly
upholding Canning’s interests, and no doubt planned on a restoration to the Cabinet
after a relatively short term in India, but given what we can deduce about his wider
aims, it was a setback. However, he made sensible use of the still-vacant Cabinet position. He finally cemented an alliance with the Grenvillites by offering the head of the family, the Marquis of Buckingham, a dukedom and inviting their most prominent member in the House of Commons, Charles Williams Wynn to enter the Cabinet in Canning’s old post. Lord Grenville himself, much happier by then in his library than in the House of Lords had largely withdrawn from front line politics.

Lord Liverpool undoubtedly had plans for further changes, but the next was forced upon him when Lord Castlereigh in the midst of preparing for a congress at Verona in August 1822, suffered a sudden calamitous mental breakdown and committed suicide. The King, at the time on an official visit to Scotland attended by Robert Peel, had little trouble in predicting Lord Liverpool’s response and sent to warn him that he still expected Canning to go to India, while trying unsuccessfully to win Peel to the idea that the Duke of Wellington should succeed Castlereigh. However, Lord Liverpool was never likely to give way again, and with his cabinet colleagues convinced that he remained indispensable as premier, the King was persuaded, ironically by Wellington who shared his own feelings of dislike, that he had to accept Canning as Foreign Secretary, and Leader of the House of Commons. Just as with his father and Charles James Fox in 1806, the King and his new Foreign Secretary quickly adapted to the need for frequent contact and achieved a generally amicable working relationship, interrupted only by the occasional misunderstandings inevitable between two volatile characters.

With the stand-off between the King and his Prime Minister not yet resolved, Wellington rather than Canning did replace Castlereigh as the British plenipotentiary at the Verona congress in what had become an almost impossible mission to prevent other powers intervening militarily in Spain. There, as in many other nations, the restoration of ‘legitimate’ rulers after the Napoleonic War had led to conflict. The returned Bourbon monarch, King Ferdinand, had compromised not at all with the leaders who had liberated their country with British and Portuguese help, and re-established a despotic regime. In time, his conduct provoked an uprising and he was compelled under duress to grant a democratic constitution. France, which had recently acquired an authoritarian government decided to intervene to rescue the King from the revolutionaries, and had no difficulty in gaining the support of the central European powers at Verona. Wellington, having failed there, then went to Paris and made a final unavailing attempt to dissuade the French government. Lord Liverpool and Canning toyed with the idea of intervention which would have meant
war with France, but Wellington was resolutely opposed, and the Prime Minister reluctantly gave way. Much of the political nation, looking back to the alliance with Spain against France, just a few years earlier, disagreed. Lord Liverpool had to defend an unpopular decision in the House of Lords, and deployed the arguments that another war with France was not in British interests, given the slow recovery from the previous struggle, and that in any event Spain would quickly become a small part of such a clash. He predicted that France would have little trouble in occupying Spain but that in the longer term, her forces were likely to get bogged down in a civil war, as indeed proved to be the outcome. Surprisingly, the normally pacific Grey was one of those demanding British intervention, while at the same time confusedly saying that the country really needed to be at peace. The British government strongly advised the Spanish democrats to give way to French demands but they did not and French armies duly entered Spain, allowing King Ferdinand to revoke the constitution, and to take a bloody revenge on those by whom he had been humiliated. The British government did draw some lines in the sand by making it clear that any French (or Spanish) interference with Portugal would be resisted, and also indicated that reinforcement of the Spanish forces in South America, which were attempting to contain independence movements, would be prevented by British warships. The latter pronouncement was a step on the way to Britain’s later recognition of the independence of the South American states, but there is no doubt that the country had suffered a major loss in prestige in the eyes of many at home and abroad.

In early 1823, Lord Liverpool made further changes to the cabinet when the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nicholas Vansittart was persuaded to accept the largely decorative Cabinet office of Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster by the offer of a peerage, (he became Baron Bexley). The Prime Minister replaced him with a more effective spokesman, Frederick Robinson, who had been President of the Board of Trade, freeing the latter position for William Huskisson who was appointed in February 1823 and entered the Cabinet, a few months later. These appointments completed Lord Liverpool’s one and only reshuffle during almost fifteen years as Prime Minister and gave him a Cabinet of very different complexion to its predecessor. The changes took him eighteen months to effect, where present-day premiers expect to take little more than an afternoon. However, Lord Liverpool left no-one seriously offended or seeking revenge, more or less coerced the King into agreeing to the changes, and managed to bring about a sea-change in the political
alignment of the Cabinet, seemingly without raising suspicions of what he was about, until his arrangements were a fait accompli.

3.6. Liberal Conservatism at Home and Abroad

Lord Liverpool had set the scene for the liberal conservative phase of his premiership, but he had also brought real controversy into the Cabinet room. There was a real divergence of view between those who wished to see continuity with the cautious, laissez faire policies of the previous decade, and those who wanted change. Lord Liverpool had long exercised complete authority in the financial and economic domain, so it was external factors rather than the new balance of views in the Cabinet that finally gave him confidence enough to move strongly in directions presaged by a number of speeches in the preceding years. Thus, he set in motion an assault on indirect taxes in a series of budgets which reduced taxes generally, and especially duties on a whole range of commodities. The new Chancellor of the Exchequer earned his nickname ‘Prosperity Robinson’ in those years, but no ‘insider’ doubted that he was following the premier’s guidance. Apart from these fiscal measures, a wide range of restrictions on trade were eliminated during the same period, whether by legislation in Parliament, or negotiation with foreign trading partners. This was the genesis of the combination of balanced budgets and free trade picked up by Peel and Gladstone amongst others, which became the paradigm of financial policy in the Victorian age. Indeed, at this time, Lord Liverpool made it clear in a letter to Canning that he would have liked to reintroduce the income tax abandoned in 1816, and to have used the increase in revenue to move further and faster in reducing duties (so anticipating Peel in the 1840s). That he did not do so was down to the fact that the earlier arguments and ill-feeling generated by the attempts to retain the income tax were too well remembered in the 1820s, and of course, unlike Peel, he did not have a mandate coming from being newly elected by a much expanded electorate. Still, the measures which were implemented were successful enough through 1823 to 1825 with trade booming to the extent that revenues from the reduced duties often exceeded those before the changes, an outcome helped by a reduction in smuggling which had been rendered less profitable.

Inevitably a booming economy bred speculation, and in spite of Lord Liverpool’s strictures, and his delivery of a stern warning in parliament that he would oppose any measure to recompense losers, country banks first sprang up all over the place with
minimal securities to back them, and then collapsed in great numbers causing a major financial crisis. The government response was to propose legislation which permitted the formation of stronger joint stock banks with more than six partners. Seeing the joint stock banks as serious competition, the Bank of England (a private company then) opposed the measure and the compromise eventually enacted, prevented the joint stock banks from setting up less than 65 miles from London. As compensation for the perceived strengthening of the competition to the Bank of England, it was given the right to set up branches in towns around the country; the project was pursued half-heartedly for a few years, but hostility from local financial interests eventually defeated the initiative. The government also addressed the inflationary issuing of large numbers of bank notes by the country banks by forbidding the printing of notes of small denomination, except by the Bank of England, at least in England; a proposal to extend this measure to Scotland was defeated by agitation in which Sir Walter Scott was prominent. These measures also blazed a trail, though more significant banking legislation was to come from the later administration of Robert Peel.

Mention of Robert Peel is a reminder of another strand of reform that ran through the later years of Lord Liverpool’s government, namely the Home Secretary’s sweeping reforms of the penal code, (especially reducing the severity of the penalties exacted from those committing relatively minor crimes), the prisons, and large parts of the system of administering justice through the courts, in England and indirectly, in Scotland. There is no doubt that Lord Liverpool invested more trust in Peel than in most other ministers and for this reason he played little part in the development of the Home Secretary’s proposals. Nonetheless, he decided how fast to proceed and how best to get Cabinet and parliamentary approval for the reforms, and where necessary used his authority to overcome opposition from the likes of Lord Chancellor Eldon. He had less success in steering Peel’s early moves towards the creation of an organised police force in London, which were made in the last years of his ministry, and opposition across parliament delayed action until a few years later. His closeness politically, if not personally, to Peel had been demonstrated earlier when in 1825 the latter, upset by the vote in the House of Commons in favour of Catholic Emancipation, decided to resign. Lord Liverpool’s response was to state that if that happened he would have to retire since he regarded Peel as the representative in the House of Commons of his own distinctive views, and without Peel in the government he would be too isolated to continue. This caused a ministerial panic and Peel was
eventually persuaded by Canning to withdraw his resignation in the cause of maintaining the government in office.

Reference has already been made to the divergence of views in the Cabinet which resulted from Lord Liverpool’s reshuffle. Lord Liverpool was for most of his career an effective conciliator, but in those years he had his own agenda which placed him firmly on one side of the argument, and lacked his normal patience and consideration because he had been somewhat ground down by poor health, and stressful confrontations with the King and others. As a result Cabinet meetings became forums for discord and disputes, as recorded by Hobhouse, though it needs to be stressed that there were no resignations. Much of the friction centred on Canning, not least because more reactionary members of the Cabinet saw him as having hi-jacked the Prime Minister for the liberal conservative faction. In fact, it is too easy to forget that Canning had been in the Cabinet since 1816, (with the short break referred to above) without much influencing the government’s direction of travel. Things were very different when he returned to office in 1822 as the second man in the government, because he had determined backing from the Prime Minister in his own sphere, and there was a coterie of ministers who were more than willing to follow that lead in their own areas of responsibility, the likes of Peel, Robinson and Huskisson.

The main Cabinet battle-ground was foreign policy, Canning’s direct responsibility, and while his lack of tact, and sometimes, common sense did not help matters, there was a real divergence of view over the substance. Wellington, and those of like mind, saw British initiatives that Castlereigh would not have contemplated, distancing the nation from its allies in central and eastern Europe, and they attributed them to Canning’s advocacy, but sensibly enough saw Lord Liverpool’s support as key to their acceptance by the Cabinet as a whole.

The denouement was an extra-ordinary letter, ostensibly sent by Charles Arbuthnot, the government’s long-serving patronage secretary, but with a large input from his closest friend, the Duke of Wellington, asking the Prime Minister to show more independence of mind in resisting Canning’s propositions. Lord Liverpool must have been shocked, and was certainly piqued, but typically, instead of dismissing the impertinent junior minister, he quite mildly pointed out that he and Canning actually agreed on the aspects of foreign policy that were in dispute. The relevant correspondence supports this assertion and makes it clear that though the Foreign Secretary initiated many lines of policy, the Prime Minister had a significant input and exerted a similar moderating influence to that applied to Castlereigh though normally
in the opposite direction. It is quite clear that when Lord Liverpool disagreed with a proposed initiative, as when Canning wished to visit France for the funeral of King Louis XVIII, and while there, to discuss points of disagreement with the French government, the writ of the Prime Minister ran. Canning did not go.

In Lord Liverpool’s mind it is likely that the Duke of Wellington was much more of a problem than Canning. As indicated, he led the faction of the cabinet which opposed the direction of foreign policy, and lent his great prestige to those who wished for closer alignment of British policy with the central European powers, and for less support to be given to the freedom movements in South America and Greece. Wellington was not above intriguing with foreign ambassadors (and especially their wives) to try to obstruct the government’s policy, and he certainly played on the fears of the King. It was only when Canning broke the unity of the ‘Holy Alliance’ of the central European powers by allying with Russia in support of Greece, that Wellington’s position collapsed, with Canning even replacing him as the favourite of Princess Lieven, the Russian ambassador’s wife. In 1825, Wellington, along with his brother the Marquis of Wellesley also caused problems for the Prime Minister in another sphere, when they supported the candidature of another brother, Gerald, for a bishopric even though by the conventions of the day, the cleric’s marital situation ruled him out; (he was separated from his wife but had not divorced her, leaving room for a suspicion, probably unjustified, that he had not been blameless in the affair). The two grandee brothers, who must have known the rigorous standards that Lord Liverpool set himself in such matters, pursued the matter to embarrassing lengths. Great as was Lord Liverpool’s admiration for the Duke of Wellington’s military qualities, and content as he was to have him lending his prestige to the Cabinet by occupying the quasi-military role of Master of the Ordinance, he entertained few illusions as to the Duke’s political naivety and is on record that it would be best if he were never offered a fully political role. Given the Duke of Wellington’s undistinguished term as Prime Minister, it is difficult to argue strongly against Lord Liverpool’s judgement, though in fairness, the Duke, in his last years seems to have acquired political wisdom enough to restrain the large conservative majority in the House of Lords, in a statesmanlike way.

As mentioned above, by the mid-1820s there were signs that Lord Liverpool’s health was beginning to fail even though he was still a comparatively young man in his middle 50s. Observers noticed that he seemed to need to put a foot up when sitting in the House of Lords, there were trips to Bath, to rest and take the waters, and he
was ill, apparently with very low blood pressure, in 1826. Perhaps, he had begun to think his days in office were numbered, and this is certainly implied by a letter, sent in that year to Frederick Robinson who had requested release from office as Chancellor of the Exchequer on grounds of over-work. The letter anticipated changes and warned Robinson that it would be a bad time to leave office. Paradoxically, the premier's position and that of his government had never been stronger, with even the above-mentioned Cabinet disagreements fading into the background, and the levels of dissention in the country as a whole, lower than they had been since the end of the war. A general election took place in that year, but it hardly altered the status quo in parliament. The comparatively small number of contested seats suggests that, if not completely happy with the government, the political nation recognised that there was no viable alternative. After fourteen years in office there seemed to be nothing to stop Lord Liverpool's government continuing for some years longer and certainly there were few harbingers of the dramatic changes to come in the near future. (Much writing on the period illustrates Butterfield’s depiction of the Whig interpretation of history, in which everything is seen in the light of what came afterwards. There have been plenty historians willing to point to the disagreements touched on above, and to present them as the origins of the splits which destroyed Lord Liverpool's party after his collapse, but I have found little evidence that people thought this way at the time. Rather there is a sense of a government carrying on its business as though it expected to be doing so for some time to come, and opponents with few expectations. Only the Premier with knowledge of his own state of health seems to have had real doubts about the longevity of his ministry, and if or when he shared these doubts, as with Robinson, my suspicion is that his confidants, who had become used to occasional mutterings about resignation, discounted them.)

Two political issues dominated Lord Liverpool’s thoughts as 1826 drew to a close. One was Portugal where British soldiers had been sent following the French invasion of Spain to counter encroachment by Spanish absolutists acting with at least tacit support from the Spanish King and the French government. The British force had stabilised the situation in Portugal, but there was a threat of civil war, and Lord Liverpool and Canning corresponded early in 1827 for what was to be the last time, on how to proceed, and particularly on how to engineer an exit from a commitment which had become open-ended. The problem was to outlast the premierships of both the correspondents. The other matter furnishes strong evidence that Lord Liverpool, for all his concerns about his health, did not intend willingly to give up his office in the near future. He decided to tackle reform of the Corn Law in the 1827 parliament. He
had never been happy with the working of the 1815 Corn Law introduced partly because of the reality of the political strength of the agricultural interest, but also because he saw a need to retain a strong home supply base. The measure had been tailored to protect home producers from cheap corn which might have driven them out of business, but had not met all their aspirations as regards price levels, yet it had more or less blocked off imports rather than restricting them. (Lord Liverpool had wanted foreign supplies to be available when home harvests were poor, to guard against scarcity.) It had been anticipated that the measure would result in prices fluctuating fairly close to the break-price of 80 shillings per quarter, above which price, imports would be allowed; in 1815 this was generally recognised as a fair price for home producers. In practice, prices had varied wildly, rising initially to more than 100 shillings per quarter, then in the 1820s falling sometimes to less than half that price; at either extreme the corn law seemed irrelevant, though that did not stop it being a serious cause of contention. In 1825, Lord Liverpool suggested that given the tax reductions since 1815, the agricultural community could stand a break-price of 60 shillings per quarter rather than 80 shillings. Over the next eighteen months, with the indispensable aid of Huskisson, he had developed a fairly complex proposal based on this view which removed any prohibition on imports when the price had risen above 52 shillings per quarter, but applied a tapering duty of 40 shillings, decreasing to zero when the price reached 73 shillings. The measure also contained provisions for improving the assessment of the true price of corn, taking account of regional variations. Having forced the Cabinet to acquiesce, and knowing that the changes were unlikely to get an easy ride from the agricultural lobby when parliament resumed sitting in February 1827, Lord Liverpool was especially reliant on Canning, who as Leader would present it to House of Commons, while he himself took responsibility for the measure in the House of Lords. When it became clear that Canning was too ill to come to London, it seemed that Huskisson would have to take charge of the measure in the lower House, but Lord Liverpool decided that he, as a committed ‘free-trader’, would arouse too much hostility. Accordingly the Prime Minister gave the task to Peel and was then faced with the kind of interview he always abhorred, to explain to the disgruntled Huskisson why he was not to take the lead. Perhaps, worry about this tipped the balance for his fragile health, because two days before he was due to present the Corn Bill to the House of Lords, on 17th February 1827, Lord Liverpool collapsed with a severe stroke, at his home. In his unavoidable absence, the Corn Bill was scuppered by the agricultural lobby with the aid of the Duke of Wellington, a few months later, though an amended version was passed by the same rather chastened Duke a year afterwards.
At first there were expectations that Lord Liverpool would recover, though to some degree that might have been purely wishful thinking. His role in keeping the government together was well understood by those in the know, and whoever succeeded him was likely to have great problems with personnel and policies. At any rate, the King did not permit any immediate move to replace him. There can have been few doubts in anyone’s mind that Lord Liverpool’s own choice of successor would have been Canning, but a smooth transfer of power would have required his continuing presence in the Cabinet Room as a conciliator. After a few weeks, Lord Liverpool recovered enough for his second wife to be able to ask him if he thought he would be able to resume as Prime Minister. His protestation that he was too weak, confirmed what was obvious, so the King, having dabbled with the possibility of offering the position to the Duke of Wellington, duly asked the Foreign Secretary, apparently recovered from his own illness, to form a government. Many of Lord Liverpool’s cabinet, led unsurprisingly by the Duke of Wellington, but less predictably, including Peel, refused to continue in office, leaving Canning no option but to approach the Whigs. The response was unenthusiastic with their greatest figure, the semi-retired Lord Grey refusing to consider office, but enough gave their support, to allow Canning to form a viable government for the few months of life that remained to him. So the ‘party’ of Pitt, rebuilt and expanded by Lord Liverpool, which had largely governed Britain for almost 45 years survived Lord Liverpool’s collapse by little more than a month.

In the weeks which followed, Lord Liverpool recovered most of his faculties, if not his mental equilibrium, so full recovery began to seem possible but a second stroke within a year altered the prognosis, and a third in December 1828 killed him. Ironically, by then he had survived two governments and the Duke of Wellington had become Prime Minister and was soon to prove the truth of Lord Liverpool’s reservations about his political ability. Roman Catholic Emancipation was less than one year off, and parliamentary reform would come in just over three years. Lord Liverpool’s party seemed to have been destroyed and some of the framework of the state in which he had operated was about to change irrevocably. In fact, as we shall see later, his political legacy was much greater than this would suggest, but he died an almost forgotten man, and his funeral involving a dignified progress from his London home to the church in the little village of Hawkesbury in Gloucestershire, though suitably grand, attracted little national attention. Remarkably, it took thirty years for a descendent to get round to marking the place of his interment with a suitably inscribed, if plain, marble plaque. This neglect has been mirrored by
informed opinion, in the years since then. The scarcity of written accounts doing justice to his contribution is matched by a total absence of commemorative stonework or statuary, in London or anywhere else, though he does have a street in the capital, and indirectly, a railway station named after him. At Walmer Castle, the residence of the Warden of the Cinque Ports, which he occupied regularly for over twenty years, a single small portrait is his memorial, whereas fellow Wardens like William Pitt and the Duke of Wellington are commemorated by rooms filled with memorabilia.

It is intended that the brief account of Lord Liverpool’s career which has just been concluded will provide a suitable background against which Lord Liverpool’s contributions in different areas of government can be assessed. However before tackling these matters, it is sensible to look at the qualities which Lord Liverpool brought to his demanding task in government, and the weaknesses which he had to try to overcome. As with all leaders, he was better in some situations than others, and events did not always play to his strengths. The next chapter of the book takes a look at aspects of Lord Liverpool’s personality, world view, and circumstances, which affected his modus operandi as a senior minister.
4. Lord Liverpool's Persona and Private Life

This chapter is mainly a consideration of those aspects of personality which affected the way in which Lord Liverpool conducted himself as Prime Minister, and of the world view which underlay his approach to the issues which confronted him in office. I also deal briefly with his life patterns and personal circumstances, since the former obviously impinged on his official life, and an absence of financial pressures meant that unlike some of his associates, he was never distracted by a need to make money. On the other hand, his easy acquisition of wealth, even though he was the last person to flaunt it, may have inhibited his ability to appreciate the problems facing the majority of the population, while he led the government of the country. I have avoided the temptation to indulge in amateur psychology; references to personal characteristics have been culled directly or indirectly from accounts and observations by contemporaries, whether diarists, portraitists or cartoonists, but I have eschewed speculations about the influences of heredity, upbringing, or other life experiences on his persona. I am concerned with the consequences of my subject being as he was, not about why he was that way. I begin by considering criticisms made by contemporary and later commentators.

4.1. A Man Misjudged – Hidden Strengths and Overstated Weaknesses?

It has been stated by some that the long-time premier was a weak man, easily overborne by difficult events and strong personalities. I do not think that the career which has just been outlined argues for this view, but aspects of his persona seem at first sight to lend support to its proponents. He was prone to occasional displays of emotion which were seen as excessive in an age at least as used to masculine tears as ours. Thus a diarist noted that a public quarrel between Lord Liverpool and Canning reduced the former to a tearful wreck, not long after his early promotion to government office, and it was common currency that the event was not unique. Years afterwards, at Lord Castlereigh’s funeral he broke down in a fashion which embarrassed his colleagues, including those who had been closer associates of the erstwhile Foreign Secretary. Members of the Cabinet in the 1820s disclosed that his emotions occasionally got the better of him, when his views were opposed in that forum, though there was no suggestion that this was a precursor to his giving way over the matter in question. No doubt, his colleagues were embarrassed, and perhaps frustrated that their freedom to press the points in question was curtailed,
but it needs to be remembered that these were years when the premier’s authority increased rather than the opposite.

In early manhood, the young politician was certainly susceptible to the influence of those closest to him. The near-suffocating interest taken by his father in his career continued until he had attained senior office and beyond, and the son appeared to tolerate a level of interference that led some contemporaries to believe he was little more than his father’s mouthpiece. The aforementioned youthful friendship with George Canning left few observers in doubt as to the dominant influence. However all was not as it seemed in either case; the first Lord Liverpool was humoured in many things thanks to the filial respect of his son, but his fierce opposition to the latter’s proposed marriage was not allowed to prevent it, and where the two had divergent views as on the slave trade, the son expressed his own robustly, fairly soon after entering Parliament. As for Canning, when he caused real offence at the beginning of William Pitt’s second administration, Lord Liverpool did not take cheap revenge, but he made no effort to rescue the friendship, and its re-establishment almost ten years later was on very different terms as is shown by the ensuing correspondence. The premier’s letters are open, friendly, and un-patronising but the authority derived from his social status and office is present, if understated. There is no evidence that anyone exercised ascendancy over Lord Liverpool in his later years, whatever the Duke of Wellington and Charles Arbuthnot might have thought in the 1820s. Indeed, the great soldier’s frustrations demonstrate the resolve of the Prime Minister once his mind was made up since the efforts of ‘the first citizen of Europe’ to get more attention paid to his own views were futile. Even more striking evidence of that fixity of purpose was given by the Prime Minister’s refusal to resign when King George IV attempted to get rid of him in 1821. No premier before him, from Walpole to Pitt the Younger, had shown like-defiance of a monarch’s wishes.

Another element of his detractors’ evidence for weakness is the tone of many contemporary references to him. Throughout his career he was often referred to in political circles as ‘Jenky’ or before his father died, ‘young Jenky’, diminutives which lack the gravitas one might expect for a long time Prime Minister and peer. Richard, Marquis Wellesley held him in contempt until he was well established as Prime Minister, and referred to him in correspondence and conversation as ‘Stinkingson’, (I think the insult was a play on a name, rather than anything more specific). Jealousy of Lord Liverpool’s rapid rise, in comparison with their own slower progress, must have fed into this and Canning’s concurrent disparagement, but their barbs shouldn’t
be completely ignored, even if they reflected a failure of judgement of the perpetrators as much as weakness in the recipient. Wellesley and Canning are only two of a long list of people whom Lord Liverpool failed to impress much at early acquaintance; King George III and Prince Metternich are two other examples, but the other thing these sceptics have in common is that sooner or later, they usually acknowledged that their initial assessment had been wrong. William Pitt the Younger was one of the few to place a high value on the future Prime Minister from an early point in their acquaintance-ship. Otherwise, the respect of his associates was usually hard-earned by Lord Liverpool, and his reputation has suffered from comments made before the process was completed.

The tendencies to make unfavourable early impressions, and to take time to grow into any role, are indications that there was much about being in public office which did not come naturally to an introvert, who was at least until his mature years, diffident and not wholly convinced about his own merits. Far from pursuing his own advancement single-mindedly, as his father wished, he invariably held back during the first decade of the 19th century, and it was probably only after he became Prime Minister that his self-esteem began to rise. He seems never to have been much at ease in male company, however convivial, largely limiting his appearances to formal gatherings in parliament, the Cabinet room, and unavoidably, the royal audience chamber and drawing room. Saving discussions with his closest advisors, he would perhaps have preferred to conduct government exclusively on paper. Social gatherings were not to his liking, even when organised for political purposes and his membership of White's Club, a venue where he could have sampled the hopes and fears of his followers informally, was allowed to lapse part-way through his premiership, following some years of disuse. He entertained infrequently at his country residences, and when he did, the guests were usually close colleagues brought together to discuss future policy, rather than a wider circle asked to meet the Prime Minister in a relaxed setting. Occasionally he did extend the list, but those invited derived little pleasure from their visits and there were complaints about the absence of organised entertainment, and of a host who was hardly capable of light conversation. As a result of all this he remained quite a distant figure to most of the political class, and certainly he seemed to know a lot more about their thoughts, fears and aspirations than most of them did about his.

Long before the television age, a politician’s appearance could help or hinder a career. William Pitt, Canning, and Grey all benefited from a distinguished bearing,
captured in well-known portraits and embellished, when speaking, by grandiloquent gestures. Even Castlereigh, by all accounts a leaden speaker, very much looked the part with his trademark blue coat and upright mien. In comparison, Lord Liverpool was fairly nondescript, and though an effective speaker in debates, usually lacked passion, and certainly never attempted to simulate that emotion. A portrait painted by Romney displayed recently (2007) in the National Portrait Gallery, (Figure 2), showing him in his twenties, will surprise anyone who knows only that he was a long serving political leader, though it fits well enough with the personal characteristics already mentioned. He is depicted as a willowy figure with wind-blown hair and sensuous lips, and with an apparent dreaminess and fragility more appropriate to a poet or actor than a young politician whose career was to be built mainly on solid administrative competence. Hardly obvious in what was presumably an exercise meant to flatter, are features recorded by those who encountered him at this time, namely a long neck, and a slight stoop, which, added to a shambling walk, contributed to an overall presence which was neither commanding nor dignified. There are contemporary suggestions of a degree of slovenliness in dress and personal habits which further detracted from his image. Leveson-Gower, an acolyte of Canning, was surely exaggerating when he described him as looking ‘as if he had been on the rack three times and saw the rack preparing for a fourth’, but the jibe must have carried some truth to be appreciated, and others commented during his early years in politics, on the air of mournful resignation, and diffidence, which comes over in the portrait. Later paintings by Thomas Lawrence tell a different tale, for by then he was a long-time Prime Minister in middle age, and they give him some of the dignity and gravitas which might be expected; even a rather lumpish nose has been refined to a shape of which any patrician might have been proud, (Figure 3). However, in the work of caricaturists including the Cruikshank brothers, Rowlandson, Lane, and Heath, he bears no real resemblance to any of his portraits and appears as a fussy, bird-like character with a rounded head, a prominent, but pointed nose and a steeply sloping forehead, added to the long neck already mentioned. The ridicule in these representations is comparatively gentle, with little of the venom that characterises contemporary representations of the Prince Regent, Castlereigh, Sidmouth and Eldon, but the strongest impression left is that this was not a man to be taken too seriously. The cartoonists were of course wrong, and it would not be sensible to think of Lord Liverpool’s deficits in dignity and charisma as matters of significance or concern to the political class, during the later stages of his career. Certainly his foibles were the subject of perplexed, amused, and even exasperated comments from those who worked close to him, and some of his associates would no
doubt have preferred a leader with greater presence, more like the man in Lawrence’s portrait, but well before the end of his career he and most of the political nation had become used to each other.

A less trivial criticism than those considered until now is that Lord Liverpool sometimes procrastinated, taking too long to make up his mind and postponing action, when circumstances suggested that he should have tried to take matters forward. His method of tackling problems had maybe served in part as a model for his protégé, Robert Peel in that he liked to gather all the information he could about a topic, to think deeply, and to discuss possible responses at length with his closest advisers. On matters like the Corn Law of 1815, return to the Gold Standard, and legislation to restrain agitation in times of hardship, no-one with any opinion to offer, at least from the political class, was denied a hearing. However, whereas Peel added the priceless ability to come down fairly quickly on one side of any argument, and would then back his judgement with every resource at his disposal, Lord Liverpool tended to see all sides of any question and especially the dangers rather than the benefits of making changes. He was also uniquely conscious of the political implications of any step, and seemingly averse to doing anything which might cost him support, a complete contrast this to the single-mindedness of Peel. So as Prime Minister he was sometimes indecisive and can fairly be blamed for his government’s tendency to drift in the years between 1815 and the early 1820s. It is likely that a figure like Peel would have given a much firmer lead through these years, though the choices were in reality so limited that it cannot be certain that the outcomes would have been any better.

The justifiable criticism of Lord Liverpool’s indecision during the years after Waterloo has however become conflated with the idea that he simply lacked the vision to contemplate directions in which the country might move forward. Of course, this argument carries great weight in the eyes of Whig historians because of his attitude towards institutional reform. However, during these years he did make prescient, if low key, speeches on other matters which anticipated future reforms, especially with regard to taxation, tariffs, and some of the foreign policy initiatives later associated with Canning. His failings of the post-Waterloo years did not include an absence of vision, at least in comparison with his contemporaries, but stemmed from the aforementioned lack of conviction that the likely benefits of action were sufficiently clear-cut, and especially, from his doubts that he could assemble the political support to drive changes through without risking his government. Probably he
underestimated the strength of his own position, but there is no doubt that his Cabinet and the Prince Regent were firm supporters of the laissez-faire policies with which his government was then identified, and would have reacted just as strongly against change as some of the individuals concerned did unavailingy a few years later.

So far, this chapter has been largely a litany of aspects of personality, appearance, and character which could have militated against Lord Liverpool’s success as a political leader, though I have suggested that many of them have been over-emphasised or were overcome. It is high time that I reviewed some of his positive attributes. One can start with tools of a senior minister’s trade, like an ability to speak and write clearly and persuasively, and the skilled administrator’s knack of getting things done. In our times, governments present themselves largely as legislators and agents for change, but this was not the situation two centuries ago, when legislative action had been relatively infrequent, before the later years of the Liverpool government, and arose at least as often from the body of parliament. Then, the main task of senior ministers was to conduct the country’s affairs, day by day, year by year. Each, backed only by a staff of around twenty assistants and clerks, had to take informed decisions and give specific orders bearing on great and small matters in the purview of his department, and had to find ways of ensuring that these orders were carried out. A large capacity for work was essential, though an ability to select able deputies and to delegate could be helpful. A Prime Minister had similarly to keep a firm grip of his own department, the Treasury, but if he wanted to convince his colleagues that he was in control of the government, he had also to keep a close eye on all the other departments of state, and not rely totally on matters of moment being brought to his attention. In an age when information was conveyed in long letters and even longer state papers, the premier’s home reading list was necessarily extensive. There is abundant evidence of Lord Liverpool’s capacity for, and diligence in, the tasks of government. The indecisiveness, which has been referred to above, affected his willingness to initiate major policy changes in the immediate post-war years, (and sometimes his settling of small matters of patronage when people’s feelings were a concern, much to Charles Arbuthnot’s frustration) but was absent from his conduct of the main business of government in peace and war. Here is part of a letter sent to Castlereigh on 28th October 1816 which gives an idea of how he actually ran the country;
I deferred writing to you until I came to town and saw what was the state of public business. In your own department I do not find that there is anything of importance except the further intelligence that has been received of the Portuguese projects in South America. The manner in which this information has come into our hands renders it unnecessary for us to take any step upon it at present; .................

I send you enclosed the state of our Consolidated Fund ......................... We shall have considerable difficulties on the subject of finance in the next session ...........

We have plenty of money for every branch of the public service and we have accordingly agreed to-day to fix the meeting of Parliament for the 28th of July next.

I am sorry to say we have some unpleasant information respecting the Lord Chancellor’s department which proves that there is a desire to evade our Civil List arrangements. We are determined to adopt a course I am sure you will approve as it will, I trust enable us to stop all these projects in the bud.

The points to note are that decisions have been taken, business has been dispatched without fuss, and that even within Castlereigh's area of responsibility, the Prime Minister is stating what will be done, not seeking guidance. (The letter also carries an example of the difficulties Lord Liverpool found in constraining the Prince Regent’s extravagance, but shows the premier as uncompromising.)

To this professionalism, to use Gash’s word, which was by no means a universal attribute amongst ministers of the day, must be added the qualities that enabled Lord Liverpool to operate Cabinet government effectively. Intellectual capacity and the ability to reason are perhaps too easily discounted, and his determination was often well concealed, but together they helped Lord Liverpool to get what he wanted from most Cabinet meetings. In the 1820s, these skills allowed him to steer policy in more liberal directions without a clear majority in the Cabinet. His integrity was considered absolute, so his statements that he was guided by the national interest were credible, even if with hindsight we should not disregard his political motives. Diarists acknowledged the kindliness, tact, and consideration which normally characterised Lord Liverpool’s dealings with his colleagues, to the extent that he was justly accused of procrastinating when compelled to convey disappointing tidings to colleagues or supporters. He lacked rancour, or any capacity for nursing grudges long term, so colleagues knew that they could disagree with him, without jeopardising their relationship with him or their future prospects, even if his immediate reaction at some periods was tetchy. When disagreements occurred, real offence and lasting
bitterness were avoided, so no member felt driven to resign. Somehow, he performed the rare feat of persuading strong, opinionated politicians that they could hold opposed views, but still work together. They certainly did not remain in the Cabinet because they admired or liked each other, for example, Wellington and to a degree, Peel despised Canning. Their bonds were exclusively with the premier. It is surely extraordinary that during Lord Liverpool’s fifteen years as Prime Minister, there was only one resignation from his government caused by disagreement, (that of Canning over the affair of Queen Caroline in 1821, which was more a gesture than a true dispute). This was in spite of the fact that some of its members such as Lord Sidmouth had made resignation a habit before Lord Liverpool took the first office, and others like Huskisson were to mirror that behaviour soon enough after his removal from the scene. Even Peel, normally wedded to his principles allowed himself to be talked out of resignation, when convinced that his leader would feel compelled to follow him, in 1825.

To summarise, Lord Liverpool had determination, great stamina and considerable intellect, otherwise it is inconceivable that he could have led his country effectively, in war and peace, for almost fifteen years. He was introverted, unassuming, and shy, but he was liked and respected by colleagues who got a close-up view of his qualities, and this enabled him to hold his government together, in spite of the spread of opinions within his later Cabinet, on the great issues of the day. He lacked presence, far less charisma, so could not inspire in the way of a Pitt or Canning, but neither did he arouse hostility. He was reasonably far-seeing as regards the country’s future direction, even if his views on institutional reform were not to the taste of the Whig historians, but he was too prone to see all sides of any question, and too concerned to maintain his grip on power, to be an agent for change, within a largely reactionary Cabinet, in the years after Waterloo. Nonetheless, when he had managed to get like-minded colleagues into key positions, and had removed all possibility of his own displacement, he determinedly steered the country in some new directions in the 1820s.

4.2. The Political Philosophy of the First Conservative Prime Minister

Little attention has been afforded to Lord Liverpool’s world view and political philosophy, even by those who have granted him a significant role in running the country. Presumably they have seen him as a competent administrator and conciliator, rather than a maker of policy. There is certainly some excuse for the
omission, because Lord Liverpool rarely spoke on general political principles, and when he did, his words were usually nuanced. Some of his written communications, especially to Canning, make his wider views explicit but most often they focus on specific issues rather than the philosophy underlying proposed actions. He did correspond with some outside the political mainstream like the poets and polemicists, Coleridge and Southey, but he was more concerned to understand their ideas than to express his own. Nonetheless, he said enough, and backed his word with actions sufficiently often, to make it fairly clear where he stood on the major issues of the day, and why.

The main difficulty for anyone wishing to rest Lord Liverpool’s actions on a coherent political philosophy is of course the contrast between his government’s policies before and after 1822. Some historians have furnished a simplistic explanation, discounting Lord Liverpool completely, and explaining the differences purely on the basis of ministerial changes, especially those involving Castlereigh and Canning. I shall give this matter some attention later, perhaps more than it deserves, but I am concerned here with Lord Liverpool’s perceptions rather than those of anyone else. Others have sought to downplay the reforms of the 1820s. Their thesis is most easily maintained by viewing the measures of the 1820s in comparison with those of greater scope introduced later in the 19th Century by Grey, Peel, Gladstone and Disraeli, and gains credibility from the absence of institutional reform. However it is a rather unhistorical point of view, and if instead one looks forward from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 when government began to take on a recognisably modern form, the later Liverpool ministry is seen in its true colours as the first reforming administration of our history. Its predecessors had occasionally tackled single issues, and attempted to make improvements, but none had followed a substantial programme of reform; perhaps William Pitt, the Younger would have tried to achieve more, if he had not been ‘ambushed’ by the French Revolution, though he had little success with reforming initiatives in the 1780s. In my view, it is impossible to escape from the fact that the first Prime Minister to be called ‘Conservative’, in his own time, was also the first to lead a government which deserves the label, ‘reforming’.

There is in fact, a symmetry associated with Lord Liverpool’s change in political direction of the early 1820s, because it was close to a mirror image of the about-face performed by William Pitt, more than thirty years earlier. As mentioned earlier, the latter had begun his political career as a self-described Whig with a reforming agenda. It was only when the state appeared endangered by a combination of
revolutionary propaganda, and later French military successes, that he allowed himself to be convinced by the arguments of Edmund Burke that the status quo needed to be preserved at all costs. We cannot know how Burke or Pitt would have seen matters if they had survived to the end of the struggle with France, but the majority of Pitt’s political heirs stayed wedded to the view that all change should be eschewed, because the French Revolution had demonstrated how easily reforming initiatives could run out of control. However, it is apparent from a few nuanced statements made by Lord Liverpool in the next few years and of course, from what happened later, that he did not agree that all the workings of the state could or should be frozen in aspic. He was at one with an earlier moderate Whig, David Hume, in believing that organic or incremental improvements based on experience should be made when it was safe to do so, and that this was the best way to head off the ideas of visionaries like Rousseau, which really were dangerous. However the words ‘when it was safe to do so’ determined Lord Liverpool’s direction of travel for several years after Waterloo, because he did not consider that condition met. At a time of protest, demonstrations, and riots, almost any reform would have been seen as a concession to violence and other law-breaking, which could only encourage more of the same, with the possibly of escalation leading all the way to revolution. So Lord Liverpool, Canning, and those who emerged as liberal conservatives, a few years later, remained in step with more reactionary colleagues, all seemingly still convinced that the survival of the state demanded maintenance of the status quo.

The trigger for a change in direction was undoubtedly the return to growth in the economy, and the related dramatic reduction in mass agitation in the early 1820s. In Lord Liverpool’s mind, the safety criterion for organic reform had been met. Another factor was his realisation that a majority in parliament were willing by then to give him the benefit of most doubts, in sharp contrast to the early years of his premiership, when much of the support that he needed was conditional on what he did. Nonetheless, he still sat round the Cabinet table as part of a group where reactionary conservative views predominated. So, he embarked on a process in which he edged out sitting members of the Cabinet, and installed more liberal replacements; Peel for Sidmouth, and Robinson for Vansittart, were the most significant of these changes. As we have seen, he moved relatively slowly, characteristically intent on giving a minimum of offence to the retiring ministers. The sad death of Castlereigh, which so affected him personally, was ironically his greatest stroke of luck, because it paved the way for Canning’s return and elevation to be effectively the second man in the government. Lord Liverpool’s determination to brook no other outcome was a
measure of his need for Canning to buttress his own future plans. Thereafter, Lord Liverpool was able to preside over the agenda which we now call liberal conservative, but which William Pitt the Younger would have recognised as similar to the moderate Whiggism, which he had propounded in the 1780s, lacking only a strand of constitutional reform. In my view this narrative accounts for most of Lord Liverpool's political philosophy. He was indeed a follower of Pitt, but Castlereigh would have said the same. The difference was that Lord Liverpool (and Canning) saw Pitt’s acceptance of Burke’s warnings and eschewal of all reform as a necessary but temporary response to revolution and war, whereas Castlereigh and those of like mind saw a lasting or even permanent response to an ever-present danger identified by Burke.

This is an appropriate point to deal briefly with the question of whether it is correct to describe Lord Liverpool as the first Conservative Prime Minister. I must first address some confusion in terminology, and in particular distinguish between Conservative with a capital ‘C’ which in this period came to apply to a political party and an ideology developed by Burke, and conservative with a small ‘c’ which is best described as a general outlook resistant to change. Lord Liverpool's political inheritance from William Pitt the Younger had impeccable Whig origins, albeit of the Walpolean Court variety, rather than the revolution principles of Sidney and Locke. However, Burke had converted the rather incoherent package of Court Whig beliefs into a Conservative political philosophy, though he had gone so far, that a rebound was probably inevitable, and it can easily be argued that it was this rather than a return to moderate Whig principles that Lord Liverpool led in the 1820s. Confusion also derives from the soubriquet ‘Tory’ which in our age has become synonymous with Conservative; neither Burke nor Lord Liverpool was ever a Tory, yet there was such an element in the party which coalesced around the premier in the 1820s. Not so long ago, there was a consensus that the old Tory party, the original adversary of the Whigs, vanished in the middle of the 18th century, destroyed by its association with Jacobitism, and its long exclusion from power by Walpole and Henry Pelham. More recently, it has been accepted that the Tories remained a coherent, if unstructured grouping, with a strong following in the localities until the end of the century. Whether they were a party, as we normally understand the term is open to doubt, as pursuit of office had become anathema to most of them, but they continued to hold steady to Tory principles, and the interests of the landed class. By 1800, these Tories were most often referred to as the Country Gentlemen, and thanks largely to Burke’s reorientation of moderate Whigs, their beliefs and those of Pitt’s
followers had moved closer together. Thereafter, the patriotism engendered by a long war reduced mutual suspicions about motives, and eventually allowed most of the Country Gentlemen to accept Lord Liverpool’s leadership uncritically. Needless to say, the government’s introduction of the Corn Law in 1814 had done nothing to hinder this process, though the 1816 budget was a setback. So by 1820, Lord Liverpool led a party which largely held to Burke’s Conservative principles, though he was about to soften them, and some old Tory maxims, and his adherents had increased during his term of office from the original hundred or so followers of Pitt, to over 300 Conservatives. I shall deal later with other aspects of this dramatic change.

So far, I have dealt mainly with generalities, but I will conclude this discussion by trying to tease out a little more understanding of Lord Liverpool’s beliefs. The previous paragraph tried to resolve confusion about matters Conservative and Tory, this one is about conservatism. My reading of Lord Liverpool political philosophy is that he was resolutely conservative in so far as he believed that the institutions of the state and the church should be preserved. In this regard he would not have gone as far as David Hume in favouring experientially guided organic changes in how the country was governed. His sole concession to a need for change in this regard was a willingness to nod through small scale remedial actions to address corruption, and excessive self-aggrandisement, so he supported the disfranchisement of a few individual parliamentary constituencies, and tackled blatant examples of plurality in church appointments. Otherwise, he was vigilant in opposing any wider initiative and made it clear that he specially feared setting off a wider campaign of reform. He was also conservative in wishing to see no expansion of what was then, the very limited role of the state. For example, although always supportive of the charitable work of the church, he made no effort to intrude the state into the existing parish-based systems for relief of the poor, which were creaking as a result of shifts in population and wealth. The first ever legislation for banking, and trade unions was undertaken reluctantly in response to events, rather than as a product of reforming zeal. The liberal component of his beliefs appeared in his support with Canning for states struggling to move from absolutist to constitutional government, in the commercial measures aimed towards deregulation of trade, and reduction of customs and excise duties, and in his firm support for Peel’s legal and penal reforms. Above all, there is a strong sense of paternalism about Lord Liverpool’s politics. He believed in many of the things dear to his critics, such as fairness, compassion, and disinterestedness, even if his definitions might have been slightly different from theirs, but he also believed that government was a burden that had to be borne by his own class. He
was no snob, and assumed few if any airs and graces, but thought that people like himself had been bred and trained up to exercise authority, and that this capacity was rarely found in those of more humble origins. Such convictions explain his life-long opposition to any reform of church or state which might have the effect of expanding the pool from which the governors of the country would be drawn.

4.3. Lifestyle and Interests

The long-time Prime Minister’s day to day existence seems to have been very quiet; he resided normally at one of three houses, namely, Fife House, (Figure 4), in central London, Coombe Wood at Kingston-upon-Thames, and, after his appointment as Lord Warden of the Cinq Ports in 1806, Walmer Castle on the Kent coast, (Figure 5). Only the last-named survives, now open to the public, and I have not even been able to find any meaningful pictorial representation of the house at Coombe Wood, which was demolished long ago. As did most aristocrats, he and his first wife paid visits to the country houses of a few peers, while sojourns with the Prince Regent, later the King, were a periodic requirement of his office. This routine was infrequently varied by making sight-seeing trips with his first wife, and he did actually get as far as the Flanders coast, shortly after peace was finally concluded in 1815. Taking the waters at Bath became a regular occurrence in his later life, and he may on such occasions have visited the family estate at Hawkesbury in Gloucestershire. Unlike many of his high-born contemporaries, he eschewed grandiose house-building plans, contenting himself with a few strictly functional improvements; (adding some rooms to Coombe Wood to enable it to accommodate formal events like the dinner given to the allied rulers in 1814, and trying to counter the winter chill at Walmer Castle). His London residence, Fife House was leased to him in 1809, after the death of its builder, the Earl of Fife; he paid £12000 for possession until 1825, when the lease was renewed until 1868. A government report states that the house was ‘throughout very ill-planned; contained three square stories besides two small garrets within the roof; the ground floor apartments were very low, and occasionally subject to inundation.’ The engraving, Figure 4, appears to confirm most of these details, and the fact that Lord Liverpool was content with such unpretentious accommodation for almost twenty years backs up many observations about his character. (There was a tradition that the eccentric Scottish earl who built Fife House was so unhappy about having to live sometimes in London that he brought cart-loads of earth from Scotland on which to build his house, so that he could claim to be resident still on Scottish soil.) It can be added that, in general, the furnishings and decorations were little more elaborate
than the houses, which is slightly surprising because Lord Liverpool did have a passion for high art. Statues by Canova, portraits and other paintings were commissioned by him, and it was quite widely known that he enjoyed viewing representations of the female form, as a respectable connoisseur of course, and not as any kind of voyeur. I have already referred to his intervention which stripped Paris of Napoleon’s looted art treasures; he was probably one of the few statesmen who knew whence many of them had come, and so to where they should be returned. He also had a key part in the foundation of the National Gallery of London in 1824, and chose to be painted by Lawrence holding its charter, (Figure 3), as a signal of his support for the institution.

Another pillar of Lord Liverpool’s life was religion; he was a high church Anglican with strong links to a group called the Hackney Phalanx, who are seen by ecclesiastical historians as the first significant church reformers of the 19th Century. Their focus was mainly on the expansion of education provision under church auspices, and on training for the priesthood, but they were also strong proponents of the church building programme, for which as we have seen, Lord Liverpool found substantial funds even while government spending was tightly constrained. His predecessors had approved the appointments of bishops and deans on largely political grounds, (perhaps understandably, because apart from prelates having seats in the House of Lords, senior clerics also wielded influence in many House of Commons constituencies). Qualities like spirituality, intellect and diligence had been very much secondary. Lord Liverpool changed a lot of that and his open-mindedness extended to church politics as well, since he was willing to look beyond the section of the church which enjoyed his own allegiance, when seeking candidates for preferment. He was the first premier to appoint bishops from the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church, perhaps influenced in this by his friend William Wilberforce. A major blight on the reputation of the Anglican Church at that time was the pluralism of senior churchmen, i.e. the holding of multiple lucrative appointments, and Lord Liverpool addressed the problem. Many of his appointees received bad news as well as good when he met them to offer a promotion, because in a departure from past custom, they were asked in return to give up benefices already held. Lord Liverpool would have given short shrift to any proposals for statutory reform of the Anglican Church, such as those brought forward by the Whigs in the 1830s. However, as the religious historian, Gibson acknowledges, he and the leaders of the Hackney Phalanx anticipated by their actions much of what was later placed on the statute book, and
perhaps demonstrated that enlightened leadership could be as effective as the law in modernising a national institution.

All his life, Lord Liverpool appears to have much preferred to relax in the society of women, and he was most content when at home in the company of his first wife Louisa, with her female friends making up the company. She seems to have been as unhappy in more formal surroundings as he was, not least because her health was never robust and in her last years she was mainly an invalid. There is evidence that they found Court functions a particularly unwelcome chore, but of course the Prime Minister remained enough the servant of the monarch to make his regular attendance more or less compulsory. Diarists refer to their discomfort on such occasions, especially when required to attend to the whims of the then Prince Regent, who may on occasion have sought revenge for the regular thwarting of his wishes as regards patronage, by employing his Prime Minister on petty errands in the royal drawing room. They never had children, but I have no idea whether this was from choice. There are obvious reasons why it might have been; the delicacy of Louisa’s health and the fact that her husband’s mother had died in the immediate aftermath of his birth would have reminded any couple of the risks, and the mental instability prevalent in Louisa’s family, is at least to modern eyes, another possible discouragement. There was no great surprise in society when Lord Liverpool married again less than a year after Louisa’s death, to a close friend of hers, Mary Chesters, daughter of a church minister, and grand-daughter of an earl. The wedding took place quietly in September 1822, and they seem to have been happy enough during the 4½ years left to Lord Liverpool, before his disabling collapse. Though in better health, she appears to have been little more outgoing than his first wife, and the tranquil pattern of his private life continued much as before which was almost certainly what he wanted, and indeed with his own health deteriorating he was by then probably unfit for anything more active. It should perhaps be made absolutely clear that a preference for female company, and indeed a liking for sculptures and paintings of pretty women, clothed or unclothed, never carried over into conduct after the style of Lord Palmerston or David Lloyd George, and it is not possible to attach to Lord Liverpool another common vice amongst premiers from Pitt to Churchill; a post mortem indicated that his arterial system was ravaged, but that his liver was in good order.

The relevance of the foregoing is that Lord Liverpool was subject to few if any siren calls drawing him away from his political work. It is easy to picture him at home,
annotating a pile of state papers, or writing to a colleague, seated with his wife and other female companions in a somewhat drab room, with the ambience enhanced only by two or three high quality paintings and sculpted figures. I have already spoken of the misalignments between Lord Liverpool’s personality, and the role of a senior minister, but after a few years as Prime Minister, there can be little doubt that he had adjusted to the role. Thereafter, he behaved as if determined to keep the position, and his colleagues learnt to discount the occasional mutterings about retirement, and probably failed to appreciate how much his health was failing. I would go so far as to say that he needed to be Prime Minister, not because of the status of the position, but because the work filled, and in his own mind justified, his life. The biggest contrast is with Lord Grey whose consuming interests in his family and estate in Northumberland meant that he spent his time in London longing to be two or three days journey north, and sometimes made him reluctant to come to London at times of political crisis, even if he remained sufficiently motivated by ideas of duty and enjoyment of public acclaim to be unwilling to relinquish all political involvement.

I have already noted that Lord Liverpool was indebted to his father for the rapid progress of his early career, even if there was a down-side in the parent's desire to maintain a guiding hand for too long. There are indications that the elder son was kept on a pretty tight financial leash, as long as his father lived, and this may well have set the pattern for a relatively thrifty life-style thereafter, but on the first Earl's death in 1808, his elder son was apparently left with an income of £23000 per annum, part it is true made up of his own salaries earned and unearned, but a large part, the inheritance from his father's lifelong pursuit of financial opportunities. In turn, Lord Liverpool was thereafter attentive to the well-being of his family, employing his younger half-brother Charles as an Assistant-Secretary of State, and in other junior positions. The future 3rd Earl of Liverpool is a shadowy figure, but it has to be assumed that he performed competently enough, otherwise one would surmise that his appointment would have been criticised by his contemporaries. When the 2nd Earl became Prime Minister his income probably exceeded £30000 per annum, thanks to the £7000 per annum granted to the First Lord of the Treasury, augmented by the stipends from his three sinecure offices. They were Commissioner of Affairs for India which paid £1500 annually, Clerk of the Rolls in Ireland, which paid £3500 annually, and Lord Warden of the Cinq Ports which paid £4000 annually, though he gave up the income from the last position, when criticism of such offices mounted in the years after Waterloo. (A factor of 60 should be applied to get an idea of present day values).
A short digression is probably in order; the word sinecure was originally ecclesiastical, and referred to positions which carried an income but no responsibility for ‘the cure of souls’, i.e. the duties of a priest. The term gradually extended into the secular world to cover positions giving an income without significant responsibilities, and in the world of politics, the first half of the 18th century saw a huge growth in the number of such fake offices. They were a handy source of income for senior figures, and many were conferred in exchange for support of the government in parliament and the localities. However, the writing was on the wall for them after 1780 when the Whigs began to agitate for Economical reform. Once in the spotlight, they could not be defended. In this, as in many other ways, Lord Liverpool is a Janus-like figure, in so far as he was of the last generation of senior political figures who thought it respectable to hold such offices, (William Pitt and Lord Grenville were others who had few qualms), yet led a government which, according to Lord Castlereigh’s boast, had abolished 2000 such offices by 1820. In succeeding years, sinecures died with their possessors, so few remained by the middle of the 19th century, but it would be wrong to imagine that patronage vanished with them. There remained many so-called efficient positions in the church, the courts, and the revenue collecting agencies which placed trivial demands on their occupants, and whose judicious distribution continued to oil the wheels of government for many more years. As a final point, it might be argued that not all sinecures have vanished even now, since offices like Lord Privy Seal, The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and Minister without Portfolio, survive, but these appointments are not made to give individuals income without responsibilities, but represent an arcane way of conferring Cabinet rank on someone whose very real tasks and responsibilities are not described by a better defined office like Secretary of State.

The thought of actively building a larger fortune does not seem to have much occupied Lord Liverpool’s mind. Although the rotation between three houses hardly implies frugal living, there is a sense that he accepted that there were appearances to be kept up as an earl and senior government minister, but that he had no real wish to go much further, beyond buying the odd painting and sculpture. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that financial worries distracted him during his later ministerial career. As already noted, his affluence can only have meant that his understanding of the pressures of life which bore down on most of those he governed was that much less. The biggest contrast amongst his ministerial colleagues is with George Canning, who was always short of money, and in consequence was influenced at a number of critical points of his career by the need to improve the financial prospects
of his family. The fact that his acceptance of a Portuguese embassy, paved the way for his return to government in 1816 cannot obscure the fact that the strongest motivation was a large salary and generous expenses, and his acceptance of the Governor-General-ship of India for a similar reason would probably have ended his front-line political career had he not been 'rescued' by the fall-out from Castlereigh's suicide. It is only speculation, though there was an occasional caustic reference in diaries of the time, but if Lord Liverpool had retired in a conventional way, he would no doubt have been offered at least a Marquisate in acknowledgement of his services, so he might have worried a little in his later years about whether he was going to have sufficient income to keep up the expected state for a more exalted rank. This could explain why he hung on to the income from his sinecures, behaviour which goes against what might have been expected of him, but these were hardly the concerns of the common man.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how Lord Liverpool’s public career was influenced for good or ill by the type of man he was, by his political beliefs, by his preferred mode of living, and by his personal circumstances. The overwhelming impression is of a life lived in a minor key, of a man who was fairly colourless and even dull. He was not wholly devoid of outside interests, in art, in religion, and in a tranquil home life, but his official life swamped everything else, even if it was conducted as much as possible in the background. However, it is a step too far to equate dullness with ineffectiveness, when there is much evidence to refute such a conclusion. The remainder of the book attempts to tease out the extent and true value of Lord Liverpool’s role in the direction of British affairs over quarter of a century.
5. War Minister

This chapter is focused on the period from 1809 to 1815 when Lord Liverpool, first as Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, and then as Prime Minister had the central role in directing the British involvement in the Napoleonic War. In these years the British situation was transformed from that of a lone, rather ineffective combatant, struggling to land a blow on her adversary, to being an important partner in a victorious alliance; the similarity with a later war and the change in circumstances between early 1941 and 1945 is obvious, though the point is rarely made. To assess the impact made by Lord Liverpool on the prosecution of the war, I have considered three aspects; firstly the way Britain’s strategy developed and was implemented before and after 1809; secondly the tangible support given to British forces fighting abroad during the last six years of the war, looking especially at Wellington’s army in Portugal and Spain, and thirdly the success of the government in maintaining support in Parliament and the wider nation, until their adversary was totally defeated, an achievement beyond the two great war-leaders of the previous century, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, and William Pitt the Elder.

I have made use of a number of secondary sources, including the fairly brief general accounts of the Napoleonic War as a whole, and the Peninsular War, produced by Gates which provided me with a coherent, and I think accurate, backdrop. Although there are books describing almost every passage of the War in question, few have dealt with British strategy, other than as an aside. Two exceptions are books written by Hall and by Muir, though neither is wholly satisfactory from my viewpoint; the former is far stronger in its account of the early years of the Napoleonic War, and rather peters out during the years of most interest to me, while the author of the latter adopts so negative an attitude towards Wellington, as to cast some doubt on his views in general. As regards organisational matters, I must highlight Knight’s PhD Dissertation, submitted to Florida State University in 1976, which presents much information about Lord Liverpool’s activities as Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, even if I disagree with some of the researcher’s conclusions. Another invaluable reference, dealing with the period immediately before that considered here, is a book written by Glover, though I have found it just as difficult to accept all his verdicts. In particular, the fulsome praise for Castlereigh’s terms as War Secretary is hard to reconcile with the doubts of his fellow ministers during his second period in the office; Muir seems to provide a reasonable corrective for this. Many of the problems with which both Castlereigh and Lord Liverpool had to contend
were consequent on the failure to address two key issues which had been around for more than a hundred years. One was structural, in so far as a logical civilian chain of command had not evolved by the time of the treaty of Amiens in 1802. Arrangements tended to be ad hoc, and a function of the status and personalities of those in government at any particular time. Predictably, neither Castlereigh nor Lord Liverpool contributed improvements here; they both instinctively opposed institutional reform, but in any case few would have thought it wise to embark on such an exercise in the middle of a war. So, each simply sought to make existing institutions work as well as he could. This matter is mainly addressed later when I consider the whole question of back-up for the British forces engaged in combat. I deal first with the other issue, namely the formulation of a war-winning strategy.

5.1. Strategy before 1809

Throughout the 18th century, Britain had usually fought wars in an ad hoc way, responding to threats to Hanover, and continental allies when the need became pressing, but also sending ships and soldiers to far flung places to fight colonial wars, and seize trading outposts. Historians have seen an on-going tension between two strategic approaches, though in reality matters were rarely as clear-cut. One approach, the ‘Blue Water Strategy’ stood for concentration on trading and colonial objectives, with continental commitments limited to subsidies, and contributions to joint operations near the periphery of the land-mass. The other was a ‘Continental Strategy’ which required the commitment of a large army to a major battlefront, again in partnership with one or more allies, but on a more equal basis. In practice, the decision had usually been to do ‘a bit of both’, as for example did William Pitt the Elder, but one danger lay in trying to do too much of both, causing resources to be spread too thinly and dissipated too quickly. Another danger was that limited British support on the ground might not be sufficient to balance up an unequal struggle between continental allies and a more powerful adversary. Evidence for this was certainly forthcoming during the French Revolutionary War, and the Treaty of Amiens negotiated under Lord Liverpool’s aegis in 1802 reflected in part a British failure to make war effectively. Although it is described as a peace of exhaustion in British accounts, which is fair enough as far as it goes, it was also a resounding French triumph with Britain surrendering almost all her colonial conquests, and France remaining dominant on the continent.
After a short intermission, the resumption of war soon saw the return of William Pitt the Younger to office, and it has been suggested that he had learnt little from the earlier conflict as he reverted to the policy of building coalitions on the foundation of British subsidies to reluctant allies, while again devoting military resources to the repossessing of the colonies of France, Holland and Spain. Such a view is not wholly fair, because this time, the British military effort in Europe was stepped up, and could fairly be described as conforming to a Continental Strategy. Two joint operations with Russia were set in motion; one in the toe of Italy was secondary and directed to stabilising the kingdom of Naples (and Sicily), but the other in northern Germany involving Sweden also, was much more ambitious. The plan involved the landing of Russian soldiers at Stralsund in Swedish Pomerania (on the north German coast), and a British army, originally in the same place, though its destination was changed to Hanover to make its supply line shorter. By early 1806 there were more than 20000 British soldiers in Hanover, and the next step should have been an invasion of Holland by a combined force of upwards of 50000 men while powerful Austrian and Russian armies moved directly against France, further south. (The British force was committed while Napoleon was still massing an invasion fleet at Boulogne, and before Trafalgar, so bears comparison with Churchill’s brave decision to reinforce the Middle East in early 1941, also before the then adversary, Hitler’s Germany, had given up the idea of invasion.) Unfortunately, too little account had been taken of Napoleon’s genius. The French Emperor marched his army from the Channel coast to the Danube, and won crushing victories at Ulm and Austerlitz; perhaps wisely, Austria sued for terms even though her largest army was still unscathed in northern Italy. It soon became clear that Russia might follow the same path, though no-one in Britain could have foreseen that negotiations would eventually result in Napoleon converting Russia’s subsidised support into active hostility. The British army in Hanover had been left exposed to greatly superior forces, so there was no option but to bring it home, and Napoleon allowed Prussia to send an occupying force into this other possession of the British monarch, cleverly poisoning relations between two of the countries that might have combined against him.

Perhaps Pitt’s death in early 1806 was less unfortunate for his country than was thought at the time, since given his resolution and stubbornness, it is likely that he would quickly have embarked on yet another round of coalition building, regardless of its scant prospects of success, and of the cost to the British exchequer. Instead, there ensued a period of virtual stalemate, with neither of the two remaining belligerents able to harm the other seriously, at least in the short term, though British
naval superiority could have been threatened eventually if Napoleon had been able to apply his continent-wide resources to a massive warship-building programme, and had commandeered ships and sea-going men from the maritime states he dominated. In this context, the British assault on Copenhagen in September 1807 which produced the surrender of the Danish fleet, and the later safeguarding of the Portuguese fleet, were strategically sound measures, but the same could not be said for other initiatives taken in these years. No minister seemed yet to appreciate that with Napoleon so strong, it was a time to conserve resources, and wait for the French Emperor to make mistakes. Canning, by then Foreign Secretary, deserves the main credit for the Copenhagen expedition, but his general approach of trying to rebuild a Continental strategy was premature since there was little prospect of meaningful alliances, while his rival, Castlereigh seemed happy to support operations which might be locally successful, but meant little in wider terms. Glover is right to praise the War Secretary for creating a ‘disposable force’ (which we would now term an expeditionary force), complete with its own shipping, but it was used as a ‘fire-fighting’ tool, rather than being husbanded until an opportunity to inflict real damage on Napoleon arose.

After his victories in 1806, and settlement with Russia, Napoleon knew that he had little to fear militarily from Britain, but for so long as his hegemony on the continent was un-recognised he also knew that any European state which chose to challenge him would find a willing ally. He did fear that British economic strength could enable her to wear down France in a long struggle, so he attempted to lessen this by imposing a reverse blockade, the Continental System. His dominance across Europe meant that the usual British weapon of blockade had for a while been a two-edged sword, with the French ability to close most of the ports of Europe to British trade as potent a weapon as the stranglehold that British fleets could impose on ports in French occupied territory. This balance had at first led to a tacit acceptance by both protagonists that some trade should continue, largely through the agency of smuggling, even to the extent that on occasion French corn fed British armies, and British wool clothed French soldiers. However, frustration with his failure to impose a victor’s peace on the pacific and Francophile Fox, (who had been Foreign Secretary for a few months after Pitt’s death), and so confirm his redrawing of the map of Europe, drove Napoleon to make the move which would lead indirectly to his downfall. He issued Decrees from Berlin in 1806 and later, Milan in 1807 which implemented a reverse blockade by barring British imports through ports controlled by France or her allies, and freed French privateers to assault any neutral ship which
was trading British goods. The British responses, the Orders in Council of 1807, which barred any ships from entering French ports, could be and were enforced, but the measure had downsides in that it shut off trade which benefitted Britain more than France, and greatly annoyed neutrals like the United States. Nonetheless, the consequences for Napoleon were in the long run even more damaging because he had started along the fatal path which led him to move into Spain and Portugal in 1808, and eventually to invade Russia in 1812, at least partly in order to enforce his blockade.

Most of Europe was enjoying a rare peaceful interlude when Napoleon sent his armies into Spain, and he probably expected to achieve his ends relatively easily. However, his installation of a puppet regime triggered a national uprising and his occupying force was soon confronted across the country by large armies, as well as the guerrillas who have gained even greater notice from posterity. Portugal, seen rightly as the French Emperor’s next target became the destination for Castlereigh’s disposable force, and at first all went well for them. A strong British base was established, and the Portuguese fleet was taken over, denying it to France. Then Arthur Wellesley won a decisive victory at Vimiera over General Junot’s invading French army, and began a pursuit which should have led to the destruction of the beaten army. However the British command arrangements were chaotic, with one general after another arriving on the scene to take over. The first such, Moore had stood aside gracefully to let the junior officer, Lieutenant-General Wellesley, win his battle, but Lieutenant-General Moore was in turn superseded by Lieutenant-General Burrard, and after one more day, by the yet more senior Lieutenant-General Dalrymple. They halted Wellesley’s pursuit, and agreed to negotiate. The result was the misconceived Convention of Cintara which allowed a defeated French army, 20000 strong, to be carried, fully armed, back to France in British ships, and a Russian fleet trapped in Lisbon to continue its journey homewards, even although Britain and Russia were nominally at war. (The fate of that fleet makes a strange tale because it travelled next to Portsmouth, but was allowed to complete its journey to Russia.) Dalrymple deserves most of the blame he has been allocated by posterity, but Wellesley has escaped too lightly as he raised few if any objections, and freely signed the relevant documents. He was fiercely criticised in the immediate aftermath, but his powerful political allies, including Lord Liverpool, kept their faith in him. (In truth, even Dalrymple hardly suffered, receiving further appointments and another step in rank to full General.) The difficult start to British involvement in the peninsula continued later in 1808 with a misinterpretation of the military situation in Spain which
triggered the over-ambitious advance of Sir John Moore’s army into the heartland of Spain, while Napoleon himself was racing to intercept him with a much larger army. Moore saved his army, but at the cost of his own life, before its evacuation from Corunna in Northern Spain in January 1809. Wellington was restored to the command of a British army in Portugal thereafter, but it was thought that the most he could achieve would be preservation of a British outpost there.

The sad tale of mishandled initiatives continued with the Walcheren expedition of which more will be written later. It is arguable that military setbacks, the seeming lack of a viable forward strategy, and the hardship caused by interruption of trade, made 1809 the bleakest year of the whole war. The government almost ceased to exist as an entity, with a premier, the Duke of Portland in the throes of his last illness, some ministers scheming against their colleagues, and the others carrying out no more than their direct responsibilities, as detached individuals rather than as members of any kind of team. Lord Liverpool, the Home Secretary, and Spencer Percival, the Chancellor of the Exchequer seemed to know as little as most of the Cabinet, of what was going on beyond their Departments, even though their leadership roles in the two Houses of Parliament should have required them to make themselves better informed. At any rate, matters came to a head in the summer, when details of Canning’s attempts to bring about the dismissal of Castlereigh were made known to the whole Cabinet; the two principals resigned, as did the premier, and soon after that, the infamous duel was fought between the erstwhile War and Foreign Secretaries. Spencer Percival assumed the premiership, and Lord Liverpool became Secretary of State for War at what was clearly a most inauspicious time. In fact, those dark days must have seen the first glimmerings of understanding of how Britain ought to fight the war against the French Empire, and it fell mainly to Lord Liverpool to tease out and implement a strategy, which with considerable unintended help from Napoleon, eventually proved successful.

5.2. Strategy after 1809

When Lord Liverpool moved to the War and Colonies Department in October 1809, British forces were scattered all over the world, backed of course by naval units. There was perhaps a case for most of the deployments based on trading and colonial interests, but many of them had nothing to do with winning the war against France. In Europe, he inherited three British armies at the extremities of the continent dominated by Napoleon. Wellesley’s army in Portugal will feature large in this
account, but the other two must be described briefly. Sir John Stuart commanded a force which had originally been landed in southern Italy as part of Pitt’s coalition arrangements some years earlier. The Battle of Maida had been won in 1806, but could not be exploited, and the small army had been driven back to Sicily, where it bolstered the last outpost of a Bourbon monarchy which had evacuated its mainland territories. Stuart’s numbers had been steadily increased thereafter because of fears in London of an imminent French invasion, which if successful would probably have converted the Mediterranean into a French lake, denying access to any British fleet. Stuart was able and ambitious, if no more strategically aware than most of his contemporaries, so it is unsurprising that rather than standing idle he had decided to use his extra resources, and to this end had planned an assault in the autumn of 1809, on the French held Ionian Islands, to the west of the Greek mainland. The fact that the operation was unjustifiable on either strategic or commercial grounds did not weigh heavily with the general. This was just one of a number of operations in far-flung places, (Admiral Home Popham’s near farcical failure to capture Buenos Aires is another example) which went ahead without formal government approval in the years before Lord Liverpool established a firmer grip.

The Earl of Chatham still occupied the island of Walcheren off the coast of Holland, which had been invaded by a large force of 40000 men in July 1809. The initial target had been Flushing, where it was hoped a French fleet might have been trapped, and it was hoped to move on to the capture of Antwerp, but the real justification had been to give indirect support to an Austrian attempt to overturn previous treaties imposed by France. Gallingly, the Austrians came quite close to success before they were defeated by Napoleon at Wagram, so a well-conceived diversion could have been influential. Whether the Walcheren expedition was ever that is doubtful, but in any case, the army and naval commanders were so dilatory in their preparations, that the campaign on the Danube was over before any British soldier had stepped ashore, hence the doggerel verse about the commanders of the expedition;

‘Great Chatham with his sabre drawn, stood waiting for Sir Richard Strachan,  
Sir Richard, longing to be at ’em, was waiting for the Earl of Chatham’

The operation should have been called off when its main purpose vanished, but its sponsor, Castlereigh, had staked his reputation on success. It began reasonably well, when the soldiers took Flushing after a fierce battle, though the targeted French ships had long gone, but thereafter, the generals dithered and their men, quartered
on the low lying marshes of Walcheren soon became riddled with fever. Approximately 16000 were eventually to be incapacitated; a large proportion of the force. Whether for dubious strategic reasons, based on the idea that the island could serve as a bridgehead, or more likely for fear of the parliamentary difficulties which would attend a precipitate withdrawal, Lord Liverpool gave some consideration to the retention of Walcheren. Soon enough, he decided that the British forces had to be evacuated, and all the captured dockyard installations along the estuary of the River Scheldte were destroyed, (the only tangible benefit yielded by the costly expedition). He also warned Sir John Stuart in Sicily, that he must not extend the operation in the Ionian Islands, (which captured all but one of them in the next few months), because he would not be reinforced further, and that it was likely that he would be asked to relinquish some of his army to boost Wellington’s numbers.

The key decision had been taken that British effort in Europe would be concentrated on a single enterprise, for the foreseeable future, that in the Iberian Peninsula. Here is Lord Liverpool writing to Wellington in June 1810; 

…………. when I accepted the seals of the War Department (in 1809) I laid it down as a principle (to the Cabinet) that if the war was to be continued in Portugal and Spain, we ought not to suffer any part of our efforts to be directed to other objects. Upon this principle we have acted and are still acting …………. 
and again a year later; 
………… the government was determined not to be diverted from the Peninsula to other objects: if we could strike a blow, it was there that we would strike it ……

That is not to say that either Lord Liverpool or the Cabinet, under his prompting, were convinced that in all circumstances and at all times, the Peninsula would be the right place to apply British effort, a matter to which I shall return. They were however to be consistent in the view that Britain should only mount one major land campaign, and that other operations, such as in the Mediterranean, or much later in Canada, ought to be purely defensive. This decision fed into an even more important policy change that was made at the same time. During the previous decade and a half of war, Britain had shown great energy in building numerous coalitions and mounting expeditions and campaigns. Very little had been achieved towards weakening the main adversary, France, although large amounts of money had been spent, and many soldiers had died, (a majority because of sickness rather than enemy fire). While Castlereigh had continued the pattern, the idea seems to have grown in the minds of Lord Liverpool and Spencer Percival even before 1809, that this approach
was more likely to bankrupt the country, and exhaust its manpower resources, than to produce victory. They knew that Britain could not win the War alone, and that allies would be needed, but they recognised that these allies would have to fight with the same determination as Britain. The pattern until then had shown countries being enticed into declarations of war against France by promises of subsidies and territorial gains, fighting sometimes without great conviction, and then suing for peace leaving France stronger than ever. In the new scenario, when nations demonstrated real commitment to the fight, Britain would be willing to furnish subsidies, and might look to send an army as well, but until then, diplomacy would be passive, except as regards trying to repair hostile relationships. It was impossible to predict when a sufficiently strong alliance to threaten France would emerge, so the logical conclusion was that Britain had to be prepared to fight a very long war, and to husband resources until a genuine opportunity arose.

During Lord Liverpool’s tenure of the office of Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, and later as Prime Minister, he endeavoured, albeit without complete success, to stick to this policy. He saw the involvement in Portugal and with Spain as just about compatible, in so far as these nations had risen spontaneously against French rule, and were showing the desired commitment. However, Lord Liverpool did not see operations there as a war winning opportunity in 1809, so he gave instructions to the commanding general, Wellington, which encompassed limited aims, as we shall see. As already noted, he had shut down all other European offensive operations, within months of taking office. For all that it wished to limit expenditure, the government never doubted the need to retain a very large and costly fleet to protect British shores and interests around the world, and was attentive to any threat to its naval dominance. There was resigned acceptance that most of the wide-flung garrisons, to which I have already referred, large ones in India, and Canada, smaller ones in many islands and coastal forts, could not be withdrawn. Some rationalisation was attempted, and a few expeditions to take enemy-held islands were permitted, on the grounds that force levels could then be reduced in the region concerned, (Guadeloupe and Mauritius were examples), but as we shall see later the consequences of the strategic reappraisal were at best the freezing rather than the reduction of such commitments. Diplomatically, there was less contact with the European powers; no official envoys were sent, nor proposals put forward, to the likes of Russia, Austria, or Prussia. (This retrenchment was made easier by the natural lethargy of the new Foreign Secretary, Marquis Wellesley.) Within the limits described, Britain had within a few months of Lord Liverpool’s appointment, ‘batten
down the hatches’ to await real opportunities, and the previous scattergun approach of attacking wherever and whenever possible had been discarded.

It could be and indeed was argued by the likes of Grenville, that the involvement in Portugal was just another side-show, and the government’s steady commitment to it can be portrayed as inconsistent with their new strategy, in that they also never believed that the war could be won there. However, Lord Liverpool took the view that Britain had to demonstrate her own determination to stand out against the French hegemony, and willingness to assist others who took up the baton. Portugal seemed in 1809 to be the only place where that could be done, albeit that no-one could predict whether a better location, say northern Germany or Holland, might not present itself later. Lord Liverpool certainly tried to keep his options open, stressing from the outset in his letters to Wellesley that preservation of the army was the first priority, even beyond the protection of Portugal, and for a long time seeking to limit the scope of the general’s operations to avoid being drawn in too far. This caused friction between them, and it was inevitable that more would arise because Wellesley’s prospects in the Iberian Peninsula depended in large part on how well he could be resourced, yet the government had decided to try to husband resources overall. These issues smouldered at first then really came to a head in 1811.

The important relationship between the country’s leading general, and Lord Liverpool was never easy from 1809 right through to the latter’s collapse in 1827, though they usually managed to preserve a front of formality and rather cold courtesy. Although Lord Liverpool was slightly the younger he had been the senior minister as Home Secretary when they had first worked together after Sir Arthur Wellesley’s appointment as Chief Secretary for Ireland, and he largely preserved that authority in their dealings, even when after Waterloo, the general had become the Duke of Wellington, and was lauded as the ‘first citizen of Europe’, the friend of Kings and Emperors. Lord Liverpool understood Wellesley, paying due regard to the general’s abilities and self-confidence in the military sphere, understanding the hunger for honours and susceptibility to flattery of a long un-regarded younger son, and resigning himself to the general’s propensity to complain about just about everything. Only rarely did he allow himself the luxury of replying tartly to an ungrateful tirade. His first letters after his new appointment in 1809 were calculated to assure
Well of the full support of the government and the new Secretary of State, and included the ingratiating, if unusually self-admiring, statement;

‘I think I may be perhaps more use to you in your command in Portugal than any other person who could be placed in the same situation’

Since he had replaced Wellesley’s closest political ally and friend Castlereigh, it is unlikely that those sentiments impressed their recipient. He also made Wellington’s remit totally clear;

...............it must be our policy to remain in Portugal as long as we could remain there without risking your army ...... , and again shortly afterwards;

...............though we should not be justified from want of timely precaution in sacrificing that army which formed the greater part of our disposable force, yet it would neither be just nor politic to abandon Portugal before such a measure was absolutely necessary ..............

So the Portuguese outpost was to be defended as far as reasonable, but there was to be no question of dying in the last ditch. The army had to be preserved to take part in future operations when prospects had improved. Of course, Wellington was already planning his ultimate defensive redoubt at Torres Vedras, but had chosen not to inform his political masters. Rather unreasonably in the circumstances, he read the letters as signalling a lack of confidence in his judgement, so Lord Liverpool’s intention of starting on a good footing with the general was still-born. Perhaps he was being unusually tactless in even discussing such matters, a few months after Wellesley had won a major victory at Talavera, but the new Viscount Wellington had by then been forced back to Portugal, and a major French offensive was expected at any moment.

The next eighteen months proved especially difficult for the British army in Portugal, its commander, and his relationship with Lord Liverpool. It was obvious that the French victory against Austria, and the resulting Peace of Schönbrunn in October 2009, would lead to reinforcement of the French armies in Spain, and it was widely anticipated that Napoleon would take command there himself. In a rash attempt to pre-empt the predicted French attack, the Spanish armies went on the offensive, but were badly defeated, with the result that the whole of Andalucía (south-east Spain) was lost to them, and Cadiz, the headquarters of the Spanish insurgency, was placed under siege. General Thomas Graham had to be dispatched there from Portugal, with Wellington’s concurrence, together with a few thousand British soldiers to help to defend the centre of Spanish resistance. The Spanish defeat left Wellington and
Portugal even more exposed to whatever Napoleon chose to throw at them. With an Empire to run, Napoleon decided not to lead the attack himself, but sent Masséna, perhaps his most able marshal, to take charge, together with substantial reinforcements. With hindsight, we know all about Wellington’s lines of Torres Vedras, though there is less awareness that he had hoped at first to hold the French near the Portuguese frontier, but was out-manoeuvred by Masséna. Napoleon thought success a formality, and even counselled his general to proceed methodically, rather than hurrying, so it is hardly surprising that the British government was anxious, and that Lord Liverpool saw fit to remind Wellington to prioritise the safety of his army. Indeed, there was a feeling in London that a transfer of the British and Portuguese armies en bloc to Cadiz might be the best recourse, though as usual they deferred to the commander on the spot. Reference has already been made to Wellington’s irritation, but his own secretiveness over his plans did not help. At any rate, regardless of their fears, Lord Liverpool backed by Prime Minister Percival did everything they could to reinforce Wellington, and spending in the Peninsula during 1810 rose almost three-fold to over £8000000, in spite of the government’s wish to husband resources. This is not a campaign history, so it will suffice to say that late in the year, Masséna forced Wellington back to Torres Vedras, only to be confounded in his turn when he found that the British general had created an impregnable fortress there. A full-scale assault would have been suicidal, so Masséna set himself to out-wait his opponent, scouring the Portuguese countryside for food for his army and its horses. Of course, Wellington had foreseen this outcome, knowing well the stubbornness of his adversary which had served Napoleon well in the past on numerous occasions, so a scorched earth policy had been followed during his retreat. Early the next year, (1811), Masséna had to acknowledge defeat and embarked on a difficult winter retreat into Spain, though he was still strong enough to discourage close pursuit. Nonetheless, he had failed in the task allotted to him and was replaced by his ruthless master. Wellington’s confidence that he could hold on in Portugal had been vindicated and his reputation rose accordingly.

However, there were serious disagreements about what Wellington should do next. Lord Liverpool and the Cabinet were still clear that the Napoleonic War could not be won in the peninsula, and wished to ensure that what they regarded as exceptional expenditure during 1810 would be cut back. They were in favour of Wellington consolidating his position in Portugal, but no more, and initially forbade his request to carry out operations in Spain. Wellington and his supporters in England, including his
brother, Marquis Wellesley, the Foreign Secretary, would have none of that, and under their pressure, the general was resourced at a marginally higher level even than in the previous year, and allowed to flex his instructions as much as he needed, to prepare the way for a Spanish invasion. There were two routes into central Spain from Portugal, each guarded by a strong fortress town, Badajos which began the year in Spanish hands, but which was lost by treachery in April 1811, and Ciudad Rodrigo which remained in French hands throughout the year. Wellington attempted but failed to retake Badajos, during the summer, and it was probably only this which averted further strife between the general and his political masters over his remit. After the uplift given by Wellington’s successful defence of Portugal, there was little to cheer the spirits of Lord Liverpool, or anyone else in Britain in 1811. Wellington had effectively marked time and spent a lot of money. Graham had won a battle at Barrosa outside Cadiz, but thanks to inept Spanish general-ship, the opportunity to raise the siege there had been lost. The possibility of redirecting British effort must have been considered again by the Cabinet, but events elsewhere in Europe presented no opportunities, though the first reports were reaching London of a dramatic deterioration in relations between France and Russia.

The early months of 1812 were probably ‘make or break’ for the Peninsular campaign. Wellington by then had the agreement of Lord Liverpool that he could move into Spain, but to do this he had to take the two fortresses, Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajos quickly, otherwise another campaigning season might have disappeared without positive results. Had this occurred it is likely that by the next spring, with Napoleon in full retreat from Moscow, the attraction of landing a substantial army in northern Europe would have become irresistible to the Cabinet, and soldiers left in Portugal would have been reduced to the role of a garrison. In fact, both fortresses had fallen by April, albeit at very heavy cost in soldier’s lives, and to Britain’s reputation, as both towns were sacked after surrender. (Even his greatest admirers have to admit that Wellington was not a master of siege-craft, though he was not helped in this case by the failure of his engineers to move his heavy gun train up from the coast quickly enough to influence events). The British and Portuguese forces were finally free to move forwards and a brilliant victory at Salamanca and the totemic capture of Madrid lay ahead for Wellington. The decision to land a small army drawn from Sicily, at Alicante, that autumn, must have seemed like reinforcing success to the Cabinet, by this time led by Lord Liverpool as Prime Minister. Although, the force, timorously commanded by a General Maitland was to achieve little, it did influence the French decision to lift the siege of Cadiz, and may have had
other indirect benefits for Wellington’s operations. By the late summer, Lord Liverpool probably thought that victory in Spain was in sight, regardless of the large number of French soldiers remaining there, certainly approaching 250000. Things began to go wrong when Wellington turned north from Madrid, and besieged Burgos, as a step towards creating a stronghold on the northern coast, through which he could be supplied over the winter. The siege dragged on, the French concentrated their armies and threatened Wellington’s existing supply lines; soon it became clear that he would have to lift the siege and pull back. The question was how far? The answer at first was just to the west of Madrid, but eventually thanks to skilful French outflanking operations, it became, all the way back to the Portuguese frontier. The two critical fortresses, Badajos and Ciudad Rodrigo were however retained.

Fortunately for his place in history, Wellington’s latest withdrawal was seen in London as a temporary setback, and he was given a free hand to make his plans for 1813. Napoleon had withdrawn 20000 soldiers from Spain, to join the Grand Army he led into Russia, and that action together with wastage had reduced French numbers to 195000 in total, of which his brother Joseph and Marshal Jourdain, in command of the force confronting Wellington directly, disposed of less than half. The British general, with large Portuguese and Spanish contingents, and clear numerical superiority for the first time, never bettered his performance of the early months of 1813, as he repeatedly manoeuvred round his adversaries’ left flank and drove them back through northern Spain to the foothills of the Pyrenees. There, he set up the battle of Vitoria in early June, winning a decisive victory, in which the French army was fortunate to escape annihilation. Their retreat continued, Wellington entered France, and then paused. Obviously, his army needed to regroup after their long march and battle triumph, but as the pause extended, it began to appear that Wellington did not know what to do next. The world had changed completely. Napoleon had perhaps lost as many as 570000 casualties and prisoners during his abortive invasion of Russia, but had scoured France and all his other dependencies to put a new army in the field against the advancing Russians, and finally halted them in Germany at around the time Vitoria was being won. Britain had by then come to an understanding with Russia (and Sweden), and was working hard to do the same with Prussia. Subsidies were made available, and an ambassador, General Lord Cathcart, with real powers to negotiate, and disburse money, had been attached to the Russian Headquarters where their Emperor had based himself. The war-winning opportunity, hardly glimpsed in 1809, but by 1813 a reality, was being pursued
relentlessly by Lord Liverpool and his government, but they were aware that Britain had no direct involvement on the front which was likely to prove decisive.

It was against this background, that the premier floated the idea of closing down the struggle in Spain and southern France, by agreeing a truce with Napoleon, which would see French forces evacuating Spain. In such circumstances, Lord Liverpool thought that the well-trained Spanish and Portuguese cohorts of Wellington's army, with a small stiffening of British soldiers, would be well capable of holding the line of the frontier. This would have allowed most of Wellington’s British contingent, with its commander, to be transferred to northern Germany, where it would have taken its place alongside the allied forces of Russia, Sweden, Prussia, and it was hoped, Austria. Lord Liverpool had no doubt that this was where the war would be decided, and of course deployment there would have meant that when success was achieved, a British army would be in position to protect what were seen as paramount interests in Hanover and the Netherlands. Perhaps the logistics of completing such a move in time to influence the war, told most against it, and it may be that Napoleon would have gained by switching his soldiers to the north, faster. Anyway, Wellington was strongly against the idea, and this proved decisive, such was his prestige by then. So he and his army remained in southern France, where the French commander, Marshal Soult, who had made good use of the respite given to him by Wellington’s pause, attempted to outflank him, and move back into northern Spain. Wellington duly thwarted these manoeuvres, and also completed fairly laborious sieges of port towns in northern Spain, San Sebastian and Pamplona, which meant that he could be supplied from there, rather than Portugal.

In spite of the absence of British soldiers from the main front, it would be quite wrong to underestimate the importance of British money and diplomacy in securing the downfall of Napoleon. In general, British decision-making remained sure-footed, though the experience with Sweden was something of a throwback to the earliest years of the struggle. Subsidies and the promise of territorial concessions had brought that country under her French Crown Prince, the erstwhile Marshal Bernadotte, into the war, but the allies profited little from his negligible efforts. Sweden would have been a key ally, and may have been compelled to do more, if a British army had been brought to northern Germany, so the diplomatic effort expended can be explained if hardly justified. Otherwise, British money was better
spent in support of the armies of Russia, Prussia, and when she eventually entered the struggle, Austria. With Wellington deploying a hundred thousand men (forty thousand of whom were British) in southern France, no-one could claim that Britain was not committed on the ground, even if distant from the centre of the action, and his victories had indeed earned respect for his nation.

Probably, Napoleon’s fate was sealed by two factors above all; firstly a feeling across Europe that it was ‘now or never’ if the continent was to be freed from his depredations, and secondly the subsidies which funded the armies arrayed against him. He had enough battlefield success in 1813 to show that if the allied forces had been a little less formidable, or even if he had negotiated more realistically, he might have saved himself. After victories at Bautzen and Lutzen in the late spring, he had been able to negotiate a truce (of Pleiswitz) to last for 6 weeks, and the British government was for a while very concerned that this would be converted into a peace treaty under Austrian good offices, which would leave Napoleon in control of an enlarged French state. At this time, Lord Liverpool consulted Wellington as to whether he would be able to cope if Napoleon was free to switch the remaining French armies to confront him, and did not receive a very positive answer. The British ministers knew that Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor, was so worried about the growth in Russian power, that he wanted France to remain strong enough to balance this, and was even happy to contemplate her remaining in possession of Spain and the Netherlands. However, Austrian efforts to broker peace foundered on Napoleon’s intransigence and Metternich brought her into the war, at last, fearful that she might miss out on the fruits of victory; a British subsidy was duly supplied. The numerical balance of forces was tipped irrevocably, and Napoleon lost the decisive battle of Leipzig in October 1813, even though he inflicted twice as many casualties on his adversaries as suffered by his own army; he was compelled to return to France with the remnants, while the allies regrouped and prepared to invade French soil early the next year. Meanwhile, Wellington threw off his puzzling lethargy and began to move forward late in 1813, and cities like Bordeaux and Toulouse fell to him before events further north ended the War. There had been one last round of discussion of his redeployment to the north, triggered this time by a Spanish attempt to negotiate a treaty with Napoleon, which would have brought to an end the fighting in the south of France. There was rising dissatisfaction in Portugal and Spain, that their soldiers were fighting out-with their own borders, and a traditional antipathy towards Britain had resurfaced in Spain. However, nothing came of this proposal, either, and Wellington saw out the war in southern France. (Political considerations
prompted the dispatch of a small force to attempt the capture of Antwerp, early in 1814; it failed to make much progress like others similar earlier in the war, but this proved of little consequence in the context of the main events.) Otherwise, the beginning of 1814 saw Napoleon confronted by overwhelming force, still able to win battles, but not to exploit his victories, and without the numbers to resist everywhere. He was given one more opportunity to accept peace on relatively generous terms, by the star-struck Russian Emperor, but refused, and the net around him tightened. Soon, even he could see that the game was up. He abdicated and was granted imperial status on the Island of Elba, while Emperor Alexander of Russia took the salute at a march-past of the victorious allied armies in Paris.

Britain was not yet at peace, because the war with the United States of North America which had broken out in 1812 was on-going. I shall say a little more of it later, but for completeness will deal first with Napoleon’s last throw of the dice. A number of explanations have been adduced for the events of 1815, with some, which refer to unfulfilled promises, seeking to cast Napoleon implausibly in the role of victim, while it has been conjectured that he was motivated by boredom as much as anything else. He left Elba in February 1815, landed in southern France, officers and men from his past armies flocked to his support, and soon he was in Paris, and the restored Bourbon King had fled. However, the British government along with its allies reacted quickly and decisively. Armies were concentrated on the French northern frontier, made up from the British, Dutch, and Prussian troops immediately available; the Duke of Wellington, who had been in Paris rather than across the Atlantic as he might have been, was given the command, and Russia, Austria, and Sweden promised large armies later, if required. Of course they were not, and Waterloo followed by Wellington’s rapid occupation of Paris decided Napoleon’s fate for ever.

In the context of the present discussion the importance of these events is as a demonstration of the surer touch in setting British strategy which had emerged in the later stages of the Napoleonic Wars, and of the fact that the British government recognised that it could not leave the task of defending British interests on the continent to other powers. The treaties agreed prior to Waterloo, by the four great powers provided for the supply of 150000 troops by Britain, (albeit that many would be contracted from Germany and Holland) the same contribution as from Russia, Prussia, and Austria, firstly to confront Napoleon, and then to counter any future disturbance caused by France. The contrast with the level of British engagement in the central struggles during the years of Pitt’s primacy could hardly be greater.
The Waterloo campaign actually saw the logical end-point for the decisions on British strategy taken around 1809, reversing once and for all the trend towards fighting European Wars by proxy, and returning to the earlier ‘Continental’ paradigm of William III and Marlborough that Britain had no alternative to engagement with France, or any other adversary, on the key continental fronts. The strategy during the devastating 20th century wars with Germany and the dispositions during the Cold War, showed that Britain had learnt the lesson, and that the ‘Blue Water’ strategy had been consigned to history. Having said that, a new division had arisen by then between those who wanted focus on the main theatre of war, and those championing a different kind of indirect approach, the ‘Easterner’s’ in the First World War, and proponents of a Mediterranean Strategy in the Second, who included Churchill in their number. Their case was at least in part based on a British misinterpretation of the eventual success of the Peninsular War campaign, namely that it was a major factor in Napoleon’s loss of power. As should be clear from this account, even if it had some attritional value, (as the so-called Spanish Ulcer), and however much we admire Wellington’s great military achievement, it was a secondary influence on the outcome of the Napoleonic War. The French Emperor drew reinforcements from Spain, and later from Southern France, regardless of the state of play there, and Wellington never believed that he could conquer France from the south or even retain Southern France if confronted by a resurgent Napoleon, freed from pressure in the north. It is clear from his correspondence, that Lord Liverpool saw the limitations of the Peninsular War from the start, even while he was voicing strong support for Wellington’s operations in the House of Lords. For a year or two, he tried to constrain Wellington, and restrict the depth of Britain’s involvement in the peninsula. Thereafter, he decided that the quickest way out was to win the campaign, so Wellington was given a free hand, and resourced to the greatest extent possible. I am convinced that during the closing years of the war, Lord Liverpool and others in the Cabinet wanted a British army to be directly involved in an end-game between Napoleon and the rest of Europe, when that event happened, but that they accepted that the commitment would have to be total. Either all of Wellington’s army, with its commander would be transferred to a northern front or none. Ironically, it took Napoleon’s last throw to bring about something like their desired scenario on the field of Waterloo.

Any consideration of strategy during the later stages of the Napoleonic War must touch on the impact of the war of 1812, between Britain and the United States. The fact that war broke out is mainly a charge against Spencer Percival who was totally
committed to the trading restraints (Orders in Council) on non-belligerents, which caused much of the hostility between the two nations. Their removal shortly after Percival’s assassination came too late to prevent war. The United States had acted on opportunistic grounds as well as out of annoyance, and saw the conquest of Canada as a realistic war aim, even although her own armed forces were in a lamentable state. Britain aimed largely at containment, and to minimise the resources drawn away from the vastly more important war with France. A few battalions were sent to Canada rather than to Wellington, but the effect on the latter’s army which by then mustered upwards of a hundred thousand men was negligible. The Americans attacked around the Great Lakes, captured a few outposts and burnt the township of York (the fore-runner of Toronto), but were soon driven back. Thereafter, the war continued at low level; the Americans without a battle-fleet, posed no real naval threat even though they did win a few high-profile single-ship frigate encounters, and caused some disruption by privateering. Britain attempted nothing ambitious for so long as the European War persisted. Its conclusion saw more reinforcements being sent across the Atlantic, and expeditions were mounted against Washington, some of which was burnt, and New Orleans, where the attacking force was repulsed. More ominously for the United States, a rumour appeared that Lord Liverpool had begun a written correspondence with Wellington concerning the possibility of his taking command, and about the resources he would require. In fact, this was probably part of a bluff; Lord Liverpool was unconvinced that Britain could gain from prolonging the struggle. It was costly, there was a danger that Russia might interfere in order to embarrass Britain at the Congress of Vienna, and there were no prizes to be had, which would be worth the effort needed to keep them in the future. Accordingly the premier insisted that Britain adopted a conciliatory posture in negotiations at Ghent, and the war was brought to an end in late 1814, with neither side having achieved anything worthwhile. It had been a futile war that Britain (and the United States) should have avoided, but at least Britain had not compounded matters by allowing her focus on the Napoleonic War to be distracted.

In summing up this discussion on Lord Liverpool’s influence in developing and implementing war strategy it should be acknowledged that the later years of the Napoleonic War saw a sea-change. For a decade and a half after 1793, Britain tried frantically to strike at France, but few of the blows landed were heavy, and some of the operations carried out were hardly relevant to the main struggle. After 1809, the approach looks far more measured, with its focus on the single land campaign in the Iberian Peninsula, and the recognition that Britain should assist those nations which
resolved to defy and fight against Napoleon, but should not incite or bribe them to do so. There remained contradictions, especially around the extent to which Britain should have allowed herself to be drawn into the Peninsular War, rather than husbanding resources to take a more direct role in the central struggle against Napoleon, whenever it took place. Great prestige was gained through Wellington’s exploits, but Britain’s role at the peace-table was eventually bought less by him than with subsidies, and Castlereigh’s presence and skills as a negotiator. However, it is rare indeed for any strategy to be followed exactly, and in my view, Lord Liverpool brought about enough of a shift, to deserve credit he is almost never given, for the successful outcome for Britain.

5.3. Military Organisation and Logistics

Although there have been large shifts in power at the top of the British government structure during the last few centuries, processes have changed less. The decision making forum has always been a council, made up of the monarch’s key officials and advisors, which evolved into a Cabinet with a Prime Minister rather than the monarch in the chair. The position of Secretary of State emerged to conduct the necessary two-way communication with those charged with implementation of every matter of policy which concerned the government, passing down decisions and receiving information. At various times such office-holders assumed an executive role by taking and communicating their own decisions, and effectively challenged the higher body to over-turn them. The work-load eventually demanded a splitting of the role in two, but the job-titles, Secretary of State for the Northern Department, and the Southern Department, only reflected some of the story. Certainly, the office holders preferentially communicated with ambassadors and envoys operating in different parts of the world conveyed by the titles, but they also handled communication with Lords Lieutenant and Justices of the Peace, the internal policy implementers; exactly the same principle applied during wartime, when admirals and commanders in chief were also answerable through a Secretary of State to the Cabinet, or its precursor. Thus, Secretaries of State like John Carteret and William Pitt the Elder were able to assume the sole direction of wars, though each was brought down when he lost the support of the Cabinet.

Workload was again the justification for the appointment of a third Secretary of State in 1768, and although the office was actually abolished once (in 1782), and its responsibilities and status changed frequently in the years up to Lord Liverpool’s
appointment, its title at least was settled by then as Secretary of State for War and Colonies. In time of war, the part of the portfolio requiring most attention was obvious, and Lord Liverpool was clearly fortunate as well as insightful in choosing Robert Peel, then in his twenties, as his assistant to deal with the colonies part of the brief. The responsibilities were in one sense clear, he was the channel for communicating Cabinet decisions to those at home and abroad who were expected to implement them, but of course he had more influence than that implies. He was the key figure in developing and implementing strategy as we have already discussed. The ministry of Spencer Percival formed in 1809 has to be seen as near to a Duumvirate with the premier in sole charge of all financial matters, and Lord Liverpool charged with leading the war effort. Conveniently enough, they were also the spokesmen for the government in the two parliamentary chambers. A powerful Foreign Secretary might have challenged the War Secretary, but the then incumbent, the Marquis Wellesley, rarely showed enough energy to prolong an argument, and the remaining Cabinet members were close to ciphers.

The issues around strategy which had confronted Lord Liverpool were extremely challenging intellectually, but once he had seen his way clearly, it was a matter of keeping his Cabinet colleagues in line, and trying to ensure that all his own decisions fitted as far as possible within the strategic framework he had constructed. However implementation brought a host of day to day problems, of which the greatest was the need to convince other major stake-holders who had a place in the war machine that they also must act in conformity with the grand vision. The organisation which managed the British war effort had developed in a very haphazard way over centuries, and the Secretary of State did not sit atop a simple structure. So the countless actions necessary to achieve anything militarily were separately charged to officials reporting to a plethora of masters. Some of the latter viewed themselves as no-whit inferior in status to the Secretary of State for War, and had to be treated circumspectly if their cooperation was to be obtained. I shall now identify the main players and give a brief account of their responsibilities as they impacted on the deployment and maintenance of an army in the field.

General administration of all kinds, provision of food, clothing, and forage for horses, and the channelling of money for pay and local supplies was the responsibility of the Secretary at War, a relatively junior government position not to be confused with the Secretary of State, or indeed even answerable directly to that minister. The office had been established by the Treasury in 1661 to oversee military spending, mainly to
satisfy the House of Commons that this was being done, rather than to meet the needs of the army. The duties had once involved little more than keeping accurate records of what was being done by other functionaries for later inspection, but the full responsibility for implementation had gradually devolved onto the Secretary at War. However, the capacity of appointees infrequently reflected the central importance of the role and in 1809, the office was filled by Lord Palmerston, who was then in his early 20s, albeit at the start of a long and successful career. I have found nothing to suggest that he distinguished himself particularly at this stage. It is telling that Lord Liverpool, the last person to usurp a colleague’s responsibilities gratuitously, felt the need in the next few years, to involve himself in a number of matters within Palmerston’s brief.

The provision of arms and munitions was the responsibility of the Board of Ordnance at whose head was a member of the Cabinet, the Master-General, and he also formally commanded the artillery and engineer units in the army, (though not their field operations). In 1809, this position, which had medieval origins, was held by John Pitt, 2nd Earl of Chatham, elder brother of the deceased premier, who was generally viewed as able enough, and was a substantial enough political figure to have been mooted as Prime Minister on more than one occasion, but he was incorrigibly lazy. Glover describes the progress made by Chatham’s predecessor in the office, the 4th Duke of Richmond, in improving guns and shells, and the quality of artillery officers and men, but Chatham’s lack of energy, and disputes over responsibilities with his subordinates, threatened a reversal.

Latter-day experts have praised the Commander in Chief in 1809 and for the previous 14 years, the Duke of York, brother to the heir to the throne. He was responsible for appointments, promotions, training, and discipline in the army. He is given credit for transforming the education of officers and training generally, not least by supporting innovators like Sir David Dundas and Sir John Moore. However, he did nothing to alter the army’s fixation with seniority, which meant that the principle of ‘Buggin’s turn’ rather than ability often dictated the choice of generals, and lower ranked officers to fill key positions. The fragmentation of responsibilities should already be apparent, and there was yet more!

The Home Secretary and the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland were charged with the deployment of soldiers stationed on the British mainland and in Ireland, respectively, and held the main responsibilities for home defence; generals commanding forces in
different areas of the countries reported directly to them. Inevitably, this meant that
they took an interest whenever the Secretary of State for War looked for additional
soldiers to engage in, or reinforce, enterprises abroad, or when the Commander in
Chief attempted for training purposes, to concentrate soldiers, normally scattered
round the kingdoms. Unsurprisingly, the provision of naval support, whether for
protection of troop transports or supply ships was solely the responsibility of the
Admiralty; even although Castlereigh had managed to create a separate dedicated
transport fleet, it could not sail unescorted. In truth, the division of responsibilities was
not an accident. There remained a belief that no one person should be given full
authority over the army, because of fear that the power might be used to suborn the
state; memories of King Charles I, Cromwell, and King James II still carried
resonance. Although some rationalisation took place during the rest of the 19th
century, it was to be another hundred years before the whole structure was swept
away to be replaced by a General Staff reporting to the Secretary of State. The
contrast with the handling of naval matters, for which a single board headed by the
First Lord of the Admiralty had already existed for over a hundred years is striking,
but of course, ships of war had never been seen as a potential threat to the state.

The last group of key stake-holders with whom the Secretary had to deal directly was
of course the commanders in chief in the field, and it is worth remembering that
contrary to arrangements during the past century or so, there was no professional
soldier acting as a buffer or intermediary. There was however a major constraint on
the ability of the Secretary of State to influence events, namely the time taken to
exchange messages; the speed of the horse and the fastest sailing ships was the
determining factor here. (The Napoleonic War saw real advances in semaphore
systems, but this only boosted battlefield communication; the electric telegraph which
allowed rapid communication between countries and continents only became
available fifty years later.) It was probably not a weakness that the general on the
spot had to be conceded tactical freedom to fight his battles as he thought best, but
his independence could extend into strategic matters. It was to be one thing for Lord
Liverpool to take the decision to focus on the Peninsular Campaign, it was entirely
another to cajole the commanders in other theatres into releasing forces to reinforce
Wellington’s army, as they could and did waste months raising queries and
objections. More than that, I have already pointed to the fact that substantial
initiatives had been taken without reference to London by officers who knew that by
the time news reached their masters, the outcome would be settled one way or
another. Lord Liverpool at least put a stop to that.
By now it should be clear that in order to achieve anything militarily, a number of stakeholders had to be aligned with strategic objectives, and persuaded or otherwise compelled to work cooperatively. Lord Liverpool's most flamboyant and able predecessor in the office had been Henry Dundas, who brought to bear an outsize personality, a vast capacity for work, and an instinctive knowledge of the vulnerabilities of those with whom he had to deal. Dundas managed to impose his will, so that operations largely proceeded as he directed during the 1790s, but his lack of strategic insight meant that the outcomes were very disappointing. There was never any chance of Lord Liverpool adopting such an autocratic mode of proceeding, which ran completely against his instincts and personality. He was a collegiate leader, willing to listen and compromise on most matters, provided that the direction of travel was generally as he desired. As we shall see this approach meant that steps to improve procurement were not taken which probably should have been, and there were unfortunate delays in the implementation of some measures, another source of irritation to Wellington, but there was also an absence of serious mistakes and blunders. A good illustration of how Lord Liverpool worked is furnished by his involvement in manpower issues, for Wellington’s army and the army in total. Again, I stress my debt to Glover and Knight for what follows and readers are referred there for more detailed information.

At the beginning of 1810 the total strength of the British Army was 294000 of whom 210000 were regular troops, the remainder being militia restricted to service in the United Kingdom. When Lord Liverpool became War and Colonies Secretary, recruitment at a rate of 16000 a year was insufficient to compensate for a ‘wastage rate’ of 24000 a year, from death, injury, illness and desertion. In order to plug this gap of 8000, Lord Liverpool swiftly implemented a proposal formulated by Castlereigh, which envisaged up to 10% of the militia per year being offered a bounty to join the regular army. The numbers in the militia were then to be topped up by the traditional means of a national ballot of eligible men, with those selected having the options of serving or, if they chose and could afford it, finding paid substitutes. After Lord Liverpool had steered the necessary bill through parliament, the measure proved to be transformative. Helped by this and some other reforms which included giving soldiers in the lower ranks freedom to practice any religion, wherever they were stationed, (critical for recruitment in Ireland), and the targeting of black recruits (free men rather than the slaves sometimes conscripted in the past), for service in
the West Indies, the strength of the regular army had increased by 8000 to 218000 in early 1811. This was a real success for which Castlereigh and Lord Liverpool share the credit, but it was not backed up by logical deployment of the growing numbers. In particular Lord Liverpool’s strategic decision to focus British resources on Wellington’s army had little immediate impact as regards manpower allocations.

In late 1809 Wellington’s British army, which was awaiting the French onslaught on Portugal, had a front-line strength of only 25000, which Lord Liverpool initially aimed to increase by 8000, by removing 2 battalions each from Malta, Sicily, and Halifax in Canada and sending a draft of recruits of 2500 from the United Kingdom. Although Lord Liverpool had warned Sir John Stuart in Sicily that he would be asked to release some of his force, that general had little trouble in delaying action, so no troops came from there, and in total, less than half the transfers presaged by the Secretary of State took place. Only by sending more troops than intended from the United Kingdom was it eventually possible to get Wellington’s strength up to 30000 by the end of 1810. Lord Liverpool was dismayed and asked the Commander in Chief, General Sir David Dundas, (the temporary replacement for the Duke of York, who had resigned when accusations were made that his mistress had arranged the sale of army commissions), to carry out a detailed analysis of troop numbers around the world, in an effort to identify sources of additional manpower. The figures produced by Dundas amounted to the following, (India is excluded because maintenance of an army there remained the responsibility of the East India Company, and their force was unavailable for deployment elsewhere);

United Kingdom; 56000 (many still recovering from illness, ‘Walcheren fever’)
Ireland; 17500
Cadiz & Gibraltar; 10100
Malta; 4600
Cape of Good Hope; 4300
East Indies; 25800
West Indies; 13700
New South Wales; 1200
Others; 5600
‘Active fronts’; 68000 split between Canada, (where war with the United States was anticipated well before its outbreak), Castlereigh’s ‘disposable force’ in Portugal (30000), and Sicily and the Ionian Islands, (15000), as discussed earlier.
These numbers should surprise in that they show that less than one third of the army was actually confronting enemies or potential enemies, with the remainder deployed largely in garrisons. By then, British naval superiority was absolute, so there was no possibility of a French invasion of Britain or Ireland, nor of attacks on colonies, other than Canada. Obviously, the large numbers in Britain and Ireland were in part deployed to preserve order, but that should mainly have been a task for the militia. It was argued by the Commander in Chief’s staff that it would take too long (several months) to bring back soldiers from Canada, the West Indies and especially the East Indies, and that there would be further delays in getting them organised into battle-ready units. I have mentioned earlier that conquests of Guadeloupe and Mauritius did allow some minor reductions, and transfers, but something more should have been attempted. It might have been expensive, and would no doubt have sparked protests from proconsuls and generals on the spot, but the prize of generating substantial reinforcements for Wellington’s army wherever it might eventually be deployed, was worthwhile. The incident illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of Lord Liverpool’s methods; he insisted on being supplied with accurate information, and when he received it made ostensibly sensible proposals, but proved unwilling to drive them through in the face of opposition from self-proclaimed experts. It has to be said that Wellington did little to stiffen the resolve of his superior on this matter, since he never pressed for more men, as vigorously as he did for other support, perhaps because he over-estimated the difficulties associated with supplying greater numbers. His British forces were increased from 25000 to 35000 while Lord Liverpool was Secretary of State, and to 40000 by 1814. Wellington also had a good Portuguese army under command, 40000 strong, and in 1812, he had access to a British trained Spanish force of 25000. By then he had numerical superiority over his direct opponents which he used to good effect. The most relevant question is whether with greater numbers, his last retreat in 1812 could have been avoided, with incalculable strategic consequences.

With regard to supplies generally, the role of the Secretary of State was very much that of a trouble-shooter, given that the formal responsibilities lay elsewhere, mainly with the Secretary at War, and the Master General. So Lord Liverpool and his able Military Assistant-Secretary, Colonel Henry Bunbury, only became involved when there were particular complaints from Wellington or when they developed personal concerns. Thus, Bunbury investigated specific orders for shoes and great-coats, while Lord Liverpool on one occasion took action to prevent the Portuguese army being supplied at British expense, with better cloth for uniforms, than their British
counterparts. The Secretary of State also devoted time to examining such minutiae as the quality of forage for horses, encouraging the development of an improved mix of hay and grain, though nothing came of this eventually, because of the unwillingness of those in command to embrace change. As regards the supply of ordinance, Wellington’s needs were largely met, though there was a continuing problem with siege equipment, which was mostly to do with its transport along terrible roads to the points where it was needed. Lord Liverpool could do nothing to help here, and such input as he had on the munitions side was fairly peripheral, urging, against the conservatism of the military establishment, the use of innovations like Congreve Rockets and Shrapnel shells. Glover makes the amusing aside that by the end of Wellington’s campaigns the spectacular rockets had a more fearsome reputation throughout Europe than they deserved, not least because only the British army seemed to know that they occasionally reversed course and exploded amongst those who had fired them.

Another problem which occupied much of the correspondence between Lord Liverpool and Wellington was the supply of money, required for payment of troops and the local purchase of supplies for the army. A considerable mythology has arisen around the role of the Rothschilds in providing specie, but it seems likely that the campaign had reached southern France before their contribution became significant. Wellington always found it difficult to understand why the government did not ship out to Portugal the quantities of coin he required. In fact, there was a shortage of gold and silver in Britain, and of course any coin supplied to Wellington was not available to oil the wheels of commerce internally, so exacerbating the difficult economic conditions. Lord Liverpool found a solution when it was realised that the steady arrival of gold and silver from South American, largely uninterrupted by the war, meant that there was abundant coin available in the Iberian Peninsula, Spanish dollars and the like. Wellington’s commissaries were furnished with British bills of exchange which could be traded for specie with local bankers and merchants. The bills had to be discounted to less than their face value because eventual full payment was seen to depend on British victory, an outcome not certain at the time, so it was quite an expensive way of obtaining the required coin, but it was preferable to the alternatives of leaving Wellington short or denuding Britain. Although Wellington never expressed himself satisfied, and there were occasions when soldier’s pay was significantly in arrears, the sourcing of coin in Portugal proved largely successful, as long as the army was based there, and thereafter the Rothschilds largely attended to the matter.
These few examples cannot tell the whole story, but they convey the general picture. There were failures of supply, and some problems and bottlenecks took too long to sort out. It can hardly be doubted that a more logical organisation in London would have helped. Lord Liverpool’s emollient style avoided any major clashes between stakeholders which might have been very disruptive, but equally, more firmness on his part might have helped on some occasions. Nonetheless, the overall achievement of sustaining a substantial army in a fairly distant country for several years, during the age of sail, should not be underestimated and Wellington for all his catalogue of demands and complaints at the time was much more generous in retrospect, writing to Perceval’s son in 1835:
‘Of this I am certain, that I never whether in public or private said one word of the minister (Perceval), or any minister, except in praise of them; that I have repeatedly declared in public my obligation for the cordial support and encouragement which I received from them……… throughout the war I received from the King’s servants every encouragement and support that they had in their power to give.’

While anyone viewing Wellington’s correspondence, especially with Lord Liverpool, would hardly recognise this description, Knight’s view of the apparent volte-face as a sign of senility in the Duke is harsh, not least because, in spite of his deteriorating physical health, his active political career still had many years to run, and testaments to his continuing acuity were to be given right up to his death seventeen years later. It is more sensible to accept that Wellington’s letters during his campaign certainly reflected genuine concerns but that they also served as a safety valve for frustration and a way of keeping pressure on his political masters; on reflection he realised just how much worse things might have been. Equally, Lord Liverpool and his colleagues put up with quite a lot from their general, wisely seeing his ability to win battles as far outweighing the aggravation and occasional political embarrassment caused by his letters and dispatches.

5.4. Retention of Public Support

The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars occupied 22 years with only two short intermissions, of fourteen months after the Treaty of Amiens, and ten months between Napoleon’s first abdication and his return to France from Elba. So, Britain was at war with France for twenty years. Although there were British victories, mainly at sea and later in the Iberian Peninsula, most of them hardly bore comparison with Napoleon’s triumphs, Marengo, Austerlitz, Jena, Wagram and many more. Until the
French Emperor’s catastrophic decision to invade Russia, no dispassionate observer could have seen any better outcome than an eventual negotiated peace, largely on French terms, a second Treaty of Amiens. Yet Britain kept on fighting, whereas over the previous century, even when success had followed success as for Marlborough and William Pitt, discontent had risen, mainly over the costs being incurred, and the taxes imposed, until the great war-ministers were overthrown, and a new set of ministers, committed to early peace negotiations, were installed. Britain’s persistence was a phenomenon, which has received much less specific attention from historians than perhaps it warrants; here I am primarily concerned with Lord Liverpool’s role, and to place it in context.

War must have seemed much further away from the populace as a whole than it does now when pictures from combat zones are immediately brought into people’s homes, whether in newspapers, or on television and computer screens. In the early 19th century, information arrived weeks after the event in general’s dispatches, which might be read in parliament, and disseminated in news-sheets and by word of mouth, or occasionally when a victory could be celebrated, by the ringing of church bells. Though there were invasion scares, there was no direct threat to the citizenry, whether from bombers, or blockade by such as U-boats, (the country was still fairly close to being self-sufficient). In other ways however, the impact of war was no less. As regards casualties, the 1st World War is normally held out as by far the worst in our history, and with one million dead it was terrible enough. The population then of the United Kingdom was 45 million, about four times greater than in 1815. Casualty figures are less reliable for the earlier war, but 300000 is the best available estimate of the number of British deaths during the Napoleonic War. The Revolutionary War which preceded it was only slightly shorter in duration, and fought in much the same way, save perhaps for the absence of a long-lasting land campaign like that in the Iberian Peninsula. It would be surprising if the number of deaths was not at least 200000. Thus, a conservative estimate of the number of British war-related deaths between 1793 and 1815 is half a million, in relative terms, twice as large a population cull as between 1914 and 1918. Of course, the much longer duration of the earlier conflict and the absence of deadly prolonged battles like the Somme and Passchendaele, probably made it seem less devastating, but the prospects for the wounded must also have been poorer then. The other main cost of the wars was financial, and I will deal with this in more detail later. For the moment it is sufficient to say that the cost of fighting the wars between 1793 and 1815 far outweighed those of
any earlier war, and relative to the total wealth of the country it is arguable that they remain the most expensive ever fought by Britain.

Thus the ministers, who kept Britain fighting, operated for eighteen out of twenty years during which a British victory seemed a remote possibility, when historically high casualties were being incurred, demanding payment of high taxes and racking up a massive national debt. Obviously they did so out of strong personal convictions, which they managed to convey across the nation, but Pitt, Grenville, and Dundas, followed by Percival, Lord Liverpool, Canning and Castlereigh must have had some other things going for them apart from their own status and abilities as communicators. There were probably two such. The first of them was the nature of the adversary. During earlier wars, there had certainly been hostility towards the likes of France and Spain, personified by their leaders including King Louis XIV and King Philip II. However feelings of fear and disgust for Revolutionary France hit unprecedented heights, not immediately after the fall of the Bastille in 1789, but certainly after the executions of the Royal family, and the other excesses of the ‘Terror’, that coincided with the early stages of the war. Extreme antagonism towards Napoleon seems with hindsight less inevitable, and his many apologists have lined up to proclaim its unfairness. No doubt government propaganda played a major part, but so did the French Emperor’s many acts of aggression in furtherance of what seemed to be an ambition to control a continent. At any rate, Napoleon had become widely viewed as an unredeemable ogre with whom no compromise was possible, even before Lord Liverpool became a main agent in fighting the war against him in 1809, and this perception certainly helped those determined to maintain the struggle against him.

Throughout the long wars, a second factor favouring the government was the ineffectual opposition in parliament. During previous conflicts, factions opposed to the government of the time had looked inwards and set themselves at the head of those losing out, for example, landowners paying high taxes, and traders losing ships to privateers. Even governments prosecuting a war successfully had been unable to withstand that form of attack indefinitely, hence the eventual fall of Marlborough, but it was not adopted seriously at any stage between 1793 and 1815. Instead, Charles James Fox mounted a largely philosophical opposition for more than half the period, though nothing loth to try to exploit military set-backs. The Treaty of Amiens owed little to his efforts, and all he really achieved was to be branded a class-traitor, and unpatriotic as well. After Fox’s death, opposition was led by Lords Grenville and
Grey, but the former was as convinced as the government that the war had to be fought, and confined his criticism to matters of strategy. Grey was certainly anti-war, and thought that peace could be re-established if only Britain and France would negotiate rationally, but had to acknowledge that even his mentor, Fox, had been unable to start such a process in 1806. Split, and easily portrayed as unrealistic, the later opposition leaders presented a weak challenge to the government between 1807 and 1813 when the tide of war finally turned, but this did not mean that the task of the main government spokesmen in the two parliamentary chambers, Lord Liverpool, Spencer Percival, and latterly Castlereigh was simple.

The numbers in the House of Commons who were being materially disadvantaged by the war, the ‘country gentlemen’ and some with commercial interests, were probably no less than during previous wars, even if they had not been mobilised to make a concerted attack on the government. Clearly if they had ever become convinced that the government was not prosecuting the war competently, or even that a particular event had been badly handled, it was entirely possible that they would have risen up and defeated the government with the aid of the opposition, and then anything could have happened. So the government case had to be well made in the lower House, and paradoxically it was perhaps even more important that the same happened in the House of Lords, because of the influence of the peers over the members of parliament elected from areas they dominated. It was also true that the words of Lords Grey and Grenville carried more weight than those of any single member of the lower House, so from the government point of view their arguments had to be swiftly and convincingly refuted. There is no doubt that in the years up to and including 1809, Lord Liverpool had his work cut out, whether trying to defend a rare success like the Copenhagen expedition of 1807 from attacks on the immorality of invading a neutral state, or the indefensible, like the Convention of Cintra, and the delays in the Walcheren expedition. At least, after 1809 he was defending policies and operations over which he had a major say, and by then the focus was on events in Spain and Portugal.

From then until 1812, as Wellington consolidated his position in Portugal, but struggled to establish a permanent foothold in Spain, there was strong opposition to the Peninsular Campaign and its commanding general in parliament. Hostility to Wellington was inevitable as he was seen as a political general, having served in the government before taking command in Portugal, then had come the affair of Cintra which tarnished his reputation, and the government only exacerbated his
unpopularity with many thereafter, by rewarding him with promotions, steps in the peerage, and grants of money whenever battles were won. One motivation was of course to keep him relatively happy in spite of his many gripes, and another was to raise his rank so that he could be provided with able subordinates. At the start of his Iberian campaign he was a very junior lieutenant general, and such was the respect paid to seniority in the British army then, that it proved a major problem to find experienced (and competent) officers who could serve as his deputy, or command detached units. (Not all were as patriotic as his sometime second in command, Sir John Hope, who waived his seniority in order to serve in Portugal.) Most important of all to the government, was the desire to foster the idea that he was fighting a successful campaign. However, in the eyes of many, inside and outside parliament, victories like Talavera (which earned a viscountcy) were of questionable value, because year after year Wellington was held to be winning battles, yet after expending much money and incurring many casualties, he ended up back in Portugal where he had started; the attritional impact on the French of the ‘Spanish Ulcer’ was not understood by many contemporaries, and in truth, has probably been exaggerated since. Lord Grenville made much of this, and also cast doubt on the relevance of the Iberian campaign. Ironically, Lord Liverpool must have had some sympathy with Grenville’s view, in so far as he saw the Peninsular War as more than a side show, but not as a war-winning initiative. His view was much too nuanced to be disclosed outside Cabinet meetings, and he answering the attacks head-on, retaining majority support even when faced in 1810 with concurrently defending the Walcheren expedition as well as justifying another Wellingtonian retreat. On the latter occasion, he respond with the rare passionate speech quoted from earlier, and easily had the better of the argument. However such attacks were damaging, in part, because they stirred up Wellington, whose brothers made sure that all the critical remarks were reported to him, and were not always equally careful to stress the vigour of the defence.

By the middle of 1812, when Lord Liverpool became Prime Minister, the criticism in Parliament had become more muted, and Grey even made some complimentary remarks about Wellington and the Peninsular Campaign. Some attacks thereafter came from the Marquis of Wellesley, who having resigned as Foreign Secretary, claimed albeit without open support from the man at the centre, his brother, that the government had not given the campaign sufficient backing. His persistence in making these accusations must have owed something to his having heard Lord Liverpool express to the Cabinet his strategic ambivalence concerning Wellington’s campaign.
Those aware of the premier’s doubts sometimes failed to appreciate that for so long as the Peninsular Campaign remained the main British initiative, which turned out to be until the end of the war, Lord Liverpool was unwavering in his determination that there should be a minimum of resources diverted elsewhere. The government had few problems maintaining support for its prosecution of the war in 1813, and 1814, when victory seemed assured, but when the Waterloo Campaign had to be fought, Grey returned to his critical stance, taking the position that an accommodation ought to be reached with Napoleon. This time, Grenville confined his opposition to questioning some of the terms of the peace treaty negotiated in Vienna, especially the partition of Poland, and parliamentary support for the renewed struggle was strong enough, overall.

From November 1803 until the war ended in the spring of 1815, with the single break of 13 months while the Talents ministry held power, Lord Liverpool had defended the government’s conduct of the war in the Upper House, against the likes of Grenville, Grey, and latterly Wellesley, with very little assistance from an otherwise weak government bench there. The burden of justification had been sustained against more intense, if not necessarily intelligent, scrutiny in the House of Commons by Pitt, Percival, Canning and Castlereigh, but none of them had done so for half as long. I have alluded to some factors which helped the government to sustain support for the war but they were far outweighed by the resolve of the named ministers and their effective public defence of the pursuit of victory at almost any price.

5.5. A Great War Minister?

The outcome, of the war which ended at Waterloo is more easily judged now than it would have been by the surviving British ministers who presided over the victory. We can see that 1815 did not just mark the end of the Napoleonic War, but also the end of what is sometimes called a 2nd Hundred Years War, this time between all of Britain and France, commencing in 1689. Seven major wars had been fought, but none until then had been decisive. From the British viewpoint, their nation was clearly much stronger than its main precursor, England had been, when the last of these wars began in 1803, but if the original aim had been to weaken Louis XIV’s France, no-one viewing Napoleon’s version could have claimed success. It can be argued that the Treaty of Amiens, negotiated while Lord Liverpool was Foreign Secretary, in 1802, was the last of the old-fashioned pauses in the 2nd Hundred Years War, when a limited number of possessions were traded in accordance with the perceived
outcome. Both Treaties of Paris signed in 1814, and after Waterloo, in 1815 were very different in their designs and purposes. France was not stripped of much territory, being returned to its 1790 frontiers, but it was held in the grip of a tight alliance of the European powers. Nearby countries like Holland and Prussia were enlarged to act as a more effective buffer, and an army of occupation was stationed in Northern France. Britain made a treaty commitment to supply 150000 soldiers, and to subsidise armies of similar size to be supplied by her allies, Russia, Austria and Prussia in the event of renewed French aggression. For some years after Waterloo, it was very clear to allies and potential foes alike, that Britain had not disengaged from Europe militarily, and that the days were over, when in the interest of economy of money and lives, Britain would not figure if continental armies began to move. The contrast with other British governments in office when wars have been brought to a successful conclusion is striking though the pressure to disarm in 1815 to aid economic recovery was at least as great as on any other occasion, before or afterwards. The credit for what has to be read as a determination to win the peace, as well as the preceding war has to be shared between Castlereigh and Lord Liverpool, but the task of gaining acceptance for the settlement, by the political nation, fell largely to the latter.

With the above excursion beyond the time-frame of the war, I have completed my survey of Lord Liverpool’s conduct as a war minister. I have attempted to demonstrate that he brought clarity to British strategy which was conspicuously lacking earlier in the long war with France. The big decisions were largely correct, even if they did not place British forces at the main decision point, until the last campaign of the Napoleonic War. Especially important was his recognition that Britain had to focus her efforts, and that alliances should be as far as possible based on mutual interest rather than territorial or financial bribes. There was a clear-eyed view of subsidies as an essential weapon against Napoleon, to maximise the strength of the allied armies committed to fighting against him, and senior envoys like Lord Cathcart, and later Lord Castlereigh were positioned and furnished with the wherewithal to facilitate the process of their payment, as a part of their negotiating portfolios.

At the level below strategy, Lord Liverpool was willing to make suggestions on organisational, personnel and logistical, though never battlefield, matters, to generals in the field, but relations with Wellington were too strained for these to be given much of a hearing. As regards the wide topic of resourcing Wellington’s army, the picture is
mixed, in large part because of Lord Liverpool’s unwillingness to challenge those with
grand and historic appointments, who still had a role in an archaic and inefficient
military organisation. Nonetheless, he did preside over a substantial increase in the
size of Wellington’s army, and kept it sufficiently well supplied to win its campaign.
Crucially, Lord Liverpool played a major role in maintaining majority support for
continuation of the war when the outlook was unpromising in spite of the opposition
of many of the most distinguished and able political figures of the time. Undoubtedly,
Napoleon’s demonic reputation helped, but it was the unrelenting commitment of her
own leaders, always on display, which brought Britain the decisive victory which had
eluded her throughout the eighteenth century, and ended the ‘2nd Hundred Years
War’ with France.

It would be misguided to claim that Lord Liverpool was as great a war minister as
William Pitt the Elder, or Winston Churchill, because he lacked their ability to inspire
a nation, but he yielded nothing to them in providing direction and organisation, and
just as with Lloyd George in a later conflict, his country was fortunate he took the
office he did in 1809. He deserves but has never received a comparable amount of
credit for the eventual decisive victory to that granted to the Welsh premier. I will end
this chapter with the encomium to Spencer Percival, and Lords Liverpool and
Castlereigh, given by Sir John Fortescue, the historian of the British army, at the end
of his Ford Lectures in 1911. If its phrases are somewhat grandiloquent for our age,
there is no doubt about the sentiments which might serve as a corrective to much
that has been written about the period before and since.

‘Pitt is honoured among us, at least for the courage, sagacity, and wisdom he
displayed during the nine years of his administration in time of peace; but for his
resolute hostility to the doctrines of the Revolution he is still severely blamed, while
Castlereigh, Percival and Liverpool are sneered away as mere narrow-minded
reactionaries. Personally when I think of the tremendous odds against which the
three last stood up with unshakable firmness, I am lost in admiration. The old ground
of conflict was changed; but the enemy was infinitely more formidable. On the one
side was Napoleon, an autocrat vested with such power as great genius and good
fortune have rarely placed in the hands of one man, with the resources of half Europe
in his hand, and an armed force unsurpassed in skill and devotion, ready to march to
the ends of the earth to uphold his will. On the other was a plain English gentleman
with not so much as a force of police at his back; with a population by nature five
times as turbulent as it is now, and in the manufacturing districts inflamed alike by
revolutionary teaching and real distress; with an Ireland perilously near revolt but wanting a constabulary; and lastly with a House of Commons, unreformed indeed, but not upon that account containing a less factious, mischievous and obstructive Opposition than any other House of Commons during a great war. And in the face of these difficulties he had not only to conduct the ordinary business of government, but to raise armies, man fleets, construct and pursue a military policy and be unsuccessful at his peril. Napoleon could lose whole armies with impunity. He lost one in Egypt, another in St. Domingo, and a third thrice as big as the other two put together in Russia; and yet he did not hesitate to order levies amounting in all to 1300000 men in 1813. Five thousand British troops beaten and captured would have brought any British Minister’s head perilously near to the block. Such were the difficulties that confronted Perceval, Liverpool and Castlereigh; yet for their country’s sake they encountered them without flinching. But they are to be decried because they strove against the ‘spirit of the age’ and loathed the thought of democracy.’
6. The Foreign Policies of the Liverpool Government

6.1. Preamble

It would be difficult to find much to praise in Lord Liverpool’s first essays in foreign affairs, whether consideration is given to some rather immature pontifications in support of Pitt’s government in the 1790s, or to his undistinguished tenure as Foreign Secretary between 1801 and 1804. In the latter case, the point has already been made, that he cannot fairly be blamed for the inglorious product of his main task which was to supervise a search for peace to end the unsuccessful first phase of the French war. The negotiation in France, entrusted to the experienced envoys, Lords Malmesbury and Cornwallis, took place around terms drafted by William Pitt before he went out of office, which reflected the general course of the war in bearing little resemblance to that statesman’s aims, eight years earlier. However criticism is more fairly directed towards Lord Liverpool for his conduct in the office during the months of fraught relations with France which followed the signing of the Treaty of Amiens.

He was unable to achieve a balance between conciliation and firmness in his dealings with the French ambassador in London, and directly with the government in Paris, alternating between the two approaches in a way that must have conveyed indecision and weakness. More culpably, he permitted misguided attempts to bribe members of Napoleon’s family to persuade the French leader to acquiesce in the continued British occupation of Malta; a course of action which showed no understanding of Napoleon’s character and motives, and made later accusations of French double-dealing ring hollow with other nations. To compound matters, his early dealings with the King, who still arrogated to himself a role in monitoring foreign policy, were unrewarding for both parties, prompting royal quotes like ‘he has no head for business, no method, no punctuality’ and ‘he always approached him (the King) with a vacant grin and hardly ever had anything business-like to say’, the latter perhaps a rather unfair attack on Lord Liverpool’s diffidence in his younger days, to which I have already made reference. The relationship with the King, whose moods oscillated perhaps as a result of his unstable mental health, was turned round quickly enough, judging by a another royal quote, soon after, that ‘there was no-one with whom he found it so pleasant to transact business’ and by the monarch’s championing of Lord Liverpool’s appointment as Home Secretary in the second Pitt administration formed in 1804. However, there is no doubt that Lord Liverpool was widely seen as an inadequate Foreign Secretary, and when Pitt returned as premier
this fact, as much Pitt’s intention to become personally involved in negotiations with potential allies, made it inevitable that he would be moved.

For the next eight years as he rebuilt his political reputation, first as a safe pair of hands at the Home Department, and thereafter, as we have seen, as a successful War Secretary, Lord Liverpool was not much involved with the detailed conduct of foreign relations. He did have to speak about this topic, as all others, in his capacity of leading in the House of Lords, defending the governments of which he was a member against the strictures of two other foreign secretaries of the period, Lords Grey and Grenville, and it seems undeniable that even without direct responsibilities he did gain much in understanding and judgement of world affairs during those years. The evidence for this comes from the early years of his premiership which saw his skilful handling in the absence of the Foreign Secretary, of Bourbon pretensions to resume the throne of France, and the negotiations which ended the war with the United States. Both of these matters have been touched on previously and will not be considered in detail now, as this chapter is mainly concerned with Lord Liverpool’s interactions as premier with his two Foreign Secretaries, firstly with Castlereigh, a partnership which lasted till the suicide of the latter after ten years in the office, and then with George Canning. However, in fairness to Lord Liverpool, the two largely personal successes should be acknowledged, as they at least balance earlier failures. A return of the Bourbons was by no means the preferred option of allied leaders, especially Emperor Alexander of Russia, and open support from Britain might have fixed their hostility. Instead, the British government at first gave outward signs of disinterest, but turned a blind eye to unofficial aid, so buying time for the Bourbons to raise support, and then chose their moment well to champion a solution which had by then demonstrated its popularity in France. It is hardly too much to say that Lord Liverpool’s insistence on a conciliatory posture towards the United States of North America during negotiations at Ghent, which he explained at length in a letter to Canning, saved Canada from eventual absorption by its expanding southern neighbour. It might have been possible then to impose the peace of a victor, as some ministers wished, but this would certainly have prompted attempts at redress by the aggressive young state, and it is difficult to believe that geography would not eventually have triumphed over British will to keep its remaining North American colony.

Any analysis of the development and implementation of foreign policy during Lord Liverpool’s premiership, unless it were to resort to a full reassessment of original
documents from most of the chancelleries of Europe, must rely on the original research of Webster and Temperley, who wrote magisterial works in the first third of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, neither saw his task as limited to producing a comprehensive account of events; each was determined to enhance the stature of his subject, Castlereigh in the case of Webster, and Canning in the case of Temperley. The discussions between the two historians which apparently took place concerning the matters about which the statesmen, whom they championed, differed would have been fascinating to witness! Webster saw British foreign policy as entirely the construct of an all-powerful minister, Castlereigh, before, during, and after the Congress of Vienna, even although this view seems to be contradicted by some of the documents which he brought forward for the first time, while Temperley presented later policy development largely as a contest between an all-seeing Canning and a reactionary and devious Duke of Wellington, even if he did acknowledge that the former might have lost out without the support of the Prime Minister. Nonetheless, the copious information they supply was indispensable, and taken with some correspondence collected by Yonge, provided the material for my own analysis which has reached some rather different conclusions about the contributions of the different parties.

6.2. Castlereigh and the Congress of Vienna

Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereigh, Dublin-born in 1769, a year before Lord Liverpool, the son of a prominent Ulster land-owner, (protestant of course), had begun his political career in the early 1790s by getting elected to the House of Commons as a Whig supporter of Charles James Fox. Members of his family pointed out to him that this was not a road to preferment, and he duly switched sides to follow William Pitt, getting his reward a few years later, with an appointment as acting Chief Secretary of Ireland, the first Irishman to hold the office on any basis. In this position, he made a major contribution to the passage of the Act of Union by the Irish parliament in 1800, which ended the existence of that body, but his none too scrupulous actions at that time, augmented a small squad of bitter enemies he had made already by his change of political alignment. Thereafter, he made his home and career in England, and advanced by way of the Presidency of the Board of Control for India to the position of Secretary of State for War and the Colonies in 1807. After the interruption to his career caused by the duel with Canning in 1809, he returned to the government as Foreign Secretary in the months before Spencer Perceval’s death, in 1812. He sat in the House of Commons because his title was by courtesy to
his father, a strong government supporter, who was steadily advanced through the Irish peerage to become eventually, the 1st Marquis of Londonderry.

All in politics agreed that Castlereigh’s appearance and bearing were dignified and impressive, and his intellect considerable, but his adversaries thought him cold, aloof, and duplicitous. He was an uncertain and tedious speaker, and generally uncomfortable in parliament, which even in its unreformed state, he seems to have seen as too much a hostage to public opinion, but his whole career from the negotiations around the Irish Union of 1800, onwards, suggests that he was an exceptional councillor and negotiator in smaller groups of men. In such milieus, he relaxed his stiff, formal persona, at least a little, so that he was regarded with some affection by those colleagues who got to know him well and even by a few of those contending against him. His reactions to Canning’s machinations in 1809 show that, behind the impassive façade, ran fiercer passions. He insisted on a duel and then, unusually, after both had missed with pistol shots, on discharging a second round at an adversary, who was firing in the air, this time wounding Canning in the thigh. His eventual suicide, usually attributed to a mental break-down caused by overwork, was triggered as he indicated to both the King and the Duke of Wellington, by his fear of the exposure of a homosexual encounter. There is little doubt that an incident did take place, and whatever its exact nature, it points to some kind of secret life. The Duke of Wellington had real personal regard for his fellow Irishman, as to a lesser extent did George IV, but in the long-lasting correspondence between Castlereigh and Lord Liverpool there is no great warmth, though the latter displayed much grief at Castlereigh’s funeral. They were certainly respectful colleagues, but as we shall see, had rather different world views. Generally, Castlereigh polarised opinions. If the few closest to him tended to like and admire him, many more, who only knew of his imperious bearing, and sometimes ill-chosen public words, detested him. Shelley’s bitter lines in ‘the Masque of Anarchy’, written soon after the Peterloo massacre in 1819, represent the latter;
'I met Murder on the way,
He had a mask like Castlereigh,
Very smooth he looked yet grim,
Seven bloodhounds followed him:
All were fat; and well they might
Be in admirable plight,
For one by one and two by two,
He tossed them human hearts to chew
Which from his wide cloak he drew.'

It remains slightly perplexing that Castlereigh carried so much of the government's unpopularity in the difficult years after Waterloo, when he had little to do with formulating the economic and law enforcement policies which caused public anger. Certainly he defended the policies in the House of Commons, but no more vigorously than Lord Liverpool did in the upper House. It seems that the part of the political nation that scorned the government line needed a scapegoat, and Castlereigh fitted the bill far better than the unassuming premier. The Foreign Secretary already had 'form' with those who accused him as a turncoat and crooked dealer in his early years in Irish politics, so it proved easy enough for his opponents to extend the list of his supposed misdeeds, and he made matters worse by largely disdaining to engage with those who disagreed with him. His attitude was conveyed by a curious statement that between popularity and unpopularity, 'unpopularity is the more convenient and gentlemanlike'.

Castlereigh's greatest services to his country were rendered during 1814 when with the concurrence of the Cabinet, leaving Lord Bathurst to look after routine business in the Foreign Office, and Lord Liverpool to deal with foreign ambassadors and to oversee the negotiations to end the Anglo-American War, he departed for the Eastern borders of France and joined the throng of emperors, kings, and princes, ministers, officers and courtiers, in the train of the invading allied armies. He went because the ministers thought that their ambassadors to the allied leaders, the likes of Lords Cathcart and Aberdeen, were not wielding enough influence in discussions on terms for a general peace. The Cabinet gave Castlereigh a widely drawn remit, certainly because he was trusted, but also because with despatches normally taking more than a week to travel between the allied headquarters and London, his position would have been untenable otherwise, in negotiations with heads of state who could commit their nations on the spot. In an otherwise thoughtful work on the Congress of
Vienna, Nicolson suggests that Castlereigh was given great freedom because the Prime Minister had little interest in foreign affairs, but this assertion is totally belied by the strenuous efforts made by the British team of negotiators to keep Lord Liverpool informed of most that was going on, albeit after the unavoidable time-lag, and even more by the depth and detail of the Prime Minister’s frequent return messages. However, it must also be acknowledged that Castlereigh was on occasion selective in his disclosures, even to the three ambassadors with him, Lords Aberdeen, and Cathcart, and his brother, Sir Charles Stewart, and certainly to the Prime Minister, so that he sometimes pursued his own rather secretive course without wider British awareness. There were echoes in this of his conduct as War Secretary, and it was to be a continuing theme during the remainder of his career.

When he arrived on the French border, Castlereigh, who travelled with his out-going, if slightly eccentric wife, and a young niece, quickly showed himself to be in his element, gaining the respect and, to a degree, the confidence of the key power-brokers, Emperor Alexander of Russia, and Prince Metternich, the Chancellor of Austria, during the negotiations which consolidated the alliance and brought the war to an end. Thereafter, as the centre of diplomatic activity shifted first to London during the visit there of Alexander, Metternich, and the King of Prussia, and then to Vienna where broader discussions on the future of Europe began, accompanied by an exhausting round of social engagements in which Castlereigh and his wife took a full part, his prestige remained high. His achievement of such status was helped by the government’s willingness to continue disbursing subsidies, even if the absence of British soldiers from the main battlefront was a negative factor. Nonetheless, the esteem in which he was held had its limits, and he was soon to over-estimate the extent to which he could persuade leaders with aspirations in the central heartland of Europe, to subordinate what they saw as national interests to his desire to find equitable and lasting solutions.

Before the Congress in Vienna began, the most important British objective had been to reach an enduring settlement with France. Reference has already been made to the way in which Lord Liverpool had allowed the Bourbon case for restoration to the French throne to prosper without backing it openly, so avoiding allied opposition. The 1st Treaty of Paris was thus highly satisfactory from the British viewpoint as it encompassed the forced abdication and exile to Elba of Napoleon, and the return of the Bourbon King, while Russia and Britain together ensured that the French frontiers were only pushed back to their 1792 limits, so defeating the efforts of Austria and
some lesser powers to punish France territorially for twenty years of war. (Metternich had reversed an earlier policy of trying to maintain a strong French state, as a counterpoise to Russia, when his direct negotiations with Napoleon collapsed, a year earlier.) Castlereigh and Emperor Alexander of Russia aimed to ease the path of the restored Bourbon monarch and avoid the generation of such resentment in France that a future government would find it easy to launch a war to recover lost territory; the approach was statesmanlike, and contrasts with that at more recent peace negotiations. As a safeguard however, Castlereigh, with full backing from his government, had continued the alliance between the four powers, Russia, Austria, Prussia, and Britain, directed specifically against France, making provision for the supply of large armies by each (150000 men), backed by British subsidies. Other important British objectives were also achieved, largely bilaterally, with France and Holland before the main congress in Vienna. Britain restored most but not all of the colonies taken during the war, and Austria agreed to cede the Austrian Netherlands to Holland to create a stronger northern buffer against France. (The process which led to the restoration of an independent and strengthened Dutch monarchical state is not central to a description of Lord Liverpool’s career, but it should be noted as amongst the diplomatic successes of the period, in that for all that it was Russian and Prussian soldiers who cleared out the occupying French, it was Britain which engineered the return of the exiled William VI of Orange-Nassau; he assumed the position of Hereditary Stadtholder in late 1813, and became King in 1815, with the agreement of the Congress of Vienna.) A peace agreement was brokered between France and Spain, both again ruled by Bourbons, but with a restraint on any renewal of ‘The Family Compact’, the alliance between France and Spain which had loomed large in the 18th century. Needless to say, no discussion of maritime rights was permitted by Britain in any negotiation, and the only real British failure during this round of peace-making, concerned the slave trade where none of the remaining practitioners, France, Spain, or Portugal would accept an outright British ban as a part of a settlement, even when offered colonial concessions in return.

It is understandable that Lord Liverpool and the Cabinet, viewing these mainly successful outcomes, for which they rightly gave Castlereigh great credit, regarded the British task in negotiating peace as almost complete. They took pleasure in Britain’s prestige and were more than happy to see Castlereigh take a prominent place at the Congress of Vienna, which was expected to ratify the above-mentioned arrangements, but they saw few if any vital British interests at stake in the settlement of central Europe, and Italy, which had still to be agreed. Probably they knew that
Castlereigh had definite views on these matters, based largely on an analysis carried out by William Pitt when he was assembling his coalition in 1805. If so, Lord Liverpool should probably have foreseen that the Foreign Secretary might act as more than a disinterested broker in discussions of disputed issues, and even commit his country a bit too far in cases where the British interest was negligible. However, no-one, either in Britain or the rest of Europe, could have anticipated the lengths to which he was prepared to go, committing every ounce of British prestige and authority to his self-appointed task, and risking breaches with the central European powers, whose interests were directly affected. Perplexingly, it is difficult to see a consistent strategy behind Castlereigh’s negotiating stances; for example in the case of Saxony he changed abruptly from one side to the other of the argument over its survival as an independent entity, and it almost seems as if he was more concerned to try to establish his authority as arbiter between kings and emperors, than with the specific outcomes. The letters sent between London and Vienna during the next few months, point to a large difference in ambitions for the Congress, and show the Prime Minister struggling to keep up with the rapidly changing directions of Castlereigh’s thoughts, and sometimes deeply worried by the extent to which the Foreign Secretary seemed to be committing his country.

Serious differences between the allies first emerged over the dispositions proposed for Poland and Saxony. A Polish puppet state, the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, had been carved out of Russian, Prussian and Austrian territory by Napoleon at the height of his power, but the victorious countries were not in agreement as to whether it should survive in any form. While Austria and Prussia favoured re-partition, the Russian position, nurtured by Alexander’s Polish Foreign Minister, Prince Czartoryski, was that the Grand Duchy should largely remain an entity, but with the Russian Emperor as its ruler. Prussia was willing to go along with this, in return for the considerable compensation of being allowed to absorb the whole Kingdom of Saxony, which had made the disastrous mistake of remaining allied to Napoleon to the bitter end, and had as a result been occupied by Russian forces. The final piece in this jigsaw was to be compensation for Austria with territory in Italy, but the Austrian chancellor, Metternich was strongly opposed to the Russian and Prussian carve-up, which would have diminished greatly Austria’s status in Germany. Lord Liverpool saw no essential British interest threatened by the Polish arrangement, and more to the point, no way in which Britain could exert direct influence; he wished to confine the British response to a clear statement for the record that the restoration of an independent Poland would be ‘a measure most just in itself and most satisfactory
to the people of this country’, though he knew very well that such an outcome was a pipe-dream.

Castlereigh, with help from Talleyrand, (who simply ignored any attempt to marginalise him as representing a defeated power), opposed the Russian proposals vehemently. The arguments raged on in Vienna until the end of 1814, with Lord Liverpool urging restraint on Castlereigh, who however persisted in his hard line. The Prime Minister’s concern is conveyed in a letter he sent to Wellington at this time; ............ We are very much dissatisfied at the last accounts we received from Vienna. The course which the negotiation has taken is particularly embarrassing. Lord Castlereigh has been substantially right in all his points; but I wish we had not been made so much, principals in the Polish question. ..................

Eventually, when rumours of threats of war reached London, Lord Liverpool warned Castlereigh to drop the matter; ................ we are decidedly and unanimously of opinion that all your endeavours should be directed to the continuance of peace; that there is no mode in which the arrangements in Poland, Germany, and Italy can be settled consistently with the stipulations of the Treaty of Paris, which is not to be preferred under present circumstances to a renewal of hostilities between the continental Powers. ......it would be quite impossible to embark this country in a war at present except upon a clear point of honour ........... The defence of Holland and the Low Countries is the only object on the Continent of Europe which would be regarded in this light ............

In fact this unambiguous instruction seems to have coincided with a realisation by the Foreign Secretary, after a stormy meeting with Emperor Alexander that he was defending a lost cause and would have to retreat. So the Russian view prevailed, and Castlereigh had to confine himself to getting Lord Liverpool’s form of words read into the conference proceedings.

Castlereigh had been perfectly willing to see Saxony absorbed into Prussia, while he was working on schemes to separate Prussia from Russia in the dispute over Poland. Having lost the latter argument, he began to pay more attention to the concerns of his own Cabinet about the arbitrary destruction of a recognised state, and those of Austria, to whom a large southward expansion of Prussia was anathema. At the end of the year, Russia escalated the crisis by allowing Prussian troops to take over in Saxony, but Castlereigh found support from Lord Liverpool and the Cabinet, in spite of their fear of a renewal of war, when he opposed these
manoeuvres, possibly because Britain was by then free of its American entanglement. Castlereigh engineered a formal if secret agreement with Austria, France and Bavaria, (then, with Hanover, and Saxony itself, one of the next-ranking states to Austria and Prussia in Greater Germany), to oppose the Prussian aggrandisement and at the same time in a piece of judicious sabre-rattling, reinforcements were sent to a British army in Holland. Although details of the agreement were not immediately disclosed, there were enough rumours to make Prussia see the writing on the wall. Her appetite was eventually satisfied by the cession of part of Saxony, a few Polish provinces surrendered by Russia, and substantial gains along the Rhine; Saxony survived for another half century as an independent, if smaller, state. In this instance, Castlereigh had correctly estimated that the Russian Emperor would be less willing to risk war for Prussian territorial gains than for his own Polish scheme but the risks taken by the allies in pushing their disagreements to such lengths became clear a month later when Napoleon landed in southern France.

Another source of difficulties between Castlereigh and the Cabinet was the question of the Kingdom of Naples, (which extended to the whole of the southern mainland of Italy), still ruled by Napoleon’s brother-in-law, Marshal Joachim Murat. In return for French backing over Poland and Saxony, Talleyrand obtained Castlereigh’s support for the restoration to the Bourbon King of Sicily, of Naples, which had been in his possession prior to the wars. They then tried to enlist Metternich, and develop plans for an invasion, but the cautious Austrian Chancellor went no further than to express support for the principle of Murat’s deposition. When Lord Liverpool learnt of these discussions, he quickly ended the scheming by making it clear to Castlereigh that armed intervention by Britain could not be countenanced. The following is taken from the last of his messages on the subject, sent just before Castlereigh returned to Britain;

........... You will not have been three days in London before you are convinced of the absolute impracticability of our engaging in any military operations for the purpose of driving Murat from the throne of Naples. The truth is the country at this moment is peace mad. ............

Percipiently, in view of what was about to happen to French armies confronting Napoleon, the British Prime Minister referred in the same communication to the problem for France.

............ but I think that for his own interest and for that of the French nation, his Majesty (the King of France) ought to consider well before he embarks on military
operations for the purpose of expelling Murat. …… I know there are many persons attached to the Bourbons who are of opinion that the greater part of such an army would desert if opposed to Murat, especially if there were any prospect of Murat being joined by Bonaparte. ……..

Murat encompassed his own downfall shortly afterwards by joining Napoleon.

I have highlighted the areas of disagreement between Lord Liverpool and Castlereigh to demonstrate that the Foreign Secretary did not have complete freedom of action, and that when he seemed to be risking a renewal of hostilities he was usually restrained. Of course, Lord Liverpool and the Cabinet were entirely happy with much that Castlereigh accomplished at Vienna, just as in earlier negotiations, and they were always very reluctant to gainsay him. However it is quite clear that the seeds of future contention were sewn here, with Lord Liverpool acquiring a mistrust of congresses and conferences in general, because they seemed to lead to unwanted commitments, and damaging quarrels, while Castlereigh saw only the positive aspect, namely that many difficult issues had been settled by face-to-face discussion. Lord Liverpool’s demands for Castlereigh’s return from Vienna to prepare for the session of parliament at the beginning of 1815 were undoubtedly prompted by knowledge of the likely difficulties ahead for the budget in the House of Commons, but they must also have reflected his growing scepticism about some of the matters which Castlereigh was pursuing.

Before moving on, it is necessary to record one other Cabinet frustration with the Vienna negotiations, namely the absence of any agreement to bring nearer the abolition of the Slave Trade. Thanks to the efforts of Wilberforce, Clarkson, and other activists, British public opinion was more strongly mobilised on this issue than any other. Lord Liverpool himself had something of the enthusiasm of a convert, but his wish for progress was not just altruistic; if British shippers were forbidden the highly profitable trade, while French, Spanish, and Portuguese merchants were allowed to continue, the long term impact on British commerce could have been serious, and of course this would inevitably have fed back into attacks on the government in parliament. Although in later years Castlereigh worked diligently for the cause, in Vienna he didn’t give abolition of the slave trade much priority in comparison with his plans to redraw the map of Europe, perhaps in part because of his distaste for pandering to public opinion. As a result, the comparative failure of Britain’s bilateral
negotiations on abolition with France, Spain, and Portugal was not mitigated by any progress in Vienna.

6.3. Castlereigh and the later Congresses

Following the final French defeat at Waterloo, and the speedy capture of Napoleon, the allied negotiators reconvened at Fontainebleau to decide what to do with the deposed emperor and with France. In a letter to Castlereigh’s brother and assistant, Sir Charles Stewart, Lord Liverpool expressed the hope that the negotiators would come to an agreement quickly, probably because he thought that prolonged discussion would allow a repeat of the dissention which had arisen in Vienna. This time, the British negotiating positions had been hammered out in some detail beforehand, in meetings between the plenipotentiaries, Castlereigh and Wellington, and the Cabinet. As regards Napoleon, the British would have liked him to be handed over to the re-established Bourbon regime to be dealt with, no doubt in draconian fashion, as a rebel, but became resigned to yielding to a consensus that as a recognised emperor (of Elba) he could not be disposed of in this way. However there was continent-wide agreement that Napoleon could not be left free to trouble the peace of Europe again and Britain accepted the responsibility for his incarceration. After considering but rejecting the suggestion that he might be confined in a remote part of Scotland, Lord Liverpool had the necessary legislation passed through parliament that allowed him to be transported to St. Helena. At Castlereigh’s insistence, he grudgingly accepted the extra cost of housing representatives of the allies on the island to monitor Napoleon’s conditions of imprisonment; the Foreign Secretary had wisely foreseen the need to be able to demonstrate that the ex-Emperor was receiving humane treatment.

As regards France, the Cabinet was not united in counselling restraint, with Lord Liverpool amongst those wishing to see punitive measures in response to the enthusiastic French response to Napoleon’s return; his letter to Castlereigh in July 1815, encapsulates his views,

.............. The prevailing idea in this country is that we are fairly entitled to avail ourselves of the present moment to take back from France the principle conquests of Louis XIV. ............I think it is material that you should sound our allies with respect to them. .................
While even they could not justify again treating France as a blameless victim of the deposed Emperor’s ambition, Castlereigh and Wellington, calling in aid the views of the like-minded Russian Emperor, overcame the harsher ideas of the Cabinet, and some European powers. The terms of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Treaty of Paris were astonishingly lenient in the circumstances, though France was forced to accept precautionary measures proposed by Lord Liverpool in the rather convoluted letter quoted from above,

\textit{………..Suppose Bonaparte to be dead or a prisoner in the hands of the allies, we might be induced to waive any permanent cession of territory on the part of France upon the following conditions; …………..}

These included the dismantling of border fortresses like that at Lille, and the stationing of an army of occupation in the northern provinces of France. Apart from having to pay for the occupying army, the twice-defeated nation was also charged with a large indemnity, and the eventual removal of the occupying force was made conditional on the retention of the French throne by the Bourbons who were seen at this time as a force for moderation. Castlereigh also took the opportunity to impose an immediate ban on French trading of slaves, so remedying a perceived weakness of the 1\textsuperscript{st} Treaty of Paris. Unfortunately, the measure was seen within France as unacceptable interference, so no national effort was made to enforce compliance, and the trade thrived in the next few years, in spite of the efforts of patrolling British warships. Alongside the sessions which settled the future of France, separate negotiations continued the treaty of alliance between Russia, Austria, Prussia, and Britain, which required each to supply 150000 men in the event of a disturbance in France, with Britain pledged to furnish subsidies of £5 million in total.

Acceptable as most of this was for Lord Liverpool and the rest of the Cabinet, they were not to escape from Castlereigh’s latest round of peace-making without some embarrassment. The central European allies, Russia, Austria and Prussia concluded a treaty of mutual assistance and co-operation in defence of the status quo, the Holy Alliance, and asked Castlereigh to secure British adherence by causing the signature of the Prince Regent to be added to the document, alongside those of the emperors and king (of Prussia). The attitude of the Foreign Secretary is hard to gauge. Webster seemed to think that Castlereigh regarded the matter as fairly trivial; at Vienna he had toyed with something very similar, namely a guarantee by the four powers for the agreements reached, but had dropped the idea in the light of complications associated with Russian disputes with the Ottoman Empire. Certainly, Castlereigh
seems to have been largely unaware of the political and constitutional issues raised, and sent the document to London with a recommendation that the Prince Regent should sign it as some kind of informal agreement between sovereign rulers.

Lord Liverpool was dismayed that Castlereigh had let the matter reach this stage as indicated by his letter of reply of 15th October 1815,


I forbear discussing the question how far it might not have been more advisable on every account to prevent such a proceeding altogether. The work is done and it is one thing to have wished it not to have been done, at least in such a manner, and another to refuse being a party to it after it is done. ..........

This is very strong for Lord Liverpool, and the whole letter breathes his annoyance. In the first place, the British monarch had long ago lost the power to make treaties, unlike the absolute rulers on the continent, so what Castlereigh had proposed was unconstitutional, and the Prime Minister’s difficulties were increased by the Prince Regent’s enthusiasm for signing up to the pact, alongside his peers, regardless of this. Secondly, when news of the conclusion of the Holy Alliance reached Britain it was seen as a defence of absolutism, providing for the suppression of constitutionalists, and nationalists everywhere. The Cabinet could not ignore the fact that there was already considerable support in parliament, prompted by vociferous public comment, for independence movements, for example, the rebellions against Spanish rule in South America. Finally, British adherence would imply a willingness to commit to armed action even if no specific British interest was at stake. However, the request having been made, it could not simply be turned down flat. Apart from the loss of face this would deliver to Castlereigh, there was the damage that such a snub might do to the united front thought necessary to hold France in check. The solution to the British conundrum, worked out mainly by the Prime Minister was to inform the Holy Alliance signatories that the British constitution did not allow the Prince Regent to sign a treaty, but to get him to countersign a letter from the government signalling their acquiescence with the principles of the alliance. This recourse appeased the Prince Regent, as well as the central European powers, without giving any commitment to future action, but the letter gave a rather misleading impression of the degree of British government’s approval, by saying among other things that it reflected the Prince Regent’s ‘entire concurrence in the principles which they have laid down’ and more in this vein.
After the Fontainebleau conference, the government had to address pressing internal matters like the economy, and widespread disturbances, and Castlereigh was left to direct foreign policy with little interference from the Prime Minister or the Cabinet for a few years. The period was characterised by a growth of British suspicion of Russia, and a corresponding drift towards Austria, assiduously fostered by Metternich. No doubt, Castlereigh hoped to rebuild a wider consensus at another conference arranged for 1818 in Aix-La-Chapelle. The main business was to decide whether to withdraw the army of occupation from France, and if so, whether it should just be pulled back to Holland or disbanded. Unsurprisingly, the French government, skilfully led by their chief minister, the Duc de Richelieu wished for withdrawal and disbandment, and he was able to play on the concern felt especially in Britain, that allied intransigence would cause the fall of the French government and its replacement by a set of more reactionary and aggressive ministers. As might be deduced from previous disagreements between Lord Liverpool and Castlereigh, the former took a harder line initially, being content to see a continued occupation of France, by an allied army funded by the French. The status quo represented a way of maintaining a larger British army than parliament would fund; probably he also saw the occupation of France as the best means of preserving the alliance of the European powers against that country, and perceived dimly that its termination would open the way for less agreeable alignments. If so, he was right. Castlereigh with the strong support of Wellington looked ahead more positively to a situation in which France freed from encumbrances could take a full part in the concert of Europe, and presumably hoped to engender her future cooperation by making concessions. Castlereigh’s optimism won the day, and his instructions accorded with his wishes, but events did not turn out as he had hoped.

When the conference opened, British willingness to relax the terms for France, and especially the strength of Wellington’s advocacy, sufficed to persuade the other allied powers, and it was agreed to disband the armies of occupation immediately. Other issues concerning the sums due from France as compensation and reparation were settled by the mediation of the Duke, now at the height of his prestige, and bankers previously readied for their role made the necessary arrangements for a loan to allow France to settle these debts and the remaining part of her indemnity. The four power alliance against France was renewed, but this was kept secret to avoid giving offence to the target. Thus far, the conference had been satisfactory from the British viewpoint, but Emperor Alexander then reverted to Castlereigh’s old idea of guaranteeing the frontiers of the states of Europe, and now added to it a proposal to
guarantee existing governments as well. Although Castlereigh was able to side-track the Russian proposal with Metternich’s help, attention turned to a rather ambiguous clause in the text of the four power alliance, (Number 6), which had referred to a need to meet to discuss incidences of internal disorder with the potential to upset European peace. The clause had been drafted in 1815 by Castlereigh, and thereafter was interpreted by Britain at least, as directed only against France. At Aix-La-Chapelle, a wider interpretation was implicitly adopted when it was agreed that France should henceforth be admitted to these discussions. By his acquiescence, Castlereigh paved the way for future disputes over the rights of the powers as a group, to interfere in the internal affairs of other states. It is doubtful if Lord Liverpool and the Cabinet were ever made fully aware of the significance of the change. As far as the Foreign Secretary was concerned, the Aix-La-Chapelle conference had been completely successful and the usefulness of such conferences as a means of resolving European problems had again been demonstrated. He proposed to put in place a programme of such events at regular intervals and his fellow delegates would certainly have concurred. However the Prime Minister would have none of it, and easily carried the Cabinet with him, informing Castlereigh that;

‘We cannot but express the great doubts we entertain whether it would in any way be advisable by any new act to proclaim to Europe that it was the intention of the four powers to hold continual meetings at stipulated periods. ............The notion of such meetings would create a great deal of jealousy amongst the other powers of Europe.’

Lord Liverpool, whose reference to four powers confirms that he was still unaware of Castlereigh’s acceptance of French involvement in any future deliberations, was only willing to concede that a date could be set for one future congress at which Britain would be represented, if there were issues of concern to her to be discussed, but not otherwise. This time there was no fudge to save face for Castlereigh, and he had to back-track, so exposing a reduction in British commitment to the congress system. Although significant, symbolically, of a change in the British government’s attitude, Lord Liverpool’s veto may not have made a great practical difference to the conduct of foreign policy because as we shall see, other factors were to diminish the value of congresses, even in Castlereigh’s eyes.
6.4. The Decline in British Influence

In the next few years, British policy lost coherence, mainly because Castlereigh was unable to give public voice to his real sentiments which were diverging from those of the Prime Minister, and even more from British public opinion. Thus, he secretly encouraged Metternich to take action in Italy and Germany, to compel rulers of small states to withdraw constitutions, but cautioned him against trying to get support from Russia, and especially against calling together another congress to obtain open approval from the European powers for his actions. His purpose was to prevent intervention becoming a public matter in Britain, since he would then have had to register the country’s opposition, regardless of his own views. The greater public awareness of circumstances in France compelled him to warn off Russia and Austria from meddling there, when the Duc de Richelieu’s government was replaced for a short time by a more liberal administration. Similarly, when a revolt in Spain forced their King to grant a liberal constitution, the Foreign Secretary followed the wishes of the great majority of his countrymen, and discouraged outside interference, with famous words;

‘We shall be found in our place when actual danger menaces the system of Europe, but this country cannot and will not act upon abstract and speculative Principles of Precaution.’

Matters came to a head with events in the reunited kingdom of Naples and Sicily in 1820, when an army revolt resulted in their King having to shed most of his powers by granting a very liberal constitution. Once again, Castlereigh’s response was to recommend privately to Metternich that Austria should quickly invade the Italian state and enable the King to disown the constitution, but of course he was completely unwilling to make this advice public. Russia offered to back Metternich publicly but only at a congress which would agree general principles of intervention. Unsurprisingly, Metternich preferred the Russian offer, and the congress at Troppau was scheduled for 1821. Perhaps, the Austrian Chancellor had anticipated that Castlereigh would still attend under protest, but to do so would have exposed the inconsistencies between his secret promptings and the only public policy which his country would tolerate, so Britain was represented only by the Foreign Secretary’s brother, Sir Charles Stewart, then Ambassador to Vienna, as an observer with no powers to negotiate. The meeting duly delivered general backing for intervention to suppress constitutional movements, against which Castlereigh protested, almost
certainly more for his British audience than because he actually disapproved. Then a follow-up meeting was convened at Laibach at which the policy of the three allied powers was presented to the Italian states. Britain tried to rescue the situation by persuading the Sicilian constitutionalists to disown their extreme wing, the Carbonari, and seek negotiations, but the initiative failed, Austria invaded, and the Sicilian King re-imposed absolutist rule. A similar scenario then played out in Piedmont, and once again Austrian forces restored the status quo. Whatever Castlereigh’s private views, most in Britain saw their country as isolated and impotent.

The confusion associated with the British stance was further demonstrated when revolts spread to the Ottoman Empire, in Serbia, Walachia, Moldova, and Morea in Greece. Castlereigh, fearing a military confrontation leading to Russian gains from the Ottoman Empire, was reduced to reminding the Tsar of his recent signature of the Troppau Treaty, guaranteeing the integrity of existing states and their governments, the treaty against which Britain had protested a few months earlier. The chance that this step alone would prevent Russian action was minimal, so the Foreign Secretary had little choice but to rebuild the relationship with Austria, fractured by Metternich’s recourse to alliance support for his Italian projects. Castlereigh accompanied King George IV to Hanover, when that monarch followed his coronation in London by making a state visit to his other main possession, and discussions were held there with the Austrian Chancellor. Agreement was reached that each would separately put pressure on Russia to hold back from war with the Ottoman Empire, and this proved sufficient to arrest the crisis, but Britain had to pay a full price, part of which was to accept £2½ million as settlement of an Austrian debt of £14 million outstanding from the wars. More damagingly in the eyes of many of her own people, Britain was once again aligned openly with the most reactionary state in Europe.

Attention then turned to the situation in Spain, where as has been mentioned, Ferdinand, King of Spain, had been forced to grant a constitution before the Italian and Turkish problems had arisen. The Spanish King had intrigued with France and Russia, in an effort to secure their intervention, but the axis of Britain and Austria had so far prevented this. However, France, by then under a hard line reactionary government, had positioned an army of observation just across the border from Northern Spain, and clearly wanted to send them in, in part because of concern about allowing a liberal constitution to survive in the next-door state, but also because she saw a successful ‘invasion’ of Spain as a way of reasserting French
national pride after the humiliations surrounding the fall of Napoleon. When Metternich proposed a conference in Vienna, to discuss Spain, preceding the congress already arranged for Verona in the summer of 1822 to deal with on-going Italian issues, Castlereigh was placed in a quandary. If he had refused the invitation, he would have risked his newly re-established relationship with Metternich, and the conference would certainly have approved French action, but his attendance meant that his embarrassment would be all the greater, if he failed to overturn the allied consensus. At all events he decided to go, and acknowledging the seriousness of the position, the Cabinet gave him a pretty free hand. Webster is unequivocal in thinking that had he taken part, he would have prevented a French invasion of Spain, but in truth such an outcome seems highly unlikely, even given Castlereigh’s skills and the respect felt for him by the other plenipotentiaries. To what extent worry about his difficult mission contributed to his break-down and suicide, shortly before he was due to depart for Vienna, can never be known, though I have already made clear my own opinion that personal considerations were more to blame.

The Duke of Wellington accepted the poisoned chalice of replacing Castlereigh as the British representative at Verona (delays occasioned by Castlereigh’s death meant that there was no time for the pre-meeting in Vienna), but for all the prestige he still carried, was unable to prevent the other powers sending an ultimatum to Spain, which demanded the ‘release’ of the King and the repudiation of the constitution. (For all his general support for reactionary regimes, Wellington had obvious personal reasons for disapproving of a French invasion of Spain.) He did manage to prevent Russian (or Austrian) involvement in any projected invasion, but this suited France well enough, and in spite of the Duke’s direct appeal to the French government made in Paris on his return journey, their invasion preparations went ahead. The British government advised the Spanish constitutionalists to give way, the last hope of preventing the French invasion, but the Spaniards, perhaps still hoping for British aid, refused. The French army moved into Spain, and occupied Madrid with little opposition. The King denounced the constitution he had been compelled to concede, and rather than seeking to conciliate, he set about avenging himself on his enemies. Of course this was not the end of the matter, and the French were left holding the ring, as civil war broke out.

Public opinion in Britain was outraged, with many contrasting the passive response of the government with the determination a dozen years earlier to rid Spain of Napoleon’s armies. Lord Grey spoke in parliament for sending France an ultimatum
to withdraw from Spain which would almost certainly have led to war; surprising in some ways given his ambivalence during the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, but in his eyes a reactionary Bourbon government was more of a threat than the earlier regimes. The Cabinet had also traded strong views, with Lord Liverpool and the newly appointed Foreign Secretary, Canning, at first in favour of a very high line with France, but Wellington, who must have been torn between dislike of the Spanish constitutionalists, and his disapproval of the French invasion, warned all present that such a response would need to be backed up by a willingness to fight a general war. His council of caution prevailed. In the House of Lords, Lord Liverpool duly spoke for restraint, pointing out that it would not be possible to confine a war to Spain, which would become a side-issue in a wider struggle with France, and he did not need to emphasise the embarrassing fact that Britain would find itself unsupported by any major European power. Certainly, the British navy was so dominant that she would have had little to fear directly in such a struggle, but equally, without allies she had little prospect of damaging France, or even getting the French armies out of Spain, unless she was willing to embark on another long and costly war. However, the Prime Minister, and Canning in the House of Commons, who went as far as expressing his hope that Spain would repulse the invasion, drew limits to what Britain would tolerate. They warned France that she should withdraw quickly from Spain, that there must be no renewal of the Family Compact between the Bourbon kings, and that she should not get involved in Portugal, which was also in the throes of a conflict between absolutists and constitutionalists. It was emphasised that any attempt to reinforce Spanish forces fighting independence movements in South America would be prevented by the British navy. The government majorities held firm in parliament, and excitement slowly died down.

6.5. Castlereigh’s Problematic Legacy

Before looking at the conduct of foreign affairs under the new Secretary of State, George Canning, it is appropriate to review Castlereigh’s tenure. There is no doubt that his handling of the negotiations at the end of the Napoleonic War was the high point, and he secured almost everything that Britain wanted in the months after the French emperor’s first abdication, doing much to ensure that Napoleon’s last hurrah would be crushed quickly, and that France would be held in check thereafter. His touch was much less certain during the Congress of Vienna, and Lord Liverpool, although hundreds of miles away, was generally more realistic as to what British diplomacy could hope to achieve and certainly more aware of what British public
opinion would accept. The combination of Castlereigh’s attachment to principles expounded by Pitt ten years earlier in a very different world, and his overvaluing of the influence he could exert on the likes of Emperor Alexander, led to his over-reaching. Lord Liverpool became sceptical about conferences and the commitments they might engender, and though Castlereigh retained a belief that he could achieve much in face-to-face meetings with other statesmen, he found open diplomacy difficult in his later years in office, because of divergences in opinion with the Prime Minister and the mass of the British public.

The major difference in view between the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary lay in their attitude towards constitutionalist revolts of which there were many in the years after Waterloo. They might have been expected to hold similar views, because each of them acknowledged William Pitt the Younger as a mentor, but Lord Liverpool’s closest association had been much earlier when Pitt still retained liberal leanings, whereas Castlereigh’s discipleship had taken place in the last few years of the great statesman’s life, by which time Burke’s teaching and the need for stability dominated his world view. Lord Liverpool was not an out and out liberal on foreign policy matters, but he had an understanding that times were changing, as conveyed by his words as far back as 1813;

‘We have seen during the last twenty years coalitions whose size promised strength crushed by the power of the enemy. What then we may ask, is this new life which has given an irresistible impulse to the present confederation of northern nations? The feeling of national independence, that sentiment which impels all to stand before the liberties of their countries. This feeling, which first arose in the nations of the Peninsula, gave the war a new character, and afforded grounds to hope not only for the deliverance of these nations, but also for the rest of Europe.’

His words were a realistic take on the world soon to emerge from the Napoleonic War, even if his northern examples were to be far from the forefront of the new movement towards constitutionalism. He didn’t want Britain to interfere in absolutist states to overturn the established order, but where internal forces achieved liberalisation for themselves, he was adamant that there would be no British involvement in actions to restore absolutism. He was pragmatic enough to realise that Britain could not prevent states like Austria acting to suppress constitutionalists in neighbouring states, but he did not expect Britain to give encouragement. Since he recognised that British public opinion saw the endeavours of other states to obtain
more liberal constitutions as following in British footsteps, (foreign revolutions were routinely compared to the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688), he had no illusions about the unpopularity of any support for their suppression. To this set of views should be added an abiding mistrust of Austria, not hidden from her ambassadors, stemming from that country’s vacillations at the end of the war, and reinforced by a shrewd enough assessment of Metternich whom he had met in London in 1814.

Castlereigh’s world view was different as he saw any constitutionalist uprising, however peaceable or restrained, as potentially upsetting to the world order which he and the rulers of the European powers had put in place to end the wars with France and preserve peace. (A near-exact parallel to his view, that any concession to internal agitation risked the overthrow of the British state.) He had no fellow feeling for those who tried to replicate British institutions elsewhere, and was perfectly happy to see them crushed. He came to realise that his views were not shared by the Prime Minister, and even that the government could not ignore the public opinion for which he had such contempt. This led him to oppose interference by the allied powers as a group in the internal affairs of other countries, but he continued confidentially to advise suppression by individual powers, of uprisings in countries near to them. He valued his alliance with Metternich because he thought that they understood each other; the Austrian Chancellor could have tacit British support for anything he did in Germany and Italy, provided he would help Castlereigh keep the lid on any Russian and French adventures in Eastern Europe or Spain, which would arouse strong feelings in Britain. The tension in the relationship was created by the fact that on occasion Metternich wanted open support for his repressive measures, and Castlereigh knew that he could never go so far.

Castlereigh’s system during his last years had too many inconsistencies to be successful. Effectively, he was saying one thing for public consumption in his own country, while secretly giving support to Austria, the chief exponent of the polar opposite practice. Eventually British policy was going to have to come down on one side of the argument, and given public opinion it seemed that that could only be against the allied powers, and for constitutionalists. This would obviously have been anathema to Castlereigh, and to Wellington, and some other members of the government, but even for Lord Liverpool the consequences must have seemed daunting. The alliance against France by which he set great store would surely be dissolved, and the alignment of powers at the time of the French invasion of Spain, with Britain isolated would become the norm. This was the conundrum which faced
George Canning when he replaced Castlereigh, after strenuous royal objections to his appointment had been overcome.

6.6. Canning and the Americas

George Canning had Irish protestant ancestry in common with Castlereigh, but little else. In particular, he had a quick intelligence, and carried open-ness about his feelings and views to an extreme. The most compelling orator of his generation, he lacked the discretion to hold back barbed, if witty remarks, so made enemies of many who might otherwise have admired him. His promise had been recognised from a young age, not least by William Pitt who seems to have been fascinated by him. So also was his contemporary at Oxford University, Lord Liverpool, though their relationship seems in the days of their youth to have veered by the week, between affection and outraged feelings, with Canning in the ascendant role. There is no doubt that Canning saw himself as far more able than his contemporary (and everyone else in politics except Pitt), and he found it galling that in spite of his own close friendship with Prime Minister Pitt, the career of Lord Liverpool progressed more quickly than his own. Jealousy must have been a partial cause of his unwise comments in parliament about Lord Liverpool at the start of Pitt’s second administration in 1804, and he cannot have felt any better when he learned that Pitt had placed his future in the government at Lord Liverpool’s disposal, even if the latter spared him dismissal. Relations between the two remained cool if proper, for the next few years, as Canning achieved high office as Foreign Secretary in 1807, and then threw it away in the imbroglio with Castlereigh, two years later. In 1812 when Perceval was assassinated, Canning attempted in partnership with the Marquis of Wellesley to form a government which would have side-lined Lord Liverpool, and then when these manoeuvres failed, he made the greatest mistake in a career littered with them, by refusing the office of Foreign Secretary because it came with a requirement to accept the leadership of Castlereigh in the House of Commons.

Though it can be argued that it took Canning ten years to recover from this mistake, it did represent a turning point in his relationship with Lord Liverpool who responded with understanding to Canning’s decision, and won him over by making it clear that he did not regard Canning’s exclusion from the government as permanent. Of course as already noted, Lord Liverpool was not acting entirely out of generosity; he still believed that Canning’s abilities and especially his oratorical skills would strengthen his government, and was always aware that Canning could be a threat if he co-
operated with moderate Whigs to provide a possible alternative government, as had nearly happened in the preceding weeks. In the next few years, encouraged by the Prime Minister, Canning drew closer to the ministry. He disbanded his small group of supporters in parliament after electoral disappointment later in 1812, accepted an ambassadorship to Portugal, and then in 1816, re-entered the Cabinet, albeit in a second rank position as President of the Board of Control for India. In that role he gave loyal support to the government for the next few years, providing much needed reinforcement to the treasury bench in the House of Commons, even if he did grumble that his office was in no way commensurate with his abilities, and moan occasionally about the faults of the Prime Minister, with a modicum of justice in this period. When the Queen Caroline affair reared its head in 1820, Canning, an earlier devotee of the then Princess of Wales, if not more, got himself into another corner from which the only honourable exit seemed to be resignation. The damage to his career might have been small, since the Prime Minister understood his situation and wanted him to return to the government as quickly as possible, but the King chose to interpret his resignation as an admission of guilt over his earlier association with the Queen. The ramifications are important constitutionally and will be dealt with later, but for the moment it is sufficient to repeat that when Castlereigh died, Canning was destined to go to India as Governor General, and became Foreign Secretary only because Lord Liverpool put his own position on the line, to compel the Cabinet and the King to accept the appointment.

When Canning took office as Foreign Secretary, it had already been decided that the Duke of Wellington should attend the Verona congress, and his inevitable failure to gain support for British opposition to French intervention has been described already. Canning’s main task thereafter was to restore British prestige at home and abroad, after that embarrassment. A majority of the Cabinet, with Wellington to the fore, thought that Britain should row back on any support to constitutionalist and independence movements, in the expectation that this would re-establish good relations with the Holy Alliance powers. Canning did not favour that option, but at first could see no easy route to a coherent foreign policy that would be both popular and aligned to Britain’s best interests. Events rather than design caused him to focus his attention on the Americas, North and South, during his early months in office. His first major initiative was to approach what were then known as the United States of North America, to suggest a joint rebuttal to aggressive Russian statements about lands and waters near Alaska, then a Russian dependency. He was seeking to build on a conciliatory British policy extending back to the negotiations supervised by Lord
Liverpool, which ended the 1812-14 war, since followed by successful adjudication of disputes over the boundary between the United States and Canada, and an agreement to remove armaments from the Great Lakes. However, Canning did not get a positive response from the Anglophobic Secretary of State, Adams, who professed to distrust Britain’s attitude to the struggles of the Spanish colonies in South America. Adams had some justification, since Castlereigh had steered a convoluted course, certainly preventing any reinforcement of Spanish forces by other powers, but repeatedly offering British mediation to Spain without any preconditions about the independence of the South American provinces. Castlereigh had also rather cynically delayed formal American recognition of the provinces, by regularly holding out the prospect of an imminent allied agreement to some mediated settlement, which would have left the United States isolated. After Canning’s accession to office there was at first little outward change in British policy, but the content of informal discussions between the Foreign Secretary, and the American Ambassador in London, Rush, convinced Adams that Britain had no territorial designs on South America. Then Canning cajoled France into denying any ambitions there either, (in the Polignac Memorandum); clearly he was preparing the way for an eye-catching announcement. However, Adams had effectively been freed from any risk that the United States would have to try to act as enforcer of non-interference in the Western Hemisphere by European states, so he arranged for his President to proclaim the Monroe doctrine, which elevated the British and French denials of interest into a principle. It was a real diplomatic coup.

Canning had to acknowledge privately that he had been out-maneuvered, with the danger for Britain being that the United States would be seen as the chief supporter and protector of the South American provinces, conferring large benefits in the battle for trade that was already on-going. Lord Liverpool perceived immediately that the presidential declaration left no alternative to British recognition of some of the provinces. Canning hung back, in part because he still hoped to negotiate a deal between Spain and her possessions which would preserve monarchism in South America. Meanwhile the other European powers maintained a constant dialogue at ambassadorial level in Paris, seeking to find a way of reasserting Spanish rights, and they intrigued in London with Wellington and other like-minded members of the Cabinet to delay a change in the British position. Eventually, Canning too was convinced that Britain must act, more by evidence of French meddling in South America than fears of the traction gained there by the United States, and with Lord Liverpool’s firm support, (the Prime Minister actually produced the key Cabinet
paper) cajoled the Cabinet and King into agreeing to the offer of commercial treaties to three of the break-away provinces, (Mexico, Columbia, and Buenos Aires), effectively recognising them, in 1824. The measure was successful with regard to trade; British exports rose fifteen-fold from a value of £400000 per annum in 1812 to £6000000 per annum in 1825, three times the value of the exports of the United States, though Canning’s high flown oratory in 1826, ‘Calling the New World into being to redress the balance in the Old’ was overblown. British influence in South America added almost no weight to her authority in European matters, except in so far as Canning’s growing popularity diminished the ability of the European powers to thwart his purposes by stirring up Wellington and the King.

While the British relationship with the former Spanish colonies in South America was being resolved, an even more complex scenario was unfolding with regard to the former Portuguese colony, Brazil. At the time of the French invasion in 1808, the Portuguese King, John, had fled to Brazil, from whence he only returned some years after Waterloo, leaving his eldest son, Pedro, to rule in South America, as Brazilian Emperor. Lord Liverpool was content to leave Canning to pursue a vigorous forward policy with regard to Portugal and Brazil, while ensuring that the reactionary elements in the Cabinet did not interfere, so I shall not go into the detail. It is sufficient to say that at one point a British fleet was dispatched to the Tagus, to counter rising French influence in Portugal, and that eventually a British negotiator, Sir Charles Stuart, was imposed on Portugal and Brazil. In this way a relatively amicable separation of the two was achieved, and importantly for Canning especially, a monarchy was preserved in Brazil, though the fact that the new Emperor of Brazil remained heir to the Portuguese throne stored up problems for the future.

6.7. Canning’s Greatest Coup

Canning had demonstrated that Britain’s isolation in Europe need be no inhibition on achieving her aims in the wider world, and had transformed the image of the government by his open espousal of a popular foreign policy. The disappearance of British influence on most European issues was harder for him to address, so long as the main continental powers remained united. Britain, as always, needed an ally. Then in 1825, Canning, with help and backing from the premier, transformed the British situation by exploiting Russian support for the Greek revolt against Turkish rule. As might be expected, Temperley places all the onus on Canning, but Yonge furnishes some documentary evidence that the earliest suggestion that British
hostility to Russia might be relaxed came from Lord Liverpool, and it is easy to accept that this might have been the case, with the premier prompted by the strength of popular support for the Greeks as much as by any great feeling for their cause. Whatever the source of the change in policy, there is no doubt that the main credit on the British side for its success should indeed go to Canning, who converted suggestions into hard agreements. It has already been mentioned that in 1821 Castlereigh had enlisted Metternich to join him in confronting Russia to prevent her giving an ultimatum to the Ottoman Empire over the status of Christians in Greece and elsewhere in the Balkans. (Russia claimed to have been accorded the right to protect Christian freedoms by a treaty of the 1770s). There was no decrease in the hostility between Russia and Britain in the next few years as disputes arose in Persia and Central Asia, as well. However in late 1824 it seemed to occur to both countries, almost simultaneously, that they shared concerns about what was happening in Greece and that they might be able to make common cause there and elsewhere in the Balkans. A straw in the wind was Lord Liverpool's letter of 3rd November to Canning in which he wrote;

If we can agree upon any terms of mediation (between Greece and Turkey), I think they should be proposed by the Allies jointly and not by Russia alone. This is the best chance of avoiding war, and even of protecting the Emperor of Russia in his opposition to the war party in his dominions, if he is really sincere in his desire to preserve peace.

The formal reconciliation was initiated by the wife of the Russian Ambassador in London, Princess Lieven. The ailing Emperor Alexander, (he was to die in less than a year) agreed that an approach should be made to Canning, he accepted it, and with surprising ease a protocol was agreed between the two nations that they should jointly mediate between the Ottoman Empire and the Greeks. Other nations were given the opportunity to adhere to the protocol as suggested earlier by Lord Liverpool. France did so, Austria and Prussia refused. In this way the alliance of absolutist powers was sundered, and Canning's pleasure can only have been enhanced by the fact that the Duke of Wellington received the charge of visiting Moscow to seal the agreement with the new Russian Emperor Nicholas, later that year.

In three years Canning had transformed the diplomatic scene. Britain had demonstrated her ability to do as she wished in the wider world, and no longer
isolated in Europe, could expect to wield renewed influence on the continent. Moreover, he had achieved this by following an open foreign policy whereby he disclosed dispatches in an unprecedented fashion, and explained his intentions in detail to large audiences. Those who wish to cavil can say that Britain had already started along a path which seemed bound to lead to recognition of Spain’s South American colonies as independent nations, but steps had been taken slowly and almost furtively to avoid upsetting the Holy Alliance, the Prince Regent, and the more reactionary elements of the government. Lord Liverpool himself had given the impression that measures were being taken solely to further trade, even though it is obvious from his later conduct that he saw the issue in broader terms. There was no such dissembling from Canning, and when he began to make statements like ‘South America will be free and South America will be ours’ the effect on public opinion was electric. In contrast to the post-Waterloo years, Britain had a popular foreign policy and an even more popular Foreign Secretary.

A substantial element in the Cabinet, and for a while, the King, were more than a little confused by the fairly dramatic changes in foreign policy, which had followed the death of Castlereigh. In particular, the Duke of Wellington found it hard to understand why Lord Liverpool who had apparently backed Castlereigh in preserving good relations with the Holy Alliance powers, was, a few years later, unconcerned about Canning’s willingness to flout the opinion of many of them. Wellington’s solution to the puzzle was that Lord Liverpool had fallen under the domination of Canning, and his response was typically direct if insensitive. He arranged for his acolyte Arbuthnot to send the letter referred to previously, which suggested to the Prime Minister that he needed to assert his authority more. The letter got a more measured reply than it might have, in which Lord Liverpool merely pointed out that he and the Foreign Secretary agreed on the foreign policy being followed, but it is certain that this did not convince Arbuthnot, or Wellington and the group of like-minded members of the Cabinet. Nonetheless, they had little alternative to acquiescence, as Lord Liverpool manoeuvred for Cabinet support of Canning’s initiatives. The stakes were high because the dissenters knew that if they pushed their opposition too far they might trigger resignations, and if that happened, they would probably get a government committed to policies they disliked over a far wider spread of issues than foreign policy. However the frustrations of Wellington were not wholly contained and his dealings with representatives of the Holy Alliance powers, (and especially Princess Lieven, the wife of the Russian Ambassador) were sometimes dubious, and probably disloyal to his colleagues. It may be that the Duke with his exalted sense of patriotism
was as relieved as anyone, when Canning’s agreement with Russia ended Cabinet dissention over foreign policy, at least in the short term, but he would not have been human if he had not felt chagrin about being proved totally wrong about the best way forward for his country.

It cannot be doubted that Lord Liverpool was in accord with Canning on most foreign policy matters. The agreement stemmed from similar world views, owing much no doubt to conversations with Pitt in the 1790s, but honed by experience and a prolonged correspondence and latterly vigorous discussions on the matters in question. The meeting of minds should not be seen as a matter of the domination of one over the other; the fact that they continued to disagree amicably over matters like Catholic Emancipation, and economic policy where the Prime Minister’s opinion held total sway, is evidence enough of that. I think it is reasonable to follow Wellington and his like-minded Cabinet colleagues, to the extent of seeing the initiative in the formulation of foreign policy as most often belonging to Canning, with Lord Liverpool usually happy enough to give his support. Sometimes the Prime Minister acted as a brake on Canning’s more ambitious schemes, as for example when he blocked the Foreign Secretary’s attendance at the funeral of the French King, Louis XVIII, where Canning proposed to negotiate directly on some of the issues dividing the countries. Occasionally, the premier had to smooth difficulties caused by Canning’s insensitivity, as when the Foreign Secretary attended the banquet given by a radical Lord Mayor of London who had made offensive remarks about the King. Such interventions made to temper Canning’s impetuosity, and to buy time to engineer support from a divided Cabinet may have differed from those made to restrain Castlereigh, when there had more often been disagreement in principle. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that Lord Liverpool will have seen himself as changing his role, which was throughout to exert a light supervision, to provide restraints where he thought them necessary, but most of all to use his authority to back his ministers in Cabinet, Parliament, and in the royal apartments.

The final important foreign policy initiative handled by Lord Liverpool and Canning was the decision to despatch British troops to Portugal on the death of that country’s King in 1825. As already indicated, the heir to the throne, Don Pedro, was Emperor of Brazil, but there was a younger brother on the spot in Portugal, Don Miguel, and they had different ideas on governance, with the latter favouring an absolutist approach. The resulting dispute gave the corresponding factions in Spain an opportunity to meddle, and of course the French still a presence there, could also
have been tempted. The British response of armed intervention was unanimously agreed by the Cabinet, with Canning supplying the rhetoric to back the action, and the first aim of shutting off the border with Spain was accomplished easily enough. However just as the French had found in Spain, it was easier to intrude forces into the Portuguese dispute, than to create the conditions for their honourable withdrawal, and the last ever communications between Canning, ill at home, and Lord Liverpool, days before the latter suffered the stroke which ended his career in early 1827, were still wrestling with the problem.

6.8. A Stabilising Influence

In analysing Lord Liverpool’s contribution in the sphere of foreign relations it has been necessary to demonstrate firstly that the two distinguished custodians of the office of Foreign Secretary during his premiership did not monopolise the conduct of affairs. I think the correspondence makes it plain that neither did, and that some of Lord Liverpool’s interventions were important. During Castlereigh’s term of office, he acted largely to prevent the Foreign Secretary committing the country too far in areas which lay out-with specific British interests and which would either have been unaffordable, or have affronted public opinion. It is worth remembering that the defence of the government’s foreign policy during Castlereigh’s period of office was largely sustained in the House of Lords, against the assaults of Lords Grey and Grenville. It was Lord Liverpool who bore the main burden of justification there, so it is hardly surprising that he sought to prevent initiatives that he would have struggled to defend. If foreign policy had been under Castlereigh’s sole guidance, it can be argued that it would have been more coherent, and that Britain might have retained influence in Europe by adhering more closely to the central European powers. The price would have been even greater unpopularity at home, which the government might have struggled to survive. By 1822, there was something of a crisis, with Britain isolated and as a result, apparently impotent in Europe; the British hand may have seemed weak in the years from 1818 to 1822, but as was to become clear after Canning took over the Foreign Office, it had not been very well played. Neither Lord Liverpool nor Castlereigh had the deep understanding, allied to a certain cynicism, which allowed Canning to take a much more positive view of Britain’s world situation in the 1820s, nor had either the oratorical powers that permitted Canning to sell his vision to the British public and convince most of the world as well. However, Lord Liverpool knew that the views held by Canning accorded with his own less coherent thoughts, and he gave him strong support. Indeed it is hard to imagine that Canning
would have achieved much without that support and even Temperley in his condescending way recognises the fact. It is also clear that Canning did not have a completely free hand any more than Castlereigh before him; key decisions had to be discussed with the premier, and the Foreign Secretary’s view did not always prevail.

It has been far from my intention to denigrate the reputations of either Castlereigh or Canning; the former did great service for his country in 1814, even if his performance was less distinguished thereafter, while the latter, judged on his second term of office in the 1820s at least, was perhaps the greatest of all British Foreign Secretaries. Rather, I have attempted to show that neither operated in a vacuum, that they could never take the views of a Prime Minister, who was far more aware of political realities than either of them, for granted, and that both had to defer on occasion to his wishes. In the management of foreign affairs Lord Liverpool made a thoroughly bad start as a young Foreign Secretary. By the time he became Prime Minister, he had learnt much and had become more than competent in the field, as shown by his successes in helping to manoeuvre the Bourbons back onto the French throne, and overseeing a prudent settlement with the United States. Thereafter his wide knowledge, political awareness, and mature judgement, allowed him to apply important corrections to the courses pursued by his Foreign Secretaries. His restraining hand was accepted because it was applied tactfully, however strong the resolve behind it. Lord Liverpool made an even greater contribution by persuading his Cabinet to acquiesce in the transformation in foreign relations which is rightly associated with Canning.
7. First Lord of the Treasury

7.1 The Making of Economic and Financial Policy

For the first two years of Lord Liverpool’s premiership, the country was at war and economic and financial policy was not central to the political agenda. The majority of the political nation, (those who voted for members of parliament, and those who sought to influence them, whether by discourse, the printed word, or demonstrations of all sorts), had been persuaded that the war was unavoidable and were greatly heartened when things began to go well in 1813. Nobody enjoyed paying the high taxes which mainly went towards funding the military effort but there was general acceptance that money had to be raised by every means possible. Of course, the government was expected to husband resources, but not at the cost of jeopardising the prosecution of the war, and the great name of Pitt buttressed the whole system of funding by high taxation and heavy borrowing. Nonetheless, there was some realisation of how over-stretched the country was becoming, and that there would be daunting problems associated with restoring a peacetime economy. Those most concerned were not wholly without influence or a voice and during the last years of the war the government could not prevent the establishment of parliamentary committees to consider the currency, and protection for agriculture; straws in the wind about issues which would resonate once victory was achieved. However, this discussion will follow the majority point of view of the times in more or less ignoring the financial and economic management practised by Lord Liverpool’s government, until after Napoleon had been consigned to Elba, because it was largely a continuation of what had gone on since the early years of the war. Accordingly, I begin by considering where ministerial power lay in this domain, and then attempt to provide a brief overview of the wider and longer-term economic developments which provided the backdrop for the difficult post-war years. Thereafter, I concentrate on government responses to the more intractable of the problems which confronted them.

In 1812, Lord Liverpool on becoming Prime Minister had assumed the office of 1st Lord of the Treasury which carried the chief responsibility for the direction of the economy, (to the extent that such a responsibility was accepted by governments of the time), and for financing the government’s activities. Unless he chose not to exercise the full powers, any 1st Lord had the decisive voice in the Cabinet on matters like the size of the budget, the mix of taxes and borrowing which should be
used to raise the money required, and indeed on how that money should be spent. Prime Ministers back as far as Walpole, and before him, first ministers like Danby in the 17th century, had gained recognition of their supremacy because of their dominance in the financial sphere. Sometimes, premiers had also taken on the subordinate office of Chancellor of the Exchequer, 2nd Lord of the Treasury, either to ensure that there could not be an alternative power base in their department, or for want of a suitable candidate, and this option lived on into the 19th century. When the office had a separate custodian, the 2nd Lord carried much less prestige than now, ranking below the Leader of the House of Commons if the premier was a peer, the Secretaries of State, and even offices like Lord President of the Council, or Lord Privy Seal, which by then were seen as largely ornamental. As for function, he was charged with administering the collection and disbursement of money, passing through the government’s coffers, and could only be confident of being consulted on the details of policy, rather than its scope and direction. Chancellors could be more prominent when the Prime Minister did not sit in the House of Commons, where decisions on taxation and expenditure had to be approved, but the Leader of that body was normally the chief spokesman there for the government on all matters, including those financial, except when budgets were presented. During the Duke of Portland’s ill-fated and largely nominal second premiership, those realities had been recognised, by Spencer Percival’s combination of the Leadership, with the Chancellorship of the Exchequer, but the arrangement was only successful because Portland was happy enough to cede almost all his responsibilities for financial matters to Percival, who worked tirelessly to discharge them as well as the lower level tasks associated with his office. In the negotiations with Canning in 1812, it was at one point suggested that Castlereigh might follow that model, to accommodate Canning as Foreign Secretary. Had this arrangement been adopted, it is hard to imagine that it would have been a success because Castlereigh would not have had Percival’s freedom to direct financial policy, and would have viewed some of the more mundane tasks without enthusiasm. No doubt, he and Lord Liverpool would have found a modus operandi but it is hard to believe that it would have been a happy one. Of course the efforts to accommodate Canning fell through and the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer reverted to its customary lower status, when Nicholas Vansittart was appointed in the spring of 1812.

Vansittart had some reputation as a technical expert on financial matters in 1812, derived mainly from his service in the lesser post of Secretary to the Treasury for four years during the Addington and Grenville ministries, but was more unkindly looked
upon as part of the baggage that had to be accommodated, if support from Addington’s faction was to be secured. Lord Liverpool undoubtedly saw him in this way, but could be confident that Vansittart would be content to immerse himself in the details of taxation and loan arrangements, rather than seeking to challenge the premier over broader aspects of financial policy. This was exactly how things turned out, although Vansittart was Chancellor of the Exchequer for almost eleven years, longer than any modern incumbent, save Walpole during his premiership. Lord Liverpool took the lead in formulating policy and measures, while Lord Castlereigh was the main spokesman on financial matters in the House of Commons, except on the formal occasions when the Chancellor by tradition, presented budgets, and regularly tied himself in verbal knots. Indeed one authority, Hilton, suggests that Vansittart, and his successor Frederic Robinson, were regularly absent from the discussions which mapped out government financial policy; these were conducted by small groups chosen and led by Lord Liverpool, and most often involving William Huskisson. The Chancellors seem on occasion to have done little more than supervise the ‘number-crunching’, which estimated the consequences of potential changes in taxation rates and expenditure, allowing fine-tuning. In fairness to Vansittart, this was hardly the route to a deep understanding of the measures concerned, and should be borne in mind when his parliamentary performances in defence of them are disparaged. Otherwise, he has been described as mild-mannered, modest and likeable, qualities which added to Lord Liverpool’s aversion to disappointing his colleagues, furnish most of the explanation for why he remained in his office for so long, (for years after the main original justification for his appointment had disappeared). It is however also clear that the premier would not have been spoilt for choice if he had decided to make an earlier change; Huskisson had the expertise, but lacked the parliamentary stature (or ‘bottom’), while Canning, back in the Cabinet after 1816 had the latter quality, but lacked expertise and interest in financial matters, and probably seemed too flighty to be charged with such a role, at this point in his career. Doubts would have arisen over any other possible choices, and certainly the eventual successor, Robinson, had his weaknesses, which explains the rather half-hearted reaction to his appointment expressed by another member of the Cabinet in the early 1820s, Charles Wynn, who wrote that;

......he would be an improvement on his predecessor as to manners and popularity, but as to measures, Liverpool must of course give the orders and he obey ............
The comment is interesting because it gives an insider’s view of the realities of power in the Treasury, but also, taking it as referring to Vansittart’s official rather than private persona, because it points to the damage incurred by the government as a result of the unconvincing presentation of its financial measures in the House of Commons during the years after Waterloo.

As we shall see later, the government had no guaranteed majority there during the period, so measures stood or fell by the limited powers of persuasion of Castlereigh and Vansittart. Certainly, the opposition Whigs had fewer regular supporters than the government, but the balance was held by a large block of independent members, ‘the country gentlemen’, who had their own strongly held opinions. This influential group was also commendably sensitive to the views of their constituency, largely the agricultural interest, and saw it as their responsibility to compel the government to give full weight to these views, by defeating or side-tracking any of its proposals which seemed to run counter to them. Unfortunately perhaps, other sections of the community did not have such determined and effective advocates. The government’s uneven economic and financial performance during the early years of peace, most often biased towards those with parliamentary clout, too often hesitant, and sometimes inconsistent, must be viewed against this background. Lord Liverpool cannot be blamed for his unavoidable absence from the scene of the real action as regards financial matters, (the House of Commons) but he took a very long time to respond to the problems caused to his government by inadequate presentation. As will become apparent, the team of Canning and Robinson, backed intellectually by the premier and Huskisson, persuaded the House of Commons to accept many useful financial and commercial reforms in the 1820s, but the government could probably have done even more, if the memories of the stumblings of the previous decade had not conditioned parliamentary views.

7.2. The Economic Storm and Government Shortcomings after 1814

In the sixty years after 1750, Britain had experienced almost unprecedented demographic and social changes which together wrought a transformation in what had been, outside London a predominantly agrarian society. There had been a population explosion, once wrongly attributed exclusively to a decrease in the death rate, but more recently considered to be due to a mix of factors, including a trend towards marriage at a younger age. The English population in 1750 is usually estimated at just less than 6 million, possibly little greater than 450 years earlier, at
the start of the 14th Century. A famine in the early years of that century, followed by three major visitations of the plague during its middle years, had cut the number of inhabitants in half. Thereafter, a few centuries of mainly slow growth had just about restored the population to its previous peak. Yet by 1812, the population had surged to over 11 million, more or less doubling in 60 years. As we now know, this increase had much further to run, but Thomas Malthus convinced many with his thesis that it was unsustainable at its then rate, because the growth in national resources would be unable to keep pace. He claimed that the result would be a reduction in the standard of living for the poorer part of the community which at the bottom end could result in starvation. His remedies, which were not short term palliatives, included education to explain the need for sexual abstinence, a utilitarian favouring of prostitution over early marriage, (a surprising position for a church minister), and just as controversially, the gradual removal of Poor Law support for the indigent, which he regarded as an encouragement to marry and procreate, because extra money was granted for each additional child. Another feature of the 2nd half of the 18th Century was the gathering pace of industrialisation, which produced jobs for many of the extra inhabitants, but resulted in mass migration into the towns in which the new factories were to be found, (Manchester’s population increased from 20000 to 90000, and that of Leeds from 12000 to 65000 in the 60 years after 1750). Fear of triggering instability and replicating the French Revolution, together with the focus on the war with France, had checked even the smallest moves to adjust the machinery of government to the dramatically changing face of the country.

When considering the legacy of these demographic changes, attention is usually focused on the exploding urban population, not least because most of the disturbances which punctuated the years before and after Waterloo took place in the towns. It is indeed hard to imagine the conditions in these conurbations, but nowadays we sometimes see television pictures of African towns, from Soweto to Mombassa, usually when trouble flares, and places like Manchester, Leeds, and Glasgow must have had similarities to them, in the early 19th century, even if the fabric of the buildings was very different. Overcrowded, insanitary, disease-ridden, and unpoliced, they were centred on the mills and factories which employed men, women, and children, working long hours for wages, which were often little above subsistence levels. Any sort of economic downturn, and there had been a few in the war years, led to wage reductions and dismissals. As already mentioned, there were systems of poor relief, different in England and Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, based on the parishes, and the sums of money paid out across England and Wales at least,
were substantial; almost £9 million in 1815, equal to about 10% of the inflated wartime budget for that year. In many places, those receiving outside relief, (as opposed to the relatively small numbers forced into workhouses), were little worse off relative to the mass of wage earners, than those receiving benefits are now. However, measures designed to be administered locally, in populations of a few thousand in a predominantly rural environment, were not designed to cope where a single parish might engross a whole industrial town with a population of tens of thousands. In such cases neither the number of rate-payers who supplied the money, (mainly local property owners), nor the arrangements for collection and distribution of that money, were adequate to support the system, and many of the needy went short. This was the unsatisfactory situation while economic activity was relatively high before the arrival of peace tipped the country into deep recession. Demand for all manufactures necessary to make war, from clothing to munitions, plummeted, and there was no prospect of overseas markets quickly taking up the slack. Unemployment and wage reductions resulting from this unavoidable decline in demand, further reduced the size of the internal market, and it was easy to foresee a spiral into a very deep trough in which great swathes of the population would have faced destitution. In fact, this proved to be a pessimistic view and Britain’s pre-eminent position in the world as a manufacturer did allow a relatively rapid recovery based mainly on an expansion of foreign trade, but the upturn proved alarmingly fragile and stalled frequently in the following years.

The situation in the countryside was at least as bad. Migration to the towns, large as it had been, had not absorbed all the increase in population, so there was a systemic surplus of agricultural labour, concentrated in the south of England. While the national population was increasing, enclosure had proceeded steadily, and for all its benefits for efficient production, its main side effect was to throw previously self-sufficient families off the land. Unlike in the towns where ample work had been available for some of the time, there was never enough work in the countryside, and as a result the claims on the parochial rates for support of the unemployed poor multiplied. Then, when the war ended, the price of agricultural produce fell; farmer’s incomes decreased, and some went out of business. So the numbers requiring support increased, and the ability of ratepayers to provide the necessary funds declined. In both town and countryside, the welfare system established in the last years of the 16th Century looked unequal to the demands placed on it. Those receiving support had of course no say in the matter, but amongst those who did, whatever their political views, from most reactionary Conservative to Radical, there
was a growing consensus that the English Poor Laws were over-generous to many of those who drew on its resources, even while it failed others completely. It was not that compassion was lacking, but there was a perception that too much of the national income was going towards relief, rather than investment in commercial enterprises, and that a way had to be found of providing help at less cost. Scotland, where provision was much less generous, and the workhouse loomed larger, seemed to provide a more realistic model, but it was to be some years before England moved in that direction. Thus the country had emerged from over twenty years of war, with a still rapidly changing demography, into an economic recession or maybe even a depression, with her finances wholly out of balance, and with a social infrastructure near to collapse. The question to be answered here concerns the adequacy of the government’s response, but it is important to try to answer it on the basis of the state of knowledge then, rather than in the light of another two hundred years of experience and research. It also needs to be emphasised that support for the impoverished was still seen as a matter for the 15000 parishes, and not the responsibility of central government, except perhaps temporarily when conditions in an area were exceptionally severe.

It is unlikely that Lord Liverpool, any of his senior colleagues, or indeed many of his parliamentary adversaries, based in London, and largely confined in their movements to a circuit of their own and fellow landowners' country houses, had either first-hand experience of the industrial towns, or a full understanding of the squalor in which so many lived there and the hardship they faced. Doubtless, they read plenty of reports from Lord Lieutenants and Justices of the Peace, and a few of them had to seek election in northern towns from time to time. However, no fact finding visits seem to have been made, nor were formal meetings held with those who had experience on the ground. The governing class should have known a bit more about rural conditions, but even here a stay in a peer's country mansion probably added little knowledge of life in the farm labourer's cottage, outside the deer park. So they cannot have fully appreciated that quite small changes in industrial activity, or the price of corn, made the difference for many between surviving at a near subsistence level, and going short of necessities. There is no doubt that people, especially children, died each time the economy plunged. Shielded from direct experience of what was happening, Lord Liverpool was able to look with some complacency at longer term improving trends in a letter to Canning written during one of the downturns in 1818, referring as an aside to a few difficult areas, but with little sense that he realised that people were likely to be very hard-pressed there. He was
undoubtedly a caring man, with an honourable record of supporting and initiating humanitarian legislation, (abolition of the slave trade, the first factory act to protect child workers, church building, and penal reform are examples), but he did little to acquaint himself with the worst affected areas in the country, and as a result was under much less moral pressure to take action than he would otherwise have been; his omission was not repaired by any really influential members of the political class, supporting government or opposition. The other benefit of Prime Ministerial visits would have been the morale boost to those in straitened circumstances; the comparison is not direct, but accounts of the Duke of Wellington’s visit to the north west of England, when he was Prime Minister at the time of the opening of the Manchester to Liverpool railway show that the populace was electrified, even though by then he was seen more as a reactionary politician than a war hero. Of course, Lord Liverpool’s predecessors had behaved no differently from him in cutting themselves off from most of the country, and it was only when politicians had to appeal to an expanded electorate that things began to change. The fact remains that he was willing to govern while in a state of some ignorance of conditions in the country, a contrast to his insistence on being supplied with abundant information on other matters requiring his attention.

Even if Lord Liverpool’s comprehension had been greater, he would have faced other problems in doing much to help the situation. A major inhibition on a pro-active approach to the economic problems arising in the years after Waterloo was the fact that the pace of change had left the new discipline of economics far behind, and coherent policies to address the situation were virtually non-existent. There is irony in the fact that the preceding hundred years, which had transformed thinking about economics, had produced so little of practical relevance to a struggling government. For example, Adam Smith had demolished mercantilist thinking with his strictures on the futility of governments manipulating trade to ‘pile up heaps of gold’, and the workforce to produce the ‘right’ goods, but his remedy of their withdrawing from the scene, and leaving nearly all to the market, trusting in ‘the invisible hand’ to protect those at the bottom, offered no short-term remedy for the conditions of 1815. The greatest contemporary economist, David Ricardo offered even less comfort to those engaged in menial work for low wages, theorising that the interests of those who capitalised enterprises, and those of the workers, were in conflict because wages and profits came out of the same pool of money, another way of saying that wages must be held down if the new businesses needed to increase employment were to emerge. Both Smith and Ricardo thought that government had a moral responsibility to do
something to help the poor, but neither went so far as to suggest what that might be, and by advocating ever deeper cuts in government spending, Ricardo was proposing to tie the hands of the ministers more tightly, making any intervention less likely. Thomas Malthus, for all his dislike of some aspects of the operation of the Poor Laws, saw that wholesale cut-backs in relief and government spending might be counterproductive, but he was near a lone voice amongst economists, and certainly there was no 18th or early 19th Century precursor of Maynard Keynes. A few revolutionaries advocated stripping the wealthy of their possessions by force, but only Thomas Paine had by then proposed a more rational redistribution of wealth by direct taxation, and he proved to be a hundred years ahead of his time. The overwhelming orthodoxy amongst those who purported to understand economic matters was that the government must cut expenditure (and taxes of all kinds) to return the nation to prosperity.

With neither full comprehension of the national condition, nor backing from economists for intervention, it was hardly likely that Lord Liverpool would have favoured ambitious measures, but even if he had, there would have been other problems. Inevitably, money would have had to be pumped into the worst hit regions, and apart from the hostility engendered amongst those who wielded local power by an apparent government encroachment, the larger question would have concerned the source of this new money. In fact, it could only have been obtained by increasing further the national debt which was at historically high levels after the war, or by defying the will of the political nation, and increasing taxation. Almost no-one in politics would have supported such measures, whether Conservative, ‘Country Gentleman’, Whig or Radical. Parliament echoed the views of the great majority of economists that government spending had to be reduced, and taxation brought down if recovery was to take place. Additionally, in an age when ministries comprised a few dozen employees at most, and the government was under pressure to reduce even those numbers, the bureaucracies needed to administer ambitious schemes simply did not exist, at national level, and we have already seen that local networks were equally constrained. Against this background, Lord Liverpool’s plea paraphrasing Samuel Johnson that ‘by far the greater part of the miseries of which human nature complained were in all times and in all countries beyond the control of human legislation’, is understandable, and the laissez faire policies which followed, appear inevitable. He shared the general belief that the country would return to prosperity, as conditions reverted to those of peacetime. He accepted that the task of the government was to reduce spending, borrowing, and taxation in order to leave cash
in the hands of entrepreneurs who would invest to create employment and boost wages, and probably regretted that spending commitments could not be shed more quickly. Perhaps the most that can be said for the humanity of his economic policy is that he lent no government support to efforts made in Parliament to increase the protection given to farmers after the passage of the Corn Act of 1815, or to reduce Poor Law expenditure, both of which would have increased the hardship experienced by the poorest. It is also fair to say that the need to find new markets, and expand existing ones was always prominent in Lord Liverpool’s foreign policy agenda, though it was only after he had reconstructed his Cabinet, in the early 1820s that actions of substance began to follow his words.

It is not my view that the government could have effected a dramatic improvement in the economic situation during the years after Waterloo, but I do believe that some measures could have been taken which would have relieved the worst conditions and perhaps hastened recovery a bit. Frustratingly, Lord Liverpool seems to have been aware of some of the possibilities, but to have been insufficiently confident of either positive outcomes, or his ability to carry parliamentary support, to commit to them. On one occasion, he found some money for relief of extreme conditions in the West of Scotland, possible government investment in agriculture was discussed, and he spoke wistfully of tariff reductions as a means of boosting trade, years before he implemented them, but he was unable to summon the resolve to attempt to do more, sooner. So I think there was some failure of leadership, not because there was a very different course that the government could have pursued, but because it should have tried to weave into its policy some tokens of concern, a few more small packages of aid, perhaps some assistance to trade. Such measures need have been no more expensive than the building programmes for the Prince Regent’s palaces and Commissioner’s churches which were supported in these years. There certainly ought to have been visits to troubled areas, however large the army detachments required for protection. If steps like this had been taken, the difficulties of the years after Waterloo might not have been much ameliorated for the majority of the population, but accusations that the government simply did not care would have been countered, and it has to be assumed that order would have been more easily preserved. One can admire the way in which Lord Liverpool and his government kept their nerve and saw the country through difficult times, but still regret their failure to demonstrate much concern for those at the lower end of society. Lord Liverpool’s reputation would stand higher if he had attempted more, even if the tangible effects had not been great.
7.3. Financial Dilemmas after 1814

Having made it clear that, misguidedly or not, there was a widely shared view that the government’s main contribution towards a restoration of national prosperity had to be the dismantling of the wartime financial arrangements, it is appropriate next to consider how well that task was carried out. In what follows, the sums of money seem miniscule by today’s standards, and although I mean to consider them largely in their own context, it is necessary to say something about why the differences between then and now are so great. Looking at tax takes, the comparison is between £60 million in 1814, and nearly £600 billion in 2012, a factor of close to 10000. It is possible to identify some major contributors to the difference, inflation, 60X, population growth, more than 5X, while many artefacts and bodies are taxed now that were not, two centuries ago. However, the difference also reflects the simple facts that disposable incomes, (the residue after essentials to life like food, shelter, and heating have been purchased) are much larger now, and that consent has been given through the ballot box for the state taking a very large share, (around 40% of total GDP) in return for providing services like health care, education, and welfare of all descriptions.

As a starting point for a discussion of fiscal matters, it is best to follow Halévy and contrast the situations of Britain, the victor, and France, the vanquished in 1815. In 1814, Britain with a population of less than 13 million had an annual tax take of nearly £60 million and a debt of close to £900 million, while France with a population exceeding 26 million raised taxes of £35 million and had a national debt of £70 million. (Expressed otherwise, British taxation is normally assumed to have amounted to between 15 and 20% of GDP in 1814, so the national debt was at least twice its GDP; historically a very high figure for any nation). If nothing else these figures demonstrate that contrary to much received wisdom, France under Napoleon and his revolutionary predecessors actually had the more financially viable system of waging war, namely getting France’s defeated adversaries to pay for her armies, but of course this contributed to an unpopularity which eventually caused most of Europe to join the fight against her. It is also true that the great expense of maintaining a large active navy was, at least in the latter stages of the war, a burden that fell only on Britain, as was the need to fund most of the armies put into the field by her allies. Consequently, Britain had been very heavily taxed in comparison with France, and had incurred the vastly greater debts referred to above, so it would have been no surprise if the defeated nation had made a faster recovery than the victor. In the
event, Britain's industrial and commercial advances were to modify that scenario to some degree, though in the late 1820s, Thomas Atwood, the Birmingham banker and radical politician, was able to make much of the greater prosperity he claimed to have observed during a visit to France.

In 1814, Britain spent £60 million on her armed forces, £10 million on subsidising her allies, a mere £4 million on 'general government administration', and £37 million as interest due on loans previously raised, giving a total expenditure of £111 million, almost twice the sum (£60 million) produced by taxes. The difference had to be found by yet more borrowing, which of course increased the burden of interest payments, never mind debt repayment for future years. Nonetheless it would be very wrong to assume that Britain saw herself as on her last financial legs; the response to Napoleon’s escape from Elba in 1815 shows that the government and parliament were prepared, after the briefest hesitation, to pay the price of renewed military action, and did not shirk a decision to continue the war-time system of finance. A year later, when Napoleon had been consigned to St. Helena, the war could finally be regarded as won, and there was a widespread expectation that the country would receive the peace dividend of greatly reduced taxation. However, the most elementary reading of the numbers presented above shows that because of the massive commitment to pay interest on previous borrowings, (albeit slightly reduced by falls in interest rates which accompanied peace), even the elimination of subsidies to foreign governments and quite draconian reductions in spending on the armed forces would at very best have brought the budget into some kind of balance with a total tax take of £60 million.

Lord Liverpool and his advisers were left with two almost irreconcilable problems, associated with the measures introduced by William Pitt the Younger in 1798 to make possible war expenditure, which was unprecedented in its scale and duration. The first problem concerned the income tax which was levied at a rate of two (old) pence in the pound for incomes of £60 per annum rising to two shillings in the pound (10%) for incomes above £200 per annum, and which by 1814 was contributing £15 million to the yearly tax take. The tax was disliked almost as much because of the intrusive nature of the investigations needed to establish the amount to be paid, as because of the burden it imposed, and its removal immediately war ended had been an article of faith, since its imposition. The Cabinet had acknowledged the promise during the budget discussions in early 1815, prior to Napoleon's return to France from Elba, seeking to compensate for the loss of revenue, with a hotchpotch of new
direct taxes on artefacts ranging from carriages to servants. They had no illusions that these thinly veiled substitutes would be accepted willingly by the House of Commons, but the decision to resume the fight against Napoleon allowed the retention of income tax and postponed a confrontation for another year.

The second problem was associated with the repayment of debt, and the vehicle reintroduced by Pitt to achieve this, Sinking Funds, (Walpole had been the first to employ them). At least to non-economists, there is a large element of ‘smoke and mirrors’ about a Sinking Fund, not least because there seem to be differences between descriptions of modern versions and those devised by Pitt and his predecessors, (and also because American variants are different again). At any rate, controversy about their operation was to dog the government for many years after Waterloo. The essential fact is that a Sinking Fund represented a commitment by the government to an annual allocation of taxation income to the repayment of a debt, with the amount determining the period of repayment. As I understand it, there was no flexibility as to what the fund was to be used for, but the way in which it was applied to the task was a matter for the government’s financial officers, who aimed to maximise the compound interest increasing the fund, while minimising that expanding the debt. To any gains which could be made by such manipulation of the fund, the system added a strong signal of the government’s commitment to reducing the debt which certainly helped additional borrowing, not least by reducing the rates of interest demanded by lenders. As long as the war lasted, no-one appears to have bothered very much about the fact that money could only be applied to the Sinking Funds by additional borrowing, as this element was almost lost in the total borrowing requirements. However, once the war had finished, government borrowing was expected to cease, with the consequence that ‘nourishment’ of the Sinking Funds would have to become another charge against the taxation income; full compliance with Pitt’s guidelines concerning the rate of repayment was going to require that more than £10 million be invested in the Funds in 1816.

When preparing the budget early that year, Lord Liverpool and his colleagues made the obvious savings; military expenditure was halved with the help of the imposition on France of the cost of the army of occupation in her country, foreign subsidies were essentially discontinued, some sinecures, which formed part of the so-called administrative costs of £4 million, were abolished, and the Prince Regent’s spending was curbed. However, the finance ministers regarded the contribution to the Sinking Funds as sacrosanct, and this led to a decision, contrary to that made a year earlier,
that the income tax would have to be retained if there was to be any chance of balancing the budget. (There can be no doubt that financial logic was taking second place to reverence for the works of Pitt in the mind of Lord Liverpool, and there can be little doubt that Pitt himself would have been more practical and iconoclastic.) It was hoped to deflect criticism by halving the top rate at which the hated tax was to be levied (to 5%), but there was a storm of protest inside and out of parliament when Vansittart presented the budget in February 1816. The Whig opposition, with Henry Brougham to the fore, saw the chance to discomfit the government, just as they had done over the Orders in Council, four years earlier, and began a petitioning campaign which attracted support throughout the country. As seemed to be largely the norm for those times, the government made little effort to combat the adverse publicity outside parliament, and Castlereigh and Vansittart performed without distinction in defence of the tax, inside. With the balance of power in the House of Commons held by independent members, there was only one likely outcome, and the government lost the key vote, and thus its budget, by 238 votes to 201. Nowadays such a demonstration that many of its usual supporters had either voted against it or abstained over such a key matter would signal the end of a government, but matters were not then as clear-cut, whatever the hopes of the Whigs. The government survived because shortly afterwards, it won a vote of confidence in the House of Commons, thanks in part to Brougham’s misjudgement of the needs of the situation during the key debate, and because it received renewed backing from the Prince Regent. However the decision of Parliament that income tax would have to go meant that taxation sufficient to balance the budget (including the Sinking Fund contribution) could not be raised, and Vansittart set about raising the new loan needed to bridge the gap. Indeed Lord Liverpool, foreseeing opposition from the agricultural interest to the continuation of another war tax, that on malt, instructed the Chancellor to amend his budget to exclude this as well, and to adjust the bridging loan upwards accordingly, (to £11½ million). The complete surrender of the government was signalled when the Chancellor of the Exchequer ceremonially burnt some of the records that had enabled income tax to be collected, though unbeknown to the populace, copies had been made and were kept. Ostensibly, the removal of the hated income tax had been achieved at little cost, except to government amour-propre, since even the addition of several million pounds to the national debt of almost £900 million hardly seemed of great significance, but in fact the imbroglio had long lasting effects.
To understand the full economic consequences, it is useful to contrast the situation which prevailed after the government’s concession, with the majority of taxation then falling on consumption (customs and excise), i.e., indirect taxes, to the picture now, when direct, progressive, taxation (income tax, national insurance contributions, death duties, and business taxes) contributes more to the revenue than indirect taxes on goods and services. There is no doubt that our present mix of taxation is more equitable in pushing the burden towards those best able to afford it, and less restrictive to trade. After his setback in 1816, Lord Liverpool never felt able to propose increases in direct taxation. In 1821, he stated in the House of Lords that;

‘Whether the present modes of taxation were the best, he would not stop to enquire. It had been his opinion that an increase of the direct taxes would have been beneficial, and therefore he was for preserving for some time the income tax’

When early in 1824, Canning wrote to enquire of the premier,

‘Are you forward in your financial plans? Can you remit us any more taxes? If so I am for direct taxes this season.’

The query, which amongst other things makes it very clear where the responsibility for financial policy lay, drew a clear reply;

…………………If we could do what we ought to do (do not be alarmed, I am not going to propose it), we should make an augmentation in our direct taxes of at least two millions; and, as a compensation, take off indirect taxes to the amount of four or five millions. By such an arrangement we should not materially reduce our revenue, and we should considerably increase the wealth and resources of the country, by the relief which might be afforded to commerce………………….

These words demonstrate that nearly a decade after the furore which had attended the attempt to maintain the income tax, even with his government relatively popular, the economy booming, and with an orator as great as Canning available to persuade the House of Commons, Lord Liverpool still did not consider it practical politics to attempt to shift the balance of taxation from consumption towards income. Perhaps, by then he was wrong and was demonstrating excessive timidity, but to gainsay him would be to question the most highly developed political judgment of the age. Soon afterwards, Lord Liverpool’s government did indeed make substantial commercial reforms, including the reduction of tariffs, to the great benefit of the country’s economy, but the above extracts make it clear that the Prime Minister would have liked to move earlier and further. Succeeding governments, especially the Whig administrations of the 1830s, which had other priorities did virtually nothing in this
sphere, and further progress had to await the premiership of Robert Peel in the 1840s, when he was buttressed by a popular mandate from a greatly increased electorate, and dared to reintroduce an income tax. The decision of parliament in 1816 to move decisively away from direct taxation probably inhibited the growth in national prosperity for quarter of a century thereafter.

There were to be other damaging consequences of the government’s surrender to parliament in 1816. Part of the case deployed against the retention of income tax had been an argument that the government was not reducing expenditure quickly enough, and it became clear to the Whigs that on this issue they could command sufficient support in the House of Commons to embarrass the government, even if they could not take the next step of passing a no-confidence motion which could have led to their own assumption of power. In the next few years, the armed forces budgets came under sustained attack, even though the 1816 figure of £30 million was reduced by the government to just over £16 million in 1817. It is to the government’s credit that these attacks were resisted strongly, but by 1822 the constant pressure had reduced military expenditure further to just over £13 million per annum, and disarmament had proceeded to a level which was coming close to harming the security of the country. The loss of government authority in 1816 also carried over into constant parliamentary sniping at the salaries of office holders, both ‘efficient positions’ like those of ministers and civil servants, and more justifiably, ‘inefficient positions’ or sinecures. Lord Liverpool was a serial offender in this regard, but his government, as much as the Whigs and their allies, who themselves held not a few of the latter offices, recognised that sinecures could no longer be defended. The policy became abolition whenever such an office was rendered vacant, (normally by the death of its occupant), and the government somewhat brazenly sought credit for this, as when Castlereigh claimed that 2000 such offices had vanished since 1812, in a speech to the House of Commons in 1822. However they could never do enough to satisfy the country gentlemen in parliament, egged on by the Whigs, and this led to the appointment of parliamentary committees, out-with the control of the government, which looked for further economies, and it was not long before ‘efficient’ offices below ministerial level, like junior Lordships of the Admiralty, and assistant Secretary-ships, came under attack. Given how small government was at this time, with whole departments staffed by only twenty or thirty individuals, (in 1809 the Home Office comprised two under-secretaries and thirteen clerks, together with a few more menial employees, like doormen and cleaners), it is not surprising that the government saw such moves as a real threat, and on occasion had to fall back on its
weapon of last resort, the threat of demanding a vote of confidence, to defeat them. (In 2010, the headquarters staff of the Home Office exceeded 3700.)

These then were the consequences of the two major errors made by Lord Liverpool and his advisers in 1816, namely to continue with the Sinking Funds as prescribed by Pitt, and to attempt, but fail, to retain income tax, and though it was the latter that aroused the storm of protest, and had damaging long term consequences, it is arguable that the former was the root cause of most of the trouble. A decision in 1816 to cease altogether paying into Sinking Funds would certainly have been unwise because of the message it would have sent out to the financial markets, but the maintenance of the somewhat arbitrary rate of contribution set by Pitt was almost equally misguided because it should have been obvious that the country simply could not afford it. Without income tax, the situation became farcical, with the government claiming to be standing by the principles of Pitt, when in reality for the next few years almost every pound contributed to the Sinking Funds came at the expense of a pound added to the total debt. Eventually in 1819 the government bowed to the inevitable and reduced the prescribed annual contribution, which by then had risen further, from £13½ million, to £5 million, though even then, the difference was described as a loan from the Sinking Funds. It was only in 1823 that the government stopped dissembling, and remodelled the Sinking Funds which allowed the budget to be balanced and loan repayment to proceed at a rate commensurate with the country’s resources, but even after that, controversy was renewed whenever an economic downturn put pressure on the budget. If the nettle had been grasped in 1816, the promise to remove income tax could have been kept, (rather than having the measure forced on the ministers), the damage to the reputation of the government would have been prevented, and perhaps the rebalancing of taxation away from consumption and towards income, which Lord Liverpool always desired, could have been attempted long before the 1840s. In that scenario, the reductions in tariffs and trade restrictions which boosted the economy in the mid-1820s would have been feasible a few years earlier, and some of the hardship of the post-war years might have been reduced in duration.

7.4. Disputes over the Currency

The government was faced with other difficult issues associated with returning the war economy to what was regarded as the normal peacetime arrangements. After a few years of war in 1797, the Bank of England’s gold reserves had been almost
exhausted, largely as a result of the export of gold, for purposes which included paying for food and other imports, but also financing armies operating abroad, and providing subsidies for allies. In response, Pitt's government had suspended cash payments, that is to say, removed the requirement on the Bank of England to furnish gold at request, to the face value of notes presented. This allowed the Bank to maintain liquidity in the internal economy by issuing notes at a rate dictated by the needs of commerce, rather than the amount of gold it held, and soon enough there was general acceptance that the measure would have to remain in place for as long as the war lasted. In the years which followed the separation of the currency from gold, there had been inflation, with the value of the pound decreasing whether measured against gold, or other artefacts, albeit at a relatively low rate, but the cause and thus the cure became subjects of controversy as the Napoleonic War drew to a close.

A group known as ‘bullionists’ had views which anticipated those of present day monetarists, and demanded that cash payments should be resumed whenever the war ended. They claimed that inflation stemmed simply from the government’s action, aided and abetted by the Bank of England, in allowing the circulation of too many banknotes, and that the return to cash payments would automatically restrict the issue of notes, and so restore the integrity and value of the currency. However, their arguments could be questioned on the grounds that there seemed to be other factors involved, because the value of the pound had not always tracked the number of banknotes in circulation. The arguments of the ‘anti-bullionists’ were more complex, making much of this divergence between inflation and the number of banknotes issued, and focussing on price movements of commodities traded internationally, as external generators of inflation. No doubt, there was some truth with both sides, and in general, the anti-bullionists did not advocate a permanent suspension of cash payments, but rather an extended transition period. However, the simpler arguments of the bullionists, developed and championed by the respected economist, David Ricardo, prevailed with the majority of the political nation. Nevertheless, the government came down on the side of the anti-bullionists and sought to delay the change. Their main motivation was a not unreasonable concern that a speedy return to cash payments, would be severely deflationary, and place another obstacle in the way of recovery from the anticipated post-war depression. They also were aware that the coinage had so deteriorated during the war due to the withdrawal of gold and silver, whether legally or not, that there was an urgent need for it to be re-established on a sound basis. It would have been a recipe for chaos to
embark on this exercise, which was bound to reduce liquidity in the short term, at the same time as the money supply was being tightened by the re-establishment of the link with gold.

The main losers as a result of the inflation which had taken place since the suspension of cash payments had been the landed property-owners, who had invested in land and agricultural improvements, but were being repaid by fixed rents in a devalued currency. Their spokesmen were the country gentlemen elected from the county constituencies, and the government knew that there was much to fear if they made common cause with the opposition Whigs on any issue, even although they had yet to suffer the destruction of the 1816 budget. Nonetheless, William Huskisson duly brought to parliament a proposal for a delay in the return to cash payments beyond the period of 6 months following the end of the war, which had been prescribed when the suspension had been introduced by Pitt. To the relief of the government, the Whigs proved unwilling to co-operate with the country gentlemen, because the manufacturing interests, who were especially fearful of the possible deflationary impact, were part of their constituency. A delay was accepted. A comprehensive re-coinage was undertaken immediately, with gold sovereigns replacing the guinea as the standard, while completely new silver coins, namely the crown, half-crown, and shilling were minted by the million to ensure liquidity at the level of ordinary daily transactions.

The status quo prevailed until 1818, when the government was faced with renewed demands that the currency must be re-attached to gold and had to compromise and accept the appointment of a select committee of the House of Commons to take evidence and make recommendations. The committee was well stocked with government ministers, but also included the expert proponents of the bullionist case, including Ricardo. The chairman of the committee, to whom was arrogated the key task of writing the report with its recommendations, was Robert Peel, then out of office following his resignation of the post of Chief Secretary of Ireland. The government would certainly have preferred further delay, and might have anticipated that with their own nominee as chairman, a man expected to return to high government office whenever an opportunity presented itself, these wishes would be given full weight. Peel, characteristically, was little influenced by considerations of party or ambition, and brought a completely open mind to his task. He heard everyone with a contribution to make, assembled a large amount of information in a short time, and perhaps to his own surprise, came down firmly on the side of a
speedy return to cash payments, albeit in an orderly manner. The government had little choice but to accept the recommendation. Contrary to expectations, the change was made smoothly and easily, with the process being completed two years earlier than originally planned in 1821, and the judgement of history has been that the overall economic impact was small. Views at the time remained polarised; the landed interest was quietly satisfied, but the manufacturing interest was convinced that the return to gold had depressed production, and reduced standards of living, and Thomas Atwood and his Birmingham supporters were especially prominent in agitating for a reversal well into the 1830s.

In truth, the role of Lord Liverpool and the government in all this seems fairly inglorious. They supported continued suspension of cash payments, but never made a convincing case against the bullionists. Eventually the latter won the parliamentary argument and the government meekly fell into line. Probably the delay in the return to cash payments caused by their hesitancy was helpful in giving time for the coinage to be sorted out, and it is likely that the country was better able to withstand deflationary pressures in 1818 and 1819 than in 1816, but real leadership was lacking. The government’s conduct was more creditable when strong pressure from the banking and industrial community for a rethink arose as early as 1819. Lord Liverpool made it plain that he was not minded to replay past controversies and arguments, writing to Chancellor of the Exchequer Vansittart

……………Let us therefore determine to stand upon our present system and let no one entertain a doubt that this is our determination. I am persuaded the Bank, for their own interest, will not make any improper reduction of their circulation; but even if they did, I think it would be both easier and wiser to have recourse to other remedies, than to retrace the course we took last year. …………

Almost a century passed before another major war forced Britain off the Gold Standard again.

7.5. The Corn Law

The Liverpool government had just as many difficulties with a third area of contention in the economic domain, namely the protection from foreign competition given to farmers, by the Corn Law. As a result of population increase, and to a lesser extent, industrialisation, and in spite of increases in agricultural productivity, Britain had regressed from being self-sufficient in most food items to requiring substantial
imports of the most basic commodity, corn, (wheat, barley, and oats) by the end of the 18th century. War had interrupted the supply from countries like Poland, and a combination of increased prices and government exhortation encouraged many landowners to bring marginal land into cultivation, which helped to feed the nation, but also increased the average cost of production of home-grown corn. During the last few years of the war, when there was a growing certainty that it would be won, there was an expectation that peace would be accompanied by a flood of cheap foreign corn into the country, and that many land-owners who had invested heavily to increase their crops, would be unable to compete on price and would go out of business. The respectable protectionist thesis was that the result would be much reduced home grown tonnages, and dependence on foreign supplies of doubtful security, given the possibility of renewed conflicts, and the danger, ever present at that time, of harvest failures, when local needs of the foreign suppliers would most likely have priority. An argument could also be offered that too many agricultural workers were already without full-time employment, and that a retrenchment would throw many more out of their jobs. The remedy, at least in the eyes of the agricultural interest, was protection, with foreign corn imports banned unless the price had reached a level which would give a fair return to British farmers, including those cultivating marginal land. Of course, these assertions did not go unchallenged, because the increase in prices, which was thought certain to result from protection, would greatly increase the profit margins of the many wealthy landowners whose costs of production were low. Once again, Ricardo became the government’s most vociferous and persistent critic.

Lord Liverpool had absorbed the writings of Adam Smith in his youth, and was a ‘free trader’ by inclination, so he discouraged the first attempts to initiate a measure of protection for corn which emanated from a report produced in 1813 by a parliamentary committee, chaired by Henry Parnell. However, he could not prevent new parliamentary committees being established to give the matter further consideration and a House of Lords committee chaired by Lord Hardwicke was to prove most influential. Lord Liverpool dropped his opposition to agricultural protection in 1814, probably influenced by the report of the Hardwicke committee, as more surprisingly did William Huskisson, newly appointed to the junior ministerial post of First Commissioner of Woods and Forests, and quickly installed as the premier’s chief adviser on economic matters. Huskisson, born in the same year as Lord Liverpool (1870) was brought up mainly in France, and shared with the Prime Minister, the experience of witnessing at first hand, the fall of the Bastille in 1789. His
background was prosperous enough, but middle class and he was always sensitive to perceived slights from his aristocratic colleagues. He attached himself to Canning in the first decade of the 19th century, and established a reputation for financial expertise which earned him junior office in the Treasury in some of the governments of that period. In the field of economics, he was a passionate disciple of Adam Smith, and his acceptance of agricultural protection was reluctant and fairly soon regretted; otherwise he was hard working, competent as an administrator, and a good communicator. However his chippyness about his origins, added to a lack of tact, made him generally unpopular, especially with those who did not share his opinions. It is his misfortune to be mainly remembered now for his fatal accident at the opening of the Manchester to Liverpool railway, (which project, as a member of parliament for the latter city, he had done much to further), and this was only the last of a long series of accidents and illnesses, but his resolve enabled him to pursue his career in spite of such setbacks, except, of course, the last one. It is rarely possible to allocate credit and responsibility between Lord Liverpool and Huskisson for the developments in financial and economic policy that emanated from their collaboration, but there is no doubt that the Prime Minister relied on his junior colleague to put flesh on the bones of proposals, and to provide arguments he used to convince the Cabinet and parliament, once he had accepted a need for action. It is equally true that Huskisson’s propensity for giving and taking offense was a continuing problem for the premier, since the very fact of his advocacy was enough to turn some against such proposals. This, rather than any arcane suggestion of snobbery, is a more than adequate explanation for Lord Liverpool’s reluctance to promote Huskisson to the Cabinet when he became President of the Board of Trade in the 1820s.

Lord Liverpool had been brought round to accepting agricultural protection mainly by the arguments concerning security of supply, but political considerations were always in the forefront of his mind. He well knew the strength of the agricultural lobby, with land-owners dominating the Upper house, and the country gentlemen able to exert a decisive influence in the Lower. The issue was viewed very differently by manufacturing and commercial interests in London and the other cities and towns, where protection was seen as certain to cause increases in the price of wheat, and thus bread, putting upward pressure on wages. However, the proponents of continued free trade in corn were weak in parliament. Through 1814, while petitions came in on both sides of the debate, polarised between the country-side and the towns, and demonstrations and disturbances took place in the latter, Lord Liverpool and his advisers inched towards agreement with the agricultural interest. Once the
government had accepted the protectionist case, there were two main issues to resolve; firstly, what should be the break-price, i.e., the price above which wheat should be allowed to enter the country, and secondly, whether duties should be imposed above that price according to a sliding scale. Lord Liverpool was a proponent of a sliding scale which went with a lower break-price, but the spokesmen for the agricultural interest in parliament favoured the simpler scheme of switching imports on and off at the break-price, and of course they aimed for the highest break-price they could get; such a scheme was termed a ‘contingent prohibition’. The measure was discussed in two large meetings which brought together the Prime Minister with his advisers, and the protectionist MPs led by ‘Squire’ Charles Western, and which were held at Lord Liverpool’s London residence, Fife House. The protectionists generally had their way, and it was agreed that the government would bring in a Corn Bill with a break-price of 80 shillings per quarter for wheat, (and corresponding break-prices for barley and oats which were less important in England but more so in Scotland and Ireland) and a system of contingent prohibition. The protectionists had to concede preference for colonial wheat, which was to be allowed to enter the country above a break-price of 67 shillings per quarter, and importantly, that foreign wheat could be brought into the country at any time, and placed in sealed warehouses ready for distribution when the price had risen sufficiently. Without this precaution it would have been impossible to access Baltic corn in winter and spring months when shortages and high prices were most likely, because the exporting ports were normally icebound then. The Bill became law in early 1815, and was as badly received in the urban areas, as it was well received by the agricultural interest.

Not a little of the agitation for parliamentary reform of the next few years stemmed from the view that parliament had shown itself biased in favour of the interest strongest within it, and this has been the argument of many who have discussed the issue since. Their case is impossible to refute, but there was more to it than that. The issues of security of supply, and especially hardship in the countryside, were glossed over by most of the ‘free-traders’, but Ricardo was honest enough to admit that he expected British agriculture to suffer grievously without protection, so greatly increasing imports, (and presumably rural unemployment). He thought that this would be more than compensated by cheaper corn feeding through into lower wages and manufacturing costs, which in turn would boost exports. Overall he saw a utilitarian gain for the country, and a classic example of Adam Smith’s principles in action, with the unrestricted market focussing the national effort where it was best applied. He was however, unable to convince his friend Malthus who thought the cost to the
agricultural community would be too high and that any price benefit for Britain’s goods might only be temporary. In practice these theoretical debates proved of little account because in the medium and longer term the effects of the Corn Law were not as had been anticipated, either by those in favour, or its opponents, as is shown by the following tabulation of the yearly average prices per quarter for wheat, taken from Hilton’s book on the subject:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Wheat Price Per Quarter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1812</td>
<td>126s 06d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1813</td>
<td>109s 09d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1814</td>
<td>74s 04d</td>
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<tr>
<td>1815</td>
<td>65s 07d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1816</td>
<td>78s 06d</td>
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<tr>
<td>1817</td>
<td>96s 11d</td>
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<tr>
<td>1818</td>
<td>86s 03d</td>
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<tr>
<td>1819</td>
<td>74s 06d</td>
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<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>67s 10d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1821</td>
<td>56s 01d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1822</td>
<td>44s 07d</td>
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<tr>
<td>1823</td>
<td>53s 04d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1824</td>
<td>63s 11d</td>
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<tr>
<td>1825</td>
<td>68s 06d</td>
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<tr>
<td>1826</td>
<td>58s 08d</td>
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<tr>
<td>1827</td>
<td>58s 06d</td>
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<tr>
<td>1828</td>
<td>60s 05d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td>66s 03d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>64s 03d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The collapse of the high war-time prices between 1813 and 1814 which led to the passage of the Corn Bill is apparent, as is the anticipated recovery in prices which followed its passage into law. However the steep fall in prices which began in 1818 was completely unforeseen and shorter term fluctuations also decreased in size, so the break-price was never reached after 1819, and even the lower price of 67 shillings applying to colonial wheat was rarely attained. The price behaviour of other agricultural produce mirrored that of wheat. A somewhat unreal situation arose, with town dwellers still thinking that the price of bread was being inflated by the Corn Law, while the agricultural lobby were clamouring for more protection because of the low prices they were getting. The government were concerned because they still feared famine and had assumed that the Corn Law while protecting home producers would still allow some entry to the market from traditional regions of supply like Poland, thereby ensuring the desired plurality of sources. Inevitably, with corn prices low, the powerful agricultural interest in parliament procured committees to review the operation of the Corn Law, but a tacit alliance between Huskisson and Ricardo ensured that those seeking more protection did not get their way. Indeed the only tangible result of the deliberations was the 1821 Corn Law which effectively reduced the break-price to 70 shillings per quarter for wheat, in keeping with the government’s desire to give some encouragement to foreign suppliers. However, the protectionists
managed to insert a clause which stipulated that the new arrangement would not come into force until the next time imports entered the market, which required the price to reach 80 shillings per quarter once more, and it never did so while Lord Liverpool remained in office.

Given the lack of direct impact of the Corn Law it might have been anticipated that the issue would decline in importance, but throughout the 1820s, controversy flared up with some regularity. The lower prices did not stem from a glut in home grown corn but rather from deflationary pressures attributable in part to the return to cash payments, and partly to the periodic slumps in demand for manufactured goods which fed through into pressure on wage levels. Thus corn became cheaper because customers could not pay any more for bread, and would have had to turn to the cheaper alternatives to wheaten flour provided by barley and oats if prices had not fallen. As Lord Liverpool pointed out in the House of Lords, most landowners could in fact tolerate lower prices, not just because agricultural wages were linked to the lower wage levels in the towns, but also because of the other changes which had favoured them, like the removal of the property tax, and the effective increase in the value of rents which had followed the return to cash payments. However, disquiet in the agricultural community was increased when the government felt compelled to react to a failure in the Irish potato crop by releasing foreign corn stored in warehouses as an emergency measure in 1825 and then again in 1826, even though the price was still below the break-price. It was feared that this was a first move towards the removal of protection, a terrifying prospect for the agriculturalists, because however low the price of corn had fallen with protection in place, they had little doubt that it would fall further in its absence. This was the background to Lord Liverpool’s last attempt to get a workable Corn Law which might reconcile the fears of the growers of corn that their prices were on the point of collapse, with the demands for cheaper bread in the towns.

Prolonged consultations and discussions led by the premier, fed into a paper prepared by Huskisson, which set out the failings of the 1815 Corn Act, and more importantly developed proposals for change. Well aware of the controversy which would arise, not least in the Cabinet, Lord Liverpool proceeded very carefully, initially circulating Huskisson’s paper only to a few senior ministers namely Canning, Peel, Wellington, and as a courteous afterthought, to Chancellor of the Exchequer Robinson, in October 1826. The detail has no place here, and I recommend Hilton’s
book to those wishing to know more, but the principles of the proposed new law are worth stating:

1. *That the British farmer was entitled to countervailing protection to the amount of his special burdens vis-à-vis other domestic interests.* (A justification for why corn should be accorded protection, while other commodities and indeed manufactures were not. Climatic and soil conditions, scales of production, and relative wage levels meant that unrestricted competition could not be resisted by most British farmers.)

2. *That the British farmer was entitled to no protection once Corn had touched a scarcity price.* (Obviously, any duty imposed in these circumstances would increase consumer hardship, and effectively go straight into farmers’ pockets).

3. *That to offset the occasional sacrifice implied by the second principle, the British farmer was entitled in years of extra-ordinary abundance, to have protection increased above the level prescribed by application of the first principle.* (A slightly dubious contention which would increase protection above levels strictly necessary to account for higher costs of production, but no doubt inclusion of such a sweetener was the only means of getting the measure accepted by the agricultural community).

Taken together, the principles dictated a change in approach, ironically towards Lord Liverpool’s preferred model of 1815, which was encapsulated in the new Corn Bill agreed by the Cabinet towards the end of the year (1826). Imported wheat was to be allowed to enter the market when prices rose above 52 shillings per quarter but at a very high duty of 40 shillings and 8 pence; thereafter the duty was to decrease smoothly, vanishing at a price of 73 shillings per quarter, which by then was regarded as a scarcity price. There were additional proposals to improve price calculations to minimise opportunities to manipulate the market. In order to ease the passage of the Bill through parliament, Lord Liverpool determined that he would introduce it in the House of Lords, and that Canning rather than the expert Huskisson should shepherd it through the House of Commons. The decision to keep Huskisson in the background, as Lord Liverpool had done while securing Cabinet approval, was a sensible enough precaution in the light of hostile attitudes towards him. In one of Lord Liverpool’s last communications with Canning who was ill, we see him telling the latter not to return to London till fully recovered, and indicating that Peel as the next senior in the House of Commons would have to deputise, while ruefully anticipating a
difficult interview with Huskisson who was bound to see his side-lining as a slight. Of course, Lord Liverpool’s plans fell through because he collapsed with the stroke which ended his career, a few days before he was due to make his speech to the House of Lords. With the premier’s removal from the political arena, Wellington found it easy to backtrack from his original agreement, and he encouraged the agricultural lobby to make enough trouble to cause the bill to be discarded by the weak governments which struggled through 1827. (A clear demonstration of the strength of Lord Liverpool’s political management, and the vacuum his resignation left.) However, there was to be a twist in the tale; a year later, a similar bill was pushed through by the government led by a somewhat chastened Duke. In part because of some apparently minor changes to the sliding scale which introduced abrupt changes in the duty, and thus provided opportunities for speculators, this Corn Act of 1828 was little more successful in regulating the trade in grain than its predecessors, and the controversy about agricultural protection lived on until the 1840s.

Lord Liverpool has been much criticised for agreeing to pass the 1815 Corn Act which is often portrayed as a purely partisan measure favouring the agricultural lobby which he needed to appease to remain in office. The fact that he regularly professed to support the free trade principles of Adam Smith is considered to make his decision even less forgivable. While political considerations must as usual have weighed heavily with him, it is only fair to acknowledge that throughout his premiership, security of supply of corn was also a major concern. Thus in 1815 there was a genuine fear that without protection, British output would diminish to an extent that shortages were inevitable, thereafter the fear was the loss of alternative foreign supplies to be sourced when British harvests were poor. Pleas for increased protection as prices fell during the next decade were opposed resolutely by Lord Liverpool’s government and the Corn Act of 1821, and the Corn Bill developed in 1826/1827 were both intended to reduce protection and allow some foreign corn into the country, thereby preserving these alternative sources of supply. Viewing the Corn Laws with hindsight, it is surprising that their effects diverged so far from predictions, and from the intentions of those who introduced them. Unfortunately, they did increase prices, and thus hardship, during the difficult period after the end of the war, even though their impact decreased as general conditions got easier in the 1820s. The earlier period reinforced preconceptions, and set the scene for the strife that well-outlasted the time when the Corn Laws were exerting a major influence. Starting from the rather partisan legislation of 1815, Lord Liverpool tried to find a fairer balance, but moved very slowly, and did not succeed, before he was forced from
office. It is clear that neither he, nor his advisors like Huskisson, nor indeed those opposed to the measures, like Ricardo, had a full grasp of the complex factors which interacted to control the price of corn. It is by no means certain that faced with the same issue today, our current leaders would do much better.

7.6. An Early Example of ‘Boom and Burst’

For economic and financial policy, as much as foreign policy, there was a divide in the early 1820s, between the years when the government struggled to overcome the problems left by the war, and rarely seemed in full control, and the following years of Liberal Conservatism when apparent drift was replaced by progressive reform. It was suggested earlier that the change had its beginnings in the improvement in economic conditions which settled the country down generally, and persuaded Lord Liverpool that reform was no longer a potential outrider for revolution. The impact was at least as strong in the Department for which he was directly responsible, the Treasury, as anywhere else. In the space of a few months, the Prime Minister acquired the confidence to act on some of his long-held principles in the economic and financial spheres. Frederic Robinson’s accession to the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer in succession to Vansittart in 1823 was also beneficial to the government, as he was a much better speaker, and so was thought with some justice to be more competent, and from about the same time financial proposals also had the benefit of Canning’s advocacy. Robinson was personable and intelligent, and had a long and mainly successful career, (excepting a short and disastrous stint as Prime Minister after Canning’s death in 1827). However, he had little capacity for work and even less appetite for controversy, so he never sought more influence on the formulation of economic policy than his predecessor. Whatever the impression given by his nickname ‘Prosperity Robinson’, the main driver for the burst of measures which liberalised trade and commerce in the mid-1820s was the commitment of Lord Liverpool, and his key advisor, Huskisson.

A precondition for fiscal reform was the retreat from Pitt’s legacy of the Sinking Fund, begun with a fudge in 1819, and finally placed on an open and formal basis in the budget of 1823, in which a single new Sinking Fund was opened but with an annual contribution of £5 million, at last striking a more realistic balance between seeking to pay down the national debt, and what the country could afford. A final encouragement was the buoyancy of trade, attributable to the recovery of old markets in Europe after the war, and especially to the huge expansion of exports to
the western hemisphere, which fed through into increased tax receipts, over £54 million in 1822, estimated to rise to £57 million in 1823, giving a surplus of more than £2 million over expenditure in the latter year, even with the still heavy burden of debt interest payments and the contribution to the Sinking Fund.

Yet the government was largely unsuccessful in implementing Lord Liverpool’s preferred financial measures in 1823, because the Whigs decried the utility of any Sinking Fund on the grounds that the country had shown it could cope with the interest on the national debt, suggesting that there was little point in trying to reduce these payments by eliminating the debt by some theoretical date, far into the future. Some radical figures even suggested that it was best to maintain the debt, as it would inhibit future borrowing and perhaps prevent adventurous foreign policies which could lead to war. Instead, the Whigs opportunistically offered the landed interest, whose supporters could still tip the balance in the House of Commons, the seductive prospect of really large reductions in the remaining direct taxes, to which offer the government felt compelled to respond by proposing some remissions and reductions in taxes on servants, gardeners, horses and carriages, using up all of the projected surplus. In effect, the new Sinking Fund had only been accepted in return for further reduction of the taxes charged directly on income, so Lord Liverpool was further than ever from his desire to shift taxation away from customs and excise.

However, in 1824, and 1825, Lord Liverpool finally oversaw real progress in reducing duties and otherwise transforming the rules of commerce. Robinson and Huskisson introduced measures which reduced duties on a wide range of raw materials such as wool, cotton, silk, metals, coffee, cocoa, wines and spirits. Apart from the obvious benefits for those purchasing the items in question, two wider benefits were expected to follow; firstly that lower duties would feed through into the prices of British manufactured goods, either directly in the case of raw materials or by moderating pressure for wage increases, and secondly that the reductions made it possible to negotiate with other nations for reciprocal tariff changes. At the same time, internal trade in commodities like coal was freed from all restriction, as was Irish trade with Britain, (A measure that William Pitt had tried and failed to bring in almost forty years earlier). Colonial trade was given preference over other foreign trade, in part a political measure to counter any United States designs on Canada and the West Indies, and as we have seen, commercial treaties with Spanish colonies in South America triggered a boom in trade with those states, as well as smoothing their path to freedom. In this period the government also eased the navigation acts which
restricted the rights of foreign shipping to carry goods to and from Britain and its colonies. Reciprocal measures led to a large expansion of the British share of the carrying trade between foreign states and substantial net gains for British shipping companies.

The government was not given long to bask in the national approval engendered by expanding trade and increasing prosperity. The availability of money for investment allowed large numbers of speculative ventures to be set up, many with no chance of success. Proposals to trade warming pans and ice skates to the tropics, and to send milkmaids to Buenos Aires, were merrily subscribed to at this time, and Lord Liverpool became concerned in the middle of 1825. He spoke in the House of Lords to the effect that those persons who engaged in joint-stock companies or other enterprises, entered on their speculations at their own peril and risk. He declared that he would never advise the introduction of any bill for their relief, but on the contrary, if any such measure were to be proposed, he would oppose it, and he hoped parliament would reject it. Unfortunately, his warning was not heeded, and he did nothing else; speculation continued unabated, the bubble eventually burst, and a stock exchange crash in September 1825, was followed by multiple banking failures which at one point threatened to extend to the Bank of England itself.

Orthodox economists had no doubt as to the cause of the problem and pointed to an increase of £3 million in the value of notes issued by the Bank of England between 1823 and 1825, and noted that provincial banks had increased their note issues from £4½ million to £8½ million in the same period, thereby fuelling the speculative bubble. Whereas the Bank of England had to be able to back its notes with gold, the provincial banks, issuing large quantities of notes of small denomination, did not. This suggested one of the remedial measures brought forward by the government, namely that the provincial banks should be deprived of the right to issue bank notes, apart from Scottish banks which (in dramatic contrast to the 2008 crash) were seen as having behaved more responsibly, and benefited from the support of an influential lobby, including Sir Walter Scott. It was assumed that the Bank of England, which had also played a part in the irresponsible management of the currency, would be sufficiently chastened by its near failure, to operate more cautiously in the future. Another measure also took a lead from Scottish banks, and sought to strengthen the capital base of local banks by removing a restriction that a maximum of six could subscribe to a joint stock company running a bank, from which only the Bank of England had been exempt. The Bank of England, then of course a private concern,
was to be allowed to keep its unique status within 65 miles of London and further compensated by being given the opportunity to open local branches elsewhere. The status of joint stock companies was regularised by the repeal of legislation introduced a hundred years before, at the time of the South Sea Bubble affair, which technically made them all illegal. None of this did anything for those who had lost life-savings, businesses, and property, but as Lord Liverpool had made clear, he thought that they should have protected their own interests. Unfortunately, as with all such crises, the effects were to be felt by large numbers who were blameless, as the economy went into reverse.

In many ways, the government’s response to the banking crisis was typical of its financial management throughout Lord Liverpool’s premiership. Lord Liverpool saw the dangers early and warned the country of them, but the government then stood back, and did nothing to prevent the crisis; in fairness the premier had promised nothing different. When the worst had happened, the government did step in to pass sensible legislation, aimed at minimising the impact of any recurrence. We should certainly expect a government to be more pro-active nowadays, not least because we have had the opportunity to learn from a few more financial crises since the 1820s, but recent experience shows that the likelihood of averting the lasting damage caused by such events has hardly increased in almost two centuries. So, any criticism of Lord Liverpool should probably be muted, but it is always perplexing when a leader’s utterances and later actions suggest that he might have been able to lessen a crisis, had he chosen to act earlier.

7.7. A Last Word on Lord Liverpool’s Stewardship of the Treasury

The purpose of this chapter has been to assess Lord Liverpool’s role in the stewardship of the nation’s finances, during his premiership. The evidence that his influence was paramount is incontrovertible; those with inside knowledge at the time had no doubts as is demonstrated by the quotations presented. I have not attempted to give a running commentary on financial and economic matters over fifteen years, but have looked at what I regard as the main issues, with a particular focus on the most difficult years after the end of the war. It is difficult to take a balanced view of the premier’s stewardship through that period, and many commentators have not. The construction of the world’s first industrial economy was still work in progress, with patterns of production, trade, and consumption in a state of flux. Accompanying these changes were large population movements and rapid population growth. An
economy and financial system organised for war had to be returned to some kind of peacetime configuration, which meant amongst other things that spending on military supplies plummeted, threatening countless business enterprises, and state ordnance manufacturers. Their employees along with large numbers of soldiers and sailors were dumped onto the job-market. The government had neither answers, nor the wherewithal to experiment. The distinguished economists of the day were far better at providing complex diagnoses than practical remedies. The nation had historically large debts, and the government was unable to persuade parliament to delay the peace dividend of lower taxes, and so could not contemplate any kind of stimulus, even had they wished. The great majority of the economically literate, and an overwhelming majority in parliament, from reactionary conservatives to radicals, thought that the government’s most important task was to reduce its own expenditure, to lower taxes, and to allow the market to do the work of recovery. In fact, the economy did recover, albeit slowly, and unevenly, but by the early 1820s there was strong growth.

Apart from the above factors which had militated against direct action to try to improve the economic situation there had been a vicious circle operating even more strongly in the same sense. Hard times, especially amongst the poor of the cities, created fertile territory for agitators and proponents of revolutionary change, and so contributed to the riots and disturbances which punctuated the years after 1815. In turn these events convinced those in authority that any departure from current policies, or reform however minor, would be seen as a concession gained by law-breaking and violence, and following Burke’s analysis, the first step on the road to revolution. This understanding kept the liberal conservatives firmly in line with their reactionary colleagues, Castlereigh and Wellington, and indeed with King George IV, before and after his accession. Only Lord Liverpool could have challenged this particular consensus, and he did not do so, probably because he had genuinely bought into Burke’s analysis, though political facts of life will also have weighed with him, in that he no doubt thought that he would have lost any argument in the Cabinet. Change in the economic sphere, as everywhere else, only became possible when hard times receded, agitation died down, and reform could be considered dispassionately.

There are thus very plausible arguments that there was little that Lord Liverpool could have done, and even that government action might have made matters worse given the rudimentary state of economic knowledge. However, it is one thing to accept that
hard times were inevitable, and another to condone an absence of leadership, during the years after Waterloo. The country got little more from the premier than figurative wringing of hands. He has to be blamed for taking too few steps to understand fully the condition of all parts of the country, for doing nothing to convey to the wider populace that the government was concerned about their plight, for not ensuring better presentation of economic and financial matters in the House of Commons, and for timidity in pushing some of his own well-founded ideas, which might have helped matters if they had been adopted earlier. A more confident and assertive leader would have tried to do more than make very occasional low-key speeches about the desirability of freeing up trade and commerce, and would have made more effort to channel help to the worst affected areas. These strictures also apply, if to a lesser degree, to all the other heroes of liberal conservatism, Canning and Peel, Robinson and Huskisson, who emerged as if from nowhere, but actually from their own ministerial silos in the early 1820s.

During the later years of Lord Liverpool’s tenure, he clearly felt vindicated and liberated by the resurgence in the state of the nation, and especially by the reduction in the tension which had seemed to threaten revolution if mishandled. More significantly, as I will explain in a later chapter, his political strength was by then formidable; in Parliament the coming together of a majority Conservative Party was more or less complete, in the Cabinet, part by design, and part serendipitously he had manoeuvred fellow liberal conservatives into key offices, and he had left the King under no illusions as to who was in the last resort, the master. Organic reform was bound to come onto the agenda, in Lord Liverpool’s area of direct responsibility, trade and taxation. He would have liked to go further than he did, but no-one should doubt that the programme of tariff reform and removal of barriers to trade, was substantial, and perhaps even more importantly, that the ensuing benefits provided the evidence which convinced administrations later in the 19th century that they should go further along the path towards free trade. Other reforms to banking and trade unions were more reactive, but little less significant as building blocks for our modern state; neither had ever been subjects for legislation before.

So, I draw some definite conclusions; for so long as he was Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool exerted the decisive influence over economic and financial affairs. While he shared the fears of his more reactionary colleagues about the stability of the nation and its institutions, and doubted the firmness of his support in parliament, he steered clear of change and avoided controversy, laissez faire was indeed his mantra. It is
very doubtful if a pro-active posture was feasible then, but a few small scale
initiatives might have helped a little at the edges, and would certainly have improved
the national mood. Later as the country settled down, and his support hardened, he
felt able to act in accordance with his basic liberal conservative beliefs, and drove
through a raft of economic and financial organic reforms.
8. The Struggle to Maintain Order in Britain and Ireland

8.1. Lord Sidmouth and the Role of a Home Secretary

The main topic of this chapter is the response of Lord Liverpool and his first Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, to the unrest which arose, in the newly industrialised towns and London, at regular intervals during the second decade of the 19th century. Amongst the general histories, descriptions of individual events, and biographies which I have listed as references, I have found a book written by R.J. White especially useful, as a balanced account in contrast to some of the more polemical works on the period. For completeness, I also look briefly at the reforms associated with Robert Peel's term of office as Home Secretary in the 1820s, and at Irish policy over the duration of Lord Liverpool's premiership. As a former Home Secretary, Lord Liverpool might have been expected to take a close interest in the responsibilities of the department, but in practice he became a quite distant overseer of all but the Irish part of the brief, except when crises arose. In part, this was forced on him because the other calls on his time were so great, but he was probably happy enough to remain detached, because he trusted both incumbents during his premiership, Lord Sidmouth and Robert Peel, as much as any ministers in the Cabinet. Also, he knew from his own experience that much of the work-load was routine, and that most of the office-holder's time was likely to be spent dealing with the whims of the Prince Regent, and a voluminous correspondence with Lords Lieutenant and other local dignitaries. Nonetheless, he was to be drawn into the department's affairs, firstly because preservation of good order became increasingly difficult in the post-war years, so that the Home Secretary had need of his support and guidance, and then as those problems died down, because he found himself facilitating the root and branch reforms initiated by Robert Peel. Only the Prime Minister could get Cabinet acquiescence to changes opposed strongly by Lord Chancellor Eldon, and greeted unenthusiastically by a few other colleagues.

In 1812 Lord Liverpool had wanted a 'safe pair of hands' in the Home office, and clearly thought he had the right man in Viscount Sidmouth, as is illustrated by his unusually effusive invitation to that peer to assume the position in 1812; ‘You must be Secretary of State for the Home Department; it will mean the world to me’. One reason for his extravagance of expression was certainly his need for the support of Sidmouth's coterie in parliament, and although this had been obtained by his immediate predecessors from Pitt to Percival in return for the offer of largely honorific
positions like Lord President of the Council, their ministries had been shaken by the resignations of the grouping which tended to follow any disagreement. Lord Liverpool realised that if he wished to embed Sidmouth in his administration he would have to give him a ‘real’ job, and he knew that the match between the demands of the position and the proposed occupant could hardly have been improved on. As already noted, the office at that time had largely administrative functions, responsible for a myriad of mundane matters, and Sidmouth’s main traits of conscientiousness and a degree of pedantry meant that he would be in his element dealing with this type of work-load. In his excellent biography of the Home Secretary, Ziegler quotes a contemporary listing which itemises the responsibilities as ‘all grants, pardons and regulations in all civil matters; preferment in the church, matters of police, the regular army, militia and volunteers; dispensations, licences to trade, and alien regulations’. Where decisions in these areas had wider implications they sometimes involved other ministers, but it still fell to the Home Secretary to ensure that the paper-work was in order, and to get documents signed by the monarch. He exchanged regular letters with the Lords Lieutenant, who provided oversight of affairs in the counties, conveying the views of the Cabinet as to how they should act in specific circumstances, and gave support to less exalted local office-holders like Justices of the Peace, sometimes moral, and occasionally, if unrest broke out, tangible, in the form of detachments of troops. He received reams of letters and reports from these magistrates and the commanders of the army districts into which the country was divided, giving detailed information about the general mood and specific events in the localities, though perhaps surprisingly, there is no record of his visiting trouble-spots. Apart from this rather glaring omission, the role was really ‘hands-on’. Sidmouth perused and signed great numbers of documents, wrote his own official letters, read the replies, briefed his own spies, and interviewed suspected agitators, in the latter case occasionally with help from other Cabinet colleagues. Home Secretaries were expected to react to events, and not to take initiatives. Of course this was all to change with the advent of Peel in the office, with his characteristic determination to leave matters better than he found them, but Sidmouth, no reformer anyway, had had so many problems to contend with in the preceding decade, that change was the last thing on his mind.

However, the above provides only part of the explanation for the importance of the position in Lord Liverpool’s eyes, when he made the appointment. From personal experience, he knew that the Home Secretary was likely to be a major channel of communication between the Cabinet and the Prince Regent. Over the next decade,
Sidmouth as Home Secretary was to have more access to the Prince Regent, later King George IV, than any other minister, attending the ruler on any journeys he made within the British Isles, sometimes acting as a go-between with other members of the government, and bringing a multitude of documents before the ruler for signature or consideration, explaining them at request. Whatever the wishes of any Prime Minister, it was inconceivable at this time that a Home Secretary could be appointed who was not personally agreeable to the monarch, but the premier had to be able to rely on the loyalty of the office-holder. The views of the Cabinet, which more often than not, had been steered by the Prime Minister in a particular direction, had to be conveyed honestly but tactfully to the Prince Regent, with particular care being taken to suggest that royal opinions had been accommodated as far as possible. Lord Liverpool knew that the government depended for its survival on the deployment of the Prince Regent’s influence in parliament, but he probably guessed at the start of his premiership that his own relations with the Prince would not be easy. In fact, he can hardly have foreseen the scale of his difficulties, and on a number of occasions he had to rely on Sidmouth, helped sometimes by Wellington, Castlereigh, and Eldon, being able to persuade the Prince Regent to withdraw from untenable positions, which if held to, would have forced the Prime Minister’s resignation, and that of the government. The points mainly at issue will be considered later, but here it is most important to stress the debt owed by Lord Liverpool to Sidmouth’s loyalty, engendered to a degree perhaps by personal attachment, (Sidmouth had given the premier his first important position, and thereafter had received more consideration from Lord Liverpool, than from any other senior politician) but more to a conviction that the premier’s continuance in office was essential for the country.

Henry Addington, Viscount Sidmouth, was disparaged in his own time, and has not been looked on too kindly since then. Snobbery was undoubtedly a part of the contemporary attitude to him. In an age of aristocratic government, he was the son of a distinguished physician, Anthony Addington, who ministered to William Pitt, 1st Earl of Chatham, and later was one of the many called in to evaluate the condition of George III. Hence Sidmouth’s nickname, ‘the doctor’, which was in no way meant to be flattering but stemmed in part from perceptions that he was pernickety and pedantic, but much more from the desire of those conferring it to highlight his middle-class origins. He also suffered fall-out from a bitter campaign of invective waged against him, during his premiership, in the early years of the 19th century by Canning, exemplified by his doggerel line; ‘Pitt is to Addington as London is to Paddington’. Sidmouth did little to deserve this hostility, which was prompted in part by jealousy of
his friendship with Pitt, partly by Canning's insecurity about his own background, and partly by Canning's genuine belief that Pitt had to be got back into office. Sidmouth's career had been built on that friendship with William Pitt, which brought him first the Speaker-ship of the House of Commons, and then, when Pitt resigned over the question of Roman Catholic Emancipation, in 1801, the premiership. He was not one of the more distinguished holders of that office, neither was he near the worst, but he suffered from the perception that he was a stop-gap, in office at Pitt's pleasure until that statesman chose to return. So, when the war with France restarted after the Amiens peace, in 1803, his replacement by his predecessor was viewed by most in parliament as essential and as we have already seen it proved to be only a matter of time.

Disappointment probably unbalanced him somewhat, because his behaviour during the next few years of unstable governments greatly damaged his reputation. His premiership had bequeathed him a following, the 'Addingtonians', which included upwards of fifty members of parliament, and in addition, he retained the goodwill of the King (George III), so he could not be ignored by anyone wishing to form an administration. As a result he took some part in most of the short-lived governments of the period, regardless of their complexion, but proved an unhelpful colleague. He served in Pitt's second ministry for a few months, after Lord Liverpool patched up the relations between him and the Prime Minister, but resigned when Pitt attempted to protect Henry Dundas from impeachment. He joined the 'Talents' ministry which was essentially Whig, but connived in its downfall, and was in Spencer Percival's ministry for a few months before that premier's assassination. Although personally dignified, and courteous, some of his closest followers, especially his brother Hiley, were far from this, and there is no doubt that many senior politicians disliked the fact that parliamentary arithmetic forced them to seek the support of a faction which seemed to be driven too much by motives of aggrandisement. We might surmise that Lord Liverpool understood and maybe sympathised with Sidmouth’s erratic conduct in the years after his loss of the premiership, and he clearly valued his new Home Secretary’s diligence, calmness and resolve. Having decided that he needed Lord Sidmouth’s services he treated him and his followers generously, and was rewarded with total loyalty. After 1812, the Addingtonians effectively ceased to exist as a grouping separate from the ‘friends of Pitt’ who made up the main body of Lord Liverpool's support.
As Home Secretary, Sidmouth had direct responsibilities for law and order only in London; otherwise he operated through the Lords Lieutenant and magistrates, especially the latter. Their legal powers were considerable but their tools of enforcement, much less so. There was no national police force, and in London the Bow Street Runners were thief-takers not riot police, while a recently established river police force was irrelevant as regards preserving order on land. In the large towns, a few elected constables and tipstaffs comprised the front line authority. Local militias could be deployed at the request of magistrates, but were in general poorly trained, and were on occasion to prove unreliable when faced with large demonstrations. The last recourse was the regular army, a significant part of which was split into detachments, usually numbering a few hundred, stationed across the country, housed mainly in inns and private dwellings rather than barracks, and available for deployment under the control of magistrates when disorder was threatened. Over the next few years, ‘reading the riot act’ was to be the prelude to a number of incidents in which rounds were fired and blood was shed, as efforts were made to arrest ringleaders and suppress demonstrations. Magistrates had to strike a fine balance between preventing matters from getting out of hand by calling in regular soldiers early enough, and being accused of panic and over-reaction for resorting to them too early; inevitably they sometimes got it wrong. Equally, Sidmouth and the government faced accusations on the one hand of excessive leniency and on the other, of militarism when they tried to modulate responses to unrest.

8.2. From Luddism to Cato Street

The Liverpool government took office in the middle of a law and order crisis in 1812. The combination of Napoleon’s Berlin and Milan Decrees and the British Orders in Council had had a major impact on British trade, and matters had been made even worse by the American response, which was to introduce a ‘Non-Intercourse Act’. British exports to that country plunged from a value of £11 million to £2 million between 1810, and 1811, with textiles of all types bearing the brunt. The knock-on effects were lost jobs and reduced wages, added to which a shortage of grain pushed the price of wheat up to 126 shillings and sixpence per quarter, the highest price of the century. As already discussed, this meant privation for many in the towns of the East Midlands and the North of England where textile manufacturing was centred. In late 1811, trouble had flared up amongst stocking knitters around Nottingham, the so-called Luddite riots. There were around 30000 stocking manufacturing frames in the three counties of Nottingham, Leicester, and Derby, and
in the three months after November 1811, more than 500 were smashed. The protests are sometimes portrayed as rather mindless, but they were far from that, since they targeted large wide frames which could be used to knit four items at once, albeit of lower quality than the single products of the standard machines. Some of the resulting decrease in the costs of production using large frames doubtless went towards the profits of the owners, but part went towards reducing prices, threatening the livelihoods of other producers, and the jobs of their employees. The Percival government’s response to the disturbances was uncompromising and they legislated to increase the powers of the magistrates to search for weapons and to break up meetings in the affected areas, and introduced the death penalty for stocking frame breaking. (The latter was a draconian step, though not as extreme as it now seems, given the large number of relatively minor offences for which the ultimate sanction was available at that time. The letter of the law was merciless, but tempered by the discretion of the authorities in often avoiding prosecutions and even more by juries regularly refusing to convict regardless of the evidence; it is reasonable to assume that few if any of the Luddite protesters who were indeed hanged in the next few years, had done no more than break stocking machines.)

The situation around Nottingham had eased somewhat by the spring of 1812, when Lord Liverpool took over as premier, but the centre of gravity of the protests shifted northwards to West Yorkshire, where the main targets were gin mills which were beginning to replace a labour intensive finishing process for woollen cloth, and to Lancashire where cotton power-looms were targeted. The violence of this second wave was greater, one mill owner was ambushed and shot dead, a factory near Huddersfield was besieged by hundreds of armed rioters, and the government received evidence of oath taking and drilling with arms by factory workers. That summer, 13000 soldiers were deployed in the disturbed areas, (for comparison, Wellington then had hardly three times that number of British soldiers in Spain), while spies and informers supplied information about ringleaders and other protesters. The government was willing at first, to negotiate with the stocking-makers in the East Midlands, discussing a bill which would have introduced regulation of the hosiery and lace trades, including pricing, though nothing came of this, but their attitude to the more northerly protesters was much harsher, and preparations went ahead in late 1812 for a trial of offenders at York assizes, early the next year. The denouement was a mass hanging of 17 individuals, and the transportation of another 7; this certainly knocked the stuffing out of the protests in Yorkshire but left many of liberal persuasion looking askance at the justice system. The combination of harsh
retribution, an easing of the economic situation, and the uplift in national morale brought about by military success, calmed the situation, but the failure to regulate the hosiery trade meant that Nottingham and its neighbourhood remained a potential flash point for several years. As late as 1817, 6 rioters were hanged and 2 transported, for attacking a factory in Leicester, and by the time all such protest ceased in the 1820s, 1400 machines had been destroyed and 35 agitators had been hanged. It is arguable that in time of war, Lord Liverpool and the government, had little alternative to the use of draconian measures, but the events of 1811 through to 1813 in the East Midlands and further north were an ominous portent of what might happen if difficult conditions persisted.

The next wave of protest, largely taking the legal form of petitions to parliament, accompanied the arguments over Protection in the last years of the war. When the decision was made in favour of the agricultural lobby and the 1815 Corn Law was passed, the self-perceived losers in the towns came out on the streets, and the resulting disturbances involved a wide cross section of the working population, shopkeepers and tradesmen as well as low paid labourers and factory workers, albeit that the protests were less violent than many before or afterwards. The demonstrators could not be blamed for believing that it was simply the case that a parliament dominated by the agricultural interest would favour that interest, not least because the government made no effort to gain a wide hearing for its more nuanced reasoning. Political agitators found it easy to attract support for the argument that only a reformed parliament, which for them meant one chosen in equal sized constituencies by an electorate comprising all resident men, would take up the cause of the growing working class in the towns. Major John Cartwright, who had been prominent nearly thirty years earlier, when parliamentary reform had last aroused passions, and who was by 1815 over 70 years old, made two nation-wide tours to promulgate such views. He was an almost heroic figure, if more than a little naïve, who totally rejected violence and concentrated on founding numerous Hampden clubs in industrial towns, directed to petitioning parliament for reform. Cartwright operated strictly within the law but his activities were a concern to the government since it seemed that his network could be diverted by others to more sinister purposes. Economic hardship fanned the flames over the next two years, with the price of food rising, partly because of poor harvests, and partly because of the operation of the Corn Law, while the difficult transition from a war-time to peace-time economy had begun, accompanied by all the problems discussed in the previous chapter.
The Home Secretary was presented with plenty evidence of unrest and apparent sedition, by magistrates in the North and by the strange assortment of individuals he employed as spies, who were paid by results and so incentivised to produce ‘evidence’ of wrong-doing. However there were also events that needed no invention or exaggeration to render them worrying. In November 1816, at London Spa Fields, a rally organised by the West Country demagogue, Henry ‘Orator’ Hunt to approve a petition for reform to be presented to the Prince Regent, was taken over by extremists including a mysterious rabble-rouser, Dr. Watson, his son, and Arthur Thistlewood of later Cato street notoriety, who persuaded a small contingent of the crowd of over 10000 to join them in marching on the centre of the city to attempt the capture of the Tower of London. Although they obtained arms by breaking into a gunsmith’s shop, and murdered an onlooker, the demonstration was easily brought to a halt by a few constables, who arrested most of the ringleaders. Then in January 1817, members of Hampden clubs from all over England assembled in London to meet the radical politicians, Sir Francis Burdett, and Lord Cochrane (the famous seaman), to agree the terms of a petition for reform, which was duly tabled in the House of Commons by the latter, and predictably, ignored. Nothing more happened, and the delegates departed, disappointed, for their homes, but for the government, this was confirmation that a national organisation for reform existed, and in these troubled times, they would have been foolish to assume that its methods could be guaranteed to remain constitutional. In March 1817, several hundred weavers, ‘The Blanketeers’, assembled in Manchester to take a petition to London, asking for help for the cotton trade; obviously their hope was that the march would grow in size as it made its way to the capital. A combination of forceful action by magistrates backed by army detachments, and heavy rain, scuppered this protest; the ringleaders were arrested and the march disintegrated after a few miles. In June 1817 the Pentrich Rising took place, when several hundred demonstrators led by Jeremiah Brandreth, ‘the Nottingham Captain’ gathered to attack the authorities in the midland city, though once again the incident was easily brought to an end by a magistrate and a few soldiers; the leader paid with his life.

None of the individual demonstrations had been well organised or prosecuted with great determination, and many even then suspected that they had been encouraged by Sidmouth’s spies, including the infamous Oliver, acting as agents provocateurs. However the fact that trouble had been spread across the country supported the idea that there was some kind of national organisation fomenting it, and perhaps planning revolution. As a result, the government, which until then had contented itself with
supporting the magistrates in tackling the incidents as they arose, decided it had to strengthen the law. When parliamentary sittings resumed towards the end of 1817, LordLiverpool proposed to the House of Lords, the suspension of Habeas Corpus, (allowing imprisonment of suspected agitators for an indefinite period without trial), and that magistrates should be given the power to ban meetings which they thought likely to be seditious, before the event, rather than having to attempt to break them up, once their purpose had been made clear. He justified the government’s proposals on the grounds of precedent, pointing to the actions of Pitt's government in the 1790s, though of course the country had been at war then, but interestingly, found himself harder pressed defending the government’s failure to recall parliament and legislate earlier, because there were many who thought that the ministers had been irresponsible in delaying action so long. Though Lord Grey was willing to accept the banning of meetings, he opposed the suspension of Habeas Corpus, taking the view that the government was exaggerating the danger. Unsurprisingly, given his involvement with William Pitt’s earlier clamp down, the other key opposition figure, Lord Grenville, supported the government, buying into Lord Liverpool’s analogy with the 1790s. The measures were approved overwhelmingly by the House of Lords, (150 votes to 35), and Lord Castlereigh had equally little difficulty in getting them through the House of Commons. In part, because the strengthening of the law helped magistrates, but more because the price of corn began to decline and trade picked up, the parliamentary debates marked a high point of agitation, and within a year the situation had calmed to the extent that the restrictive measures could be quietly dropped.

However the respite for the country and the government was only temporary as economic conditions took a turn for the worse again in 1819. A difficult summer began with a large, relatively disciplined rally in Birmingham which called for reform of Parliament, then, in August, a meeting was arranged in St. Peter's Fields, Manchester, to be addressed by Henry Hunt. The ‘Orator’, equipped as usual with his white top hat and tricolour flag, intended to speak for universal suffrage and the secret ballot, his normal platform, but the magistrates had other ideas, and sent in the militia to arrest him. Unsurprisingly, the large crowd did not make the task of the militia easy, and they quickly lost any cohesion with individual soldiers becoming isolated. At this point, the magistrates decided to send in a detachment of mounted yeomanry, with sabres drawn, to disperse the crowd and rescue the militia. In this scenario, even if the cavalry-men had tried to use the flats of their weapons rather than the cutting edges, casualties would have been inevitable, but a toll of eleven
deaths and hundreds of injured, many of them women and children, suggested a less restrained approach, and presented a picture of defenceless people being ridden down by sabre-wielding cavalry, which shocked the whole nation. Inevitably, political agitators seized on the opportunity, and floods of engravings depicting the horrors of ‘Peterloo’, and political tracts inciting a response, appeared on the streets. Orator Hunt, released on bail received a hero’s welcome when he returned to London, and his later imprisonment for a few months did nothing to dent his popularity. A less extreme reformer, the radical parliamentarian, Sir Francis Burdett chose this moment to produce a virulent open letter to his constituents which resulted in him also being locked up for some months. Lord Fitzwilliam, the Whig Lord Lieutenant of the West Riding of Yorkshire, called an official county meeting to agree a petition of protest, so earning instant dismissal by the government, but the approval of Lord Grey. Peterloo seemed for a while to have united the Whigs with moderate and extreme Radicals under the banner of reform.

What of the government’s response? Regardless of the questionable competence of the Manchester magistrates in implementing their measures, the government never doubted that they had to be supported, if the machinery of law enforcement was to be sustained. Sidmouth wrote a letter whose contents became widely known in which he thanked them on behalf of the Prince Regent for their ‘prompt, decisive, and efficient measures for the preservation of public tranquillity’, provocative words in the eyes of Radicals. Otherwise, Sidmouth seems to have panicked a bit for the only time, asking Lord Liverpool to arrange an immediate recall of Parliament to discuss the situation, but the Prime Minister refused, wishing to avoid an increase in the general excitement. Sidmouth returned to the matter a couple of months later, and this time Lord Liverpool acquiesced, but instructed the Home Secretary to provide legislative proposals to constrain disturbances, rather than just laying information before Parliament, and requesting advice. Lord Liverpool wanted above all, to give the impression of a government in control, being much more concerned about those in Parliament who might accuse it of weakness, than any extra-parliamentary wish for conciliation. This was the genesis of the ‘Six Acts’ which passed into law in December 1819, and which encompassed prohibition of mass drilling, restriction of the right to bear arms, tight regulation of public meetings, harsher punishments for libels, and taxation of even the cheapest publications. Perhaps surprisingly, Habeas Corpus was not suspended again, so imprisonment without trial remained illegal. Having passed the legislation, the government with Lord Eldon, the Lord Chancellor,
to the fore was energetic in ensuring that it was used, especially to inhibit publication of inflammatory literature.

Once again it transpired that the government had got round to stiffening the law at a time when unrest had already passed its peak, though this fact was disguised to some extent by the unmasking of the Cato Street conspiracy in February 1820, and the disturbances which have rather exaggeratedly been termed the Scottish Insurrection, two months later. Arthur Thistlewood, the leader of the former enterprise, had been both an army officer, and a farmer, and had spent time in Paris towards the end of the French Revolution, before emerging as a violent proponent of change. His actions in the few years before 1820 suggest at the very least, that he had become somewhat unhinged, and he had already served a prison term for publicly challenging the Home Secretary to a duel. His plan was simple if brutal, and would have involved the murder of the whole Cabinet while they were dining at the house of one of their number, Lord Harrowby, and the removal of their heads which would then have been paraded on pikes through the centre of London. The conspirators assumed that this coup would have been sufficient to trigger a revolution, with support from the industrial towns in the north, which Thistlewood seems to have solicited during at least one visit in the previous autumn. Predictably, Thistlewood’s group had been infiltrated by a spy called Edwards, and Sidmouth allowed the plot to proceed only so far as to ensure that most of them could be detained. The trial of those apprehended, for High Treason took place two months later, and was swiftly followed by executions of Thistlewood and his main collaborators which involved the public display of the conspirators’ heads, in a grisly parallel to what they had had in mind for the Cabinet.

Scotland had not been free from the unrest that had occurred in England during the post-war years, seeing large protest meetings, and recruitment by Major Cartwright and others, of activists in the cause of reform. The genesis of the final round of Scottish disturbances was the first ever attempt to organise a national general strike, and in this, the radical leaders had some success with as many as 60000 in central Scotland refusing to work on 3rd April 1820. However, various attempts by the protesters to acquire arms failed, when soldiers intercepted small groups of workers advancing towards factories and military stores; the small scale of these events is illustrated by the numbers involved at the best remembered skirmish at Bonnymuir near Falkirk, on the 4th April, thirty-two mounted soldiers and about thirty agitators of whom four suffered wounds. The worst single incident occurred a few days later
when a Militia unit taking prisoners from Paisley to Greenock opened fire on crowds attempting a rescue, killing eight and wounding ten. The reckoning occupied another six months, and a total of 88 men were charged with treason, (a very high proportion of those actively involved). In spite of the rather disgraceful efforts of partisan judges, only eighteen were convicted. One of them, James Wilson, was hanged and beheaded in Glasgow on 30th August, and two, Andrew Hardie and John Baird, suffered the same fate in Stirling on 8th September; the remainder were transported to either New South Wales or Tasmania. Fifteen years later, all were granted a retrospective pardon.

As already suggested, unrest was declining anyway by the time Thistlewood’s group began to make their plans, but the unmasking of their plot accelerated the process, by discrediting any who sought to bring about reform by extra-parliamentary means, and by casting a shadow even over those who wished to proceed constitutionally. The vigorous application of the ‘Six Acts’ also had some impact, but much more significant was returning prosperity which, as Lord Liverpool had always expected, reduced the ranks of the activists to the few real fanatics, who could do little on their own. This time, as we have seen the government was soon able to reinforce the favourable economic trends, so there was no return in the next few years to the real hardship that had gone before, nor to violent agitation for reform.

There is certainly no consensus almost two hundred years after the events just described, as to the rights and wrongs of the matter. Those who think that the fabric of the state was threatened by a sustained period of organised unrest give the government credit for keeping a lid on the agitation. Those, who see poor and hungry people gathering to demand fair treatment, regard the government response through its instruments, the magistrates and soldiers as cruel and draconian, and the men, women and children who perished, slashed, or trampled in demonstrations, or hanged after mass trials, as martyrs. The truth, as ever, may be somewhere in the middle, but my own view is that the government’s evaluation of the overall danger to the state was realistic and their responses, largely commensurate. More vigour might have bred even more resentment and widened agitation across class boundaries, while less vigour might have allowed local protests to grow and coalesce into something truly national.

Lord Sidmouth saw his duty clearly and simply as the preservation of order; he used the resources at his disposal, and when it seemed that they might become over-
stretched he sought to strengthen them, either by employing more agents, deploying more soldiers or by enhancing the legal powers of the magistrates who were in the front line. Lord Liverpool’s motivations were more complex; he saw merit in some of his Home Secretary’s requests, but he was also influenced by his perception of the wishes of the political nation as expressed in parliament. He invariably gave total backing to the actions and public statements of Lord Sidmouth, but his responses in private were more nuanced. His delayed and sometimes negative replies to Sidmouth’s pleas for the recall of Parliament, suggest strongly that he was less convinced that the unrest was a real threat to the state. The legislation of 1817 and 1819 was probably in his eyes as much about appeasing the majorities in both Houses of Parliament who were calling for tougher action, as addressing the dangers of the situation. He played the politics of the situation with great skill, formally consulting Lord Grenville whose uncompromising views on the necessary response to unrest were well known, and ensuring that the legislation brought forward, met with the opposition leader’s approval. He knew that Lord Grey would never accept the measures, and this meant the splitting of the Whig/Grenvillite coalition with consequences described in the next chapter. It would be wrong to assume that political considerations rather than the security of the state governed Lord Liverpool’s decision-making during years of potential crisis, but he certainly managed to derive political advantage.

The final point I wish to make on this matter is that for all the noise and fury of these years, and remembering how harsh day-to-day justice was a few years before Peel started along the path of reform, the number of deaths directly linked to the years of unrest was comparatively small. Although there were personal tragedies as some of those who took the lead in demonstrations and disturbances were hanged or transported, it is surprising in retrospect, that so many of those detained were acquitted, or given relatively short prison sentences. Arthur Thistlewood, a few years before the Cato Street incident, is an obvious example; after his riotous behaviour in London, and his challenge to the Home Secretary he was imprisoned for only a few months, and the government made no effort to interfere with his lenient treatment, or with that meted out in any other cases. Not a few of those who were executed were serial offenders like Thistlewood, who would not be diverted from a sadly inevitable fate.
8.3. Peel and Reform

It would be wrong to assume that there was no further unrest during Lord Liverpool's premiership; as we shall see, the affair of Queen Caroline caused a large amount of turbulence on the streets of London. However, after this upsurge, agitation for parliamentary reform died away for a few years, as also did concern about possible threats to the state. As a result, when Lord Sidmouth retired in 1822, his successor as Home Secretary, Robert Peel, was able to concentrate on entirely different matters. Peel was very much Lord Liverpool's protégé, since his first office had been as Under-Secretary to the then Secretary of State in the Department for War and Colonies, and he had been promoted to Chief Secretary for Ireland, at the age of 24, when his superior had become premier. After a successful term of office, Peel resigned in 1818 citing exhaustion, and there then ensued a slightly curious hiatus in his career. Lord Liverpool certainly wanted to bring Peel into the Cabinet at an early date, but creating the opportunity, without causing offence to sitting members and the monarch, was no trivial matter; perhaps Peel then took umbrage over the delay, (he was not a patient man), and perhaps he was genuinely worn out by his service in Ireland, though his stamina was never to be questioned afterwards. At any rate, his actions as chairman of the parliamentary committee, which recommended the return to the gold standard, were somewhat unhelpful to the government, and he turned down the opportunity to replace Canning as President of the Board of Control for India in 1821, albeit that he seems to have conveyed to Lord Liverpool that a more prestigious office would be accepted if offered. Lord Sidmouth then found himself taken at his word over his expressed desire to retire as Home Secretary, though the King delayed matters by his reluctance to part with a minister he esteemed. A solution was found whereby Sidmouth remained in the Cabinet as a Minister without Portfolio, and Peel duly succeeded to his office in January 1822. Apart from Lord Liverpool's desire to bring an admired talent back into government, these manoeuvres must be seen as part of the premier's campaign to shift the balance in the Cabinet, towards his fellow liberal conservatives. For all Lord Liverpool's respect for and gratitude for services rendered by the erstwhile Home Secretary, the latter had become an impediment because of his opposition to measures like the recognition of the former possessions of Spain in South America.

Peel was a reformer by instinct. For him, little or nothing was sacred, neither his own past views, nor the opinions of colleagues. When his analysis of a situation dictated a certain course of action at a certain point in time, he almost invariably followed that
course, without making much effort to persuade any dissentients, regardless of the consequences for governments or parties with which he was involved. Peel is normally seen as the first ‘modern’ Prime Minister, finally coming to power in 1841, after two ‘false starts’, with a mandate from an expanded electorate to make changes, and fortunately for his reputation, the focus is placed on his considerable achievements as a reformer, and on his ‘public-spiritedness’ in doing what he thought right, rather than on the havoc he created amongst those of his supporters who tried to follow his convoluted political journey. On the other hand, his tenure of the Home Department in Lord Liverpool’s government is unreservedly admired, because his abilities were given full rein, while his impatience and abrasiveness were held in check by the Prime Minister. Peel provided the drive, energy and intellectual rigour required to bring order to the hundreds of ancient statutes which constituted the law of the land, and to begin the process of modernising institutions like prisons, but it was Lord Liverpool who ensured the acceptance of reform by such Cabinet members as Eldon who were not predisposed to favour such measures, and prevented Peel’s occasional frustrations from spilling over into precipitate actions.

For some time before Peel became Home Secretary, supporters of legal and penal reform, including Samuel Romilly, and James Mackintosh, had been able to procure majorities in the House of Commons for bills to reduce the number of crimes which carried the death penalty, but the House of Lords, under the influence of Sidmouth and Lord Chancellor Eldon had remained almost completely obdurate. Sentences, like hanging for the theft of goods worth 5 shillings from a shop, had become so far out of line with the public sense of justice that juries rarely convicted, however strong the evidence, so to a considerable degree, the law was coming into disrepute. In the five years after he took over the Home office in early 1822, there were few parts of the legal system which remained untouched by Peel, but in a book about Lord Liverpool it is sufficient to give a very brief summary, because the Prime Minister mainly kept a watching brief, providing a sounding board for Peel as he developed his proposals, and Intervention to counter potential Cabinet opposition. Peel was responsible for measures which centralised the administration of prisons, and laid down standards for their management; he reorganised the Chancery Courts which made judgements on property disputes; he simplified and regularised the appointment of juries; he rewrote the law pertaining to theft and larceny, retaining the death penalty only for more serious offences; and he brought some order to the sentence of transportation, with seven year sentences for first offences, and a life sentence if convicted again. As a result of his efforts, the death penalty, while still on
the statute book for offences other than murder and treason, became much more the penalty for really serious crime, no longer being available to punish lesser misdemeanours like breaking river banks, cutting down hop vines, impersonating a Greenwich pensioner, and destroying textiles or textile machinery (the anti-Luddite legislation of 15 years earlier). In addition, judges were given discretion over withholding sentences of death in all cases except those of murder. Peel also managed to trigger some much needed reforms to the Scottish legal system, though the special status of that system under the Act of Union of 1707 gave him no direct power to implement changes. Instead, he facilitated the appointment of a committee to investigate abuses like the long-standing custom of allowing judges to appoint juries, and to lead those bodies to an extent not by then countenanced south of the border, and so a gradual process of reform was begun in Scotland as well.

Peel had less success during the period of Lord Liverpool’s administration in the area of police reform. He had broached the matter almost immediately on taking office, and a parliamentary committee was set up. However, many who supported his other legal reforms, on mainly humanitarian grounds, feared that strengthening the rudimentary police forces round the country would place an instrument of coercion into the hands of the government, an echo of the arguments about a standing army. Added to the reactionary elements in the Cabinet who opposed any change, this meant that opposition was too strong for Peel and Lord Liverpool, and they were unable to proceed. The partisans of law reform had suggested that lessening the draconian severity of sentences would reduce crime, because those contemplating theft or violence would know that juries were more likely to convict, but a much more important consideration was that, in the absence of organised policing, the chance of being caught remained low. One of Peel’s biographers quotes startling figures, which leave little doubt that there was a marked increase in crime in the 1820s in spite of the economic upturn; the number of criminal committals for trial increased in successive seven year periods, from 47522 between 1809 and 1816, to 93718 between 1818 and 1825, and the increase in convictions was even more marked, no doubt in part, because Peel’s reforms did indeed make juries more likely to pronounce guilty verdicts. In spite of Peel’s reduction in the number of offences carrying the death penalty, the number of capital sentences increased from 4126 to 7770, though only about 500 actually resulted in executions in each period; most sentences being commuted by the monarch, usually following advice from the Home Secretary. These statistics, which may even underestimate the rise in crime accompanying the reforms which came in, part-way through the second period, had a
considerable impact on Peel when he realised their import in 1826; firstly, he took no more initiatives to reduce the severity of sentencing, and secondly, he redoubled his efforts to persuade his colleagues of the need for properly organised police forces, with crime prevention given equal importance to the detection and detention of law breakers. He went out of office when Canning succeeded Lord Liverpool in 1827, but when he returned as Home Secretary in Wellington’s administration a year later, Peel finally succeeded in founding the Metropolitan Police Service in London, creating a model for the independent local police forces which gradually spread across the country.

Although Peel had few problems with unrest to contend with in his early years as Home Secretary, that situation changed in 1824. Radical members in the House of Commons led by Joseph Hume, and advised by Francis Place, had proposed the repeal of the Combination Laws which prevented workers organising to increase their bargaining power with employers. The President of the Board of Trade, Huskisson supported reform as a means of enhancing industrial production, and managed to convince Lord Liverpool, and more surprisingly, the rest of the Cabinet, so the Combination Laws were greatly relaxed in 1824, opening the way for the establishment of Trade Unions as we know them. Unsurprisingly, newly legal workers organisations began to flex their muscles, and the result was strikes, intimidation, and disturbances, in a number of the industrial towns. It was clear that illegal means were being used to ensure solidarity of work forces and the law had to be modified in 1825 to allow conviction of ‘over-enthusiastic’ union activists. The down-turn in the economy associated with the banking crisis added to the unrest created by the unions, and in 1825 and 1826, Peel found himself resorting to well-tried measures, to try to restore calm. Thus he approved the use of spies in Northern England, and wrote to Lord Liverpool to ask him to ensure that sufficient troops could be made available to impose order. This surge of disorder was never as serious as that a few years earlier, and there was never any suspicion of national organisation of agitation, but Peel, after the defeat of his early attempts to organise effective policing, had little new to offer as compared with the methods of Sidmouth, when it came to the maintenance of law and order during an economic downturn.

8.4. Containment in Ireland

To a degree, the security situation in Ireland in the first quarter of the 19th century mirrored that in the rest of the British Isles, with unrest rising and falling in phase with
economic swings. The government’s response was similar, in that maintenance of law and order was seen as paramount, but there was a greater willingness to adopt repressive measures, than on the mainland. This harsher approach could to some extent be justified by the fact that the background level of violence was far higher in Ireland, with armed gangs, like the ‘Whiteboys’, roaming the countryside, and attacking the property and persons of landowners, for much of the period in question. Additionally, in contrast to the mainland, there could be little doubt that movements promoting agitation were organised on a national basis, and even when ostensibly directed towards relief of oppressive conditions, whether economic or religious, the underlying aim was to weaken the role of the British government in the affairs of Ireland.

Lord Liverpool’s involvement with Ireland began when he first took office as Home Secretary in 1804, and with shortish intermissions, when the Talents ministry was in office in 1806/07, and when his attention was necessarily elsewhere, as Secretary of State for War and the Colonies between 1809 and 1812, lasted until he left office involuntarily in 1827. Although he thought long and hard about Ireland for more than twenty years, it cannot be claimed that he left the state of that country, or its relationship with the rest of the nation better than he found it. As any open-minded enquirer into her history will quickly realise, Ireland had rarely been governed in her own interests, but rather to serve the interests of the political class in England, especially as regards matters financial, commercial, and religious. After the suppression of the Dublin parliament in 1800, all Irish legislation became the responsibility of the British parliament, but it remained the case for some years afterwards, that English advantage rather than Irish need was the greatest influence on the reception given to proposed legislation. On occasion, Lord Liverpool permitted measures guided by humanity, but his attitude towards reform of any type in Ireland was the same as that he maintained more generally in the years after Waterloo, seeing only potential dangers. For Ireland there was never an adoption of liberal conservative principles.

Part of the problem with governing Ireland had always been the system, with the responsibility split between those ‘on the ground’ in Dublin, and the British ministers in London, but as might be expected of a constitutional conservative, Lord Liverpool did nothing to alter that, (nor did any other premier before Home Rule was conceded, a century later). Nominally, the Lord Lieutenant administered Ireland, on behalf of the King rather than his British ministers, but in practice, subject to constraints imposed
by the British government, and within a framework of laws approved by the British Parliament. The Lord Lieutenant had the help of an Irish Cabinet including financial and legal officers, and he also had control of whatever armed forces were stationed in Ireland. Normally a political appointment, the Lord Lieutenant could be expected to evince general support for a government’s aims, but this did not preclude the holding of divergent views on major Irish issues. For much of the 1820s, the Lord Lieutenant was the Marquis of Wellesley who was a ‘catholic’, (a designation referring not to his own religion which was Anglican if anything, but to the fact that he favoured Roman Catholic Emancipation, i.e., the opening of all senior offices, including membership of Parliament, to Roman Catholics), whereas the Home Secretary, Robert Peel, and the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool were ‘protestants’ opposing Emancipation. Another common area of disagreement between Dublin and London was the level of response to the waves of unrest which swept over Ireland; the modern terms of ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ convey the differences which arose between advocates of repression and appeasement. Although the formal channel for communication with the British government was by way of the Home Secretary, Lord Lieutenants of the time, like the Duke of Richmond and Lord Wellesley, saw themselves as having a direct line to the Prime Minister which they were not slow to use.

The other key member of the Irish government was the Chief Secretary, the office in which both Castlereigh and Peel first made their names, and which was held by the then Sir Arthur Wellesley, prior to his departure to Portugal. In Ireland, the Chief Secretary was responsible within the Irish Cabinet for the implementation of policies and day-to-day administration, effectively the chief executive who wielded the powers of the Lord Lieutenant. However, when the British Parliament was in session, the Chief Secretary left these duties to his civil deputy, (he also had a deputy for military matters), and decamped to London where he was expected to answer for the management of Irish affairs in the House of Commons, and to take the lead in getting any Irish bills through that house. Not the least of a Chief Secretary’s responsibilities, after the Union of Parliaments in 1800, was to cajole Irish members of parliament who supported the government into joining him in London so that their votes were available to the Prime Minister of the day. Formally, the Chief Secretary served two masters, the Lord Lieutenant and the Home Secretary, but the relationship with the latter depended on the interests and personalities of the incumbents. On the other hand, the working relationship between the Chief Secretary and the Lord Lieutenant was necessarily close, so it was a real problem if they were not personally compatible; (the difficulties in the 1830s between the Lord Lieutenant, the Marquis of
Anglesey, and Edward Smith-Stanley, later the 14th Earl of Derby, the then Chief Secretary, make this very clear). However, the opinions of the two office-holders, on key Irish issues could and often did diverge markedly, because there was a tendency to ‘balance the ticket’ on the greatest issue of the day, with ‘catholic’ Lord Lieutenants being furnished with ‘protestant’ Chief Secretaries. The confusion resulting from the division of power is best illustrated by the fact that Irish policy in the 19th century is sometimes attributed to a Prime Minister, as with Gladstone, sometimes a Home Secretary as with Peel, sometimes a Lord Lieutenant as with Wellesley, and sometimes a Chief Secretary as with Peel again, or Balfour later in the century; the truth is that policy more often oscillated as the interest and influence of these office-holders rose and fell. During Lord Liverpool’s premiership, he was heavily involved with the Irish administration for as long as Sidmouth remained Home Secretary, because that minister had little knowledge or interest in the country, and because Peel, previously his ministerial deputy continued the habit of consulting him; in the 1820s his direct involvement decreased because Peel as Home Secretary had his own follower, Goulburn installed as Chief Secretary, but he was still called on to mediate between Wellesley and Peel on occasion.

This book will not follow the detail of Irish policy through the years of Lord Liverpool’s premiership, or indeed the earlier years when he was Home Secretary. He certainly concerned himself with that detail; the pros and cons of many initiatives were discussed in long letters exchanged with the likes of Peel and Wellesley. He was willing to make minor concessions, especially in the economic domain to reduce Irish poverty, and even to the Roman Catholic Church in areas like education and training of priests. He also saw very early, the potential role for migration across the Atlantic in reducing demographic pressures, though he was unhappy and looked for curbs, when protestant Irishman at first took the lead, thereby increasing the Catholic majority. Above all else, Lord Liverpool was determined to prevent disorder, at least above the normal Irish levels of the time. This meant support for repression when agitation increased, and also strenuous efforts, including as we have already seen, a highly controversial willingness to set aside temporarily the Corn Law, to ensure an adequate food supply in times of shortages; his government’s record in that sphere was rather better than some which came after.

Lord Liverpool’s real importance in Irish affairs is that the compromise over Catholic Emancipation which underpinned his government meant that there could be no progress in resolving that matter until he left office. Pitt and Grenville had both
attempted to move towards Emancipation, but had fallen foul of the hostility of King George III, and it became clear after 1811, that his sons, George, by then Prince Regent, and Frederick, Duke of York, who became the next in line to the throne a few years later, were no more willing to go along with any such measure. Though no ruler was by that time likely to veto an act approved by both Houses of Parliament, there remained more than enough royal influence in the Cabinet room, and the House of Lords to prevent matters reaching that stage. Accordingly it was easy enough for Spencer Percival and Lord Liverpool, both opposed to Emancipation, to justify a refusal to bring forward a government proposal, but to concede to ministers who favoured Emancipation, (curiously, their numbers included both Castlereigh and Canning) the right to support initiatives which emerged from elsewhere. The premiers knew that such bills had no chance of reaching the statute book. In fact they surfaced regularly while Lord Liverpool was Prime Minister, and two of them gained majority support in the House of Commons, in 1813 and 1825, but were thrown out by the House of Lords. If Lord Liverpool had not been struck down by illness in 1827, it is hard to see that the status quo would have been altered any time soon, and when the Duke of Wellington succeeded as premier a year later, with Peel as his chief lieutenant, it was widely assumed that Emancipation was no nearer to happening. It is not within the remit of this book to explain why the two conviction politicians reversed their views within a year, and brought about Catholic Emancipation, but one inevitable result was that the role of Lord Liverpool in blocking the change seemed even stronger in retrospect. It is not surprising that Disraeli writing little more than a decade later, convinced that the right decision had finally been taken, was so hard on the premier who had stood firm against it.

Lord Liverpool was strongly opposed to Catholic Emancipation, partly on rather woolly theoretical grounds, that for so long as Britain was a protestant state, with the Anglican religion prescribed for the monarch, then it was correct to prescribe that same religion for ministers, for members of parliament, and senior officials and army and navy officers. (Strictly, the pre-eminence of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland drove a coach and horses through most of these arguments, but the real rationale for those who made them was a rather outdated fear of Catholicism.) However, the Irish dimension worried Lord Liverpool far more; he thought that Irish political agitation had the eventual target of separation, and that Emancipation might open the way to a Catholic Irish representation in parliament with that as their aim. Certainly he differed from some proponents of Emancipation who saw it as a single issue without consequence and simply a matter of fairness to the majority. His analysis was
accurate enough; it did not take long for agitators to find new issues after 1829, and the same pattern emerged soon enough after Gladstone dealt with some of them. It might be argued that British statesmen of the period should have been willing to contemplate separation, but apart from the fact that this was an age of empire-building rather than the opposite, it has to be remembered that it was hardly ten years after the conclusion of a war in which a hostile Ireland would have represented a huge opportunity for Napoleon, even greater than that offered to Hitler, a century later. In fact, Lord Liverpool saw Emancipation as inevitable eventually, but wished to hold the line for as long as possible; he would certainly have been surprised by the events of 1829, and by whom the deed was done.

So, Lord Liverpool's government held to the same policy in Ireland as they pursued on the mainland, making no major concession to the forces behind agitation, and taking the measures required to maintain a reasonable level of order. Whereas in the rest of the British Isles that policy was ultimately successful, as economic recovery damped down unrest, in Ireland the policy was sterile, in part because any improvement in economic conditions for the majority was marginal at best, and partly because the sense of grievance in an 'occupied' country was so great. O'Connell never struggled to find support in the way that radical leaders did in the rest of the United Kingdom when economic conditions were good. This is not to say that the Liverpool government was uniquely bad at administering Ireland, there was to be greater hardship, and repression at various times in the next hundred years, as Ireland pursued its tortured, if inevitable path to independence.

To sum up the conclusions of this chapter, Lord Liverpool as Prime Minister was not as closely involved in the Home Department's business as with financial or even foreign policy matters. He certainly dictated the overall strategy which made maintenance of order paramount, whether in Ireland or in mainland Britain, but in general left his Home Secretaries and Irish ministers to decide on the means. During Sidmouth’s term of office, he gave strong public support to the Home Secretary at all times. Privately, he was a calming influence, in part because he took a more sanguine view of the dangers associated with unrest, than some other ministers. As in other fields, he judged potential legislation almost as much for its political impact, as its intrinsic value, and for that reason his motivation for placing repressive legislation on the statute book might be questioned. Nonetheless, he and especially,
Sidmouth deserve more credit than is usually accorded to them for steering the country through difficult times, and although there was injustice and bloodshed, only strongly partisan commentators fail to acknowledge that things could have been a lot worse. In the calmer conditions of the 1820s, Lord Liverpool gave full rein to Peel’s reforming zeal, and if he shouldn’t be credited with the content of that Home Secretary’s reforms, he definitely was largely responsible for their acceptance by the Cabinet and passage into law. As we have seen, Lord Liverpool dictated the terms of the settlement with Ireland for as long as he held power, but he made no lasting contribution, and the most that can be said for his administration is that violence was largely contained, but that is about as much as can be said for any 19th century British government.
9. The Politics of Power Retention

In this quite complex chapter, I shall begin by asking questions about the role of Prime Ministers and indeed governments through time because there has been much discussion of changes that occurred, between the late 18th and early 19th centuries. My aim is to place Lord Liverpool relative to this transition. I move on to consider the changing balance of power between Kings (mainly) and Prime Ministers, briefly from the time of the 1688 Revolution, and in some detail during Lord Liverpool’s term of office. Finally, I draw together the factors that came together to enhance Lord Liverpool’s authority in the 1820s, and which explain why he was able to effect a fairly dramatic shift in his government’s direction of travel.

9.1 Lord Liverpool’s Premiership - Throwback or New Type

Sometimes, those political historians who have spared Lord Liverpool any attention, have characterised him as the last of a line of long serving premiers including Robert Walpole, Henry Pelham, and Lord North, each of whom saw his role as much more to preside over the operation of the nation’s institutions than to stake his reputation on changing them, (though Walpole did just that on one occasion with his failed excise bill). With some justification as regards his impact on financial management, and Irish governance, and his early attitudes towards moderate constitutional reform, the younger William Pitt is viewed differently, as a premier conforming to a more modern template, who wished to leave the state differing from how he found it. However, Pitt largely reverted to the earlier model when Britain became embroiled in war, and a fair analysis would portray Lord Liverpool’s first decade as Prime Minister in a similar light, and perhaps, in view of what came later, accept that powerful external forces rather than a reactionary and unambitious mind-set largely dictated his course. For those unwilling to go this far, the last few years of his tenure become an aberration, and they have put forward explanations which more or less blank him out of the picture. I hope I have already gone a long way towards discrediting such analyses, following in the footsteps of the likes of Gash and Briggs. However, I think it is worthwhile to attempt to set Lord Liverpool’s premiership more clearly in historical context, as regards the balance between steering the ship of state, and improving its attributes. I will also say something more about longevity in office. The intention is to answer the question as to whether Lord Liverpool should be seen as a throwback, or the first of a new type, or indeed both.
At the start of the 19th Century, ideas of the separation of powers were still prevalent in so far as it was thought that the executive role of managing the nation’s affairs belonged to the King and his ministers. The House of Commons, in addition to monitoring the government’s performance and approving (or not) its expenditure plans, was expected to play a leading part in identifying legislation which might benefit the population in general, though what was regarded as an inevitable bias towards the interests represented within it, was beginning to cause concern in some quarters. In this scheme of things, the House of Lords had of course the judicial role of being the final court of appeal, but otherwise its members infrequently initiated public legislation, and governments did not usually start bills there, which were likely to be contentious. Although the peers also pronounced as a body on the major issues of the day, they rarely threatened a government’s existence, directly. However, there was no guarantee that a government, even backed by a strong majority in the House of Commons, would get any legislative proposals passed. The upper house could modify, dilute, or critically, block bills, and in the latter case, could go on doing so for as long as they chose. Interestingly, monarchs also had such powers of veto, but had not chosen to exercise them since the start of the 18th century; usually they still got their own way less openly and controversially, by pressurising their ministers to refrain from bringing forward bills of which they disapproved, or by exerting pressure on peers to vote down offending bills. As described in the previous chapter, Catholic Emancipation was an example of a measure long delayed by such tactics.

So, before Lord Liverpool’s tenure of office, reform was infrequently seen as a sufficiently pressing concern to compel a government to take the lead, and even when it did there was no guarantee of success. Just as often, changes were made after committed private individuals, successfully lobbied a few members of parliament, who in turn persuaded their colleagues to allow a select committee to be appointed to take expert advice and evidence, and then deliberate on the matter in question. Legislation was only likely to follow if a consensus was reached by a committee, and a forceful report with clear recommendations was produced by its chairman. Even when a Prime Minister had wished to bring about reform, as did Pitt during his early years as premier, in the areas of the parliamentary franchise, and trade with Ireland, he had proceeded almost like a private member, and there was no question of his ministry being compromised by his failures. Predictably, the House of Commons, as a more proactive body normally took such initiatives, but the House of Lords could and did act in the same way occasionally when its members thought
their interests involved; the Corn Law of 1815 had its genesis in a committee of the upper house. The first ten years of Lord Liverpool’s administration generally conformed to this pattern with legislation emanating from the efforts of determined individuals as did the elder Robert Peel’s factory act, and to an extent, the premier’s own church-building proposal. The exceptions were the measures directed against riotous behaviour where the government took the lead, though at least in 1817 they were careful to build support for their proposed measures, in Parliament first. In its later years the Liverpool government behaved in a more modern way with what amounted to programmes of reform in the fiscal, commercial and legal areas, as we have seen. It is also instructive to compare Lord Liverpool’s own roles in the development of the two Corn Bills of 1815 and 1827, little more than a facilitator in the former case, but framer of the later bill (with Huskisson), its main proponent in the Cabinet, and would-be champion in parliament. Greater government involvement did not wholly replace the more traditional route to reform, and as one example of the mid-1820s shows, relaxation of laws against combination which amounted to legalisation of Trade Unions had enough backing from Lord Liverpool and his colleagues to allow its unhindered passage into law, but little more.

Viewed thus, the Liverpool government seems to sit at the cusp of modernity, and as discussed earlier it can fairly be described as the first reforming government in our history. Nonetheless, a large part of the polity, including its constitution, was regarded as sacrosanct, and the premier still took it for granted that his main task was to run the country, rather than to legislate for changes. Probably the real divide came with the Whig government of the 1830s, whose dominating purpose was reform of state and church, with its executive role apparently secondary, (and rather poorly performed). Peel’s government in the 1840s was at least as focussed on change, and demonstrated that reform could come from across the political spectrum. This has largely been the pattern since, perhaps with the exceptions of the closing years of the 19th Century when Lord Salisbury held power, and periods when the country has been at war, although during the 2nd World War, preparatory work for many of Atlee’s reforms was done. We now take it for granted that most aspects of the routine management of the country’s affairs remain in the background, charged largely to a massive Civil Service, unless things go badly wrong, and public attention is given mainly to an agenda for change supplied in a manifesto which has helped a party to get elected to government. Rather paradoxically, there is no difference between the modern-day Conservative Party and any other in this regard.
The political demands on 18th century leaders were greater than faced by those who came later, even if the tasks of government were far less complex. Even in periods when parties are agreed by experts to have existed, they were much less cohesive and disciplined than those we can observe nowadays, and at other times there were no structures above smallish factions linked by belief usually, but otherwise by family, friendship, client relationships, or pure opportunism. So Walpole and Pelham, operating during the Whig Oligarchy, and Lord North and William Pitt the Younger later, had to put together coalitions made up from smallish groupings, and keep them together. In part because of the slow pace of political life in those days, some of the coalitions including for example, Walpole’s ‘Old Corps’ proved very durable, sustaining their leaders in power for many years. However, their limitations were demonstrated whenever a leader tried to move outside the envelope of views that were common to them, and each had his failures when trying to do so. Of course, the political skills of those named were exceptional, and others who reached the top proved incapable of staying there for long, and it should also be made clear that Walpole for one devoted as much effort to maintaining support in the King’s closet, as to his parliamentary manoeuvres. For his first ten years or so as premier, Lord Liverpool is easily presented as the successor of Walpole, Pelham, North and Pitt, building a coalition in parliament, suffering occasional defeats when he failed to take his support with him, and trying to prevent disruption coming from the royal closet. Then he moved onto a different plane, with the firmer support of an embryonic political party, as we would understand it, and with a cowed monarchy. From then on he was a new kind of Prime Minister, confronted by a new set of problems, though his system proved short-lived, collapsing whenever he was removed from the scene.

Political historians tend to see the modern pattern of politics, with regular transfers of power between parties with different agendas, as having been created by the great Reform Act of 1832, which greatly expanded both the electorate and the number of regularly contested seats. From then on, general elections began to alter the composition of the House of Commons sufficiently to change governments, rather than just providing a ‘rubber stamp’ to the King’s choice of ministers, by boosting modestly the numbers of their supporters. Certainly there are enough instances of decisive elections in the middle and later years of the 19th Century to give weight to this point of view, but there were as many occasions when power changed hands because parties were unable to remain united, losing leading figures and their
parliamentary majority, to their opponents. A major factor in Lord Liverpool’s long retention of power was that once he had the backing of a party rather than a collection of factions, and unlike Melbourne, Peel, and Gladstone, to name the most obvious examples, he did not lose the support of key followers; (Edward Smith-Stanley, later Lord Derby, Benjamin Disraeli, and Joseph Chamberlain were amongst the more notable deserters of these premiers). Completely the opposite, Lord Liverpool retained the support of his important (and ambitious) subordinates and their followers, even those from outside his original support base, so that at the time of his enforced retirement, after nearly fifteen years in office, his grip on power was more secure than at any previous time. Remarkably, he had also, without triggering Cabinet resignations, steered government policy a long way from the previously consensual laissez faire, ultra-conservative approach still favoured by many powerful figures like Wellington and Eldon, towards the liberal conservatism associated with Canning and Peel. Obviously he was a man of his own times, but if he had entered political life fifty or a hundred years later, I am convinced he would have been equally adept in building and maintaining support. Assuming as is likely, that he had risen to the top then, he would never have allowed disagreements and splits to threaten his hold on power.

It would be wrong to claim that Lord Liverpool worked always to some great master-plan, though in policy terms he certainly knew where he wanted to go; rather he took a succession of relatively small initiatives to alter the balance of views in his Cabinet towards his own position, and at the same time capitalised on events. I have argued earlier that he took longer than he might have done to recognise what was possible, even before the process was complete. When he did so, the new situation was exploited. Fairly major changes were made in a number of areas of national life through the 1820s, but still in a series of small steps, in part because he was a cautious man, but mainly because he knew he could keep his team together in this way. In this he was both the peer of Walpole and Pelham, and more skilful than some famous names of the future. So the answer to the question posed by the sub-title of this discussion is that Lord Liverpool was indeed both a throwback and a new type, and he can be seen as a key facilitator of the transition between the two. After him there were no more of the old variety, whereas before him with the possible exception of William Pitt the Younger, there had been none of the new breed of reformers.
9.2. The Struggle for Supremacy between Kings, Cabinets, and Premiers

As compared with most modern holders of the office, there were two substantial limitations on Lord Liverpool’s inheritance when he became Prime Minister in June 1812; firstly he had to deal with a monarch who still had real political power even if it had to be exercised discretely, and secondly he could not rely on the personal support of a party commanding a majority in either House of Parliament. I shall look first at the implications of monarchical power. The Bill of Rights accepted by King William III in 1689, although it limited the royal prerogative, still left that monarch with a raft of powers which enabled him to direct a large part of the affairs of the country, albeit with the constraint that he had to appoint ministers who could persuade parliament to fund his government’s activities. Other financial options, like the ill-fated Ship Money of Charles I, had been explicitly ruled out. Since then, there has been an almost complete transfer of powers from the monarch, in theory, to Parliament, but in practice, largely to the Cabinet selected and led by the Prime Minister; effectively the latter now wields the royal prerogative. The present state of affairs has been brought about mainly by the interplay of events, and the contrasting abilities and personalities of kings and ministers, through the years, rather than by any formal process, and the change has proceeded at different speeds at different times, sometimes even reversing for a while. The following brief account is intended to provide the context for major shifts in the balance brought about by Lord Liverpool.

It can be argued that there was some leakage of power from the monarch during the reigns of William III and Anne, but even the latter still had great authority. Thus she was able to dismiss and exile her erstwhile favourite, the Duke of Marlborough, chief minister as much as captain general, in spite of his unprecedented military achievements, disregarding threats by the Whig bankers to whom he was then allied, that they would cease funding her government. A key component of these monarchs’ power was the availability of alternatives to the ministers in office, who, with the help of royal influence, could command enough support in Parliament to progress the monarch’s business, and especially, get approval to raise the taxes and loans necessary to carry on the government. After the accession of the Hanoverians, one group of politicians, the Whigs, established total dominance, thanks to their identification of their rivals, the Tories, with Jacobitism, Robert Walpole’s exceptional talent as a party manager, and their ability to raise loans from the richest men in the City of London. It has been argued that George I and George II found themselves in thrall to these men for long periods, because they lacked the capacity or the desire to
rule as well as reign, but whatever the truth of this, they had no constitutional alternative as was most graphically shown by the so-called ministerial strike of 1746. This was triggered when King George II tried to maintain his own candidate, Lord Carteret, as ‘sole minister’, but he was quickly pulled into line. The hegemonies of Walpole and the Pelhams were almost impregnable while they dominated the only faction of consequence, and monopolised the purse-strings inside and outside parliament; one outcome was considerable accretion of monarchical power.

The trend was reversed when the first ‘English’ Hanoverian King, George III, came to the throne, seemingly determined to re-assert the monarch’s rights to select the ministers he wanted, and to ensure that these ministers followed policies with which he agreed. Partly because there was no dominant political figure like Walpole, once William Pitt’s health broke down, the King had few problems in finding alternatives to incumbent ministers whenever they incurred his displeasure. After a decade, he found a Prime Minister willing to concede the desired level of royal authority, and yet skilful enough to manage parliament. He considered that he had only re-asserted rights that had been illegally appropriated by the Whigs during the reigns of his most recent forbears, but it can be argued that during Lord North’s premiership (1770-1782), King George III wielded an authority that was almost a throwback to his Stuart predecessors in the 17th Century. Had he been successful, the new order might even have been accepted, at least for a while, but of course he presided over the disastrous American War of Independence. Eventually, a storm of protest arose in parliament instanced when the philosopher-politician, Edmund Burke, pronounced that ‘The power of the crown, almost dead and rotten as Prerogative, has grown up anew with far more strength and much less odium, under the name of Influence’. In 1780, a Whig politician, John Dunning secured a majority in the House of Commons for a famous motion, ‘that the influence of the Crown had increased, was increasing, and ought to be diminished’. Though that particular vote changed little in the short term, it demonstrated the hostility of the legislature to Lord North’s puppet administration, and Parliament eventually had its way. Lord North resigned and for a period the King lost practically all influence, being forced to accept the governments which ended the American Independence War and freed the thirteen colonies.

It is doubtful if King George III had fully understood his own temporary success in restoring monarchical authority, or the causes of its disappearance. Certainly, the conditions in the early 1780s were extreme with an unpopular war in the process of being lost, and the blame firmly lodged with a government in which the King’s role
had been dominant and visible. Suddenly, the King found himself unable to count on the support in the House of Commons, of many of the ‘King’s men’ who had traditionally backed the ministers selected by the monarch, and their measures, as a patriotic duty, and of the independent members of no fixed allegiance who were normally inclined to give the government the benefit of the doubt. He was seen as having abused their trust. Another major threat to his power came from Lord North’s long tenure of office. Although submissive to the King in the 1770s, and totally unsuited to the role of wartime Prime Minister, North was no mean politician, and built a strong personal following from the ‘King’s men’ and independent members in the House of Commons, which stayed with him even when he left office. As a result, the King was left in the early 1780s with the support of only the place-men in parliament, those members who had themselves been ‘bought’ with positions and other rewards, or else were the clients of the few ‘borough-owners’ who still supported the King out of loyalty or interest. They were a substantial block of members, perhaps 130 in a body numbering 550, but the King no longer had in his gift the support necessary to enable a Prime Minister to govern, so was constrained in his choice. However, he still appeared to have a veto, in that none of the governments he disliked in the early 1780s proved durable.

It may have been desperation that caused the King to fix on young William Pitt, son of the great war-minister, as his potential rescuer. He had been no great admirer of the father, while his new premier was embarrassingly young (24), and held some quite radical views. At any rate, by December 1783, the King had manoeuvred his new protégé into power, by the simple expedient of rejecting in succession every feasible alternative. It may be that he thought he had found a successor to Lord North, and would be able to resume a dominant role, but more likely the King had been chastened, and accepted that he would have to move into the background, for a while at least. Pitt had to survive a difficult few months, because the recently dismissed ministers, Charles James Fox, and Lord North, (who had rather astonishingly reinvented himself as a near-orthodox Whig with little sympathy for monarchical pretensions) still commanded a large majority in the House of Commons, but the former’s leadership proved inept and his support began to leak away. A General Election held in the spring of 1784 confirmed the trend. The ‘King’s men’ and independent members gradually returned to their normal allegiance, the place-men remained a constant element, and the Prime Minister himself, as much by accident as by design, built personal support. Pitt had his own agenda, and favoured proposals for reform of the parliamentary electoral system, which did not meet with
royal approval, but the King permitted them to be brought forward, confident that they would be voted down, and Pitt accepted his failure. Something of a charade, but honour was satisfied, and the only real alarm before the end of the century occurred when the King suffered his first temporary descent into madness in 1788. However, any doubt that the King once more held the whip-hand was removed when Pitt decided to pursue Catholic Emancipation. The King refused to countenance the change, and the Prime Minister’s resignation quickly followed. As the new century dawned, it seemed that although a Prime Minister could in some circumstances be forced on a King by Parliament, such a one had never lasted long, and that however long and distinguished a Prime Minister’s tenure, he still held office at the King’s pleasure. Of course, by then, the King was also able to apply moral blackmail citing his mental collapse of ten years earlier when protesting that to upset him would endanger his sanity. This, together with Pitt’s illness and exhaustion, explains why the Prime Minister put up no fight in 1801.

The King accepted the Addington ministry, largely engineered by Pitt, and later, Pitt’s return to power with fairly good grace, because he was able to preserve his vetoes on Fox receiving ministerial office and Catholic Emancipation. In 1806, when Pitt died and Lord Liverpool declined to succeed him, the King was compelled to accept an unpalatable administration, though to his great surprise he found himself perfectly well able to get on with his new Foreign Secretary, Charles James Fox. However, the great Whig’s death destroyed much of the credibility of the ‘Talents Ministry’, and the King soon found a way of dispensing with it, assisted by Lord Liverpool, in a palace-led coup, which produced the Portland government. So, in 1807, the rights and powers of the monarchy still appeared to be little less than those of a hundred years earlier. No-one then knew it, but that was to be the last time in our history that a monarch actually dismissed a government which seemed to enjoy the confidence of the House of Commons, though it was to be a long time before all accepted that the power had vanished.

King George III, over 70 years old and in a fragile mental state, took little part in the next political crisis, in 1809, which followed the collapse of the Duke of Portland’s ministry and the duel between Castlereigh and Canning, save to make it clear that he expected the remaining ministers to stay in office, as they did under Spencer Percival’s leadership. Then, in 1811, George III suffered a final relapse into madness. Following the precedent set during his first such attack in 1788, a Regency bill was passed which gave his eldest son George, Prince of Wales, limited powers for one
year as Regent, to be increased thereafter to those of a king, if his father had not recovered in that time. The very fact that the ministers backed by parliament had determined his powers inevitably reduced the authority and freedom of action of the Prince Regent, as did the possibility that the King would again recover to displace him. In addition the Prince Regent’s strength vis-à-vis his ministers, was undermined by his unpopularity in the country at large. Too much was known or suspected by the political classes about his extravagant and dissolute younger days, his secret marriage to Mrs Fitzherbert, and his fraught relations with his consort, Princess Caroline. An intelligent man, even if often lacking in personal restraint and common sense, the Prince Regent was realistic about his situation in this regard, and followed the pattern of the first Regency crisis by retaining his father’s government. He was still thought to be a supporter of the Whigs, even if his relations with Lord Grenville and especially Lord Grey were much less cordial than with Fox, twenty years earlier; the assumption was that he would make a change once he felt firmly ensconced. However, as we have seen earlier, Spencer Percival’s government waxed in strength over the next year, and the political sages of the time became less and less certain that the Prince Regent would replace his ministers. This view seemed to be confirmed when Percival was assassinated in June 1812, and the Prince Regent asked Lord Liverpool to assume the office of Prime Minister.

The initial refusal of the House of Commons to accept the Prince Regent’s choice, which has been described in an earlier chapter, was by no means unprecedented; Pitt’s accession to the premiership in 1783 was far more strongly opposed in Parliament. However, the reduced prestige of the monarchy meant that ministers were no longer willing to ignore the views of the House of Commons, backed only by royal support, as Pitt had done, and Lord Liverpool immediately ended his first attempt to form a government. Similar considerations lay behind Lord Wellesley’s swift, if anguished, acceptance of his failures to put together a ministry, firstly, with himself and Canning grafted on to lead the rump of the previous government, and then at the head of a coalition with the Whigs. The next abortive attempt to form a government saw the refusal of the latter party to accept office in a government headed by the Prince’s friend, Lord Moira, and is often presented as being more to do with delusions of indispensability harboured by Lords Grey and Grenville than any cool headed analysis, but that is not wholly fair. The Whigs, as when they had last held power in 1807, could only muster around 200 votes in a House of Commons by then numbering 650, (thanks to the addition of a hundred Irish members), so they needed the support which normally came from the ‘King’s men’ and independent
members, to any government in which the monarch had clearly demonstrated his confidence. If it was to be Lord Moira who was shown to be the repository of that confidence, the Whigs would be at the mercy of any remodelling of the government at the whim of the Prince Regent or the new Prime Minister. Their suspicions were probably confirmed when, without further discussion, the Prince Regent turned back to Lord Liverpool, whose assumption of office this time received the grudging assent of parliament, as there seemed to be no viable alternative. Perhaps the Prince Regent had obtained the outcome he had desired all along, but he could hardly be said to have controlled the tortuous process, a straw in the wind for the further decline in monarchical power he was to preside over.

9.3. Lord Liverpool’s Retention of Power during the Regency

If nothing else, the convolutions of the spring of 1812 had made very clear to Lord Liverpool the identity of his potential rivals for the premiership. Over the next decade he was to neutralise them all, and it stretches credibility to imagine that this was not largely by design, even if he could hardly broadcast the reasons for his manoeuvres. In the meantime he had to ensure that these would-be leaders were not granted an opportunity to displace him, and this required him to retain the favour of the Prince Regent, who apart from retaining the right to choose his ministers, or so it was still believed, could also exert a decisive influence over votes in the House of Commons.

There were two aspects to this; firstly, the policies pursued by the government needed to avoid some fairly predictable contentious ground, and secondly, the Prime Minister had to chart a course through the minefield of the Prince’s relations with his consort, Princess Caroline. With regard to policy, the successful conclusion of the war, followed by the reception of the allied rulers in London brought great satisfaction to the Prince, and we have seen how Lord Liverpool steered him away from the temptation of closer involvement with the Holy Alliance, without causing offence. The neutral, but effectively negative, line on Catholic Emancipation had been agreed when the government took office, and its opposition to parliamentary reform, and apparently for the next few years, to reform of any kind, was also very satisfactory to the Prince Regent, who became more and more reactionary with the passing years. It was well understood within the Cabinet that the Prince was happiest dealing with Lords Sidmouth and Castlereigh, and Lord Liverpool was content to let them shoulder most of the task of communicating government decisions, and answering royal concerns; importantly, neither of the ministers abused this trust which could have allowed them to undermine the premier. In consequence, the Prime Minister’s
more edgy official contact with the Prince was lessened, though issues of patronage, which Lord Liverpool had to control to maintain his authority, did make for some difficult interviews. Financial retrenchment after 1815 also caused some problems because it impinged on the Prince’s income, jeopardising his pet schemes like the pavilion at Brighton and the remodelling of Windsor Castle; on occasion he accused the Prime Minister of failing to defend his interests vigorously enough. However he was well aware that any replacement government was likely to look even less kindly on royal expenditure, and when called upon to declare his support for the ministry during the difficult years after Waterloo, he was robust enough in its defence. In sum, the political aspects of retaining the Prince Regent’s favour were well managed by the government, until he succeeded as King.

Almost inevitably, it was the Prince Regent’s relationship with his consort, Princess Caroline, which gave Lord Liverpool most difficulty. The marriage in 1795, had never really stood a chance of success, from the moment that the refined, and at that time, rather delicate, Prince first came face to face with a Princess whom contemporary accounts suggest to have been a stranger to dress sense, personal hygiene, discretion, and what passed for cultured conversation. The facts that the Prince had already contracted a secret marriage to Mrs Maria Fitzherbert, and had a mistress, Lady Jersey, whom he brazenly intruded into his consort’s presence, didn’t help much either. At any rate, intimate relations lasted long enough to produce an heir, Princess Charlotte, but little longer, and it was soon clear that the royal couple were completely incompatible. They began to live apart after 1797, when the Princess moved to a rented house at Blackheath, setting up an alternative court where she received politicians, scientists and artists, presumably enticed there by the aura of a princess and a certain rough physical magnetism, rather than intellectual stimuli. Meanwhile the Prince re-established relations with Mrs Fitzherbert, and retreated into some obscurity. Unsurprisingly, given her unconventional character, and the hostility of her husband, accusations about the conduct of Princess Caroline surfaced, and Lord Liverpool, when Home Secretary, first got involved with the matter which was to plague him for the next fifteen years, when he set up the ‘Delicate Investigation’ to explore their truth in 1805. It proved impossible to obtain much hard evidence, and when the commission reported, the Princess was cleared of the most damaging allegations, which included one that she had given birth to an illegitimate child, but there remained strong suspicions that she had engaged in intimate relationships with partners as diverse as George Canning, Lord Grey, Thomas Lawrence, the portrait painter, and Admiral Sir Sidney Smith.
The matter flared up again not long after Lord Liverpool took office as Prime Minister, with the Prince Regent demanding that his ministers secure him a divorce. Lord Liverpool had to explain that there was no possibility of the necessary bill being got through Parliament; presumably he did not dwell on the fact that in the eyes of Parliament and the nation as a whole, the Prince was at least as blameworthy as his wife. Finally after a number of embarrassing spats between the estranged couple, some involving their daughter Charlotte who tended to take her mother’s part, Princess Caroline was persuaded to leave the country late in 1814, in return for a substantial pension, and she spent the next six years wandering across the continent with an entourage of foreign servants. To a large degree it was a case of ‘out of sight, out of mind’, though the Prince Regent’s desire for a divorce surfaced now and again, only to be ruled out on the same grounds as before, by the Prime Minister, when the matter would be dropped. All in all, the difficult post-Waterloo years were navigated by the government with fewer alarms emanating from the royal closet than Parliament, and there seemed to be no reason to anticipate any dramatic change.

9.4. The Affair of Queen Caroline and Its Aftermath

Early in 1820, George III died, so the Prince Regent, his eldest son, became King George IV, and of course his wife became Queen. As noted earlier, the new monarch had been exercising full royal powers for almost a decade, and appeared generally content with his government, so political commentators anticipated that it would be ‘business as usual’ spiced up with a bit of ceremonial. However, Caroline saw her change in circumstances as an opportunity, though her true aims and intentions were at first, clear neither to Lord Liverpool, nor even to Henry Brougham, the Whig politician who was her senior legal advisor. The Prime Minister wished at all costs to prevent her return to Britain, and was willing to make concessions as regards her future income, and by requesting that her status as Queen be recognised at foreign courts. The negotiation was badly handled, not least because Brougham claimed influence he did not possess, but this was really immaterial because Caroline, encouraged especially by an ex-Lord Mayor of London, Alderman Matthew Wood, had set her sights far higher than anything the Prime Minister could have conceded. She was determined to return to England to assert her rights as Queen, and in particular to take a full part in the Coronation. On 5th June 1820 she landed in Dover, and greeted by enthusiastic crowds, she proceeded to London the next day, taking up residence at Alderman Wood’s house. Almost every day thereafter she paraded in front of cheering audiences so emphasising her popularity with every tier of London
life, in stark contrast to her husband. (Wood’s motivation is not wholly clear; he was a Whig and seems to have been particularly hostile to the King, but his career otherwise was fairly conventional, if unusually successful. He was born the son of a tradesman, in Devon, set up business in London, prospered, became Lord Mayor in 1815, serving two terms, and was a London member of parliament for quarter of a century. He finally received the baronetcy, customarily given then to ex-Lord Mayors in 1837, when the tensions described here had long cooled.)

Needless to say, there was consternation in government circles. The King thought that he and the country were suffering the consequences of the government’s failure to procure his divorce and that Lord Liverpool who had fobbed him off with excuses for the best part of ten years was most to blame. His intimate friends made contact with the Whig opposition, and news of the approach was allowed to escape. Lords Grey and Holland, and George Tierney, the Whig leader in the House of Commons, exchanged letters discussing the terms on which they would take office, though Grey, not perhaps entirely confident that his own past involvement with the Queen would remain a mere rumour, was reluctant and did not believe that the new King intended to push matters to the extent of dismissing the government. He was almost certainly correct in his view that the King was simply ramping up the pressure on Lord Liverpool to obtain the much-prized divorce. At any rate, the government accepted that it must act in support of the King if it was to retain office, but the danger of its taking up a cause so opposed by public opinion was obvious to all; the Duke of Wellington even expressed doubts about the loyalty to the King, of soldiers stationed in London.

When it came to the point, Lord Liverpool acted coolly enough by arranging for information on the Queen’s conduct to be laid before parliament, and by obtaining the permission of the House of Lords to bring in a Bill of Pains and Penalties against Caroline. Approval of the bill as originally framed would have granted the King’s wish for a divorce, and laid the Queen open to banishment, so the procedure was effectively a trial, encompassing the presentation of evidence, then a debate and vote by the peers who thus would play the part of a jury. Thereafter, a majority for its passage would have sent the bill to the House of Commons where the arguments if not the evidence would no doubt have been recapitulated, and the fate of the measure decided. The government knew that success would pacify the King, but outrage a majority of the populace with predictable effects on public order. Given the extent of the Queen’s support, it is probable that the government was more worried
by the possibility of insurrection at this time than they had been at the height of the disturbances in the northern industrial areas, not least because riots in London were much closer to home. Failure to gain approval for the bill was thought certain to lead to the dismissal of the government by the King, or more specifically of Lord Liverpool, whom the King held mainly responsible for the debacle, though in truth, it is hard to see how the Prime Minister could have handled the affair very differently.

The hearings began and a large number of witnesses were paraded, each willing to provide evidence of indiscreet behaviour by Caroline with her chief aide, the Italian major-domo, Bartolommeo Bergama. The fact that the witnesses were mainly Italian counted against them in the eyes of many peers, simply because they were foreigners, and in any case they were by no means uniformly convincing in their submissions to the House of Lords. Two English Naval officers who had attended Caroline on a Mediterranean cruise were the star ‘prosecution’ witnesses, but neither could give killer testimony that absolutely proved adultery, even though they described the scanty apparel and dubious sleeping arrangements of the then Princess and Bergami in considerable detail. Nothing, however scandalous, that was said inside the House of Lords had any impact on the rapturous crowds who continued to acclaim every appearance by the Queen in public, and in contrast, government ministers, especially Sidmouth and Wellington, had to run the gauntlet of hostile, stone-throwing gangs to pass between their homes and Westminster, and were subject to sustained abuse in ‘underground’ news-sheets. The King, even more a target of the latter, hardly dared to venture out of his home at Thatched Lodge, Windsor, while the hearings were in progress.

Those like Charles Greville who recorded events at the time, evinced little doubt as to the Queen’s guilt, but it was universally felt that the King was even guiltier in his behaviour with various mistresses, and the idea that she would suffer penalties, while he would be lauded at his upcoming coronation was repugnant to many. Lord Liverpool recognised that this view placed the outcome in the House of Lords in doubt, and again risked the wrath of the King, by withdrawing the provision for a divorce from the bill, but this did little to help. While some peers were grateful for the concession as removing some of the inequality in the treatment of the King and Queen, others thought that it rendered the proceedings futile since it appeared that a positive vote would have no tangible result. The final debate in the House of Lords won praise from observers for its moderation, with both Lord Liverpool, and Lord Grey for the opposition, striking statesman-like notes, but the division was awaited
with trepidation by the government. Their concern was fully justified. Although the
government won, it secured a majority of only nine votes in a chamber in which its
support was normally rock solid. The prospect of the bill surviving its passage
through the House of Commons with this half-hearted backing was negligible, and
Lord Liverpool had no choice but to withdraw it. In a letter to the influential
independent Member of Parliament, William Wilberforce, he expressed the view that
the House of Lords vote had confirmed the Queen's guilt, and that in future she
should be treated correctly but no more. He explained that he had repeated an offer
to her of £50000 per annum, without insisting that she live abroad, but stated that if
Parliament were to go further and concede her demand for inclusion in formal
prayers for the royal family, far less a role in the Coronation and the on-going affairs
of the nation, he would have to resign. The threat focussed minds in Parliament,
there were no moves to exploit the indecisive vote in the House of Lords, and Lord
Liverpool started along the path outlined in his letter to Wilberforce.

Caroline was able to enjoy the adulation of a victor in the days following the
government's retreat, and large crowds followed her to St. Paul's Cathedral, for a
service of thanksgiving for her deliverance. However within weeks the populace had
lost interest in her, and her demands, and her most prominent radical supporters
deserted her. Perhaps, there was growing realisation that a majority had found
against her in the 'trial' by the House of Lords, and that the evidence justified this.
Rather than devoting effort to changing his government, as had been expected by
some, the new King spent his time designing uniforms and ceremonial procedures
for his Coronation. However there were to be twists in the tale! The Coronation on 19th
July 1821 passed off well enough from the viewpoints of the King and his
government, and the Queen’s efforts to gain admission to the ceremony, from which
her husband had barred her, earned her derision as she was turned away, rather
than sympathy. Immediately afterwards, she fell ill and died on 7th August 1821. To
the relief of the King, then visiting Ireland, and the government, she had prescribed
that her funeral should be in her native Brunswick, but this still meant that her body
had to be transhipped there. In a letter to Castlereigh, presumably for showing to the
King whom he was accompanying, Lord Liverpool gave a compassionate view of
what was necessary;

‘In considering all these questions, (the funeral arrangements) the object ought to be
to do all that is right and nothing that would offend decent and serious people. As
long as the Queen lived it might not unreasonably have been apprehended that every
concession would be followed by some fresh demand; now all her demands are at an end, and the only consideration should be how we can close the business most quietly and without offence.'

He explained that he had originally instructed that the body should be picked up on the Thames above London, near to the Queen’s last residence, but that in response to representations from the Admiralty about difficulties involved with getting a ship to that point, he had agreed that the body should instead be taken by land to Harwich, from where a frigate could take it across the North Sea. This turned out to be a bad decision because it meant that the coffin had to pass round or through London. Army detachments were deployed to enforce a route round the northern outskirts of the capital, but the crowds of mourners were so large that they threatened to overcome the best efforts of the soldiers. The Chief Magistrate of the city, Sir Robert Baker, panicked and permitted the coffin to be carried through the centre of the city, (a decision which cost him his position), though any resemblance to a stately, respectful progress was minimal. Understandably, the King was angered by this mishandling of the arrangements, which had provided the opportunity for a final demonstration in the dead Queen’s favour, and in his eyes it followed the government’s failures to prevent the Queen’s return and to obtain his divorce. For all of this, he held the Prime Minister responsible, and another part of the fall-out from the affair was to make relations between them even worse. (Again, it is quite difficult to see how the difficulties could have been avoided; presumably more soldiers could have been deployed, but the danger of serious violence would have been increased. Otherwise, trans-shipment of the coffin from a south coast port would have kept it out of London, but would have considerably delayed the operation.)

As mentioned earlier, George Canning had become a devotee of the then Princess Caroline, shortly after her split with her husband in the late 1790s, but he as a member of the Cabinet, had been expected to support the measures taken against her during the summer of 1820. He made it clear to his colleagues that to preserve his honour, he would have to resign when the Bill of Pains and Penalties was brought forward, though he allowed himself to be persuaded instead to absent himself from the scene, in Paris, while the hearing proceeded. When the verdict of the peers was reached, and Lord Liverpool decided that although he could not continue with the bill, he would only provide for the Queen on the basis that her guilt had been proved, Canning resigned. The King was infuriated with Canning, whom he regarded as having tacitly admitted to an adulterous relationship with his consort, and even more
annoyed when Lord Liverpool made it clear that he regarded Canning’s absence from the government as only temporary.

The Prime Minister was as good as his word, and attempted to bring Canning back a few months later in his previous position of President of the Board of Control for India, but the King refused his permission. Since many of the Cabinet shared the King’s view that Canning had behaved disreputably, Lord Liverpool had to retreat, but he made it plain to the King and his own colleagues that he would not countenance a royal veto on any individual, in the longer term. Relations between the King and his Prime Minister deteriorated still further when the latter refused to accept the King’s proposal to offer preferment to relatives of his latest mistress, Lady Coyningham. Eventually in the autumn days just before the King departed for his coronation as King of Hanover, a bizarre situation was reached, with the Prime Minister kept waiting in an anteroom, denied an audience, while his government colleagues were ushered into the King’s presence. There can be no doubt that the King was attempting to force the Prime Minister’s resignation by humiliating him publicly, but Lord Liverpool, knowing that when it came to the crunch he would be able to rely on the support of the Cabinet and beyond that, parliament, refused to leave office. While in Hanover, where he was crowned on 8th October 1821, the King actually discussed his wish to make a change with Castlereigh and bizarrely, the Austrian Chancellor, Metternich, at a meeting arranged to consider the wider European situation, and the Foreign Secretary seems momentarily to have entertained the possibility of taking over. However, Castlereigh’s loyalty, perhaps augmented by a realistic appreciation of his unsuitability, (his appointment would almost certainly have provoked major riots), soon reasserted itself, and he played his part in convincing the King that an entirely new government would have to be created if Lord Liverpool was dismissed. Wellington and Eldon took the same line when the King returned to London, the monarch backed down, and some kind of normality returned to the dealings between him and the Prime Minister.

The dissention over Canning’s role dragged on for months. At first the King seemed to have got his way when Canning was lined up to become Governor General of the Presidency of Fort William, (the senior British official in India), but then Castlereigh’s death in August 1822 reopened the matter, and this time Lord Liverpool was not to be denied. He felt strong enough to give the King an ultimatum that he had either to accept Canning, as Foreign Secretary and Leader of the House of Commons, or find a new government. His Cabinet colleagues, including especially Wellington, weighed
in again to make it clear that the government would not continue in office without its leader, and that the King would be unable to find an alternative. The King gave way again. So ended the third significant constitutional crisis participated in by Lord Liverpool; in 1807 he had been a major, if secret, facilitator of the dismissal of the Talents government at the pleasure of the King, and had taken a key part in forming a successor government reliant on monarchical support, more than parliamentary approval. It can be argued that that whole process was close to a replay of Pitt’s rise to the top in 1783, even though the resulting governments were to differ so massively in longevity and achievement. By 1812, Lord Liverpool had largely reversed his position, showing himself unwilling to form a government at the monarch’s request, when parliamentary approval was not immediately forthcoming. In 1821, his willingness to defer to royal authority had declined to the extent that he was willing to defy the King’s wish that he resign, trusting in the support of his Cabinet and from Parliament, to maintain his hold on office. Another pillar of royal authority had been shaken a year later when the right of the King to veto an appointment to the Cabinet was resisted and eventually defeated. Future Kings and Queens were to test the resolve of Prime Ministers as regards ministerial appointments, and occasionally they had some success, but important shifts towards a limited monarchy had occurred when George IV tried his strength against that of his Prime Minister in the early 1820s and lost the contest.

9.5. The Parliamentary Balance during Lord Liverpool’s Premiership

Turning now to the other main limitation on Lord Liverpool’s inheritance as Prime Minister in 1812, namely the lack of an automatic majority in either parliamentary chamber, I shall focus exclusively on the House of Commons. That is not to say that the House of Lords in which Lord Liverpool and his most prestigious opponents sat, was unimportant in this period, but it is generally true that if the monarch and his government supported a measure, the peers as a body were willing to acquiesce. Any reservations might be expressed through the vote of a member of the House of Commons whose seat was in a nobleman’s gift, rather than by an overt disregard for the monarch’s wishes which could have social consequences. I have just dealt with a near-exception, the ‘trial’ of Queen Caroline, but that situation was unique with the highest born in the land resentful when forced to express a view of the embarrassing affair. Lord Liverpool’s government was not threatened by a vote in the House of Lords on any other occasion.
Things were different in the House of Commons. To throw light on the course of events, I will lean heavily on the analysis developed by Mitchell for parliamentary voting patterns during the Regency and the reign of George IV, in his book on the Whig opposition of that period. However, I do not think, any more than Mitchell did, that the numbers tell the whole story. For one thing, there is a danger of neglecting a very important feature of the House of Commons of that time. Nowadays, all members are elected on the same basis; even if constituencies are not identical in the size of their electorate they come fairly close, and the franchises are uniform. As a result, any differences in the status of members depend only on personal factors, such as ability, longevity as a parliamentarian, or the holding of office. Going back 200 years, there was an additional factor to those just mentioned, in that the views of members who represented a significant electorate, were seen as more important than those of the members elected by a few in pocket burghs, and other closed constituencies. The prestigious seats were the two assigned to each county, i.e., the ‘Knights of the Shires’, Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and a few burghs in which many thousand could vote, for example Westminster, and Liverpool. Their members were seen as speaking for the country in a unique way, and when a contentious matter was brought before parliament, it was seen as almost essential for a large proportion of this group to be willing to back the government line, if other usually reliable members were not to drift into opposition. Hence Lord Liverpool's attempts to garner such support by holding meetings at his town house before legislation like the Corn Bill reached parliament. As it happens, many of the so-called fringe members and waverers referred to in the analysis which follows, were the high status members, and others willing to follow their lead rather than committing themselves to either government or opposition, so the numbers do generally reflect this reality concerning status, even if they disguise it.

The results of Mitchell’s ground-breaking work can be summarised as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parliament</th>
<th>Government Supporters</th>
<th>Government Fringe</th>
<th>Waverers</th>
<th>Opposition Fringe</th>
<th>Opposition Supporters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1812-1818</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1818-1820</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820-1826</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mitchell’s main thesis was that these figures, based on his close analysis of the backgrounds and voting records of individual members, demonstrated a consistency of behaviour that marks the establishment of a two party system, from the start of Lord Liverpool’s premiership, and so makes the period a harbinger of the political pattern later in the 19th Century. Later political historians like Derry and O’Gorman, have approached the period from a similar Whig standpoint, and have understandably accepted Mitchell’s analysis in the main, so it has replaced the earlier paradigm that the House of Commons continued to be dominated by the contest between smaller factions of the type identified by Namier, until the Reform Act of 1832. Certainly, Mitchell’s thesis throws light on two features of the political scene in the years after Waterloo, firstly, the lack of firm majority support for the government which allowed it to be defeated on specific issues, when fringe supporters and waverers were persuaded to unite with the Whigs to oppose measures like the 1816 budget, and a few others of lesser importance. Secondly, it is made clear that the Whigs could only have secured the overthrow of the government at this date and in succeeding years by persuading some of the government fringe to vote with them in a confidence motion, an unlikely eventuality. From the Whig viewpoint, Mitchell’s analysis seems to work.

However I do not think Mitchell’s thesis as convincing when viewed from the standpoint of the governing party. In particular, I think the consolidation of Namier-type factions into a party supportive of Lord Liverpool was work in progress until 1820 at least. There is general acceptance that Lord Liverpool’s ‘party’, the followers of Pitt had a strength in the House of Commons of only around a hundred in the years up to 1812, and the coalescence with, and rapid absorption of, Lord Sidmouth’s faction, left support for the government’s senior figures at around 150 members of parliament, rather fewer than commanded by the Whig leaders. The deficit to Mitchell’s figure of 253 is made up of what is best termed the Treasury or ‘King’s’ party who supported Lord Liverpool and his colleagues, less because of who they were and even what their policies were, and more because they had the favour of the Prince Regent. The fact that this group voted in patterns indistinguishable from those linked more directly to individuals in the government, in the years following 1812, is a measure of the way in which the government retained the favour of the Prince Regent and followed policies of which he approved. Lord Liverpool’s approach during these years was much influenced by the fact that a large part of his apparently solid support might transfer their loyalty to a different group of men, if the Prince Regent lost faith in the government, mirroring what had happened in 1806 to the ‘Talents’ government, and
to a smaller extent, on his own initial appointment in 1812, when the Prince Regent had not perhaps signalled his desires clearly.

The other trend hidden by the numbers presented by Mitchell is best termed a consolidation of political belief, to which I referred earlier when dealing with Lord Liverpool's own political philosophy. This amounted to the dawning realisation amongst members in at least three of Mitchell's categories, Government Supporters, Government Fringe, and Waverers that they could buy into the amalgam of Court Whig and Old Tory beliefs that was assuming the name of Conservatism. While not yet offering guaranteed support to the government on all matters, they were becoming less and less likely to unite in opposition as the 1820s dawned. Ironically, at just this time, Lord Liverpool was edging towards liberal conservatism with its acceptance of organic reform and so generating fault-lines in his embryonic party, which only he could contain. Nonetheless, I think that by Mitchell's end-point in 1826 his figures are close to the truth as regards government support, but if anything underestimate the true solidity of Lord Liverpool’s support. For two or three years there was indeed a two-party confrontation, though it was muted because Lord Liverpool had by then drawn the teeth from the Whig opposition.

9.6. Creation of a Dominant Premiership

Probably, Lord Liverpool took seriously the prospect of the Prince Regent turning to the Whigs for too long, given what he knew about the Prince’s views on politics and personalities. With regard to the latter, it is true that until 1817, Lord Grenville would have assumed the premiership rather than Lord Grey, so the Prince’s detestation of the latter was less of a factor than it became later. However, as already described, Lord Liverpool was able to separate the two opposition leaders when preparing a response to the unrest during 1817. The event should not be seen as fortuitous for the government, as Lord Liverpool had worked assiduously to bring it about. He had begun to consult Grenville privately, months earlier, and followed this up by inviting the opposition leader to take an advisory role in the preparation of government measures to reinforce the law. The package duly proved too draconian for Grey, and the open disagreement brought to an end the political alliance which had provided the opposition for a decade. Although Grenville never entered Lord Liverpool’s government, his main follower in the House of Commons, Charles Williams Wynn eventually did so in 1821. After 1817, a Whig government would have meant Grey as premier, a prospect fairly intolerable to the Prince Regent, though Lord Liverpool took
a while to be wholly convinced of this. The removal of Grenville as a possible rival for the premiership actually represented the culmination rather than an early step in a process which had seen most of the Prince Regent’s alternatives to Lord Liverpool neutralised.

It is often said now that political leaders have more to fear from their supposed friends, than their recognised opponents, and Lord Liverpool must have felt similarly when he began his long term as Prime Minister. He had just witnessed a parade of erstwhile colleagues, drawn from the ranks of his own loose grouping, the followers of Pitt, attempting to obtain high office and to side-line him. Lord Wellesley and Canning had been at the head of the queue, but he must have suspected that others like Lord Sidmouth would have joined them had they looked likely to succeed. As we have seen previously, Lord Liverpool wasted no time before binding these potential rivals, some with substantial followings in parliament, to his government. Castlereigh was embedded when his status as effective deputy was immediately acknowledged, and his aid was enlisted in the details of the negotiation. Sidmouth, with whom Lord Liverpool’s personal relations had always been cordial enough, received the flattering offer of the Home Office, and no doubt, taking account of his inconstancy of the preceding few years, the cost of resignation was greatly increased by over-promoting his supporter Vansittart into the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer. As we have seen Canning was the recipient of offers to join the ministry immediately, but when these were refused, the ‘charm offensive’ did not end. Lord Liverpool worked to re-establish the friendship of their youth, and soon enough the offer of a well-paid embassy to Portugal followed. Canning’s acolyte, Huskisson entered the ministry shortly afterwards, and Canning himself entered the Cabinet in 1816. The Duke of Wellington could have presented a threat had he stood aloof from government, but Lord Liverpool in these years took extra care to show him great consideration, and invited him to become Master General of the Ordinance, in the Cabinet whenever he retired from active service in the army, even accepting the Duke’s self-serving warning that he would not feel bound to go out of office, if the government resigned. The Duke’s brother, Lord Wellesley, was next to be subjected to the Prime Minister’s blandishments, in spite of his somewhat juvenile hostility in the past and he eventually accepted the appointment of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, in 1821.

Lord Liverpool’s manoeuvres, as reference to Mitchell’s numbers makes clear, did not alter the balance of support in the House of Commons greatly. The gains which resulted from the switch to the government of the relatively small groups who
followed the likes of Grenville, Canning and Wellesley were largely cancelled out by
losses in the General Election of 1818. However, by 1821, all the political figures of
sufficient stature to entertain serious hopes of becoming Prime Minister, with the
exceptions of Grey, and perhaps one other Whig, the Marquis of Lansdowne, were
connected with the government. This did not render them wholly impotent, but it
transferred the battleground from the royal audience room and parliament, to the
Cabinet room where the Prime Minister had many advantages. So, Lord Liverpool,
who inevitably had gained in prestige and authority because of his long tenure of
office, had his status further enhanced by the apparent lack of alternatives to his
leadership.

Another major plank in Lord Liverpool’s ever-growing authority stemmed from his
exercise of patronage over a long period. He was able to confer appointments both
meaningful (efficient) and spurious (sinecures), paid and unpaid, together with
honours, and there was no shortage of importunate applicants. Many of them had
members of parliament as their advocates, whether for family or less creditable
reasons. The rules were well-enough understood, if unwritten. It would be signal
ingratitude for a member not to render some support in return. Before criticising, it
should be remembered that Prime Ministers now can present to members of
parliament both the carrot of ministerial promotion, (with more than a hundred offices
available), and the big stick of a withdrawal of party support, which will almost
inevitably cost the individual concerned his or her seat; in Lord Liverpool’s day there
was a much smaller ministerial carrot, and no stick. Nonetheless, a fine line had to be
followed between deriving the maximum political advantage from the gifts of office
and distinctions which the government could make, and ensuring that recipients were
worthy in the eyes of the political classes as a whole. On occasion, Lord Liverpool
risked his relationships with the monarch, and important political figures, because he
did not think that their preferred candidates for preferment would pass the test of
satisfying public opinion, or indeed accord with his own high moral standards.
However these instances were fairly rare, and much more often favours could be
offered for which a quid pro quo could be called in later.

By the end of his premiership, the number of sinecures of which the Prime Minister
could dispose was small, (I have referred earlier to Castlereigh’s boast that 2000 had
been eliminated by 1822). It had become the practice to suppress them when they
became vacant, and Lord Liverpool himself had by then given up the salary for his
position as Lord Warden of the Cinq Ports, though not the desirable residence at
Walmer Castle, nor indeed his other sinecure offices. However, there remained a considerable number of so-called ‘efficient offices’ in the lower reaches of government, dealing with Ireland and India especially, and positions in the church and the legal framework, which were in the gift of the Prime Minister and some of his senior colleagues. A substantial number of naval and military officers sat in parliament and although they progressed in rank largely on the basis of seniority, there were some short-cuts, and the government decided whether the lot of an individual officer was a prestigious full-pay appointment or half-pay idleness. The extreme case of Lord Cochrane, radical politician as much as outstanding sea captain, shows that regardless of ability, the lack of friends in high places could jeopardise the most brilliant career. At the top end of this system were peerages, and knighthoods and they were practically all political in the sense we would understand it today. Lord Liverpool and his Patronage Secretary, Charles Arbuthnot agonised over such matters as the order in which Knights of the Garter should be appointed to vacancies from the list of supportive dukes, to avoid giving offence to these dignitaries, each of whom had real political clout because of his ability to influence electoral returns, and thus the votes of members of parliament. As another example of the importance of patronage, the crucial element in sealing the agreement with the Grenvillites, referred to earlier was not the offer of a Cabinet position, but the advancement of the head of that family from a marquisate to a dukedom.

The Prime Minister of 1821 was a very different figure from the new appointee of 1812, even if he remained rather detached and insubstantial to many involved in political life. His status had been enhanced by longevity in office, by some major successes like victory in war and a perceptible economic recovery, by the side-lining of high profile rivals, and by the use of patronage. He was benefitting from a consolidation of belief in Conservative principles, and widening buy-in. In fact, he was close to being an unchallengeable leader of a growing majority party. These strengths, and the Cabinet’s understanding of them, go a long way to explaining why Lord Liverpool was able to overcome the hostility of the King, and continue in office in 1821, though he had also to display ‘a thick skin’ to withstand royal slights designed to hurt and humiliate.

9.7. Political Management through the 1820s

A number of misconceptions about the later years of the Liverpool government have flourished. There have certainly been misunderstandings of the divisions in the
Cabinet which arose during the 1820s, and it has been suggested that Lord Liverpool and some of his colleagues underwent a dramatic conversion to liberal conservative views. In addition, too much weight has sometimes been given to the recruitment of relatively liberal individuals drawn from the factions neutralised by Lord Liverpool during the preceding years. As I have pointed out previously, the seeds of disagreement within the government had actually been sewn as far back as the days of the French Revolution when Burke had persuaded Pitt and his then followers into the ranks of those believing that any reform was a signpost to revolution, while the nation was faced with attempts by France to export her new creed by all means including war. There, everyone in government remained until Waterloo, and then through the years of internal strife. Finally, with the economy restored to some kind of peacetime stability, and unrest quietened, the different interpretations placed on the tumultuous events of the preceding years emerged. The likes of Castlereigh, Wellington and Sidmouth (and King George IV), thought that the dangers associated with reform were ever-present and absolute, whereas Lord Liverpool, Canning, Peel and their acolytes thought that organic reform in some areas was at least desirable, and maybe essential, to reduce the danger of future catastrophe, and that the time was then ripe to resurrect that agenda. The newer recruits to the government simply lined up with existing factions, reactionary or liberal as we call them now; the fact that most took the side of the latter was helpful to them rather than decisive.

In Chapter 4, I considered Lord Liverpool's political philosophy, and attempted to explain why he took the side of the liberal conservatives, though his position was nuanced; as we shall see, this ambiguity greatly strengthened his leadership. Certainly, the Prime Minister did not leave matters to chance, with regard to securing Cabinet majorities for the policies he wished to follow. Thus he promoted liberal conservatives to the Cabinet in the early 1820s, such as Peel, Robinson, Huskisson and Wynn, and very gradually eased out Sidmouth and Vansittart. He also made sure that most of the key positions were in more liberal hands; Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Leader of the House of Commons. Political Leaders nowadays try usually to lead from near the centre of gravity of their party, as regards the spread of beliefs. They do this either by preaching moderation in all things, or by balancing positions which are 'leftish' in some areas, say social policy, against positions which are 'rightist' in others, say foreign policy, but they do not normally stray too far from the centre in anything. Lord Liverpool was certainly of the latter type, but the extraordinary aspect is just how much of the spectrum between the reactionary and liberal extremes, he occupied, depending on the issue.
in question. Thus he was as strongly against constitutional reform, whether of church or Parliament as anyone in public life, yet he was liberal on social and commercial matters, and on foreign policy matters like the rights to freedom of South Americans and Greeks he may have been more liberal even than Canning, who was strongly monarchist. His spread of views meant that both the reactionary and liberal factions could claim him as one of their own with regard to some matters, and if either had thought to topple him from power, they would have had to contemplate the possibility that his replacement would sit wholly on the opposite side of the divide. Obviously this gave him great strength in Cabinet, and there is no doubt that he used it. The raft of policies followed by his government was as far as we can tell in exact conformity with his views, resolutely against constitutional reform, opposed to Roman Catholic Emancipation, but reformist in financial, commercial and social areas, and certainly pursuing a liberal foreign policy.

It is unarguable that the spread of views in the newly formed Conservative Party was very wide, and that the combination of Lord Liverpool's views as discussed above, and his personal qualities such as consideration and sympathy for the opinions and feelings of others, played a large part in preventing splits. It is also true that the Cabinet became the scene of fierce debate and dissention in the early 1820s, and that Lord Liverpool's own composure sometimes deserted him under pressures coming at him from many directions. Though the government held together then, historians have fixed on these disputes as the genesis of the disintegration of the Conservative Party which followed Lord Liverpool's departure from office. Yet, I am aware of few dissentients from the view that the most acrimonious arguments revolved around foreign policy, and had been settled in favour of Canning and the premier, well before 1827. It seems clear to me that the Cabinet settled down, on the basis of Lord Liverpool's policy agenda, and was able to work amicably again, even on controversial matters like the premier's putative Corn Bill. The party split, when it occurred after Lord Liverpool's stroke, was dictated by a personality clash; Canning was detested by too many of his colleagues to have any chance of maintaining unity by his own efforts alone. In that regard, nothing had changed in nearly twenty years. Of course, a political realignment became inevitable when he searched for support elsewhere. There can be little doubt that Lord Liverpool would have wanted Canning to be his successor, but as leader of the Conservative Party. He will have known better than anyone that it would be difficult to arrange, and that his own input as facilitator and persuader was going to be crucial. The rather daunting prospect was probably one of the factors which delayed his retirement as his health deteriorated. If
he had not collapsed as he did, but had remained in office, Canning’s death a few months later would have altered much. It is inconceivable that Lord Liverpool would have seen Robinson as a potential successor, and his view of Wellington the politician has been mentioned earlier. Peel would have been the chosen one, and he would probably have been accepted by a still-united Conservative Party, say in 1829. However I believe that while such an outcome would have delayed and altered the parameters of political re-alignment, it would not have averted it. Peel was too pragmatic in his willingness to change tack to render him easy to follow, and neither sensitive nor patient enough to try to keep his support in line. So Catholic Emancipation and the Great Reform Act might have been delayed by a few years, but they would have been enacted, and Peel, Derby, and Disraeli would still have faced the task of constructing a new Conservative Party, in the new environment.

Returning to reality, Lord Liverpool seems to have been little given to introspection, but otherwise he could have been forgiven for some self-congratulation in the mid-1820s. A war which had threatened the survival of the nation had been won, order had been just about preserved through a severe economic crisis, a popular and effective foreign policy was in place, the line had been held against reform of church and state, but change was underway to modernise many other aspects of national life; all under his stewardship. His past rivals had been neutralised and either served in his government or like Lord Grey had more or less retired from front-line politics. His colleagues viewed him as indispensable, with the panic caused by his near resignation in company with Peel in 1825, proof enough of that. The King had been rendered more or less impotent as a political player, since it had been brought home to him at the start of his proper reign, that there was no credible alternative to Lord Liverpool as Prime Minister. In parliament, though the balance between government supporters and the Whig opposition was as Mitchell shows, still quite close, there was a growing consensus amongst most of the House of Commons membership, that the government was on the right lines in the important policy areas, and the irritating defeats, which had triggered stressful votes of confidence had become a thing of the past. Even Lord Liverpool’s long-time incubus, Stuart Wortley, had brought forward some motions helpful to the government, and had been permanently bought off with a peerage.

We can actually be sure that Lord Liverpool devoted no time to congratulating himself, because he still saw much left to do. Most of his final communications before his collapse were concerned with the political intricacies of securing
parliamentary approval for his new corn bill, aimed at achieving the elusive goal of fairness on corn prices, in the eyes of both the agricultural lobby and the urban population. It is appropriate that his career should have ended on this note, seeking moderate reform to achieve consensus, and attempting to reconcile divergent political views, tasks worthy of a great political manager. There is a saying that all political careers end, at least figuratively, in tears, and we have recent examples in Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair which show that long terms of office often demonstrate this. Lord Liverpool had been Prime Minister for two months short of fifteen years when he suffered a disabling stroke. Obviously the way in which his career ended is sad enough, and his travails over the remaining eighteen months of his life are even sadder. However, unlike the recent examples, his was not a political demise; in early 1827, he was as secure in office as he had ever been, and given decent health it is surely beyond doubt that he would have remained Prime Minister for some time longer, delaying seminal events in our history like the Great Reform Act. This should be taken as the measure of his political achievement.
10. A Final Accounting

10.1 A Real Prime Minister?

I was lucky enough to be taught quite a lot of history at my Scottish school, even though I was destined for a career in science, and the period dealt with in this book seemed to be well covered. In the lessons and history books, Castlereigh, Canning and of course Wellington loomed large, and it was a surprise to find that the first two had between them held the Prime Minister’s office for only a few months, serving under a different incumbent for many years. However, the apparent anomaly was resolved by explanations that the person who had held the office through the period, Lord Liverpool, was a figurehead, given the position only because he was a peer, in accordance with the custom in those days; on this basis, I built a picture of an elderly gentleman, dozing in the Cabinet room when he bothered to attend, signing a few official documents, but generally of no consequence. Some doubts arose, when I found out that Lord Liverpool was actually younger than those named above, and that he must have been appointed at an unusually young age, but they faded as we moved on to other topics. I retained some interest in the period, and over the succeeding years read pertinent books as they came my way, including Arthur Bryant’s trilogy, but Lord Liverpool remained a shadowy figure, either scorned as by Bryant or ignored completely. It was long afterwards, when I got the chance to look more deeply into historical issues which interested me, including the topic of governance during the Napoleonic Wars, that I became acquainted with material which drove a coach and horses through the account of Lord Liverpool which I had received and embellished with my imagination. This book has emerged from my further explorations.

The most cursory reading of items from the abundant surviving correspondence, and the more recent assessments, which I referred to at the start of the book, made it plain that Lord Liverpool was no cipher, and that what I had been taught at school was something of a travesty. I do not blame my teachers, because what they were passing on was then received wisdom, and history is rarely any more than that, except to specialists. However, it is worth revisiting the question of why so many highly reputable historians and biographers chose to view matters as they did, especially in the first hundred years after Lord Liverpool’s death. I have a number of explanations for this. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of Disraeli’s early disparaging comments (in the 1840s) which have been taken as near the last word
by many commentators who were unconcerned about his wider agenda of discrediting those of his predecessors, whose world view differed from his own. It was inevitable that Lord Liverpool would arouse the antipathy of liberal thinkers, never mind any of a more radical viewpoint, because of his opposition to some of their dearest causes, so they had little incentive to assess him fairly. Military historians have revelled in the details of the Peninsular and Waterloo campaigns, and indeed in tracking Napoleon across Europe, but with a few honourable exceptions, have shown much less interest in grand strategy, war finance, and the political battles which had to be fought and won in parliament, to keep the British war effort on track. It is also true that the distinguished academic biographers of his most prominent contemporaries have shown themselves somewhat partisan and willing to downplay the contribution of anyone else, in order to extract maximum credit for their subjects; I refer especially to Trevelyan, Webster, and Temperley writing about Grey, Castlereigh and Canning, respectively. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it must be acknowledged that Lord Liverpool did furnish those minded to denigrate, or ignore his part in affairs with a considerable amount of ammunition, not so much directly, though he was responsible for a few ill-chosen statements and actions, but indirectly by the impression he left with those who wrote letters and diaries at the time, including some with an ‘insiders’ viewpoint. As has been well-emphasised, he was self-effacing, usually undemonstrative, and low key in almost every respect. Nonetheless, it remains surprising, given the longevity and achievements of Lord Liverpool’s administration, and the contradictions inherent in received accounts, that it took so long for balanced assessments of how the country was governed between 1812 and 1827, to emerge. Revisionism should always engender scepticism, but in this case a paradigm did need to be overturned. It is sadly true that many historians and biographers have not yet caught up, as demonstrated by recent new books on the period which revert to the discredited view of events.

For this reason, I have chosen to reinforce the views of the more enlightened commentators by tackling directly the question posed at the head of this sub-chapter. Throughout the book I have given attention to the working relationships between Lord Liverpool and his senior colleagues, including Castlereigh, Canning and others. In each case, I have pointed to issues and events, not to be recapitulated here, which saw the exertion of Prime Ministerial authority, though Lord Liverpool’s management style was such that he was content to exercise a watching brief, for much of the time. So, with the one exception of his successor as Secretary of State for War in the years up to Waterloo, Earl Bathurst, his colleagues were left largely free to run their
departments, not least because the premier had so much to do within his own department, the Treasury, and in the House of Lords. However, they knew that he was monitoring affairs across government and had to be consulted over important matters. It should also be added that no minister was permitted to venture far from his brief, not even the illustrious Duke of Wellington, except of course by having his say during Cabinet discussions. Lord Liverpool was indeed a real Prime Minister.

10.2 An Effective Prime Minister?

Obviously it is one thing to be in charge but something different to use the power effectively. In order to summarise my thoughts on this, I shall resort to the recently fashionable pastime of inventing virtual history, I will imagine first that Lord Liverpool had been Prime Minister in two spells, one from 1812 to 1816, the other from 1821 to 1827, and had gone out of office in between (in a not dissimilar way to Churchill, 130 years later), perhaps as a result of his budget’s rejection by the House of Commons. If his government’s record when in office is considered fixed, his achievements would have been almost impossible to gainsay. In this scenario, he would have led the country to a decisive victory in a major European war, and presided over a range of reforms unprecedented in the country’s history, in his second term. There would however have been no depressing intermission of wrestling with economic problems and all that flowed from them, in the years after Waterloo, with flaky support in parliament, and an inadequate kit of remedial actions. It seems incontrovertible that with the case for his personal responsibility made, he would be seen as a very effective premier.

Of course, the intermission did not happen, not least because Lord Liverpool was a far more able politician than his rivals, Lords Grey and Grenville, and was at all times focussed on the retention of power. He was neither the first nor the last political leader to look at matters this way, nor was he with his colleagues unique, in believing that their own exercise of authority was essential for the well-being of the nation. Any discussion of Lord Liverpool’s effectiveness during the immediate post-war years, (1816-1821) has to take account of many factors. At the top of the list has to be the Burkean analysis that any innovation held real dangers in difficult times, and few contemporary political figures doubted that the period in question fitted that description. Rightly or wrongly everyone in government held to that analysis, and many in opposition, like Grenville, did as well. So reform of any fundamental kind was not on the agenda. In many ways, attitudes towards narrower economic reform were
almost as constrained with a wide consensus that the government’s over-arching task was to cut its spending and reduce taxes. There was some ambivalence in parliament, about government debt and borrowing, so it is possible that a government so-minded could have been permitted to do a bit more to relieve pockets of exceptional hardship, and in modern parlance, to try to ‘kick-start the economy’. However, it has been noted that there was then no intellectual backing for such an approach, and even now, when thanks to Keynes, there is some, it remains a very controversial topic. As regards another area of criticism by radicals at the time, and many looking back, namely the fairly draconian enforcement of order and the law, there is no doubt that repression was the wish of the great majority of the governing class, and the government was criticised for erring on the side of leniency towards agitators and rioters on a number of occasions. Of course, it is reasonably argued that real leadership demands that Prime Ministers do the right thing, rather than always ‘going with the flow’, but those who have been brave enough to do so have usually been presented with a well-defined alternative.

In my view there have been periods in our history when effective government has been virtually impossible, or more precisely that the best a government can do is wait out the time until factors beyond its control correct themselves, and its power to do some good returns. I think that the years 1815–1821 fit that description, and so perhaps, for totally different reasons did the 1970s, (when a few years have passed, some may argue similarly about the years from 2009 to 2013). Lord Liverpool’s government avoided the worst mistakes they could have made; they did not panic, they did not over-react, and they followed events rather trying to anticipate them; it is for others to pronounce on whether the governments of the 1970s coped better or worse. The aspect of Lord Liverpool’s conduct which is hardest to defend, at least viewed through modern eyes, is his remoteness. Year after year passed without his making any effort to see what was happening in the northern cities, or to meet with those with first-hand experience of hardship. There was a great scarcity of the kind of small inexpensive gestures which might have persuaded the part of the nation which was virtually unrepresented in parliament, that its governors had either compassion or concern about their lot; perhaps the church-building programme was the lone example. It can also be argued that Lord Liverpool was too slow to see the end of the dog-days, and could have moved to boost the recovery at least a year earlier than he did, though in fairness he had much to distract him then with the last illness of his wife, and the indefensible behaviour of the King and Queen.
So, I would suggest that Lord Liverpool’s long premiership was book-ended by periods in which he was as effective a premier as any in our history. The middle years did not conform to that pattern, but my thesis is that few if any of our leaders drawn from history could have provided effective leadership between 1816 and 1821. Most, but not all, of those usually seen as great, would have tried harder than Lord Liverpool to impose themselves on the situation, to make things happen, but it is not at all clear that the outcome would have been better. Where others would certainly have scored higher, especially those of more modern vintage, was as apologists for the conditions, and as publicists for the small scale gestures they would certainly have made. There would have been a great effort to persuade everyone that the government understood and was on their side, however little could be done to improve matters, but Lord Liverpool would have been acting far beyond the norms of his age had he done any of this. Nonetheless, so great was the need for some such response, that criticism of Lord Liverpool and others in government is justified. (As an aside, it is curious that Canning who had re-entered the government in 1816, and was to show himself very aware of the value of wide publicity for his foreign policy achievements a few years later did not try to take a lead in making the government’s case to wider audiences.) My conclusion has to be that Lord Liverpool was an effective Prime Minister, with the proviso that in the circumstances operating between 1816 and 1821 he was found wanting to a degree, but probably no more than would have been the case for any other premier in our history.

10.3 A Great Prime Minister?

The main question to be answered here is how far the pendulum should be allowed to swing between the extremes defined by Disraeli and Briggs, from incompetent and hardly relevant bungler to great and far-sighted statesman. It will be obvious to anyone who has read this far, that I think that the answer lies well towards the end of the trajectory represented by the views of Briggs, but I would not go quite as far as he does. It is easy enough to produce a list of achievements (in no particular order and by no means exhaustive);

1. Steering the nation to victory in the greatest war yet fought
2. (Eventually) returning the nation to peacetime prosperity and relative calm
3. Implementing the first wide-ranging programme of moderate reform in our history
4. Providing stable government for fifteen years, in complete contrast to the situation before and afterwards
5. Building the first modern Conservative party, and keeping it together
6. Re-aligning foreign policy to allow recognition of newly free countries
7. Strengthening the position of the Prime Minister vis-à-vis the King
8. Setting the country on a path of tariff reduction and freeing trade generally
9. Placing Britain at the forefront of efforts to suppress the slave trade

Of course, Lord Liverpool had considerable assistance with many of the above successes, but his own input was indispensable to all of them. He also had his failures; some during the years 1816-1821, have already been dealt with, and it cannot be pretended that he left Ireland in much better condition than he found it. The regulation of the importation of corn was another area of frustration; he had sensible aims, albeit reinforced by low political calculation, but never managed to devise a law to realise them. Finally, I must mention the major success in his own eyes which ironically most damns him for many in retrospect, namely the blocking of all constitutional reform, whether of church or state, including Catholic Emancipation, and the expansion of the parliamentary franchise. All that should be said is that he had a point of view, shared by many at the time, and was able to sustain it for as long as he held power.

The conclusion I draw from the above is that the balance of achievement against failure is at least as favourable for Lord Liverpool as for most of those premiers accepted as great without demur. However, this is not the only criterion, and impressions made on contemporaries and the considered assessments of later commentators help to form the verdict of history. No-one who has studied the period has come up with evidence that those working with Lord Liverpool or encountering him regularly thought that they were in the presence of greatness. The contrast with William Pitt the Younger in this is overwhelming. It is easy enough to understand why many who knew both men entertained very different feelings about them, and I have gone at length into Lord Liverpool’s idiosyncrasies, and the unassuming persona which contributed much to the distinctions made. Undoubtedly, some judgements have been very unfair giving little or no weight to countervailing strengths, but the first-hand impressions should not be wholly gainsaid. Some leadership qualities have always been and are still valued above others. Inspirational powers, persuasiveness, decisiveness, persistence, even stubbornness, and intellectual self-confidence, outweigh the abilities to conciliate and build consensus, to take a long view, to give
weight to alternative opinions, and to delegate and trust. Assessments based on such prioritisations of criteria are not absolute, but they are widely accepted common currency. They have been applied by contemporary observers and many later commentators to Lord Liverpool. I think a better balance is preserved by accepting that regardless of achievement, a man cannot be called great if none of his contemporaries assessed him thus, but that if the same man was seen for years as an indispensable leader, by those same contemporaries, he cannot have been ordinary. My assessment of Lord Liverpool as Prime Minister is that his achievement was great, and that he possessed some excellent qualities but they were in the main not those seen as essential to greatness. I will return once more to the implications of my statement with regard to Lord Liverpool’s ranking amongst his fellow premiers but before doing so, I wish to make a couple of more specific comparisons.

There are two Prime Ministers who seem to have a lot in common with Lord Liverpool, one whose time in office preceded his by three quarters of a century; the other held power a century and a quarter later. The former, Henry Pelham has already been mentioned; I have been struck by the apparent similarities in his and Lord Liverpool’s self-effacing personas and political methods. I think that along with Robert Walpole, they were the most skilful political operators ever to occupy the first position in Britain. Pelham also was over-shadowed at various times, by Walpole, Carteret, and at least in status by his brother, the Duke of Newcastle. Lord Liverpool’s administration certainly achieved far more, not least in actually winning the war during which it led the country, but there is a final sad parallel in that both premierships were abruptly terminated, Pelham’s by death, and Lord Liverpool’s by disabling illness, when each of them was in his late fifties.

Coming more up to date, it is interesting to compare perceptions of Lord Liverpool, and Clement Attlee, both of whom had to deal with the legacy of a successful but exhausting war. The Labour Prime Minister was overshadowed by powerful figures in his Cabinet, Ernest Bevin, Stafford Cripps, Herbert Morrison, and Aneurin Bevan, both at the time and in the eyes of posterity, in much the same way as happened with Lord Liverpool, but as with his predecessor, there is no doubt as to who wielded the chief authority. Attlee was also the victim of a cruel jibe from a great conservative statesman, suffering Churchill’s comment that, ‘he was a modest man with plenty to be modest about’. As a final point of similarity, it can be noted that the Labour party’s unity did not survive Attlee’s retirement in 1955 very much better than the governing party of 1827 survived the enforced retirement of Lord Liverpool. Of course, the
analogy should not be pushed too far, because backed by a large majority in parliament, and at least initially, by a strong consensus amongst the people, the Attlee government was astonishingly bold in pushing through measures of reform immediately after the 2nd World War, regardless of the parlous state of the economy. I see a close parallel between Atlee and Lord Liverpool, in that both achieved great things, but lacked some of the qualities that would have persuaded their contemporaries and later commentators that they were great men.

In all we have had 52 Prime Ministers since the first generally recognised holder of the office, Sir Robert Walpole. In my view, Lord Liverpool’s ranking overall should be well inside the top quartile; not quite amongst the great and inspirational holders of the office for the reasons given above, but at the top of the next rank, alongside the few others whose terms of office delivered comparable benefits to their country. I would assess 7 holders of the office as deserving classification as ‘great’, namely Walpole, Pitt the Younger, Peel, Gladstone, Disraeli, Churchill, and Thatcher. (The name of William Pitt the Elder is often rightly added for his achievements during his golden years, when he directed the nation’s military affairs between 1757 and 1761; though his formal status vis-a-vis the Duke of Newcastle is open to dispute, there is no doubting who was the master). In the next rank, along with Lord Liverpool, I would place only Lloyd George, and Attlee. Others would have their supporters, including those featuring in this book like Spencer Percival, an effective war-time premier but perhaps halted before he could cement a claim, Lord Grey for passing the Reform Act, or even Lord Grenville for passing the Act which abolished the Slave Trade, but I think successful government over a significant period is a criterion that they do not meet. Equally, others, like Pelham, Palmerston and Salisbury, have governed adequately for longish periods, but delivered nothing like an overwhelming victory in a major war, or major beneficial reforms. Another candidate, Asquith would certainly have been in this group had his inadequacies as a wartime leader not been cruelly exposed between 1914 and 1916.

As a final fact, which may or may not be unique to Lord Liverpool, as many as seven past and future Prime Ministers served in his government; Sidmouth (Addington), Canning, Robinson, Wellington, Peel, Aberdeen and Palmerston, and an eighth, Grenville gave him support after 1817. They are now seen as having disparate political affiliations, Ultra-Tories, Conservatives, Liberals, and Whigs. This gives some indication of how difficult it must have been to hold his government together for so long. Before illness struck him down, his position was thought to be impregnable,
and why that was so became clear enough thereafter, when his Conservative party quickly disintegrated, and Prime Ministers again began to follow each other in and out of office at short intervals. Lord Liverpool was different from any politician of his time. Some have rather strangely claimed that it was his ordinariness that made him successful, but I do not go along with that. He was like other men, a blend of strengths and weaknesses, but the former predominated and enabled him to fashion the long and largely successful career which has been considered in this book.
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Synopsis

Lord Liverpool was Prime Minister for an unbroken period of almost fifteen years, having previously held other high offices for ten years. It is unarguable that his government had two great achievements to its name; the triumph in the Napoleonic Wars and the wide ranging reforms during the 1820s which were without precedent in our modern history. In spite of this, he was rather taken for granted in his lifetime, his reputation declined swiftly after his death, and for many years thereafter he was disparaged if he was not ignored. Certainly, a more generous view has been taken by some recent commentators, but it is arguable that full justice is still not being done to his lengthy tenure of high office. Of course there have been reasons for the muted assessments, some fair, some less so. There is no doubt that Lord Liverpool’s performance as premier in the difficult years after Waterloo can be criticised, though the aftermaths of more recent victorious but costly wars provide evidence that political leadership in such periods is fraught with difficulty. He was perhaps fortunate to be able to call on the services of some very able people, Castlereigh, Canning, Wellington, and Peel to name a few, but it is strange that biographers and historians have extended the influence of these statesmen without real evidence into areas where they lacked interest, knowledge, or responsibility. It is of course inevitable that Lord Liverpool’s conservative outlook has reduced his chance of balanced treatment by liberal and Whig historians.

This book is neither the full modern biography that Lord Liverpool lacks, nor, I hope, is it just a favourable polemic, since I give attention to weaknesses and failings as well as pointing to strengths and achievements. After a brief account of Lord Liverpool’s career, personality and beliefs, I consider different areas of government, with a view to identifying the extent to which Lord Liverpool was either the prime mover, or had a major input, and should accordingly be given credit or criticised. My main conclusions are that Lord Liverpool was a far more significant and capable figure than he has often been accounted, but that greatness probably just eluded him, as much because of the style as the substance of his lengthy premiership.