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The ‘local state’ in Regency Britain

MALCOLM CHASE

In his celebrated sonnet ‘England in 1819’ Shelley condemned Britain’s ‘rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know’. Shelley’s polemic was directed at a national government, struggling to exert control over a restless society in which the consequences of a post-war slump and political radicalisation were all-too apparent. But what of the *local* state? I want to explore the nature of local government in these troubled years and examine its contribution to the maintenance of social stability. Its contribution, I argue, was critically important not least for the way it was giving an increasing voice in grassroots government to society’s ‘middling sorts’, thus drawing them away from potential support for popular radicalism.

The history of local authorities is typically regarded as unglamorous. But in an age where a clergyman might be hanged in effigy in a dispute over church bell-ringing, or reading the Riot Act necessary to disperse a vestry meeting *inside* a church (both happened in 1820), it certainly does not lack interest. And those involved in local government certainly did see, feel and know the condition of their country. In seeking to explain how the United Kingdom withstood the forces of post-war social and political dislocation, it is to the local state that we must look. Too often, the actions of panicking magistrates at the notorious Peterloo meeting in Manchester, on 16 August 1819, have clouded the picture of Regency Britain. In saying that, I certainly do not wish to belittle the magnitude of the tragedy. Responding to an order from local magistrates, the Manchester Yeomanry charged a peaceful political demonstration, injuring over 700 and killing 18.¹ The casualty figures were shocking enough; but the unequivocal endorsement, first by Lord Liverpool’s Tory Government and then by the Prince Regent himself, of the Manchester magistrates’ decision to send in the troops, gave the tragedy a black and enduring significance. In 1761 more than fifty had died in Hexham, Northumberland, during the suppression of an anti-militia riot. However, in the popular memory it was Peterloo that became fixed as an unprecedented example of official violence. Furthermore, no Riot Act had been read at Manchester and the claim that the assembly was illegal was highly contentious.

Many of Shelley’s contemporaries shared the belief that Britain’s future was uncertain and potentially calamitous. The Scottish intellectual Sir James Mackintosh wrote gloomily of ‘a complete separation and enmity between the upper and lower ranks, the governors and the governed, the rich and the poor in society’.² Lord Holland, a leading member of the Whig opposition in Parliament, detected ‘a spirit grown up & growing every day throughout the country, against the nature & practice of our Government, & tending I fear to the separation of the Upper & middling classes of Society’.³ Another author declared that ‘The protection afforded to the Perpetrators of the bloody outrage of the 16th of August, clearly manifests a design to subvert the laws by those who are sworn to maintain them; and to establish on the ruins of the English Constitution, a military despotism’.⁴ ‘I compare the present time to the French Revolution’, a London shoemaker declared to an ultra-radical rally, adding ominously ‘we must arm ourselves as they did’.⁵

For the poorest in society, it was almost impossible to see beyond the biting economic recession of the post-war years. William Varley, a handloom weaver from Burnley commenced his 1820 diary with the comment, ‘the poor weaver is now very hard put to it’. He commented tartly on the ‘200 soldiers of Infantry and Cavalry’ garrisoned at Burnley: ‘these soldiers must be mentained if the poor weaver die in the looms’. On 1 February Varley wrote of the ‘unhuman and relentless masters of Burnley ... but poor vassal remember that a day will come when these base fiends shall meet their certain doom’.⁶ By the time he wrote the Prince Regent had become king, following the death of George III. Within weeks the government was plunged into controversy by the new monarch’s demand to divorce his queen, Caroline, and the nation was convulsed by demonstrations in her support. And all this took place against a rising background noise of increasing crime: in Wales and England, a sharp rise in indictable offences had occurred in 1817, a pattern that then persisted so that the level in 1820 was almost triple that of 1805.⁷

What kept this febrile nation under control? Moved by Peterloo and the stringent Six Acts (passed four months later, severely curtailing freedom of speech and assembly), historians have generally concluded that the repressive

policies of Liverpool's government are largely the answer. However, while we certainly should not underestimate the coercive power of the state, we should not exaggerate it either. The means to apply coercion were uneven and after 1815 were arguably diminishing. Policing was haphazard. A few large towns (such as Bath, Birmingham, Cheltenham, Leeds, Macclesfield, and Manchester) had police forces.⁸ Rather more had a night watch. Rural areas and most towns, however, still relied upon traditional parish constables, unpaid officers appointed by the local vestry or by the courts leet ('medieval survivals' that still administered aspects of government in around 500 English parishes). There is a surprising gap in our knowledge of how parish constables actually functioned at this time. It seems likely their numbers were diminishing in the post-war period, as parishes that had appointed multiple constables, because of fears of a French invasion, returned to peace-time levels. Grays Thurrock, in Essex, for example, appointed around six constables annually in the 1790s, rising to ten by 1803.⁹

Across Britain local magistrates could in exceptional circumstances call upon military assistance, primarily from the yeomanry regiments in their county. And in coastal areas, customs and excise officers offered a degree of additional support to local authorities. However, the debt-laden government of the post-war years cut public spending in defence and revenue protection alike, concentrating the latter on the Channel ports where smuggling was almost an industrial activity. Grays Thurrock was one of the many communities affected as its two excise officers were withdrawn, one in 1816 and the second in 1818, and never replaced.¹⁰ And ironically, given the prominence of Peterloo in our perception of these years, yeomanry regiments were allowed to dwindle once the war was over. By 1820 the combined strength of the four Essex regiments, for example, was only 418, against an official establishment of 784. Many corps were allowed to fall significantly beneath their agreed establishment. By 1820, of the 156 English and Welsh regiments, 46 operated at less than 90 per cent of their established strength, with some considerably poorer than that: for example Cardiff stood at 65 per cent and Havering (Essex) at 26 per cent.¹¹ In any case, after Peterloo magistrates became wary of calling out the yeomanry. In 1820 only 11 regiments were deployed to assist civil authority and, unsurprisingly, none was used in Lancashire and Cheshire.

However, it must be stressed that the picture in Scotland was utterly different. Only six of Scotland's 25 yeomanry regiments stood below 90 per cent effectiveness in 1820, and fifteen of them were called out to aid the civil power. Furthermore of Britain's nine effective volunteer infantry regiments, no less than six were Scottish and all were deployed on civil duties in 1820. None of England's regiments was.¹² Huddersfield and South Yorkshire accounted for two of the only three significant English yeomanry deployments in 1820 (Warwickshire was the third, policing a tumultuous election in Coventry). There were twelve such deployments in Scotland.¹³

The reasons behind this pattern are not hard to discern. The central industrial region of western Scotland was the scene of a significant radical rising at Easter 1820; so too was Yorkshire, in the woollen textiles communities around Huddersfield and the linen weaving centre of Barnsley to its south.¹⁴ Where the yeomanry were not deployed was during the Queen Caroline demonstrations; but, remarkably, Britain's other part-time soldiers, the local militias, sometimes were. To take one example, at Guisborough, the northernmost town in Yorkshire, Robert Chaloner, Whig MP for York, had his country estate. Chaloner illuminated his home to celebrate Caroline's acquittal, as did all the other leading Whigs in the district. The band of the Yorkshire Militia, of which Chaloner was major, accompanied a Waterloo veteran round the town. On the veteran's shoulder was a long pole, on the end of which was a green bag.¹⁵ The procession concluded in the market place. Here, on a site recently donated by Chaloner for a new town hall, the green bag was ceremonially burned to the singing of 'Rule Britannia'. The protest, a piece of street theatre that cast politicians and people together in patriotic opposition to monarch and his government, was repeated a week later.

It is easy to be distracted by the Caroline demonstrations and the Yorkshire and Scottish insurgencies that preceded them, and overlook the remarkable fact that the peace of Britain held at a time when that of several other European states did not. Repression and coercion are inadequate explanations for this phenomenon. We must look to the nature of the local state to understand what was going on, beginning by considering religion, then the character of local government bodies, and then the broader culture of local political establishments.

Many historians emphasise the secularisation of British society in the nineteenth century, but religion still mattered a great deal. Faith was both highly personalised and highly political. To judge by the diaries of the period, even those who seldom attended church and who were not given to spiritual introspection still prayed regularly. Anglicanism was the Established or state religion in England, Wales and (albeit increasingly incongruously) Ireland. In Scotland the Church of Scotland similarly enjoyed the status and privileges of Establishment. Clergymen were figures of substance. Around one in six of all Church of England ministers were magistrates. Their churches were typically a geographical and social focal point in their communities. Nor were absenteeism and the holding of multiple benefices as crippling to the Church's effectiveness as might at first seem. Only 40 per cent of English parishes were in the charge of a resident incumbent, yet consistent pastoral care seems to have been maintained and institutionally the Church of England was in the formative stage of a process of renewal.¹⁶ The formation of the National Schools Society in 1811 had (albeit belatedly) focused the Church's efforts in day school provision; and the Church Buildings Society (established 1817) signalled a new intent to remedy the increasing mismatch between the physical resources of the Church and the rapid growth of urban populations. The Government's million-pound grant to the Society, backed by the personal authority of the prime minister through the 1818 Church Building Act, represented a major investment by the state in the consolidation

and furtherance of the establishment. It is also worth noting that both nationally and locally, Methodist leaders went out of their way to emphasise their 'affectionate regard for the ecclesiastical establishment', 'without exception ... venerating her authority', and that many Methodists were 'regular attendants and communicants at the established church'.¹⁷ 'We are unanimous in our opinion', declared Burnley's local preachers, that 'we ought to respect every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether of the King, as Supreme Governor of this Realm, or of Magistrates acting under his authority'.¹⁸

With status and privilege went responsibility. The parishes of the Anglican Church and the Scottish Kirk were charged with the relief of poverty and considerable civil authority was vested in English parishes—a point to which I shall return. Similar assumptions underpinned the role envisaged for the Church of Scotland's approximate equivalent to England's vestries, the kirk sessions. In rural areas especially these exercised considerable influence in matters of social discipline. In urban communities, town councils were often enmeshed with the Kirk. Unlike England, where each parish levied a rate to raise the money needed to relieve poverty, Scottish poor law legislation was looser. Contributions by worshippers were meant to provide the core of poor-relief funds. Where these were inadequate a rate might be set on the landed proprietors of the parish. The revitalisation of voluntary donation was central to the Glaswegian ministry of the leading Scottish establishment divine of the day, Thomas Chalmers, whose vision of a godly urban society was widely admired and emulated.¹⁹

The cement that held Britain together was not, however, popular piety alone. The most powerful cohesive forces were arguably pragmatism and social deference. The landed elites of England, Wales and Scotland controlled their regions and local communities through a combination of economic power, patronage and a near-monopoly of national political processes. The fulcrum of this arrangement was the lord lieutenant of the county, an important vector of communication between central government and the regions, with responsibilities for the militia, maintaining law and order and nominating candidates to be appointed magistrates. The latter were Crown appointments from among the principal landowners of the county. They occupied a pivotal position in society: they could dispense summary justice for minor offences; at divisional (sub-county) petty sessions they tried lesser offences and decided which cases should go to higher courts; and they also exercised extensive informal social leadership. They did so by virtue of their office and the social stratum from which they were drawn: they had to be Anglican males who either owned freehold property worth £100 per annum or who were heirs apparent to property worth at least £300. In Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (a not untypical region) a population of 283,000 people yielded a mere 900 who were eligible to serve as JPs, less than one fifth of those qualified to vote in parliamentary elections for the county.²⁰ The maintenance of main roads, bridges, gaols and, increasingly, mental asylums were the responsibility of county magistrates, assembled at quarter sessions (which of course also tried those serious crimes which did not carry a death sentence). The sessions were a sphere of government that, in terms of the budgets at their disposal, was expanding rapidly: between the mid-1780s and 1829, 'expenditure funnelled through county rates [increased] fivefold'.²¹

The office of magistrate was central to good governance as the government well knew. Cabinet members were profoundly attentive to the voices of local *political* establishments. Their correspondence with provincial figures, be they dukes or postmasters, bishops or curates, was voluminous, but the Ministry took particular care to listen to and flatter the magistracy. What historians have widely seen as the cause almost of this government's undoing, its inflexible support for the actions of Manchester's magistrates at Peterloo, was arguably a key source of its *strength*. The Ministry knew that day-to-day government rested with and upon magistrates who dispensed justice and, through the quarter sessions, undertook significant amounts of the business of local government. The cabinet risked temporary opprobrium to keep secure a long-established principle of efficient government. Its policy was aptly summarised by the India Secretary George Canning (a future prime minister). Stressing 'the difficulty of our position in respect of the Mctr Case, & at the same time the absolute necessity of our maintaining it', Canning argued that

To let down the Magistrates would be to invite their resignations – & to lose all gratuitous service, in counties liable to disturbances for ever. If the nature of the danger is not now understood, & if, in understanding it, the Country Gent. are not prepared to meet it with the necessary firmness, there is an end to all the functions of government so far as it relates to the internal peace & safety of the Country.²²

So profound was the government's commitment to the defence of the Manchester magistracy that, shortly after Christmas 1819, it was prepared to face down criticism and secure for the Reverend William Hay (the leading magistrate at Peterloo) the living of Rochdale, one of the most lucrative in the country. The Home Secretary personally lobbied the archbishop of Canterbury to ensure the appointment.²³ Even more significantly, the Ministry risked the delicate balance of political relations in the West Riding, Britain's most populous county, by dismissing Earl Fitzwilliam from the lord lieutenantancy after he had appeared on the platform of a county meeting that had called for a public enquiry into Peterloo.

Fortunately it was possible to replace Fitzwilliam with another West Riding magnate of similar wealth and status, who would soon inherit the Harewood earldom. The importance of being able to make such a replacement was apparent a few weeks later when the Earl of Glasgow was appointed lord lieutenant of Ayrshire. This met hostility because he was 'an almost Entire Stranger to the County, with little Property in it'. Lord Aisla (pointedly writing

to the Home Office using his ancient Scottish title, the Earl of Cassilis) described the action as ‘an indignity offered to every great Landholder in the county’.²⁴ Of even greater significance in Scotland, however, was the office of sheriff, a central element in local government and the law (justices of the peace were vested with less authority in Scotland) and an appointment that governments took care to confine to politically pliant members of the Scottish social elite.

However remote from the common people sheriffs, lords lieutenant and magistrates might be in terms of social status, the localities that they led generally cohered around shared senses of regional identity, ethnicity, religious affiliation and self-interest. This contrasted sharply with the situation in Ireland. English radicals might still talk of the Norman Yoke, the concept that the aristocracy was an alien imposition, but this rhetoric was little heeded at the local level. The Irish aristocracy, however, was overwhelmingly just such an imposition, alien in terms both of ethnic and religious identity. The major landowners’ monopoly of the main instrument of Irish local government, the grand jury for each county, did nothing to obviate this impression, since the taxes these bodies imposed fell upon those who *occupied* the land and not its owners. Landowner influence through the grand juries, a distinguished Whig politician wrote in 1815, meant that ‘public burdens have augmented in a most formidable progression: the public works have become deteriorated in a similar ratio. The landlord is lowered in the general estimation, by his acquiescence in a corrupt system; the peasant is impoverished and the community is plundered’.²⁵

It is difficult to overstate the contrast between Irish and British local government in this period. Across England and Wales especially, a rapid evolution in the purpose and personnel of local government was increasingly visible. The stimuli for this were several: the diminishing authority of traditional landed elites in urban and populous rural communities; the challenge of applying a system of parochial government devised in the sixteenth century for a completely different set of social and economic circumstances; coping with the post-1815 economic recession and the social dislocation wrought by it; and the increasing assertiveness of ‘the middling sort’ in social discourse and affairs. Barely a quarter of English towns were incorporated boroughs (and many of those were nominal bodies, making little practical impact on their towns).²⁶ Yet it is boroughs that tend to dominate histories at the expense of the far greater number of less glamorous bodies involved in local government. It is to those bodies that I now turn.

Urban government was delivered through an often complex matrix of overlapping and sometimes competing bodies. Leeds well illustrates this, even though it had an active corporation. Few aspects of local government in ‘the principal seat of the woollen manufacture in England’ rested exclusively with its Corporation. Responsibilities were distributed across the corporation, the vestry, the court leet and an improvement commission established by a parliamentary act of 1755. Improvement commissions were an increasingly frequent method of circumventing the vested interests and limited powers of local corporations, or of bringing an element of corporate governance to communities where hitherto there had been none. Under the Leeds Improvement Act, members of the vestry elected fourteen commissioners who, with the mayor, recorder and borough magistrates, could levy a rate for lighting and improving the pavements. In time, the commission also acquired responsibility for water supply, nuisance removal, prosecuting encroachment onto the highways, the courthouse and the prison. The commission also enjoyed powers similar to those of a turnpike trust over the main roads of Leeds.²⁷ A separate act of 1815 established a police force and a night watch. Leeds was unusual at this time in having a designated police force (for day time duty as opposed to simply a night watch).²⁷ Most localities still relied on the erratic services of unpaid parish constables, supplemented in larger towns by a night watch if powers had been obtained from parliament to establish one.

Since it acted as an electoral college for several other bodies, elections to the Leeds vestry (by the principal ratepayers of the town) were keenly contested. Seven of the eight churchwardens were chosen by annual elections. They also formed a powerful tranche on a separate poor law board, which also comprised overseers appointed by the magistrates and trustees nominated by the vestry.²⁸ The vestry also appointed a highway surveyor who doubled as the collector of the rates. In addition it elected the commissioners of lamps, for many Leeds streets basked in gaslight after 1818 (more than fifty communities adopted gas illumination in the period 1818-1828, adding to the range of issues managed by their local authorities).²⁹ Finally the vestry also elected half of the town’s street commissioners, another quasi-autonomous body whose annual accounts the vestry had the right to audit.³⁰ This is a complex picture, but I make it to reinforce one of my main points, namely that local historians, even of the nineteenth century, ignore the vestry at their peril. Vestries were the work horses of local government.

Leeds also provides a good example of the contentious survival of ‘feudal’ elements.³¹ A manorial court leet, its jury drawn from resident householders, inspected weights and measures and prosecuted traders whose equipment was short of the proper standard. The court also prosecuted encroachments on the rights of the manor. In Manchester, which had no incorporated authority whatsoever, the court leet appointed officials to undertake these roles along with two constables and the boroughreeve. These were the town’s most influential citizens and *ex officio* members of the separately constituted police commission. However the latter, with several hundred members (650 were sworn in on one occasion) was independent minded and ‘almost democratic in character’.³²

Birmingham was similarly governed by a combination of manorial court, street commissioners and highway boards.

Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester provide striking examples of a historiographical penumbra: the improvement commissions. Numerous corporate bodies had been set up under local acts of parliament in the eighteenth century: around a thousand turnpike trusts; more than a hundred boards of guardians for the poor; and commissions for improvement, paving or drainage in around 300 towns.³³ 'In Scotland, where there were fewer improvement acts, clubs and societies sought to direct and invigorate municipal action'.³⁴ Other local acts, procured at a pace determined solely by local preferences, advanced standards of public life piecemeal and unevenly. Thus the Hastings Streets Act of 1820 required each householder in the Sussex port to sweep the pavement outside his home, collecting the detritus ready for collection by a public scavenger; but a not dissimilar requirement had been made of Coventry's householders as far back as 1419, while the eighteenth century had seen a steady advance of commissioners with local powers of this nature.³⁵ Cheltenham, Hastings and Worthing obtained regulatory control over hackney carriages in 1820. From the rates it levied, Worthing's improvement commission also provided a fire service and erected groynes on the beach to arrest coastal erosion.³⁶

Membership of improvement, street and lighting commissions, it should also be stressed, involved no doctrinal tests. They did not fall within the remit of the Test and Corporation Acts which excluded non-Anglicans from public office; and, although parliament relaxed that much-deplored legislation, by annually passing an indemnity Act, the extent to which dissenters or Catholics actually applied for indemnities is far from clear.³⁷ Furthermore, as should already be clear, there was also a wide variety of other corporate bodies (with various elective franchises all similarly free of religious qualifications) overseeing roads, drainage, poor relief and aspects of local government. In addition, around 500 manorial courts were still extant across England, actively responsible for drainage, roads, hedges, fencing, and occasionally (as at Leeds) market regulation.³⁸ Manorial courts were far from anachronistic or vestigial survivors.

However the basic unit of local government, ubiquitous because they covered the whole of England and Wales, overlapping the jurisdictions of all incorporated boroughs and commissions, was the vestries. That of Leeds was unusually busy, but not atypical of the central role a vestry would often play in local life. Conceptually and constitutionally vestries were linked to Anglican parish churches; but they potentially comprised all the rate payers (male and female) of a parish, irrespective of religious affiliation, who cared to attend. In theory, declared the poet laureate Robert Southey, 'every parish being in itself a little commonwealth, it ... might be almost as well ordered as a private family'. However, he opined, 'the diseased growth of parishes frustrated the political as well as the religious purposes of our old parochial system'.³⁹ Vestries were potentially very open, and therefore contentious, bodies. One commentator deemed bull-rings, prize fighters' parlours and the French parliamentary chamber decorous compared to the quarterly finance meetings of the Manchester vestry.⁴⁰

Vestries were particularly charged with administration of poor relief, the cost of which had been rising steadily since the 1780s.⁴¹ In the rural south especially, they might set paupers to work at wage levels agreed with local employers, which tended to depress wages across the parish as a result. Most vestries pursued robust policies to exclude outside labour, fearing that in times of hardship such workers would become a drain on the rates. 'Even if it was not the predominant employer in the parish', a recent study comments, 'in many if not most areas of the south of England the vestry had by the 1820s become the de facto regulating authority for rural labour'.⁴² Control of relief also placed a potentially powerful tool for social policing in the hands of a vestry, especially where discretionary relief was concerned. For example, in the Hampshire parish of Fawley, William Butler applied for two shirts in January 1820: 'he being a very old man the Vestry allows them', noted the clerk. However, the previous year another applicant, on requesting a pair of shoes, was met with a flat refusal: 'not granted, keeps a dog'.⁴³

Vestry responsibilities also included highway repair and policing. During the eighteenth century vestries had also become involved in maintaining parish fire engines, inspecting slaughter houses and suppressing gin shops.⁴⁴ Various strategies were devised to increase administrative efficiency and place vestry governance more firmly in the hands of local oligarchies. Especially in the north-east, self-perpetuating 'four and twenties' (vestigially linked to the tenure of particular pieces of land) appropriated much vestry business. Leeds had excluded the poorest ratepayers from participating in elections to its vestry. Some London parishes had placed executive responsibilities in the hands of a socially 'select' vestry as early as the seventeenth century. St George's, Hanover Square, was one of the most successful of these.⁴⁵

This takes us to the heart of the rapid evolution in the purpose and personnel of local government in the Regency years. It was a resident of St George's, Hanover Square, who took the chair of the House of Commons Select Committee established to investigate poor law relief in 1817. The MP for Christchurch, William Sturges Bourne, then embarked on 'the most ambitious attempt to reform the poor laws undertaken between 1601 and 1834'.⁴⁶ The two 'Sturges Bourne Acts' (1818 and 1819) sought both to render poor relief more efficient and its management more socially exclusive. The first, which was compulsory, awarded multiple votes to those with the heaviest-rated properties (an additional vote for each £25 of rateable value over £50, up to a maximum of six votes). This was the first time that plural voting upon a property basis within a single electorate was introduced.⁴⁷ The second Act

permitted these lop-sided electorates, on a two-thirds majority, to devolve poor law responsibilities to a standing committee of between five and twenty 'substantial householders'. This Act was also the first step towards professionalising the administration of poor relief, by permitting the appointment of assistant overseers, facilitating the detailed investigation of claimants' circumstances and day to day management of parish poor relief activities. Around 2000 assistant overseers had been appointed by 1822.⁴⁸

One seasoned Essex lawyer described the years from 1820 as the 'Select Vestry Period'.⁴⁹ The term swiftly passed into common parlance as vestries rushed to apply these new powers. Although no central listing of parishes adopting the Sturges Bourne Acts was compiled, the rate at which this enabling legislation was taken up was impressive. Around a fifth of all Oxfordshire parishes adopted it, for example.⁵⁰ Nationally there were 2,006 parishes operating select vestries by March 1822 and by 1827 some 2,868.⁵¹ Select vestries were particularly favoured in populous parishes. Prior to 1820, for example, Liverpool's vestry had managed its affairs 'very badly'; by 1821 a saving of 30 per cent had been achieved on outdoor relief, rising to 56 per cent the year after. Significant, though smaller, economies were also achieved at the workhouse. Salford achieved a 45 per cent saving. At St Mary's, Lambeth, rates fell from 4s 10d in 1819-20 to 2s 11d by 1822. As A.D. Harvey recently showed in this journal, in 1819-1820 attendance at vestry meetings at St Matthew's, Bethnal Green was estimated to be between 1500 and 2000. Reading the Riot Act was necessary in April 1820 to disperse one meeting at St Matthew's. Implementing a select vestry, on which only the hundred wealthiest ratepayers were eligible to serve, reduced popular interest in parish politics and attendance at Bethnal Green's full vestry (now meeting only annually) to around 600.⁵²

The introduction of a select vestry did not merely signal fiscal prudence. The 1819 Act required 'Select Vestries to take into consideration the conduct of the persons to be relieved'.⁵³ In Burwash, Sussex, a select vestry was established in 1819 and immediately sought to promote a moral reformation among the poor of the parish. Those it deemed to have become unemployed by their own misconduct were denied parish employment. An allowance was withheld from a father 'in consequence of his Sons behaviour in the Street'. There were attempts to cut by a shilling the weekly doles of those who 'follow smoaking', and to deny payments to dog-owning claimants. The select vestry instructed the parish constables to check licensed premises for pauper drinkers and in April 1820 printed lists of 'Paupers receiving relief' were given to each publican for 'conspicuous' display.⁵⁴ The same month also saw a riotous assault on the poor law overseer by four men denied dole. Prison sentences of between two and twelve months were handed down to them at the next assize. In all, thirteen cases from Burwash were brought to the assizes between 1819 and 1822, a 'stark contrast to the absence of any Burwash cases sent to the Assizes between 1806 and 1818'.⁵⁵ This may seem perverse evidence to offer about the role of the local state in keeping the peace; but the obverse of such incidents was the rapidly developing role being given to the middling sort in the local state.

In retrospect, but only in retrospect, parish government in the 1820s was on the brink of a rapid demise which was precipitated by the New Poor Law of 1834.⁵⁶ But contemporaries saw in these late Regency reforms both the prospect of reversing the spiralling cost of poor relief and a welcome reinvigoration of the local political status quo. And so it proved: across England and Wales expenditure was reduced by over 13 per cent in the two years to March 1822. Parish officers commended select vestries as 'very useful', 'essential', 'a great saving', 'a great benefit', 'a considerable benefit', an 'infinite service'; 'the annual expenditure has been greatly reduced in consequence'.⁵⁷ 'By clothing the parishioners with authority', a Welsh magistrate wrote, select vestries had arrested 'the progress of an evil, which is making rapid strides to overwhelm the resources of the country'. 'Sloth and idleness, the handmaids of vice become his welcome guests', unless the vestry could restrict the relief the pauper receives.⁵⁸ Where adopted, the Sturges Bourne legislation systematised parish government and did so exclusively in the interests of the elite. These were enclosure acts, but the space they enclosed was not land but sites for open discussion and the expression of dissent. 'A Parish or Township is a kind of republic', wrote a Liversedge (West Riding) enthusiast for select vestries: 'its common business, as far as it is conducted by majorities, is conducted as the business of a republic often is; without system, without consistency; and, therefore, without the best effect'.⁵⁹

Again, contrasting the situation in England and Wales with that in Ireland is illuminating. The refinement of vestry government just described was not operative in Ireland; nor did an effective ecclesiastical establishment work in tandem there with civil authority. Whereas the story of local government in Britain is essentially one of central government reposing its trust in traditional institutions to adjust to new conditions—haphazardly and unevenly but adjusting nonetheless—the story in the second most-populous nation of the United Kingdom is a narrative of central government distrust and intervention (often military) in a system with limited capacity for effective self government. The problems of governing Ireland, without using military force to an extent that would have been anathema in Britain, constitute a vivid counterfactual argument. It illustrates how much strength the State drew, first from the English and Scottish Established churches; second from the voluntarist ethic underpinning local government in Britain; and third from local government's capacity for innovation and accommodation. None of this was evident in Ireland. Firstly, around four-fifths of Ireland's 6.8 million people were the incongruous Roman Catholic subjects of a staunchly Protestant monarchy, entirely unconnected to the established Church of Ireland except as tithe payers, and largely ignored (but occasionally hassled) by a

government whose authority derived from a distant parliament. They could vote in elections to the latter (if they otherwise met the requisite qualifications) but they could not be members of it. From such public offices as were legally open to them, they were almost habitually excluded. 'For the Catholic middle classes, the refusal to grant full political rights left a legacy of distrust and resentment against the Union'.⁶⁰ Outside the principal cities there were few institutions anyway that might have secured the active participation of the middling sort, whatever their faith. Even if parochial vestries functioned, there was no poor law to be administered.⁶¹

There were several points in the post-war years when the forces of social control and political order seemed close to rupture in Britain, and yet they held. Having sketched what those forces were on the ground, it is possible to answer the question, *how?* I want to make three points, about the reform of local government, about the established churches, and about paternalism.

Firstly, reform. The framework of local politics was easing to accommodate more of the middling sort, who had hitherto been marginalised or excluded from such activity. In England especially, ongoing changes in the form and nature of local government were acting to strengthen social cohesion. Significantly, this process was conspicuously absent in Ireland. Since the early eighteenth century, innumerable local parliamentary Acts had unevenly but steadily enhanced standards of public life. 'The rise of the parish as a dynamic politico-governmental forum' was one of the most notable features of the political landscape of the contemporary political landscape.⁶² Through the select vestries Acts a rapid evolution was achieved in the purpose and personnel of local government. Contemporaries saw in vestry reform a process through which local politics could be reinvigorated, as well as a powerful instrument for controlling poor relief expenditure and the poor themselves. Improvement commissions and select vestries both consolidated a sense of involvement in, and ownership of, local government among more-substantial ratepayers who, however, fell below the threshold for service as magistrates and, typically, also the parliamentary franchise. Such bodies therefore had a powerful symbolic as well as practical value, especially during a period of heightened social tension. Sturges Bourne was disarmingly honest about the purpose of select vestries. Referring to the tendency of open vestries 'to excite a violent democratic spirit', he told a Northumberland clergyman that his legislation 'was intended to counteract that spirit, which had driven men of property from the Vestry'.⁶³

It is a commonplace of British history to portray the decades after 1832 as the age of reform, and to depict 1832 specifically as the point at which the middle classes were incorporated into the body politic. That, however, was a drawing out of processes that had been established earlier. It is not an exaggeration to claim that the late Regency years were ones of *reforms*, if not *Reform*.

Secondly the established churches. Just as with local government, the quiet renewal and reform of the ecclesiastical establishment is easily obscured beneath the dazzling irreverence and blasphemy evident in so much of the popular literature of the period. Liverpool's 'Million Act' of 1818 quickly bore fruit in a government-supported programme of church building and the division of the most populous parishes. It is important not to exaggerate the practical impact of this act, but psychologically it served to bolster the confidence of a hitherto sagging Established Church. We should note too that the main Protestant sects likewise tended to quieten rather than excite politics. In some Welsh counties, for example, dissenting meeting houses were opening as frequently as one every fortnight during the early nineteenth century.⁶⁴

Thirdly paternalism. The local state in Regency Britain worked—and considering the broader economic and political context in which it had to operate, it worked remarkably well. In the crisis year of 1820, some of the most serious cases of disorder arose when patterns of paternalism broke down, while rural Ireland provided a woeful exemplar of a society where paternalism was perfunctory or totally absent. During the 1820 general election the worst violence occurred at Banbury, after the victor refused to distribute rosettes for the customary victory parade. The Caroline demonstrations may have actually diminished social tension in the medium and longer term. They provided pretexts for spontaneous charity and paternalism, the effect of which was to diminish the perceived distance between the local political establishments and the politically and socially excluded. A close analysis of the complex micro-politics of these demonstrations also suggests that they were in part occasions through which popular control was reasserted over customary communal festivities and the 'ownership' of contested public space. They were also a form of social bonding, a collective statement about what constituted the local community, and a signifier of corporate strength among working people. Their importance lay as much in these consequences as in the ephemeral occasion of their causation. The frequency with which the Caroline demonstrations appear in later reminiscences and parish histories suggests they were incorporated into collective memory as moments that affirmed the distinctiveness of local culture, bound up with an affirmation of the viability of local governance.

Indeed, the very term *local government* emerged in this period, a coinage denoting something that had long existed but which was now assuming an even higher profile in public life.⁶⁵ And the local state worked at three levels: first, it delivered the unremarkable quotidian stuff it was supposed to do; second, it largely contained political dislocation, partly by licensing dissent (for supporters of Queen Caroline) and partly by adhering to customary notions of *noblesse oblige*; third, it provided a forum through which the middling sort of society,

excluded both from parliamentary voting and the office of magistrate, were increasingly involved in the business of government and thus became detached from political radicalism and unrest among the lower orders.

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