‘The rising hope of those stern and unbending Tories’[1]: How High was Gladstone’s High Toryism 1832-41?

When a young Gladstone, aged just 23, entered the Commons for the first time in 1833, he quickly established a reputation as a High Tory. Certainly, Gladstone’s reactionary positions justify the portrayal of him as ‘a very hard-nosed Tory indeed’[2]. His votes and speeches as an undergraduate and as a young MP were deeply defensive of existing institutions and the hierarchical nature of society. This was further compounded at the end of the decade, with his inflexible defence of the Anglican Church Establishment in *The State in its Relations with the Church*, which prompted T. B. Macaulay’s celebrated but scathing review in the Whig *Edinburgh Review*, branding him as ‘the rising hope of those stern, unbending Tories’. This ideological expression of High Church Anglicanism unquestionably alienated the likes of Peel[3] and the more Liberal Tories, placing him firmly in the company of the High Tories on the backbenches. However, there are reasons to question the extent and logical consistency of Gladstone’s characterisation as a High Tory in the 1830s and this essay argues that while there were undoubtedly implicit High Tory elements within Gladstone’s thinking, such as his strong opposition to reform and his concept of the Anglican nature of the state, these were exaggerated by opponents like T. B. Macaulay. The rigidity of Gladstone’s social and political thoughts, despite his 1838 work *The State in its Relations with the Church*, was not as marked as has often been assumed. Instead, his Toryism already contained elements that would shortly facilitate his transition into the pragmatic Peelite politician that he became in the 1840s and even his evolution towards liberalism because in aspects of Gladstone’s thoughts practicality was already taking precedent over principles.

Gladstone’s concept of society in the 1830s was highly conservative. High Tories of the time, led by the likes of Viscount Sidmouth and Lord Eldon were strongly inclined in their preference for a traditional, hierarchical, almost neo-feudalist society over the emerging new ideas of utopian freedom and equality, and it was to this view the young Gladstone of the 1830s wholeheartedly subscribed. This differed from those Liberal Tories such as Peel who set out his support for the Reform Act subsequently in his Tamworth Manifesto. To Gladstone, any form of popular sovereignty could be only detrimental to society as the majority were to be ‘swayed by passions’,[4] and as such, ‘in the wrong’[5] on any arising issues. As he put it, ‘the right principle seems to me to be, not to give as much political liberty to the subjects as can be conceded compatibly with the maintenance of public order, but as little.’[6] This was because he saw the function of the British Constitution as permitting the living of a Christian life, not, as Enlightenment thinkers saw it, to set out the ‘natural rights’ of man. Shaped by his classical education, the intellectual foundations of his social and political thoughts were derived from his studies of Aristotle, the most important being the conviction that the world was governed by divinely sanctioned natural laws. Since he reasoned in Aristotelian terms, with the unit of analysis being society as structured by God, he had no place for the concept of the individual. His theocratic concept of society held that individuals were born into structured human societies, which were, in turn part of a wider, divinely ordered cosmos. Consequently, each individual occupied a specific place in this society, with the basic principle of fulfilling the obligations of that position in order to conform to God’s will. Man had no ‘natural rights’, but a series of obligations to his family, society and ultimately to God. Liberals and Radicals were fundamentally wrong to attach an intrinsic value to self-government and individual freedom. Gladstone’s highly conservative concept of society left no place for any form of individual freedom, expressing this in his essay of 1831, ‘a graduated state of subordination is the natural law of humanity… Civil government then is not a matter of opinion but of

[1] T. B. Macaulay, ‘Gladstone on Church and State’ (1839), in *Critical and Historical Essays* Contributed to the Edinburgh Review by Lord Macaulay, ed. F.C. Montague (1903), II, p. 331.
[2] H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-1898* (Oxford, 1997), p. 25.
[3] Peel threw his copy of ‘The State in its relations with the Church’ in the fire and stated, ‘That young man will ruin a fine career if he persists in writing trash like this!’
[4] I. St. John, *Gladstone and the Logic of Victorian Politics* (Anthem Press, 2010), p. 9.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

nature.'[7] Accordingly then, in the paternalistic High Tory fashion, he supported the 'moderate monarchism' of the existing constitution like the traditional Tories of previous ages, venerating its hierarchical nature with the state at the apex of the collective structure of paternal authority, whilst the role of the aristocracy in governance provided sufficient checks to restrain the King from tyranny, as it the divine duty of government was to exercise its paternal responsibilities for the welfare of its citizens. This was because Gladstone took a traditionally Burkean view of man, in common with both High and more Liberal Tories, arguing that the facts of human nature demonstrated that man required constraint by government if he were to follow his Christian duties. However, although Gladstone's conservatism was unmistakeably high, optimised in the phrase 'Some of them are to rule, others to obey,'[8] because of the importance he placed on the state in its paternalistic nature as the facilitator of an ordered society, not on individual freedom. His Toryism differed from that of traditional High Tories, because it was not based on the Burkean concept of expediency, and thus at this stage in his career he did not subscribe to the Burkean view of 'prescriptive rights', therefore to Gladstone, those things scared to High Tories, particularly the rights of property, had duties but no absolute rights. Instead, his concept of society was divinely orientated, with political truths being deduced from divine principles. Conservatism, to him, was not a negation but something right and desirable.

Gladstone then was a theocratic High Tory, shifting away from his Evangelical upbringing, through his acceptance of baptismal regeneration, towards the doctrine of the High Tories – High Church Anglicanism – which saw the emphasis placed on the importance of the relationship between the Established Church and the State. High Tories, particularly Eldon and Sidmouth, like Gladstone saw the state in very Burkean terms as an 'organic body', naturally rooted in the past and evolving over time. They looked back romantically to Middle Ages, through the works of contemporary Sir Walter Scott, as a time of 'laudable solidarity in the Christian faith'[9]. The state was 'not an aggregation of individuals but a community with a character of its own.'[10] It therefore had its own religious and moral responsibilities. Just like individuals, a state had a duty under God to distinguish between right and wrong. This High Tory view contrasted with that of Peel and the more liberal elements of the Conservative party, who were inclined to see the state more as a 'social machine'[11]. The moral and religious character of England was the Established Church, it represented religious truths, which no political debate could alter. Gladstone saw it not as a 'mere collection of men for religious purposes',[12] but as the 'concrete representation of the unseen Power that… had made and guides and rules the world',[13] and so the state and Church were inextricably linked in their roles, for if the state was to act morally and distinguish right from wrong and in turn promote stability, it must be guided by religion and thus the well-being of the Church was paramount. Therefore, Gladstone's position was one of a very High Tory theologically, and it is unsurprising then, that his High Tory view of society led him on religious issues, to rally around the call of 'Church in Danger'[14], a High Tory fundamental since the time of Queen Anne. He believed in the defence of the Established Church and its privileged position within society on the grounds of religious principle, not, as many more Liberal Tories did on the grounds of expediency – that as an institution it ought to remain in existence on basis of empiricism, as it was more beneficial to society than not – and so in this regard he can be considered a High Tory.

Gladstone expanded on this romantic conservatism at the end of the decade in his book entitled *The State in its Relations with the Church*. It was not only a reactionary work but an espousal of the doctrinaire theological position that put Gladstone firmly within the ranks of the High Tories of the Conservative Party. It demonstrated the continuity in his High Church position throughout the 1830s and was the culmination of his inflexible High Toryism. This was because it presented a defence of the Established Anglican Church as the primary role of the state on moral grounds and argued that the

[7] Gladstone in 1831, cit. in H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone*, vol. I (1986), p. 34.
[8] D. W. Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer, and Politics* (Oxford, 2004), p. 16.
[9] D. W. Bebbington, *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith & Politics in Victorian Britain* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), p. 50.
[10] Ibid.
[11] B. Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?: England 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006), Ch. 5: Liberal Toryism vs High Toryism.
[12] J. Morley, *Life of Gladstone* (1903), vol. I, p. 159.
[13] Ibid.
[14] En.wikipedia.org. 2020. *Church in Danger*. [online] Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_in_Danger> [Accessed 19 July 2020].

constitution of England represented an ideal that ought to be defended from the unrelenting threat of institutional reform by godless utilitarian, particularly when it came to Ireland. The opening sentence expressed this, "Probably, there never was a time… where the connection between the Church and the State was threatened from quarters so manifold and various as at present".[15] In Ireland, despite the vast bulk of the population being of Roman Catholic faith, the Anglican Church was the Established Church. Whigs and Radicals sought to solve this issue of conflict through the disestablishing the Church in Ireland and through the policy of 'concurrent endowment' – the giving of money to religious organisations outside of the Established Church – a process already practised by the Whig government in England and Ireland as schools received state grants despite not teaching the Anglican doctrine. Gladstone, on the other hand, argued that as the government of England had a much firmer grasp of religious truths than the majority of the population of Ireland 'in their destitute and uninstructed state'[16], what was needed was a far more active presentation of the Anglican truths to the Irish peasantry. His solution was thus highly conservative and doctrinaire because his dogmatic interpretation of the role of the state meant he was utterly opposed to the actions of the Whigs and Reformers. Further still, not only did Gladstone oppose the actions of the Whig governments of the 1830s over Ireland but also those aspects of the Liberal Tories, including Peel, who were in favour of the state's annual Maynooth Grant to fund the training of Catholic priests, because it entailed the state actively supporting what he described as, 'an institution whose avowed and legitimate purpose it is constantly to denounce that truth [Anglican doctrine] as falsehood'.

However, in seeking to justify his conservatism on the grounds of principle, Gladstone differed from most Tories. Despite sharing many of the romantic and paternalistic qualities, his deduction of political truths was from first principles, whereas most Tories, both High and Liberal, sought only to justify institutions on the grounds of expediency and empiricism. Although High Tories were traditionally also heavily influenced by Burke and S. T. Coleridge in their understanding of the state, seeing it 'not an aggregation of individuals; [but] a collective body'[17], thus possessing a moral conscience capable of professing religious truths, in the same way that Gladstone did. Rather than merely resist change, as most High Tories did, which he saw as ultimately leading to the gradual accommodation of the liberal pluralist state. He believed that through a strengthened Church of England, 'a revitalised Tory Party would have to stand for a set of convictions or else by swept away by the tide of history'[18]. Therefore, his characterisation by Macaulay as 'the rising hope of those stern unbending Tories' can be seen as an exaggeration because, through his abstract reasoning he sought to develop a coherent ideology of constructive Conservatism based off principles, centred around the Church as the spiritual embodiment of the state. This was designed to arm future Conservative governments with a moral defence of existing institutions, rather than to simply defend the status quo and resist all forms of change, precisely to avoid the threat of the destruction to the stable and ordered society of the Early Nineteenth Century that he saw the Whigs and Radicals posing and counter the rise of utilitarian philosophy.

For all of Gladstone's High Church Toryism in the 1830s, there were nevertheless liberal chinks apparent in his armour. His High Tory theories were abstract and entirely doctrinaire, and so not tested or practically applicable. Derived from his classical education, his thoughts were intellectual and constructed out of reflection and reading, further reflection and reading could change them, as did the influence of Edmund Burke upon his thoughts. From Burke, not only did he seek the intellectual and historic backing for his ideas, but he also derived the pragmatism that would define his later career. He began to value an 'appreciation of the circumstances and their results'[19], because 'the circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind'[20].

[15] W. E. Gladstone, *The State in its Relations with the Church* (Second Edition, 1839), p. 1.
[16] W. E. Gladstone, *The State in its Relations with the Church* (Second Edition, 1839), p. 80.
[17] D. W. Bebbington, *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith & Politics in Victorian Britain* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), p. 54.
[18] D. W. Bebbington, *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith & Politics in Victorian Britain* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), p. 39.
[19] J. Morley, *Life of Gladstone* (1905), vol. II, pp. 240-1.
[20] Cit. in C. Cruise O'Brien, 'New Introduction' to M. Arnold (ed.), E. Burke, *Irish Affairs* (London, 1988), p. XIII; cf. E. Burke, 'A Letter from Mr Burke to a Member of the National Assembly' (1791), in *Reflections on the French Revolution and Other Essays* (Everyman's edition, 1943), pp. 276-8.

This led him to conclude that 'ideals in politics are never reached'[21] contrasting with the Platonic idealism of the notion of perfectibility and 'utopian conservatism' that had shaped his thought thus far. As such, aspects of the pragmatic liberal politician that he was to become were already visible, most prominently on the issue of Catholic Emancipation. In contrast to many Tories, particularly those High on the backbenches who never forgave Peel and Wellington for their 'betrayal', with the High Tory literary journal *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* observing, 'Mr Peel's public life has been one continuing course of despicable, grovelling, mercenary faithlessness to principles and party.'[22] Yet in harmony with both his father John Gladstone and fellow Liverpool politician George Canning, also a 'Catholic' on emancipation and someone he had known from a young age, Gladstone seems to have been consistently in favour of Catholic Emancipation. On hearing the news of the defeat of Burdett's motion in the Commons in 1827, Gladstone noted, 'I trust it is all for the best, but the prospect is awful.'[23] This intimates Gladstone's primary concern on the issue was one of the prospect of disorder and unrest, despite the fact that Catholics would be in government helping to run the Established Church, which was directly contradictory to his theories expressed in *The State in its Relations with the Church*. Emancipation was justified upon the grounds of prudence over principle. This sense of pragmatism, surfacing as a result of the influence of Edmund Burke upon the young Gladstone, was to reappear throughout his High Tory phase of the 1830s, even within his most inflexible work, *The State in its Relations with the Church*. On religious issues in Ireland, in spite of the assertion of principles that guided his thought, the practical Peelite politician that Gladstone was to become was evidenced. Gladstone, in response to Macaulay's jibe 'Why not roast dissenters at slow fires?', which suggested that he had not followed his own principles through to their logical conclusions by not advocating for the persecution of those who did not conform to the Established Church, argued in favour of toleration. Though convinced that 'the general proclamation of Scriptural religion throughout Ireland'[24] would win converts in itself, Gladstone argued in favour of toleration on the grounds that there was no divine warrant for the use of force in religion, and thus conceded a degree of the religious freedom that he was to become such a staunch advocate of as his career continued to progress. Therefore, the designation of Gladstone as a High Tory must be considered an overstatement in this regard because already there were clear signs that the rigid principles upon which he built his social and political thoughts were susceptible to other ideas, practicalities had already begun to take precedent over principles.

Although Gladstone's deep hostility towards the Reform Bill of 1832 was certainly an important factor in his characterisation as a High Tory, his stance on reform differed significantly from that of the High Tories, despite coming to the same conclusion of opposition to the bill. In this sense then, his categorization by the likes of Macaulay as a High Tory can again be seen as an over-exaggeration arguably for political gain. Instead, more akin to Peel and the liberal elements of the Tory Party, Gladstone was opposed to the extreme nature of the proposed Whig Reform Bill, not the prospect of reform in itself as High Tories were, describing it as 'a revolution bill and *not* a reform bill', and seeing it as an attempt to wholly reconstruct the electoral system and even the constitution. Gladstone's opposition to the bill arose out of the growing threat of reform to the existing structures of social and political organisations from Radicals along the godless lines of utilitarian principles. He described the bill as a 'monstrous' measure which threatened 'not only to change the form of our government but ultimately to break up the very foundations of the social order.'[25] It not surprising that the young Gladstone was deeply and fundamentally opposed to such constitution change that threatened a system in place since the fifteenth century as was being suggested in 1831. Moreover, he feared that radical reform of the state would undoubtedly be followed by Church reform. It was this existential threat of Church reform posed by the Whigs, along utilitarian principles, that drove Gladstone to resist the Reform Bill of 1832 with the vigour that he did. However, despite Gladstone's fundamental opposition to the Reform Bill he was never of a High Tory when it came to the principle

[21] Morley/Gladstone dialogues at Biarritz (16 Dec 1891), in Briggs (ed.), *Gladstone's Boswell*, p. 201.
[22] Cit. in R. Blake, *The Conservative Party: From Peel to Major*, Revised Edition (1977), p. 34. H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (1969), quoting *Blackwood's* XXVII (1830), p. 41.
[23] S. G Checkland, *The Gladstones. A Family Biography 1764-1851* (1971), p. 114.
[24] I. St. John, *Gladstone and the Logic of Victorian Politics* (Anthem Press, 2010), p. 14.
[25] I. St. John, *Gladstone and the Logic of Victorian Politics* (Anthem Press, 2010), p. 3.

of reform. Though he saw merits in the old system, particularly in regard to pocket boroughs – through which he was first elected in 1833 – because they were a good example of that 'representation of the mind, for the political training of youth upwards, of the most capable material in the country'[26], he was definitely not an 'ultra' Tory, as those High Tories who opposed any measure of reform were called. He famously denounced Wellington's administration in 1830 by carrying a motion of no confidence against the Duke upon election to president of the Oxford Union when the Duke, in an attempt to reconcile with the High Tories after the 'betrayal' on Catholic Emancipation, declared opposition to all parliamentary reform in the belief that the constitution had reached a state of perfection upon which no reform could improve. Instead, Gladstone did accept the need for modest parliamentary reform albeit regrettably, because he recognised that there were 'major' anomalies present within the political and ecclesiastical aspects of the constitution that could not and should not be defended.[27] He expressed this in an unpublished pamphlet in July 1831, declaring that if in the 1820's measures were introduced that targeted proven abuses of the system, such as moderate franchise redistribution or corruption, then he believed that 'rational men would in general have admitted that the object was fair and attainable and that the means proposed did not necessarily imply the action of any destructive principle'.[28] Therefore, the categorisation of Gladstone then as a High Tory can again be seen as inaccurate because, despite his fundamental opposition to the bill, he appeared not to be against the prospect of moderate political and ecclesiastical reform in itself as many of the High Tories, such as Lord Eldon and most other Tory peers were[29], but the prospect of continued extreme reform based on a godless ideology, which he saw as posing a grave threat to the institution most sacred to him and upon which society and the state depended, the Church.

Whilst Macaulay's now infamous remark may have stuck, serving to define the young Gladstone of the 1830s both to contemporaries and historians. His characterisation of Gladstone as the future of the High Tories, bound to rebel against the more moderate leadership of Sir Robert Peel, in the phrase, 'the rising hope of those stern unbending Tories' appears to be a relatively inaccurate description. Although Gladstone's Conservatism throughout the decade appeared to be predominantly unyielding, or as Matthew puts it, 'characterised by boldness'[30], typified by reactionary, anti-egalitarian responses to the changing nature of the society around him, culminating in *The State and its Relations with the Church* in 1838. The definitive traits of his later years were already in the ascendency. Having consistently supported Catholic Emancipation and the strengthening of existing institutions with the times through moderate franchise reform, it demonstrated the importance he already placed on circumstance and practicality over the importance of the assertion of principles, ironically more in keeping with Macaulay's other now famous remark, 'reform that you may preserve'[31] than his jibe at Gladstone. Gladstone's Toryism then already contained the elements that would facilitate his transition into the pragmatic Peelite politician that he was to become in the 1840s and onwards into liberalism. The 'rising hope' definitely did not go on to disappoint over the next six decades in perusing the course of liberalism, much to the frustration of 'those stern and unbending Tories'.

[26] H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-1898* (Oxford, 1997), p. 24.
[27] H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-1898* (Oxford, 1997), p. 26.
[28] 'Report and proceedings of the opening of the Liverpool Collegiate Institution' (1843), p.13.
[29] It must be noted however that a sizeable number of Tory backbenchers, had, since the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act, come to favour moderate franchise reform so that the government would have to more accurately represent popular opinion in future, as it was deeply anti-Catholic.
[30] H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-1898* (Oxford, 1997), p. 55.
[31] T. B. Macaulay MP, *A Speech Delivered in the House of Commons in the debate of Wednesday, March 2, 1831 on the Lord John Russell's Motion for leave to bring in a bill to amend the Representation of the People in England and Wales*, p. 30.

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