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RETHINKING “OLD CORRUPTION”*

Students of late Georgian and early Victorian Britain are now heeding E. P. Thompson’s old advice to treat Old Corruption as a subject worthy of close examination.¹ They are doing so primarily because, like Gareth Stedman Jones,² they pay serious attention to radical language, particularly to what radicals from the Painites to the Chartists identified as the main cause of social oppression: the political monopoly of the propertied élite. Historians such as W. D. Rubinstein have looked especially closely at the potent critique of the late Georgian political system that radicals built around William Cobbett’s famous image of Old Corruption.³

What Cobbett and his fellow radicals meant by Old Corruption was a parasitical system — ostensibly built up to enormous proportions during the Napoleonic Wars — through which the élite fed its insatiable appetite for power and money at the people’s expense. Sinécures, they argued, put government offices in the hands of idle rich men who drew all the emoluments, but farmed out whatever work was attached to them for a fraction of the profits. Reversions, they protested, enabled the government to bequeath offices to its friends, regardless of the latter’s ability to handle the business. Government contracts, pensions and church preferment, they affirmed, were doled out by the ministers of the day to reward their hangers-on or to purchase the support of influential landed and moneyed men. Radicals contended that places and rotten boroughs enabled ministers and aristocrats to pack the House of Commons with men subservient to *their* will, not to the will of the people. Cobbett and company insisted that the growing tax burden that financed the whole execrable system hit the common people hard, while barely touching big property-

* I wish to thank Peter Mandler, Lawrence Stone and Dror Wahrman for their very helpful comments on several versions of this article.

¹ E. P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English”, in his *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978), esp. pp. 258-60.

² Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832-1982* (Oxford, 1983), introduction, esp. pp. 21-2.

³ W. D. Rubinstein, “The End of ‘Old Corruption’ in Britain, 1780-1860”, *Past and Present*, no. 101 (Nov. 1983), pp. 55-86. See also Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford, 1985), ch. 5.

holders. More generally, they alleged that government trade and financial policies benefited the vested interests of agriculture, shipping and finance at the expense of humble consumers.⁴

These were the lineaments of Old Corruption, and they furnished radicals with a compelling argument for constitutional change. The real cure for government extravagance and parasitism, they reasoned, could only be drastic parliamentary reform. Give the vote to most or to all adult men, and their representatives in the Commons would be obliged to keep taxes down and to refuse the government's political bribes, or else to face the consequences on the hustings.

This new historiographical interest in the radical language of Old Corruption is relevant to recent trends in administrative and high-political history. O'Brien, Mathias and Brewer have emphasized the unrivalled efficiency of the British state as an extractor of revenue for the waging of war throughout the "long" eighteenth century.⁵ But it was precisely the growth of the central government in response to war with revolutionary France that gave Old Corruption such force as a rallying-cry for radical political change. Of course, allegations of ministerial greed and systematic corruption had frequently been made by the government's critics from at least the 1660s forward, and it seems fair to characterize Old Corruption as a latter-day manifestation of the "country ideology" common to opposition politics throughout the eighteenth century. But what Cobbett and other radicals meant by Old Corruption was in many ways a new system created by the Napoleonic war machine. For as Thompson, Stedman Jones and Rubinstein have all pointed out, radicals emphasized that the wars had prompted the ministries of Pitt and his followers not only to suppress traditional liberties, but also greatly to enlarge the central bureaucracy and hence, they assumed, the

⁴ See, for instance, Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (London, 1776), section 1; Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (London, 1792), pt. 2, section 2; William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (London, 1793), bk. 4, ch. 2, and bk. 5; and William Cobbett, *Rural Rides* (1830), ed. George Woodcock (Harmondsworth, 1985 edn.), pp. 115-20, 159-62, 200-20.

⁵ Peter Mathias and Patrick O'Brien, "Taxation in Britain and France, 1715-1810", *Jl. European Econ. Hist.*, v (1976), pp. 601-50; Patrick O'Brien, "The Political Economy of British Taxation, 1660-1815", *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xli (1988), pp. 1-32; John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (London, 1989).

opportunities for bribery and speculation.⁶ The waging of war on an unprecedented scale, radicals alleged, furnished the government with an irresistible opportunity to raise taxes to preposterous levels, grossly to inflate the incomes attached to sinecures as well as to more "efficient" administrative positions, and to multiply the patronage at its disposal in the form of public offices and contracts. Proponents of "country ideology" had often used strong language — and what we now know was seriously exaggerated language⁷ — to denounce what they perceived to have been the inefficiency, prodigality and nepotism of the eighteenth-century state. But Cobbett and other radical critics used even harsher expressions in their assault on the Napoleonic-era government, because they deemed it to be far more expensive and corrupt than its predecessors had been.

Historians of high politics such as Hilton, Cookson and Gash have, for their part, made it clear that resentment and suspicion of the burden of debt and taxes during and after the wars were not confined to radical circles. They were also widespread among the more "respectable" ranks of British society, most notably country gentlemen and tenant farmers. Accusations of the "corrupting" effects of wartime government growth likewise became the stock-in-trade of the Pittites' Whig and independent critics in the House of Commons. The post-war Pittite ministries themselves devoted much of their energy to fighting what they perceived to be the malign consequences of wartime fiscal and administrative policies: excessive waste, burdensome credit arrangements and bureaucratic sclerosis.⁸

⁶ Thompson, "Peculiarities of the English", p. 259; Gareth Stedman Jones, "Rethinking Chartism" (1982), in his *Languages of Class*, pp. 171-3; Rubinstein, "End of 'Old Corruption'", p. 63.

⁷ See, for example, Brewer, *Sinews of Power*, pp. 101-14; G. E. Aylmer, "From Office-Holding to Civil Service: The Genesis of Modern Bureaucracy", *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., xxx (1980), pp. 91-108; Geoffrey Holmes, *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society, 1680-1730* (London, 1982), pp. 242-59; John Torrance, "Social Class and Bureaucratic Innovation: The Commissioners for Examining the Public Accounts, 1780-1787", *Past and Present*, no. 78 (Feb. 1978), pp. 59-81.

⁸ Boyd Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce: The Economic Policies of the Tory Governments, 1815-1830* (Oxford, 1977), esp. pp. 1-170, 303-14; J. E. Cookson, *Lord Liverpool's Administration: The Crucial Years, 1815-1822* (Edinburgh and Hamden, Conn., 1975); Norman Gash, "After Waterloo: British Society and the Legacy of the Napoleonic Wars", *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., xxviii (1978), esp. pp. 153-8; Norman Gash, "'Cheap Government', 1815-1874", in his *Pillars of Government* (London, 1986), esp. pp. 44-7. For a closer examination of the question of government growth during and after the French wars, see Philip Harling and Peter Mandler, "From 'Fiscal-Military' State to *Laissez-Faire* State, 1760-1850", *Jl. Brit. Studies*, xxxii (1993), pp. 44-70.

Thus the centrality of Old Corruption in radical language is well established, and the concerns it expressed about the abuses of the wartime state resonated throughout every level of late Georgian politics. What remains open to debate is the fate of Old Corruption after 1815. When did Old Corruption lose its relevance to the high-political scene, and when did it lose its force as a radical analysis of social injustice? Historians who have recently sought to answer these questions have treated Old Corruption almost solely as a critique of British government generated from without. But in order to explain the decline of the critique of Old Corruption they rely on the changing policies and comportment of the governors themselves, and their speculations as to how, why and when high politicians met the critique are much vaguer than their illuminating discussions of the critique itself. Rubinstein, for instance, argues for the persistence of Old Corruption until the 1830s in actual fact as well as in radical rhetoric: it was only then that the Whig ministries abruptly brought it to an end through an ambitious programme of constitutional reform.⁹ Stedman Jones, for his part, contends that Whig activism only fed radicals' long-standing suspicion of the central government as a corrupt instrument of élite privilege, and that Peel's reforms of the early 1840s were the necessary and presumably sufficient means of allaying it.¹⁰ Like Rubinstein and Stedman Jones before them, Biagini and Reid ultimately rely on government policies to explain the new-found faith of popular radicals in the trustworthiness of élite politicians. But they give most of the credit for the necessary retrenchments and reforms to Gladstone and the Liberals instead of their Whig or Conservative predecessors.¹¹

It is time to attempt a more thorough and systematic compar-

⁹ Rubinstein, "End of 'Old Corruption'", pp. 73, 76-9.

¹⁰ Stedman Jones, "Rethinking Chartism", p. 178. Jon Lawrence enthusiastically approves of Stedman Jones's salute to the efficacy of Peelite reformism in "Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival in Britain", *Jl. Brit. Studies*, xxxi (1992), p. 167. Stedman Jones does not specify which variety of Peelite reform the Chartists found most compelling. Was it the activist variety exemplified by the 1842 Mines Act? The *laissez-faire* variety exemplified by the repeal of the Corn Laws? Was it a combination of activism and minimalist reform?

¹¹ Eugenio Biagini and Alastair Reid, "Currents of Radicalism", in Eugenio Biagini and Alastair Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular Radicalism, Organized Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 7, 10; and Eugenio Biagini, "Popular Liberals, Gladstonian Finance and the Debate on Taxation, 1860-1874", *ibid.*, pp. 139-41, 156.

ison of the language of Old Corruption during and after the Napoleonic Wars with the policies and comportment of the élite politicians it was chiefly designed to assail. The British ruling élite did indeed undermine the radical critique of Old Corruption through timely reforms of ministerial practices and government policies. The central argument of this essay is that their effort to do so has a history that admittedly includes, but also substantially predates, the Whig reforms of the 1830s, the Conservative reforms of the 1840s and the Liberal reforms of the 1860s and 1870s. The full story of how the élite managed to sanitize government and legitimate their political authority during and after the wars is far too long and involved to be told here.¹² For now, there is one important point to establish: that the evidence for the personal greed of Pitt the Younger and his followers is far less convincing than their contemporary radical critics made it out to be, and than some historians like Rubinstein still make it out to be. Radicals accused the Pittites of promoting selfish interests at public expense, but in fact, especially after 1815, most of the latter sought to project an image of probity in their attitudes towards the profits of office.

Of course, there will always be discrepancies between activists' perceptions of the defects of a political system they are striving to change and a less partisan description of that system. But by the late 1840s there was an extreme discrepancy between the radicals' vision of the persistence of Old Corruption and the reality of a political élite that was careful not to privilege — or seem to privilege — any one social interest over others. In fact the discrepancy was so extreme that Old Corruption lost much of its rhetorical purchase even among radicals. It did so largely as the result of a cumulative series of reforms executed not solely under Whig, Conservative or Liberal leadership, but also under the aegis of their Pittite predecessors, the putative agents of Old Corruption.

The waning of Old Corruption as a radical critique only becomes evident during the 1830s, when the growth of new

¹² For a detailed analysis, see Philip Harling, *The Waning of "Old Corruption": The Politics of Economical Reform in Britain, 1779–1846* (forthcoming Oxford, 1996). For an account of the emergence of an ostentatiously public-spirited élite at the end of the eighteenth century that focuses on cultural rather than political issues, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), pp. 164–93.

popular movements calling for government activism to redress social grievances suggests a turning-away from the anti-statism which was central to the Old Corruption critique.¹³ It only becomes obvious after 1848, when the “constitutional” nature of the mid-Victorian radicals’ reform pressure evinces a willingness to trust élite politicians. This willingness set them apart from their predecessors, who had long insisted that the source from which Old Corruption drew its immense strength was the utter rapacity of the élite.¹⁴ But the critique of Old Corruption itself ultimately relied on its accuracy as an indictment of the motives and actions of the élite, and its accuracy had long since been undermined. The discrepancy in this case between perception and reality points up the dangers inherent in too single-minded a fixation upon language.

I

One of the few things that virtually all popular radicals had in common during and after the Napoleonic Wars was a profound distrust of the motives of public men. From the turn of the century until the 1830s, radical journalists relentlessly advocated parliamentary reform as the only means to extirpate the personal greed at the heart of Old Corruption. The radical assault was chiefly aimed at the Pittites, especially from 1805, when mounting evidence of malfeasance in the management of the war culminated

¹³ As Stedman Jones argues, radicals were appalled by certain forms of Whig and liberal interventionism, most notably the New Poor Law: Stedman Jones, “Rethinking Chartism”, pp. 174–5. But the prominence of Chartists in the short-time movement of the late 1830s suggests a new desire among radicals to look to a strong central government to promote the general welfare of the common people. See Stewart Weaver, *John Fielden and the Politics of Popular Radicalism, 1832–1847* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 11–12. A balanced assessment of the language of Chartism would have to take this new statism into account.

¹⁴ Some students of mid-Victorian radicalism now wish to replace the old image of working-class acquiescence after 1850 with one that links the Reform League and the Junta with earlier radicals through a shared tradition of political protest and self-empowerment: Biagini and Reid, “Currents of Radicalism”, pp. 3–5; Lawrence, “Popular Radicalism and the Socialist Revival”, pp. 163–70. But what most distinguished mid-Victorian radicals from Chartists and Cobbettites was a faith in their ability to work through the political system with the consent and even the active support of élite politicians. Even if one goes along with Biagini and Reid’s argument that this break with the radical past stemmed from a shift “not so much in the attitudes of the lower classes as in those of the ruling classes” (“Currents of Radicalism”, p. 10), the break was none the less monumental.

in the impeachment trial of Pitt's chief aide, Henry Dundas, for misappropriation of public money. But the Whigs also came under attack from 1806, when they formed a coalition ministry with the notoriously greedy Grenvilles, whom Cobbett called "the haughty family who are now finishing to swallow up the state".¹⁵ From then on, Cobbett and other radical propagandists habitually denigrated virtually all public men.

After the war, radicals were more than ever convinced that Old Corruption had foisted an unprecedented burden of debt and taxes on the productive classes, primarily as a means of paying off the state's greedy parasites, ministers and their cronies foremost among them. "Most of our *public men* have large fortunes", the *Black Dwarf* insisted, "and yet they will continue to draw from the Treasury the last farthing of enormous salaries, while those who pay them are existing upon the most precarious means" as the result of high taxes.¹⁶ Thus radicals habitually linked the exorbitant growth of wartime debt and taxes to the personal greed of politicians. It was axiomatic among them that the ultimate solution to both was drastic parliamentary reform.

In the mean time, radical journalists and politicians such as Major John Cartwright and Sir Francis Burdett felt it their duty continually to remind the "productive" classes of how the unreformed constitution rewarded the privileged; hence their obsession with sinecures and pensions. To prove their point, radical journalists listed the official incomes of cabinet ministers — which parliamentary returns had only recently made available to them in published form — as solid proof of the corruption of the ruling élite.¹⁷ John Wade showed himself a masterly proponent of this critique of government "extravagance" and "corruption" in his fortnightly *Gorgon* shortly after Waterloo, and later and more famously in the several editions of his popular *Black Book*.¹⁸ From sinecures to pensions, from the expense of the law courts to that of church pluralists, from aristocratic influence in the

¹⁵ British Library, London (hereafter Brit. Lib.), Add. MS. 37853, fo. 225: Cobbett to William Windham, 9 Mar. 1806.

¹⁶ *Black Dwarf*, no. 8, 19 Mar. 1819.

¹⁷ See, for example, *The Gorgon*, no. 31, 19 Dec. 1818.

¹⁸ John Wade, *The Black Book*; or, *Corruption Unmasked!* (London, 1820); John Wade, *Supplement to the Black Book* (London, 1823); John Wade, *The Extraordinary Black Book* (London, 1832; repr. New York, 1970). The original edition was published fortnightly in sixpenny parts, with a sale of some 10,000 for each part: E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1966 edn.), p. 676.

House of Commons to the Bank of England's influence over government loans, Wade reached the predictable conclusion that only parliamentary reform could do away with the mass of unearned privileges and perquisites that made up Old Corruption.

With Wade's exhaustive post-war chronicles of waste and extravagance we reach the climax of the radical critique of Old Corruption. It is now time to assess the accuracy of this depiction of the British central government between the 1790s and the 1830s. Did the radical portrait of "the Thing", meticulously delineated in the several editions of Wade's *Black Book*, bear a close resemblance to the thing itself? Recent historians of popular radicalism such as Thompson and Rubinstein generally think so, for they describe Wade's accounts of official corruption as "extremely impressive", supported by "well-researched evidence"¹⁹ that was "in surprisingly close accordance"²⁰ with other sources. But these judgements do not stand up to closer scrutiny. On the contrary, Wade larded his allegations of "corruption" with enough inaccurate and misleading evidence seriously to compromise his conclusions, and hence those of Rubinstein, who accepts their relative accuracy as proof of widespread ministerial greed before the "Age of Reform".²¹

According to Wade, this greed lay at the heart of Old Corruption, and it manifested itself in a wide variety of ways: for example, through the greed and nepotism of the ecclesiastical, legal and colonial establishments. Admittedly these institutions were fundamentally restructured only after the Grey ministry took office. Wade, however, greatly exaggerated the case against the Pittites in his treatment of what he considered to be an equally loathsome source of corruption: the proliferation of three kinds of "irregular" emolument – sinecures, reversions and "unmerited" pensions — the cost of which greatly exceeded the public services rendered by those who pocketed them. Close inspection of all three types of emolument casts serious doubt on Wade's argument for mounting "corruption" under the Pittites.

Wade's inaccuracy was particularly wild with respect to sinecures, and it stemmed solely from his refusal to give the ruling élite even grudging credit for their gradual reduction. On the most general level, Wade relied on obsolete evidence to make his

¹⁹ Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, p. 676.

²⁰ Rubinstein, "End of 'Old Corruption'", p. 61, n. 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-2, 72-4.

case. In his first extensive account of elite “corruption”, *The Black Book: or, Corruption Unmasked!* (1820), Wade followed a Select Committee Report of 1809 in stating the total annual cost of the principal sinecures in the civil government as £356,555.²² But he neglected to add that the same Select Committee anticipated substantial savings from its own recommendations that many sinecures be either abolished after the death of their current holders or converted into “efficient” offices whose duties would be performed by qualified men who were to be paid modest salaries for their services and nothing more. Thus Wade listed the combined net annual cost of *all* sinecures in England as over £178,000, while the Report proposed gradual reforms that would eventually bring their total cost down to about £112,000.²³

The cumulative effect of Wade’s distortions was substantially to overstate the total cost of sinecures to British taxpayers. Thus while Wade stuck to a total net cost of £356,555 a year as late as the 1832 edition of the *Black Book*,²⁴ the gradual reform of sinecures from within — through House of Commons inquiries, Acts of Parliament, Treasury Minutes, and the like — had long since ensured the gradual but ultimately dramatic reduction of this public expense. As early as 1810 a Select Committee on Sinecure Offices listed the *projected* cost of *unreformed* sinecures in the United Kingdom at only about £195,000 per annum.²⁵ In 1834 another long-anticipated Select Committee on Sinecure Offices, appointed by the Grey ministry to provide for the reform of all “inefficient” offices that their Tory predecessors had not touched, discovered that they had very little left to do. The Committee counted a grand total of almost a hundred remaining sinecures in the United Kingdom, but “by far the larger number” of them had already been slated for reform; only twenty-eight sinecures granted “during pleasure” or for life had not yet been scheduled for reform or abolition after the deaths of their current holders. Thus, while in 1810 the annual cost of *unreformed* sine-

²² Wade, *Black Book*, p. 7.

²³ Parliamentary Papers (hereafter P.P.), 1809, iii (no. 200), p. 79. This figure excludes the no doubt grossly understated figure of £17,086 per annum listed in the Report for sinecures “in Foreign Establishments”.

²⁴ Wade, *Extraordinary Black Book*, p. 488.

²⁵ Again, subtracting from the Report’s totals the impossibly low £17,086 listed as the annual cost of colonial sinecures: P.P., 1810, ii (no. 362), pp. 639–40, 642.

cures in the United Kingdom had been almost £200,000 a year, by the mid-1830s it was under £17,000.²⁶

A Whig inquiry into colonial sinecures in 1835 reached similar conclusions. While the annual emoluments from unregulated colonial sinecures may have been as high as £100,000 as late as 1817,²⁷ a series of piecemeal reforms had reduced the number of such sinecures to twelve, two of which had recently become vacant and remained unfilled.²⁸ Although the Whigs' 1835 Select Committee did not publish the annual cost of the ten remaining sinecures, one can assume that it was small. In any case, it was abundantly clear to Committee members that such totals made it obvious that the time "cannot be far distant" when "the country will reap the full benefit" of the reforms which have "operated in gradually disencumbering the finances of the country from the justly obnoxious pressure of sinecure emoluments".²⁹ The findings of the Whig committees make nonsense of Wade's assertion in the 1832 edition of the *Black Book* that the "monstrous abuse" of sinecures was still "just as flagrant as ever".³⁰ While Wade conveyed the impression that sinecures remained a very expensive and widespread abuse, a series of Pittite ministries had presided over preparations for their virtual extinction.

What accounts for the discrepancy? The answer is Wade's steadfast refusal to accept anything short of immediate abolition as an acceptable means of eliminating sinecures. "The sinecures were *abuses*", he noted in 1832, "and they ought to have been swept away without equivalent". But instead élite reformers of sinecures from Burke forward insisted either on leaving those slated for reform intact until the deaths of the incumbents, or on compensating them for immediate abolition with handsome pensions. These gradualist tactics only added insult to injury, according to Wade. Placemen, he argued, should be treated no differently from any other victims of progress: "If other classes are injured by reform or improvement, what compensation do they receive for their loss? The workman suffers by the substitution of machinery, the merchant and manufacturer by the vicissitudes of commerce, and the farmer by alterations of the currency;

²⁶ P.P., 1834, vi (no. 519), pp. 341-8.

²⁷ P.P., 1817, iv (no. 159), p. 29.

²⁸ P.P., 1835, xviii (no. 507), pp. 443-4.

²⁹ P.P., 1834, vi (no. 519), p. 348.

³⁰ Wade, *Extraordinary Black Book*, pp. 487-8.

but they receive no equivalent; no fund is provided to make up the loss of their capital and industry".³¹ This was a forceful argument, but of course it carried no weight with a political élite that had long considered government offices to be the private property of their holders. Whether independents, Whigs or Pittites, sinecure reformers within the House of Commons in the early decades of the nineteenth century dared not advocate immediate abolition for fear of allowing the dwindling minority of public men who still insisted that the state should defend the traditional status of sinecure offices as personal freeholds to raise against them the cry of confiscation.³² M.P.s' insistence on upholding property rights in sinecures while withdrawing, for instance, the right of apprenticeship admittedly left them open to Wade's charges of perpetuating a legal double standard between the patricians and the people. But this double standard did not prevent the élite from eradicating sinecures from within, if only at a deliberate pace.³³

Élite concern for the sanctity of property thus slowed the tempo of administrative reform, but by no means prohibited it. Yet, like Wade's outdated generalizations about sinecures as a whole, many of his more particular allegations against sinecure holders make no distinction between sinecures already slated for reform and those not yet touched. Wade's failure or perhaps refusal to note this crucial distinction could easily have misled unsuspecting readers into believing that sinecures were just as unmitigated an evil in 1820, or even in 1832, as they had been in 1809.

For two reasons, it is worth pointing out and correcting a few such allegations: to furnish additional proof that Wade exaggerated the scope of Old Corruption at the time he wrote, and to show that Rubinstein's retrospective validation of Wade's charges is misleading. In the 1820 edition of the *Black Book*, for example,

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 491.

³² Two years after the Great Reform Act, the Whig-dominated Select Committee on Sinecure Offices still went out of its way to guarantee the property rights of living sinecurists: P.P., 1834, vi (no. 519), p. 340.

³³ Rubinstein pays little more attention to gradual reform than does his source Wade. While noting that "something of th[e] spirit" of property-in-office "unquestionably lingered throughout the period of Tory rule" ("End of 'Old Corruption'", p. 75), he only vaguely hints at the compatibility of this notion with gradual reform (p. 74). He likewise shares Wade's distaste for the compensation of sinecure holders for abolished offices, noting two examples of this practice as evidence of abuse rather than reform (p. 66).

Wade listed Earl Bathurst's net annual income from his sinecure Tellership of the Exchequer as a truly scandalous £23,117, and Rubinstein repeats the charge.³⁴ But not only had all four Tellerships of the Exchequer already in 1817 been earmarked for extinction on the deaths of their holders,³⁵ Bathurst's had in fact long since been reformed. Thus the Select Committee on Sinecure Offices of 1810 listed Bathurst's Tellership income as only £2,700 a year, not £23,117.³⁶ Marquess Camden benefited much more from his Tellership than Bathurst from his; Camden's profits went unregulated until after the French wars, and since they were scaled to the level of public spending, they sky-rocketed during those wars. Consequently Wade's statement of Camden's Tellership income as £23,093 would probably have been fairly accurate at some point during the wars (unlike his purely fictional statement of Bathurst's), but it certainly was not so by 1820, when Wade published his first exhaustive list of official emoluments. In that list, Wade acknowledged in fine print that Camden's office had already been regulated, that Camden had renounced his surplus profits from it, and that his current annual profits were only £2,500. Nevertheless in the margin, where Wade added together the net profits of offices as proof of the extravagance and corruption of the central government, he still listed Camden's annual Tellership income as £23,093.³⁷

Wade's treatment of Lord Arden's immense profits as Registrar of the Court of Admiralty was equally misleading, as is Rubinstein's unqualified recital of it.³⁸ While in his 1820 master list of the total cost of emoluments Wade only stated Arden's *net* wartime income of £12,562 in fine print beneath Arden's name, he inserted in his running total the meaningless *gross* income of Arden's office: £38,574. More importantly, Wade did not mention then, nor does Rubinstein mention now, that Arden's office had

³⁴ Wade, *Black Book*, p. 18; Rubinstein, "End of 'Old Corruption'", p. 61.

³⁵ 57 Geo. III, *cap.* 84.

³⁶ P.P., 1810, ii (no. 362), p. 636. Despite Rubinstein's intimation to the contrary ("End of 'Old Corruption'", pp. 60-1), in the 1832 edition of the *Black Book* Wade tacitly acknowledged the regulation of Bathurst's Tellership, listing the annual salary attached to it as £2,700: Wade, *Extraordinary Black Book*, p. 510.

³⁷ Wade, *Black Book*, p. 24. In the 1832 edition of the *Black Book*, Wade finally tabulated only the *regulated* income of Camden's Tellership — £2,700 per annum: *Extraordinary Black Book*, p. 518. But he still neglected to make it known that *all* the Tellerships had been slated for eventual abolition some fifteen years earlier by 57 Geo. III, *cap.* 84.

³⁸ Wade, *Black Book*, p. 151; Rubinstein, "End of 'Old Corruption'", p. 61.

already in 1813 been scheduled by Act of Parliament for extinction upon his death.³⁹ Similarly, Wade called attention to J. C. Villiers's sinecure Chief Justiceship in Eyre, north of Trent,⁴⁰ but failed like Rubinstein to add that the office had in 1810 been recommended for abolition,⁴¹ and in 1817 scheduled for abolition.⁴²

These failures to mention that many life sinecures had already been slated either for reform or abolition on the death of the current holders could certainly be multiplied by more research, for the Whig Select Committees of the mid-1830s could discover only forty unreformed sinecures in all the U.K. and the colonies.⁴³ Despite this, Wade was still insisting in 1835 that sinecures were "just as flagrant" an abuse "as ever".⁴⁴ Rubinstein also states that as late as the 1830s "important remnants . . . still survived of sinecures and reversions in the old sense",⁴⁵ an assertion which is true only in the sense that the current holders still enjoyed them for life, although they were due for extinction or reform thereafter. As a result, they by no means constitute the evidence of glaring abuse that, following Wade, he makes them out to be. It is fair to claim that these "grandfather" clauses protecting many life sinecures were unjust, but not fair to insinuate that little had been done to put an end to these sinecures.

It is worth adding that Wade's evidence of other varieties of official "waste" and "corruption" is equally imprecise and out of date. Take the example of reversions, by which the government assigned the right of succession to certain lucrative offices (usually sinecures) to its powerful supporters, and often to their close relatives — whether or not the latter had the ability or the inclination to perform their assigned tasks. There is no arguing with Wade's conclusion that "the absurdity of this practice is sufficiently obvious".⁴⁶ But Wade never mentioned that ministers had all but given up the practice of granting reversions, primarily

³⁹ 53 Geo. III, cap. 151. See *The House of Commons, 1790-1820*, ed. R. G. Thorne, 5 vols. (London, 1989), iv, pp. 763-4.

⁴⁰ Wade, *Black Book*, p. 85; Rubinstein, "End of 'Old Corruption'", p. 74.

⁴¹ P.P., 1810, ii (no. 362), p. 592.

⁴² 57 Geo. III, cap. 61.

⁴³ Only twenty-eight in the U.K. "without any legislative provisions having yet been made for prospectively regulating or abolishing them" (P.P., 1834, vi (no. 519), pp. 344-5), in addition to the twelve unreformed colonial sinecures that still remained.

⁴⁴ John Wade, *Black Book* (London, 1835 edn.), pp. 487-8.

⁴⁵ Rubinstein, "End of 'Old Corruption'", pp. 73-4.

⁴⁶ Wade, *Black Book*, pp. 7-8.

as the result of relentless pressure from opposition and independent M.P.s. In March 1807 the independent economical reformer Henry Bankes moved to abolish all reversions on the deaths of the incumbents, in line with the recommendation of a recent Committee on Public Expenditure. Bankes's bill suffered from the chronic resistance of the Perceval ministry, but finally, in March 1812, the ministry acquiesced in a bill that only temporarily prevented ministers from granting reversions.⁴⁷ It passed both Houses, and although Perceval's government won a symbolic victory for executive privilege by blocking a permanent ban on reversions, the practice of granting them quickly fell into disuse.⁴⁸ Thus the actions of élite politicians themselves had already made obsolete Wade's criticisms of the reversions that a few of them still possessed.

Finally, Wade's criticism of official pensions as yet another source of prodigality and corruption was also exaggerated and misleading. In the 1820 edition of the *Black Book* he provided an estimate of what he called "the whole of the public money wasted on the subjects we have been describing". Wade calculated a grand total of nearly £1,400,000 a year in "wasted" public money.⁴⁹ He reached this figure by adding to his totals for the cost of sinecures and reversions £365,000 a year in annuities to the royal family and about £541,400 a year from a variety of pensions. There is no point in quibbling with Wade's inclusion of royal annuities in his tabulation of "waste". Plenty of radicals argued that *any* of the taxpayers' money spent on the maintenance of a hereditary monarchy was money wasted, although it is worth adding that several arch-enemies of Old Corruption, most notably Cobbett and Cartwright,⁵⁰ had no wish to turn Britain into a republic. But Wade's inclusion of government pensions in his list is more problematic. The cost of these pensions amounted to 39 per cent of the total annual "waste" of tax money alleged by Wade. He obviously wanted his readers to conclude that *all* pensions were inherently "wasteful" and forms of corruption.

Were they? Admittedly the king and his ministers had long used certain varieties of pension at least partly and perhaps chiefly

⁴⁷ *Hansard*, xxi, col. 1240 (10 Mar. 1812).

⁴⁸ A. S. Foord, "The Waning of the 'Influence of the Crown'", *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, lxii (1947), p. 501.

⁴⁹ Wade, *Black Book*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ See, for example, J. R. Dinwiddy, "Parliamentary Reform as an Issue in English Politics, 1800-1810" (Univ. of London Ph.D. thesis, 1971), pp. 255-62.

as means to reward friends, and sometimes to bribe opponents. Among them one can include pensions paid out of the 4½ per cent duties, not regulated by parliament until 1830. One could add pensions on the Scottish and Irish Civil Lists, which were subject to parliamentary scrutiny by the 1820s, but most of which were still political rewards. Such pensions had been limited and regulated by Burke's Establishment Act of 1782, but many of them were still being paid out as compensation for political services of questionable value to the public. Altogether, 47 per cent of the pension money tabulated by Wade might be considered "wasteful" if one makes the dubious assumption that *all* the pensions in these categories were dispensed as gifts or bribes rather than compensation for genuine public services. In any case, Wade's argument for the unqualified wastefulness of pensions is unconvincing when applied to other categories, particularly to pensions granted specifically "as compensation for eminent public services", and those granted as superannuation for service in high public offices. Taken together, these amounted to a full 35 per cent of Wade's ostensibly "wasteful" pensions. Both types of pension were granted in the full light of day, at the discretion of parliament. As for the first type, it is certainly true that what the ministers of the day deemed "eminent public services" partly depended on politics; it is impossible to imagine Edmund Burke receiving such a pension, for example, if the French Revolution had not turned his talents to the defence of establishment principles dear to Pittite hearts. But it seems only just to note that in granting Burke's pension and others like it, ministers were rewarding real ability and accomplishment as well as political services.

In the case of pensions granted as superannuation, it is true that some were outrageous. Most judicious contemporaries would certainly have agreed with Wade that it was a waste to grant a life pension of £1,000 a year or more, say, to an ambassador who had been given his appointment simply because he knew the right people, and then went out to fill his embassy only to return home after a year or even less. Such cases were by no means unheard of. But on the other hand, for each such case there were pensions granted to government officers who had spent half their lives or more in public service. There were two worthy motives behind the 1810 Superannuation Act that provided for mandatory retirement pensions: first, to reduce senescence in administrative ranks

by making it financially unnecessary for civil servants to cling to their offices after they were too old to fill them efficiently; and secondly, to facilitate the reform of such “irregular” emoluments as sinecures, reversions and fees, the only reasonable excuse for which had been the need to provide government officers with some means to keep body and soul together in their dotage.⁵¹ Thus Wade included in his grand total of “waste” the very means by which ministers sought eventually to eradicate the more infamous sources of “waste” inside the system. Wade’s failure to make any meaningful distinction in the disposal of pensions between merit and “corruption” undermined his broader charges of “extravagance”.

What are we to conclude from all these inaccuracies? First and foremost, that the Pittite élite was by no means as parasitical as radicals at the time and modern students of radical politics have made it out to be. Heavily relying on Wade’s evidence, Rubinstein concludes that Old Corruption grew “fatter and fatter” until 1830, because the Georgian élite, dominated by Pitt and his followers after 1783, was “under little or no necessity to tailor public office or official reward to public need or public opinion”.⁵² While he vaguely concedes that “much reform of Old Corruption, especially in its narrow sense, had occurred before 1830”,⁵³ he nevertheless asserts that “no subsequent ruling group in Britain has possessed a modicum of the sheer greed”⁵⁴ of the pre-1830 élite, which was dominated by Pitt and his followers. In Rubinstein’s opinion, it took the Whig ministers of the 1830s — grandees who were wealthy enough to eschew the perquisites ostensibly so important to the Pittite small fry — to usher in an “Age of Reform” that systematically dismantled Old Corruption “in its wider sense”.⁵⁵

Rubinstein has provided a valuable service in drawing attention to the important areas of Old Corruption noted by Wade and others that had nothing to do with the emoluments of office and that the Pittites had either built up in the Napoleonic era or had at least abstained from reforming in any systematic fashion: for

⁵¹ See Marios Raphael, *Pensions and Public Servants: A Study of the Origins of the British System* (Paris, 1964), ch. 6; Emmeline Cohen, *The Growth of the British Civil Service, 1780-1939* (London, 1941), pp. 59-60.

⁵² Rubinstein, “End of ‘Old Corruption’”, p. 72.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 75.

example, the “nexus” between the Pittite governments and “the older sections of the middle class” — which brought huge war-time profits to such sectional interests as Bank of England stockholders and fundholders in general, at immense public expense — and “such features of the pre-reform landscape” as the East India Company, the closed municipal corporations, the Church of England,⁵⁶ the courts of justice,⁵⁷ and above all the unreformed House of Commons itself.⁵⁸ The Pittites and their supporters undoubtedly reaped large benefits from these elements of Old Corruption during and after the wars, and it will take a real historiographical effort to determine their full extent. Rubinstein deserves much credit for opening up this very important field of enquiry. Indeed his argument would have been greatly strengthened if he had paid closer attention to these broader institutional features of Old Corruption “in its wider sense”. But instead he follows Wade in closely relying on the one important portion of Old Corruption that the Pittites themselves had permitted to be cut down to size: “irregular” emoluments to officers in the civil establishment.

For Rubinstein, it appears that the crucial point about the components of Old Corruption was that they exemplified a bureaucracy that was “pre-modern and non-rational in the Weberian sense of failing to obey the rational criteria of all modern bureaucracies”, such as promotion according to merit

⁵⁶ Although it must be said that Wade was no more accurate in his estimate of the church’s “waste” than he was in his estimate of the central government’s. In the 1832 edition of the *Black Book*, he announced that the total annual emoluments of all churchmen came to a staggering £9.5 million. Four years later, an exhaustive parliamentary inquiry put total clerical income at only £3.4 million a year. Nevertheless, as late as 1849 Wade still listed the emoluments of churchmen at over £9 million a year, even though there had been no significant increase since the middle of the previous decade. Peter Virgin, *The Church in an Age of Negligence: Ecclesiastical Structure and Problems of Church Reform* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 91–2, 203–4.

⁵⁷ Rubinstein projects a vivid impression of the bloated emoluments still obtainable in the “pre-reform” legal structure when he notes that Lord Chancellor Eldon left an enormous fortune in personalty and real estate, and that his brother Lord Stowell, Chief Justice of the High Court of Admiralty, also enjoyed an immense official income (“End of ‘Old Corruption’”, pp. 56, 60). But in defence of these lucrative emoluments, it is only fair to note that the chief justices of all the courts customarily enjoyed far larger salaries than even the highest ministers of state because such hefty sums were thought necessary to coax the most talented barristers to sacrifice the enormous fees they commanded for a place on the bench. The great Whig barrister Samuel Romilly’s £17,000–18,000 a year from fees was comparable to Eldon’s salary as Lord Chancellor. See Daniel Duman, *The Judicial Bench in England 1727–1875: The Reshaping of a Professional Elite* (London, 1982), p. 106.

⁵⁸ Rubinstein, “End of ‘Old Corruption’”, pp. 57–8.

and payment according to performance of clearly defined duties.⁵⁹ But the reform of “irregular” emoluments under Pittite auspices clearly demonstrates that the ruling élite had already taken important steps towards achieving this “rational” administrative structure in the generation before the “Age of Reform” — even if, as it remains to be shown, it did so mainly as a response to political pressure, not to a perceived need for “rationality” as an end in itself.

The second conclusion to be drawn from Wade’s distortions is the danger of taking popular radical charges of Old Corruption at face value. Of course, Old Corruption was a metaphor for grave social injustice that went far beyond the grant of sinecures, reversions and unmerited pensions. These “irregular” emoluments conveyed a symbolic message for radicals that was far more important than their trivial and dwindling money value, because they served as a graphic example of how the established political system rewarded the privileged at the expense of the “productive” classes. Cobbett himself, who coined “Old Corruption”, meant it as a metaphor for a wide variety of wartime social and economic changes he perceived to be injurious to the common people. He certainly did not believe that cheap government alone would suffice to free the people from oppression. Nor, of course, did the Chartists, and their use of the language of Old Corruption should not obscure their commitment to a wide variety of solutions to the problem of oppression, activist solutions such as factory reform prominent among them. Thus Old Corruption is a complicated subject, and when historians of high politics simply dismiss as wrong-headed the radical fixation on irregular emoluments, and side with government propaganda designed to prove it was so, they miss the radicals’ broader point about the political genesis of social injustice.⁶⁰ But in explaining that point, historians of popular radicalism should no longer simply assume the accuracy of Old Corruption as a description of the measures and motives of the Pittite governing élite from 1793 to 1830.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Norman Gash, “The State of the Nation (1822)”, in his *Pillars of Government*, pp. 33–4; Norman Gash, *Lord Liverpool: The Life and Political Career of Robert Banks Jenkinson, Second Earl of Liverpool, 1770–1828* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 131–8.

II

Having exposed the flimsiness of Wade's charges of Pittite greed, it is now necessary for two reasons to turn to the world of high politics: first, to show that the Pittites themselves were cultivating a governing style of disinterested public service in the generation before 1830, the customary opening date of the "Age of Reform"; and secondly, to ascertain their motives for doing so. It is hoped that the results will not only clear the Pittites from the more sweeping radical charges of personal greed, but will also show the need to incorporate high politics into a *long-term* explanation for the waning of the critique of Old Corruption that begins with the comportment and practices of the Pittites, not simply of their Whig or Conservative successors.

Over the first three decades of the nineteenth century, radical charges of the Pittites' subordination of public office to private ends became more and more exaggerated, just as the Pittites themselves moved closer and closer to an ethic of moderately compensated public service. Some of Pitt's followers of his own age cohort clearly had few scruples about making office pay off handsomely for themselves. George Rose, for instance, "from a low situation had by Political *activities* made a very large fortune", as one observer contemptuously put it.⁶¹ Rose's financial expertise at the Treasury was handsomely rewarded; by the late 1790s he was simultaneously Secretary to the Treasury, Master of the Exchequer Pleas, Verderer of the New Forest, Agent for Dominica and Clerk of the Parliaments. Perpetually criticized within the Commons and without for his multiple sinecures and his shady dealings as patronage secretary, Rose, according to Cobbett, had cost the public an average of at least £12,000 a year.⁶² But unlike Rose, most of the second-generation Pittites in Liverpool's ministry strove to project an image of probity in an effort to restore a broad measure of public trust in the motives of the state's élite administrators in the wake of the French wars. A few hold-overs from a more permissive era survived, such as

⁶¹ *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, ed. Kenneth Garlick, Angus Macintyre and Kathryn Cave, 16 vols. (New Haven, Conn., 1978-84), xv, pp. 5140-1 (14 Jan. 1818).

⁶² See, for example, [Anon.], *Admirable Satire on the Death, Dissection, Funeral Procession, & Epitaph of Mr. Pitt* (London, 1795), p. 14; [Anon.], *The Rosead* (London, 1804); *The House of Commons, 1756-90*, ed. Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke, 3 vols. (London, 1964), iii, pp. 375-6; *House of Commons, 1790-1820*, ed. Thorne, v, pp. 45-53.

Lord Chancellor Eldon, who once told a friend whom he had just promoted that “the true rule” for making a lucrative political career was “to get what you can and keep what you have”.⁶³ Eldon very skilfully practised what he preached; he left a fortune of some £1.3 million chiefly amassed from the emoluments of judicial offices,⁶⁴ and managed to obtain for his son, William Henry Scott, four legal sinecures and the reversions to two more.⁶⁵

Nevertheless most younger Pittites in the Liverpool ministry did not follow Eldon’s lead, whether they were moderates such as Liverpool or Peel, or liberals such as Huskisson. They were much more scrupulous about their official profits, primarily because they thought it a political liability to be seen to be making too much. Huskisson, the wizard of liberal Tory finance in the 1820s, provides a significant contrast to Eldon. It has to be admitted that Huskisson did well for himself from public office. When he died in a freak train accident in 1830, he was earning nearly £4,000 a year from pensions alone.⁶⁶ Nevertheless he was scrupulous enough to give up his lucrative Ceylon agency when he became President of the Board of Trade in 1823, because he feared he would be attacked in the Commons for conflict of interest if he did not do so.⁶⁷ This must have been a bitter sacrifice, for Huskisson had actually earned his pay as agent, having kept a close correspondence with the Governor-General of Ceylon for the fifteen years he held the office, and having dutifully promoted the colony’s commercial interests throughout that long interval.⁶⁸

Thus Huskisson was understandably furious when he found out that the ministry planned to give the agency to the veteran Treasury secretary (now First Commissioner of Woods and Forests) Charles Arbuthnot, in order to help Arbuthnot out of his straitened financial circumstances. Huskisson had hoped that his resignation of the agency “would lead to an arrangement which would deprive it of its political character, and also effect a saving in the salary”.⁶⁹ His protests ultimately prompted

⁶³ Horace Twiss, *The Public and Private Life of Lord Chancellor Eldon*, 3 vols., 2nd edn. (London, 1844), ii, p. 298.

⁶⁴ Duman, *Judicial Bench in England*, p. 143.

⁶⁵ Twiss, *Public and Private Life of Lord Chancellor Eldon*, iii, p. 171.

⁶⁶ *The Huskisson Papers*, ed. Lewis Melville (London, 1931), p. 44.

⁶⁷ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 38191, fos. 137-8, Huskisson to Liverpool, 20 Nov. 1823.

⁶⁸ See C. R. Fay, *Huskisson and his Age* (London, 1951), pp. 98-9.

⁶⁹ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 38745, fo. 134, Huskisson to Canning, 4 Dec. 1823.

Arbuthnot to turn down the agency, but the duke of Wellington's reason for having applied on Arbuthnot's behalf in the first place is instructive. "In other times he and his family would have been enriched by places", Wellington pointed out, whereas Arbuthnot now found himself considerably out of pocket after a long career of public service.⁷⁰ Other second-generation Pittites may not have been quite as fearful of negative publicity as the neurotic Huskisson, but it is doubtful whether any of them aside from Eldon profited greatly from office, even if they could have endured being seen to do so. Indeed a number of them joined Arbuthnot in losing money over long careers as public servants. Liverpool's official biographer noted that he was left somewhat the poorer from his long tenure of office.⁷¹ George Canning was left no better off from his emoluments. The parliamentary opposition liked to depict him as a rapacious profiteer, and insisted that his diplomatic mission to Portugal in the last years of the war was a scandalous job.⁷² But Canning's wife spent most of her large fortune on her husband's diplomatic and other official expenses, and practically begged for a government pension after her husband's untimely death in order to recoup at least a small portion of her loss.⁷³

The grand official entertainments expected of the men who filled such high cabinet offices as First Lord of the Treasury and Foreign Secretary probably accounted for much of Liverpool's and Canning's losses. Those who were assigned other positions with many ceremonial duties attached to them had to reach even more deeply into their own pockets. While Wade, for instance, criticized the particularly lavish emoluments attached to the most

⁷⁰ Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Report on the Manuscripts of Earl Bathurst* (London, 1923), p. 552, Wellington to Bathurst, 24 Nov. 1823.

⁷¹ C. D. Yonge, *The Life and Administration of Robert Banks Jenkinson, Second Earl of Liverpool*, 3 vols. (London, 1868), iii, p. 458.

⁷² In 1817 J. G. Lambton moved to censure Canning's Portuguese mission, but Canning refuted Lambton's allegations with his customary brilliance in debate, and the ministry easily won the division: *Hansard*, xxxvi, col. 234 (6 May 1817); *Corrected Report of the Speech of the Right Honourable George Canning, in the House of Commons, on Tuesday, May 16th, on Mr. Lambton's Motion, for a Censure on Mr. Canning's Embassy to Lisbon* (London, 1817), pp. 87-8.

⁷³ One of Canning's biographers stated that even his *enemies* claimed that he had made only some £60,000 over twenty years of public service, whereas the ostentatiously disinterested Pitt himself had made about £200,000 over the same space of time, excluding his salary as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports: H. W. V. Temperley, *Life of Canning* (London, 1905), p. 258.

prestigious diplomatic posts,⁷⁴ he made no mention of the even more lavish expenses that went along with them. "I had an Embassy to France, which left me minus, in one year, eight thousand pounds", complained the earl of Whitworth in 1817. He expected to take a comparable loss from his current office of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, despite its enormous salary. His wife, "who keeps our account[s], tells me that we shall think us well off if at the end of our representation here [in Dublin], we do not lose upon the whole, more than ten thousand pounds".⁷⁵ Considering these examples, the real wonder is not the greed of such Pittites, but their willingness to apply so much of their private income to official chores.

Several Pittites who thus denied themselves large profits had no trouble denying them to their subordinates. Particularly after the wars, Tory prime ministers were extremely conscientious in their management of patronage. By that time, several decades of piecemeal administrative reform had all but wiped out their ability to dispense additional patronage to M.P.s as a means of shoring up the "influence of the crown" in the House of Commons. But Liverpool, Wellington and Peel habitually eschewed even the relatively few legal opportunities that remained for them to bolster their support through patronage. Time and again, Liverpool turned office-seekers away, informing them that the post-war reductions in the civil establishment or the prerequisite of prior experience made it impossible for him to gratify their requests.⁷⁶ Liverpool, moreover, was deeply insulted when a man tried to purchase a baronetcy from him for £1,000,⁷⁷ and did not like to dispense honours even when bribery was not in question. "The country is suffering from the profusion of my friend Mr. Pitt in

⁷⁴ Wade, *Extraordinary Black Book*, p. 247.

⁷⁵ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 40193, fos. 223-4, Whitworth to Peel, 29 Sept. 1817. "Most, if not all, Lord-lieutenants have spent more than the income of their office", noted another one of them, Lord Redesdale: *The Diary and Correspondence of Charles Abbot, Speaker of the House of Commons, 1802-1817*, ed. Charles, Lord Colchester, 3 vols. (London, 1851), iii, pp. 269-70 (10 Jan. 1823). Thus there was a good reason why it was customary to appoint only the wealthiest aristocrats to the lord-lieutenancy.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 38263, fos. 151-2, Liverpool to Joseph Hadfield, 24 Aug. 1816; Add. MS. 38275, fo. 400, Liverpool to Col. Henry Haldane, 11 Mar. 1819.

⁷⁷ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 38250, fo. 182, Robert Page to T. C. Brooksbank [Liverpool's private secretary], 23 Nov. 1812; fo. 271, same to same, 5 Dec. 1812. Liverpool's responses were drafted on the backs of the letters.

this regard", he informed one political friend who sought a peerage.⁷⁸

The duke of Wellington handled his patronage duties with equal scruple. "It must be owned that the Duke does not love jobs", noted the diarist and political insider Charles Greville, "though he has occasionally lent himself to something like them". As one such instance Greville cited the generous pension on the Irish Civil List to Wellington's impoverished sister-in-law, the marchioness of Westmeath, that the duke had slid through by use of the Sign Manual.⁷⁹ But it is hard to find others, and like Liverpool before him, Wellington habitually rejected patronage requests.⁸⁰ A year and a half into his premiership, moreover, Wellington informed his Home Secretary Peel that he had "urged the King to abstain from creating any Peers and Baronets; and have with difficulty prevented him from creating any".⁸¹ Obviously Wellington had no wish to convey the impression that he was adding to his ministry's "influence" even through the legitimate means still available to him. Few such opportunities remained, thanks to post-war retrenchment and two decades of extensive administrative reform. But such evidence should make clear the important point that Liverpool and Wellington magnified the effects of the gradual legislative reduction of the "influence of the crown" by passing up at least some of the remaining opportunities to gratify their acquaintances.

Considering these earlier examples of Tory disinterestedness, Peel's lofty sense of his official duties appears not so much a novelty as the end result of a gradual transformation in elite attitudes about the proper uses of office. Far from relishing the chance to line his own and his friends' pockets with public money, Peel called his patronage duties "one of the most disagreeable and invidious parts" of his job as prime minister.⁸² He looked upon them as a heavy burden, for he earnestly sought to find the

⁷⁸ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 38299, fo. 157, Liverpool to Frederick Robinson, 22 Oct. 1824.

⁷⁹ *The Greville Memoirs, 1814-1860*, ed. Lytton Strachey and Roger Fulford, 7 vols. (London, 1938), i, p. 312 (25 Aug. 1829).

⁸⁰ See, for example, *Despatches, Correspondence and Memoranda of Arthur, First Duke of Wellington*, ed. 2nd duke of Wellington, 6 vols. (London, 1867-80), iv, p. 300, Wellington to Lord [blank], 8 Mar. 1828; vi, p. 155, Wellington to General Sir George [blank], 13 Apr. 1830.

⁸¹ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 40308, fo. 202, Wellington to Peel, 24 July 1829.

⁸² P.P., 1850, xv (no. 268), p. 236.

best qualified officers, and was genuinely surprised and dismayed to find that most applicants for government offices seemed to subordinate the public interest to their “unreasonable demands and exaggerated pretensions for office”.⁸³ He sought to discourage such “preposterous requests”⁸⁴ by making it his “universal rule . . . to decline interfering with the patronage of others”,⁸⁵ and by reminding applicants that “the patronage of the Executive Government” was “in truth *professional* patronage” reserved for experienced officers who had acquired the skills needed to perform the services expected of them.⁸⁶ Such self-imposed patronage rules indicate that Peel truly believed office to be a public trust for the execution of public business, and that he sought to enforce his belief.

Peel felt just as strongly as Liverpool and Wellington that titles should be conferred solely on those who had performed valuable public services. He considered baronetcies, for example, not as suitable gifts for his friends, but as rare marks of appreciation “for the long and faithful discharge of public duties”.⁸⁷ The prestige of all such honours, Peel believed, was strictly proportional to the number conferred. “The distinction of being without an honour”, he quipped, “is becoming a rare and valuable one, and should not become extinct”.⁸⁸ He even refused to take the Garter himself, simply because he did not want to risk charges of hypocrisy when turning down requests for honours from public servants who truly deserved them.⁸⁹ Thus Peel was a rock of integrity, but his extremely decorous attitude towards patronage had its antecedents in the conduct of his Tory predecessors.

III

Finally, what accounts for this shift in élite mentality towards an ethic of frugal and conspicuously self-denying public service, and what prompted a series of mostly Pittite ministries to preside

⁸³ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 40488, fo. 152, Peel to T. W. Freshfield, 13 Sept. 1841.

⁸⁴ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 40482, fos. 10-11, Peel to Henry Brougham, 23 Oct. 1842.

⁸⁵ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 40577, fo. 239, Peel to J. W. Croker, 3 Nov. 1845.

⁸⁶ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 40484, fos. 79-80, Peel to Charles Arbuthnot, 28 Oct. 1841.

⁸⁷ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 40468, fos. 105-6, Peel to E. J. Stanley, [21 Dec. 1843].

⁸⁸ Bodleian Library, Oxford, Graham Papers, Film 112, Peel to Sir James Graham, 28 Oct. 1841.

⁸⁹ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 40459, fos. 307-8, Peel to Wellington, 4 Oct. 1842.

over its legislative expression? Three closely related factors were in play. One was the quest from inside the government for greater administrative efficiency and economy in order to respond to the needs of war. The second factor was the rise of Evangelical religion within the élite itself, with its stress on the need for social leadership through moral example to fend off the threat of the French Revolution. The third factor was the growth of political pressure for economical reform, within the House of Commons and without, as a means of reducing the wartime tax burden imposed by the state, as well as the favours it doled out to privileged insiders. The last factor, though often neglected, is the most important, for it deeply influenced the other two, and showed that a mostly Pittite governing élite was at least able to respond to the allegations of personal greed at the heart of Old Corruption.

Studies in administrative history, such as those by Cohen, Binney, Chester, and others, have customarily portrayed the sanitation and reorganization of the British central government *circa* 1780 to 1860 as a long evolution based on the need for greater efficiency in the management of a rapidly growing state apparatus.⁹⁰ Those who neglect political controversy tend to treat economical reform as a unilinear march towards bureaucratic efficiency and Weberian "rationality", treated as commonsensical aims in themselves. At the end of the march we find the Victorian civil service with all its "rational" markings: a hierarchical chain of command, offices with clearly defined responsibilities, officers awarded their posts according to merit, payment by salary only, uniform rates of superannuation established by law, political neutrality, and Treasury control of civil expenditure. By the late Victorian era, at least, civil servants accepted all these "rational" administrative criteria as general guidelines, even if they often failed to live up to them in practice.

Administrative historians have traced the evolution of these

⁹⁰ Cohen, *Growth of the British Civil Service*, chs. 1-3; J. E. D. Binney, *British Public Finance and Administration, 1774-92* (Oxford, 1958); Sir Norman Chester, *The English Administrative System, 1780-1870* (Oxford, 1981), esp. ch. 2; Foord, "Waning of the 'Influence of the Crown'"; Oliver MacDonagh, "The Nineteenth-Century Revolution in Government: A Reappraisal", *Hist. J.*, i (1958), pp. 52-67; Oliver MacDonagh, *Early Victorian Government* (London, 1977); George Kitson Clark, "'Statesmen in Disguise': Reflexions on the History of the Neutrality of the Civil Service", *Hist. J.*, ii (1959), pp. 19-39; W. L. Burn, *The Age of Equipoise: A Study of the Mid-Victorian Generation* (New York, 1964), ch. 4; William Lubenow, *The Politics of Government Growth* (Newton Abbot, 1971), chs. 1-3.

guidelines, but have been less clear as to the motive forces behind their adoption. The quest for efficiency is not by itself a satisfactory answer. It needs to be placed in a milieu of political controversy, in which élite politicians felt compelled to respond to widespread criticisms of their ostensible waste and mismanagement of public money during and after the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, two long wars of unprecedented cost. It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact of the French wars on popular *and* élite perceptions of the state. Nobody anticipated the duration or expense of the wars, and Britain's "natural rulers" were themselves shocked by their scale, and deeply worried about their potential for breeding corruption and public hostility. With the example of the French Revolution fresh in their minds, moreover, public hostility to the perceived abuses of the state's officers was not a thing that the élite could afford to ignore.

The crucial economical reforms of the last decade of the Napoleonic War provide a telling example. In the mid-1780s Pitt had set about eradicating sinecures in the Customs as their holders died off,⁹¹ but his desire to keep administrative reform an executive initiative free from parliamentary interference considerably slowed its pace in the late 1780s, and the outbreak of the French wars brought it to a virtual standstill.⁹² It was only mounting pressure from independent and Whig M.P.s alarmed at the pressure of wartime taxes and outraged by executive malfeasance that spawned a more systematic reform of "irregular" emoluments, particularly after the Dundas affair in 1805. A Select Committee on Public Expenditure appointed in 1807 prepared the way for the gradual abolition or regulation of sinecures that made so many of John Wade's charges of "corruption" obsolete. The Committee was suggested by Robert Myddleton Biddulph, an independent-minded Whig who thought it essential to act against sinecures and all other "useless places" in order to mollify wartime taxpayers who rightly found it "difficult to . . . believe that the

⁹¹ According to George Rose, Pitt had planned in 1794 to do away with 196 Customs sinecures — worth £42,000 a year — "as they fell in": George Rose, *Observations Respecting the Public Expenditure* (London, 1807), p. 9.

⁹² See John Breihan, "William Pitt and the Commission on Fees, 1785-1801", *Hist. J.*, xxvii (1984), pp. 59-81. The thirty-seven reports of the Select Committee on Finance appointed in 1797 provide conclusive evidence of the death of Pitt's plan for gradual administrative reform from wartime sclerosis and neglect. See, for example, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Sheila Lambert, 145 vols. (Wilmington, Del., 1975-6), cviii, pp. 361-3 (12th Report); cix, pp. 526-7 (22nd Report); cxi, pp. 298-311 (27th Report).

grants of these emoluments are unalterable".⁹³ Accordingly, Committee members condemned sinecures as a necessary pledge of economy to Britons who suffered from "the present arduous situation of public affairs, and the great charge incurred by the war".⁹⁴ Thus it was public pressure, not the quest for efficiency *tout court*, that moved M.P.s to take the longest strides towards "rationalizing" official salaries.

Evangelicalism was a second factor in the reduction of official perquisites. But like the imperative to economize, the imperative to set a godly moral example was primarily foisted on the Tories from without. The notorious love of money of Pitt's colleagues, most notably Dundas and Rose, damaged their political reputation among Evangelicals during the French wars. Many Evangelicals looked upon the French Revolution and the subsequent wars as God's punishment upon rapacious rulers at home as well as abroad. They had no doubt that official greed during wartime was leading to moral as well as fiscal bankruptcy. Only "a THOROUGH REFORM OF PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES", in John Bowdler's emphatic words, could prevent prodigality and all the abuses to which it led from unleashing God's full wrath on the government: "ministers [must] learn . . . that human laws and human Power can avail nothing, without sound Principles and pure Morals".⁹⁵

Such apocalyptic notions of the need for economical reform were not shared by many Pittite ministers. Rather, they were forced upon successive governments by a compact group of Evangelical M.P.s led by William Wilberforce and known as the "Saints" who regularly sided with the opposition and other independents on economical reform issues. The Saints' critique of wartime "extravagance" stemmed from their belief that the greediness and ambition of Pitt's associates had ruined his early commitment to reform "irregular" emoluments and blemished his hitherto spotless personal reputation. Ultimately Wilberforce concluded that it had been impossible even for Pitt to "habitually associat[e] himself" with such self-serving men "without contracting more or less of defilement".⁹⁶ Wilberforce got his revenge

⁹³ *Hansard*, viii, col. 704 (10 Feb. 1807).

⁹⁴ P.P., 1809, iii (no. 200), p. 97.

⁹⁵ [John Bowdler the elder], *Reform or Ruin*, 12th edn. (London, 1798), p. 10.

⁹⁶ *The Private Papers of William Wilberforce*, ed. A. H. Wilberforce (London, 1897), pp. 72-4.

on the Pittites when his speech on the floor of the Commons secured enough votes to commence impeachment proceedings against Dundas in 1805.⁹⁷ Thus it was not the Evangelicalism of ministers themselves that served as a catalyst for economical reform, but Evangelicalism transformed into independent political pressure.

A rather different picture emerges of the relative force of personal religious conviction as an explanation of the rigorous public morality of the second-generation Pittites. As Boyd Hilton has pointed out, several Tory cabinet ministers took their religion seriously; at least four of them “can be called Evangelical in a formal sense” and several more, including Liverpool and Peel, were deeply religious if not avowedly Low Church.⁹⁸ But unfortunately, one can only assume that religious convictions contributed to their high standards of public morality, for these second-generation Pittites were perhaps even more reticent in matters of faith than they were in practically all other personal matters.

In contrast, they often made it clear that they felt pressure to act disinterestedly because public opinion *expected* them to do so. J. C. Herries, for example, a veteran Treasury officer who ultimately rose to the Chancellorship of the Exchequer, was not a man of deep religious feeling.⁹⁹ But he understood the value of impeccable behaviour for promotion in the public service. “Public character in this country is the creature of public opinion only”, he declared. “[I]t marks the general estimation, for work and ability, in which the men who take part conspicuously in the management of public affairs are held, and generally determines how far they advance in their public careers”.¹⁰⁰ Ministers met with personal success through their capacity to conduct public business, not through jobbery. As a City man whose intimacy with the Rothschilds provoked deep mistrust among political insiders,¹⁰¹ Herries could appreciate the value of a sterling reputation, and must have regretted not enjoying one himself.

In any case, such an acknowledgement of the power of public expectations on political behaviour is revealing. While Herries

⁹⁷ *Hansard*, iv, cols. 318–19 (8 Apr. 1805).

⁹⁸ Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 226–31.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹⁰⁰ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 57403, fos. 168–9, Herries to Lord Bexley [Nicholas Vansittart], 27 Dec. 1827.

¹⁰¹ See Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce*, pp. 241–6.

and his colleagues may or may not have esteemed the renunciation of excessive official profits as its own reward, or simply as a religious dictate, there is no doubt that they appreciated its political value. As a pamphlet put out by the Liverpool government concluded, "the ministers of a free and high-minded country cannot be without a due feeling of the value of public character". Considering the influence of public expectations, "his Majesty's ministers for themselves, and their friends for them, must naturally desire to stand well in public opinion".¹⁰² Even ministers who valued the reform of "irregular" emoluments neither as a way to efficiency nor as an act of personal piety could value it as a method of currying favour with the public.

If "public opinion" exerted such a strong influence over the conduct of Pittites, whom did it include? To what audience did the Pittites feel the need to demonstrate their disinterestedness? First and foremost, to the opposition and independent M.P.s who time and again pressed them to turn their attention to economical reform. Thus it was the Saints and other independents who ensured impeachment proceedings against Dundas in 1805; the Whig Biddulph who insisted on a Committee on Public Expenditure in 1807; the independent Dorset grandee Henry Bankes who secured the appointment of an important Select Committee on Sinecures¹⁰³ in 1810 and forced the suspension of reversions in 1812; and tireless post-war economizers like Bankes and the Whig Henry Brougham who persuaded the Liverpool ministry to appoint a Committee on Public Expenditure in 1817. All this activity on the Commons floor showed that an influential section of the political élite had itself become convinced that useless offices and windfall profits were no longer permissible. As the result of a war of unprecedented expense, taxpayers who were being forced to turn over to the Treasury so much of their hard-earned money were now voicing their disapproval of waste, and many M.P.s felt compelled to acknowledge it.

Pittite ministers had to furnish proof of their public-mindedness not only to their fellow M.P.s. They also felt constrained to do so in order to quell the periodic outdoor agitation

¹⁰² *The State of the Nation, at the Commencement of the Year 1822*, 6th edn. (London, 1822), p. 2. The British Library Catalogue attributes this pamphlet to John Singleton Copley, then Solicitor-General. But Norman Gash suggests that it may have been a joint production of several departmental under-secretaries: Gash, "State of the Nation (1822)", pp. 28-9.

¹⁰³ *Hansard*, xvi, cols. 1103-4 (17 May 1810); xviii, cols. 921-2 (21 Jan. 1811).

of landowners and tenant farmers whose impatience with government "prodigality" had turned M.P.s' attention to economical reform in the first place. The Association movement of the early 1780s sharpened the parliamentary focus on public economy, and began as a squires' revolt against what the original Yorkshire programme for reform called "gross abuses of the expenditure of the public money" during the American war, including sinecures, unmerited pensions and bloated emoluments in general.¹⁰⁴ In subsequent decades, and again in response to the immense cost of war, country gentlemen occasionally took the lead in pressing for further reforms: county meetings chiefly composed of landlords and tenants pressed for further inquiries into corruption in high places after the Dundas affair;¹⁰⁵ and throughout the late 1810s and early 1820s, county meetings petitioned almost every year for drastic cuts in taxes and spending, through the tighter regulation of emoluments among other means.¹⁰⁶ Thus the gradual reduction of bloated emoluments did not take place inside an administrative vacuum. It was an important concession that was extracted from a series of more or less reluctant Pittite ministries by the sporadic but formidable pressure of organized opposition groups within the House of Commons and beyond Westminster.

Finally, is it possible that the Pittites counted among the voices within "public opinion" to which they had to respond those of the popular radicals themselves? Admittedly, it is difficult to find evidence in elite political correspondence that attributes the regulation of perquisites *solely* to the need to refute radical charges of official greed. But there is no question that the ruling elite saw a dangerous threat in the accusations of personal corruption hurled at public men in the radical press, on the hustings and at public meetings; that they were deeply troubled by the persistence of these accusations in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary; and that the pressure encouraged them still further to clean house. As a result, the discrepancy between the accusations and adminis-

¹⁰⁴ Christopher Wyvill, *Political Papers, Chiefly Respecting the Attempt of the County of York . . . to Effect a Reformation of the Parliament of Great Britain*, 6 vols. (York, 1796-1803; facsimile reproduction, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1975), i, pp. 8-9, petition of the Yorkshire county meeting, 30 Dec. 1779. Still the best account of the Association movement is E. C. Black, *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organization, 1769-1793* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), chs. 2-3.

¹⁰⁵ See A. D. Harvey, *Britain in the Early Nineteenth Century* (London, 1978), p. 160.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, Austin Mitchell, *The Whigs in Opposition, 1815-1830* (Oxford, 1967), p. 162, esp. n. 2.

trative reality became so great that, after 1850, the personal greed of élite politicians no longer occupied so high a place on radical lists of the main sources of social oppression.

The indiscriminate attacks on the private motives of public men in vogue among radical journalists between 1805 and 1830 certainly caught the attention of the élite. Everybody from the Regent down read Cobbett, marvelled at his monumental insolence, and finally damned him for "breath[ing] nothing but massacre"¹⁰⁷ and bringing all élite politicians into contempt. The wholesale abuse of public men served up by Cobbett and others provoked Lord Grenville to declare that the time had come to decide "whether we are to be governed by the higher and better informed classes of our population or by the Mob".¹⁰⁸

Most politicians agreed with Grenville that these attacks were outrageously unfair and palpably false in view of mounting evidence that the élite was in fact surrendering many pensions and sinecures even if its reforms were hedged in by "grandfather" clauses. Even those who were reasonably attentive to popular grievances, such as the Whig Francis Horner, became sorely vexed and nonplussed as the outdoor condemnation of the greed of public men seemed to grow louder with every parliamentary effort to block the outlets for greed. Radical opinion, he concluded late in 1809, "is not embodied upon any political principle, except the vague and untrue persuasion, that great sums of public money are corruptly misemployed, an opinion which scarcely admits of being set right, because it is fostered by the very vigilance & inquisition in parliament which ought to satisfy it".¹⁰⁹

If Horner had lived to read Wade's *Extraordinary Black Book* of 1832, he would have been even more dismayed to see the persistence of the radical perception of insatiable élite greed despite over twenty more years of investigation and reform. What finally caused this perception to decline? It was not simply the Whig and Conservative reforms of the 1830s and 1840s, critically important though these were in legitimating élite political authority in the eyes of the broad ranks of Britons, and thus making possible the co-operative efforts of outdoor radicals and

¹⁰⁷ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 52443B, fo. 106, James Mackintosh's journal entry to his wife, 26 Dec. [1818].

¹⁰⁸ Brit. Lib., Add. MS. 41853, fos. 25-6, Grenville to Thomas Grenville, 9 Apr. 1809.

¹⁰⁹ British Library of Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics, Francis Horner Papers, bk. iv, fo. 139, Horner to J. A. Murray, 10 Oct. 1809.

Gladstonian Liberals. Evidence has been put forward to show that it was also the discrepancy between radical assumptions of the élite's utter greed and the actual comportment of élite politicians over a long span of years, dating back to the first decade of the nineteenth century. This essay shows that Pittite governments, continually prodded by Whig and independent M.P.s as well as radicals, had made at least one central feature of the "parasitical" critique of the British state — the rapacity of its élite operatives — less and less conformable with reality. The story suggests that in the end even the most enduring and seemingly "autonomous" political language is not entirely impervious to significant changes in the system it purports to describe.

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