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“A Mighty Impartial Personage”: Disraeli’s Entry into the Tory Party

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Article abstract

A la lumière de certaines sources récemment mises à jour, l'auteur se propose de jeter un nouveau regard sur les débuts de la carrière politique de Benjamin Disraeli, c'est à dire sur les années qui précèdent son affiliation au parti conservateur. Si les historiens ont perçu le caractère désordonné et quelque peu excentrique de ces années comme étant tout simplement imputable à l'opportunisme de Disraeli, on estime ici que cet opportunisme doit être qualifié et que l'évolution qu'il a subit au cours de ces premières années a été vitale dans l'option apparemment abrupte qu'a prise Disraeli en faveur de ce parti.

Ces années ont, de fait, été des plus utiles. Les premières défaites ont vite instruit l'homme des enjeux de la politique et elles l'ont incité à réviser sa stratégie en fonction de buts à plus long terme ; de plus, il appert que, même si Disraeli a d'abord brigué les suffrages en tant que radical, il fut toujours, jusqu'à un certain point, un conservateur déguisé. Enfin, l'auteur souligne que, contrairement à ce que l'on a toujours cru, sa décision de se joindre aux conservateurs a été antérieure au manifeste de Peel et qu'elle n'a rien à voir avec les changements qui se sont opérés par la suite au sein du parti.

En somme, Disraeli s'est joint au parti de Wellington et de Lyndhurst et non à celui de Peel. Sa décision reflétait son désir de réintégrer une idéologie avec laquelle il avait des affinités ; elle manifestait sa confiance dans le futur et témoignait du mûrissement de sa perception d'un parti politique.

"A Mighty Impartial Personage": Disraeli's Entry into the Tory Party

WILLIAM A. HAYES

Benjamin Disraeli remains to a remarkable degree an elusive figure. Despite the steady interest he has attracted over the past century, a number of questions about his life and career have yet to receive satisfactory answers. Especially intriguing is the element of doubt which continues to envelope his first political ventures in the period from 1831 to 1837. B.R. Jerman's *Young Disraeli* did open to view some shadowy areas of his private life in these years, but threw little direct light on his politics.[1] The grounds for a debate remain, and it still tends to be conducted in rather polarized terms. The prevailing modern view would seem to be that the self-evident inconsistencies of his early course prove Disraeli a straight-forward opportunist. His partisans, following in general the interpretation inaugurated by his first "official" biographer, W.F. Monypenny,[2] would claim to find an inner consistency of ideas running through his career. Monypenny, much in the spirit of Disraeli himself, boldly rationalized his subject's youthful meanderings by arguing that he entered politics determined, perhaps naively, to be his own man and, placing principle above party affiliation, was really the opposite of an opportunist. Monypenny thus dismissed the issue of inconsistency as a product of overexuberance, though he did explain, rather cooly, Disraeli's final conversion to Toryism as a matter of expediency. Robert Blake, the author of the only full-scale modern biography, adopted in his reassessment a more critical approach.[3] He accounted for Disraeli's early movements as attempts, however awkward, to trim his sails to the strongest wind. But Blake did not trace in detail the course of Disraeli's opportunism and felt constrained to leave unsettled the question of his adherance to the Conservative party, the timing, the motives, and the particular circumstances.

The difficulty of establishing a definitive interpretation of Disraeli's early politics has always lain in the fact that one can find there pretty much whatever one seeks. The abundance of Disraeli's ideas certainly makes it possible to find, by selection, a coherent pattern, if that is the aim. His public pronouncements, collectively taken, cover virtually all the available positions and quite frequently he is found boldly maintaining contradictory views at the same moment. Very often, indeed, he resorts to a delphic ambiguity as in the case of his first election slogan at High Wycombe,

1 B.R. Jerman, *The Young Disraeli* (Princeton, 1960).

2 W.F. Monypenny and G.E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, six volumes, (London, 1910-20).

3 Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (London, 1966). The most recent biography, R.W. Davis' *Disraeli* (London, 1976) is a good deal more severe in its judgements.

"Disraeli and the People", which he opposed to his rival's "Grey and Reform". All of this sort of conduct may, of course, be taken as proof enough of a categorical opportunism. Such a judgement is fair up to a point, but not the further implication that Disraeli's opportunism was of the simple, unadulterated sort, as a close examination of the nature of Disraeli's opportunism, especially as it relates to his joining the Tory party, will show. In this regard his original bias in the direction of Toryism deserves more attention than it has generally received. The judgement of expediency did over-rule this instinctive leaning when Disraeli entered electoral politics in 1832. Circumstances dictated his particular approach and opportunism came naturally to a personality which combined most curiously powerful ambition and competitiveness with light and intermittent commitment to politics as a sort of game. Yet, at least after his initial failure, Disraeli, while still trimming his sails to the wind, did not pursue a short-sighted, *ad hoc* course of expediency. Moreover, his final turn to Toryism represented much more than mere expediency; it involved both a sort of homecoming and a maturing of his view of party.

Disraeli began his career at a time of great uncertainty in English political life when parties were exceptionally fluid and designations vague, but even by the standard of the day his performance seemed eccentric. Over a span of thirty months, he entered a total of five electoral contests. Though usually identifying himself, in very loose terms, as a Radical, he straddled a wide political spectrum; as Blake catalogued his rambles in merely the first year, he "first tried to get in with Whig consent . . . then stood as a Radical with a slight Tory tinge . . . then issued an address whose tone was near-Tory with a slight Radical tinge, and finally issued one as a strong Radical again."[4] In that posture he ostensibly remained until the general election of December, 1834, when he appeared as an independent favouring Peel's Tory administration. Not surprisingly his opponents early attacked him as a slippery adventurer, even a pirate shipping under false colours, or that Greville, on first encounter, wrote him down acidly as "a mighty impartial personage".[5] Perhaps necessity left him no option, but Disraeli's final defence was quite forthright; he declared, for example, in a campaign speech, "The people have their passions and it is even the duty of public men occasionally to adopt sentiments with which they do not agree, because the people must have leaders."[6] Such a statement seems to reflect, honestly enough, the instrumentalist philosophy of party upon which he acted. However, there remains the question of whether he held any fixed beliefs at all beyond this implied rather cynical principle of expediency.

No strongly held principles attracted Disraeli into politics. A more casual beginning to a great career would be hard to imagine. It appears by his own later account that he first took a serious interest in politics while digesting, as a means of killing some idle hours on his Near East tour, some out-of-date reports about the Reform Bill struggle in England.[7] The abstract mastery of the parliamentary game which, in short order, he believed he had acquired convinced him he could master

4 *Ibid*, p. 92.

5 Monypenny and Buckle, *Beaconsfield*, I, p. 202.

6 Cited in Blake, *Disraeli*, p. 765.

7 See Monypenny and Buckle, *Beaconsfield*, I, p. 202.

active politics with equal ease. The drama of the struggle caught his imagination and soon brought him home determined to stand for election. But volatile enthusiasm did not reflect any real commitment either to reform or even to the pursuit of a political career. All the reform battle meant to him was an exciting opportunity.[8] When that battle was reaching its climax, he wrote with striking detachment to his sister, "I care very little whatever may be the result, as, under all circumstances, I hope to float uppermost",[9] and added later, "I really do not care about it, as I am more desirous of writing than ever."[10] The main belief moving Disraeli was faith in his own potential. The only consistent notes he struck were those of vaulting ambition and superlative self-assurance. His conviction of high possibilities was merely reinforced when, two years after the first awakening of aspiration, he finally witnessed a parliamentary debate: "[I] heard Macaulay's best speech, Sheil & Chas. Grant. Macaulay admirable; but, between ourselves, I could floor them all.... I was never more confident of anything than that I could carry everything before me in that house."[11] Notable in such private reflections is the absence of any apparent goal beyond attracting public attention through some dazzling display of talent. He never suggested to what purpose he would "floor them all" other than for personal satisfaction. This strikingly egotistical kind of ambitiousness, in combination with a strong competitive urge, did seem his major source of motivation.

Politics was always to Disraeli, as he later put it, "a great game". Its inherent challenge did much to sustain his interest. He consistently approached electoral contests from a sporting perspective, intense in his will to win but inclined to gamble and play with *élan*. Even his language reflected this viewpoint; he spoke, for instance, of his entry at Marylebone in 1833 as "a shy that might have succeeded."[12] More than once, when his tactics were criticized, he defended his honour violently. Frustration undoubtedly made him more aggressive during this initial phase when his competitiveness often found its only release in rather mean-minded, even bitter, critiques of the more successful young politicians he viewed as his rivals. Such an attitude certainly coloured his relations with Edward Lytton Bulwer, his fellow author and long-time friend whose superior success in literature, it at first appeared, would be duplicated in the political field.[13] Disraeli's jealousy of Bulwer was not at all mollified by the friendly, if patronizing, assistance received from him. Though Disraeli remained on

8 See Hughenden Papers, A/IV/E/32, Disraeli to Isaac D'Israeli, 22 October 1831, "If the Reform Bill pass I intend to offer myself for Wycombe." This and all manuscript sources used have been made available through the facilities of the Disraeli Project, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada.

9 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/14, to Sarah Disraeli, 9 March 1832.

10 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/23, 14 April 1832.

11 Ralph Disraeli, ed., *Lord Beaconsfield's Correspondence with his Sister* (London, 1887), pp. 15-6.

12 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/48, to Sarah Disraeli, 14 March 1833.

13 Bulwer had secured a seat as a Whig reformer in 1831 and appeared to be advancing rapidly. Disraeli at one point rather hypocritically attacked his opportunism in courting the Radicals, a tactic he was soon to pursue himself. Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/9, to Sarah Disraeli, 24 February 1832.

good terms with him and even emulated his strategy, the implicit head-to-head rivalry between the two men was obviously a prime stimulus to Disraeli. All of this goes far to explain the nature of his early political movements. For an ambitious gamester in politics, the inevitable approach was to adjust tactics and views to suit circumstances; opportunism was, in short, the natural course.

While acknowledging his evident shrewdness and considerable intellect, imagination and instinct were the governing traits in Disraeli's personality.[14] Although his approach to politics was both opportunistic and cavalier, he had, as one would expect, a certain instinctive bias. All indications are that it ran in the direction of Toryism. Given its context one should not make too much of his very Tory-like remark to his friend, Benjamin Austen, in November of 1831, "The times are damnable. I take the gloomiest view of affairs, but we must not lose our property without a struggle."[15] In Disraeli's relations with his strongly Tory family, there is more substantial, if subtle, evidence of his true leanings. Even allowing for natural loyalty, it is notable that young Ben's adopting the public posture of an advanced Radical did not at all impair his close ties with the family. There is more than a hint that they always regarded him as a true-blue Tory at heart; in a letter written during the first campaign at High Wycombe, sister Sarah spoke cryptically of "the plan of regenerating and turning them [the Wycombites] all unconsciously into Tories."[16] Indeed Sarah, his closest confidant, attempted repeatedly to press her brother into an open Tory allegiance and his refusals were always grounded on expediency alone. But all of this was a matter of private sentiments and instinctive bias; at this stage Disraeli revealed no elaborated political position of any sort, but only scattered indications of a vague Wellingtonian Toryism. In public posture, the only sign was his consistent espousal of an earnest, if simplistic, nationalism.

Disraeli's first major political venture, although anonymous and literary rather than electoral, was very Tory in character. During the spring of 1832, he was entirely occupied compiling what he described to his sister as "a very John Bull book which will delight you and my mother",[17] a propaganda piece with the cumbersome title, *England and France, or a cure for the Ministerial Gallomania*. The *Gallomania* episode has most often been dismissed as an aberration typical only of Disraeli's undisciplined and naive early course, yet it reveals much about his true feelings. While he was drawn into it partly by an eagerness to indulge in high political intrigue, it is impossible to believe he did not comprehend the project's implications or agree with its aim. The book's immediate target was Whig foreign policy, but its timing clearly indicated an intention to damage the reform programme. Its partisan colouring was obvious; John Murray, the publisher, and John Wilson Croker, editorial collaborator, were strong anti-reform Tories, and most of the material came from ultra-reactionary

14 His own dictum "imagination governs mankind" was surely based on auto-analysis. It may also be recalled that he later identified Peel's vital flaw as a lack of imagination; see Monypenny and Buckle, *Beaconsfield*, II, p. 306.

15 British Library, ADD. MS. 45908, ff. 43-4, 31 November 1831.

16 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/424, Sarah Disraeli to Disraeli, 12 May 1832.

17 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/8, 22 February 1832.

continental sources. At one point, despite the secrecy of his editorship, Disraeli was overtaken by a fit of caution and demanded the excision of some extremist material added by Croker, thus writing to Murray, "...it is quite impossible that anything adverse to the general measure of reform can issue from ... anything to which I contribute."[18] The protest seemed hollow, however, for he himself tried to rush the work forward so that it could be of use to the Tory leaders during the crucial Lords debate of early April.[19] Moreover, he was much pleased with the warm reception his work gained for him in important Tory circles. He was tempted, indeed, to commit himself openly to the opposition and only the extreme uncertainty of the political climate kept him from the step. An invitation to join the newly-formed Carlton Club he "thought ... expedient at present to refuse."[20] His reluctance proved well-judged, of course, since by mid-May reform had triumphed. The *Gallomania* itself proved a damp squib and an episode Disraeli soon preferred to forget.

With the success of the Reform Bill, Disraeli's realism took charge and overwhelmed any instinctive Tory bias. In early June he wrote of his Wycombe plans to Austen, "I start in the high Radical interest. Toryism is worn out and I will not condescend to be a Whig."[21] Circumstances were henceforth to determine his course. Judging, with no special insight, that reform meant the political tide must run in a Liberal direction for the foreseeable future, he saw no opening on the right. This conviction remained persistent in his thinking for the next two years.[22] The Tories, he implied to Austen, had been his first choice; his flippant dismissal of the Whig option did reflect some genuine aversion for their opposite. It was chiefly founded, however, on the fact that he had never made any headway in gaining the patronage of the aristocratic elite of Whiggery,[23] always an exclusive lot, and that he had already been rebuffed by the local Whig interest at High Wycombe. He would happily have "condescended" for, in his position lacking powerful connections and possessing only a dubious literary acclaim to recommend him, he could hardly afford to refuse aid from any quarter. In any case it is clear that his philosophy of party was at this stage one of simple expediency. He was still trying to obtain the acceptance of the Whigs when he declared as a "high Radical", a very malleable designation, especially in his hands.

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18 John Murray Company, Murray MSS., 30 March 1832. He also claimed that his foreign collaborators wanted nothing to do with any direct attack on the Reform Bill.

19 Murray MSS., Disraeli to John Murray Jr., 4 and 6 April 1832. The last minute push was not successful and the book did not appear until 17 April, too late to be of use to the Tory leaders in the Lords.

20 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/20, to Sarah Disraeli, 7 April 1832. The new club was at this point usually called the "Conservative".

21 ADD. MS. 45908, ff. 59-60, 9 June 1832. By "high Radical" he appeared to have meant an aristocratic Radical of the Lord Durham type as distinct from the "low" Radicals of, for example, the Birmingham Political Union.

22 Later he explained that it had been widely held at this time that the Whigs "were our masters for life". Monypenny and Buckle, *Beaconsfield*, I, p. 263.

23 When Disraeli first began privately to solicit influential aid for his entry into politics, he chose to style himself a "mild Whig", apparently meaning a conservative, but favouring reform. See Hughenden Papers, A/IV/G/11 and 14, from Mrs. Bolton, December 1831.

That, together with its placing him on the winning side of politics, made Radicalism the convenient option.[24]

Disraeli made his target High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire where he could at least claim a local connection through his family.[25] Despite the high hopes he constantly expressed, the choice was unfortunate, for conditions were generally unfavourable. Wycombe had long been and continued to be a "Whig town", very much under control of the upper merchant and small manufacturer class, among whom the Dissenting sects were represented in special strength.[26] Reform, although extending the boundaries of the parliamentary borough and multiplying the electorate tenfold, did not shift that electorate's centre of gravity very much. The only substantial landed proprietor, Lord Carrington, a Tory, had but minor influence; his son, Robert Smith, who held one of the two borough seats as a Whig reformer, owed it to the favour of the dominant interest. Facing this situation Disraeli had begun by casting his net as broadly as possible; he had complained to Austen, "...here is hard work for one, who is to please all parties."[27] While never abandonning this approach, he soon concentrated, as he learned he had to, on winning over the moderate reform forces. This proved more than merely "hard work"; an overture to Smith was turned aside brusquely[28] and his attempts by very roundabout means to contact the Wycombe Dissenters were fruitless.[29] The impenetrability of the Whig front at Wycombe was demonstrated unmistakeably when in mid-June a sudden by-election on the unreformed system took place, occasioned by the resignation of Sir Thomas Baring, the second reform member. It was not really surprising that Charles Grey, younger son of the prime minister, was sent down to contest the seat in preference to Disraeli. Doomed by this event to suffer his first defeat, Disraeli affected to see it as a betrayal by the central Whig leadership. As the man on the spot he knew, however, that his real opponent was the local reform interest. It was for this reason that he ignored the avuncular counsel of Bulwer, his London intermediary, to avoid burning bridges by overtly attacking the Ministry.[30]

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24 By late May he had begun to identify himself publicly with radicalism; see Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/32, Disraeli to Sarah Disraeli, 26 May 1832, which describes a banquet he attended honouring the leaders of the Birmingham Political Union.

25 The family had settled nearby at Bradenham House in 1829.

26 See R.W. Davis, *Political Change and Continuity, 1760-1885: A Buckinghamshire Study* (Newton Abbot, 1972), pp. 40-2.

27 ADD. MS. 45908, ff. 59-60, 19 January 1832.

28 Hughenden Papers, B/I/A/2, Robert Smith to Disraeli, 2 February 1832.

29 He attempted to employ his cousin, B.E. Lindo, a London merchant, as an intermediary with the Quaker merchants of Wycombe; see Hughenden Papers, B/I/A/7, 4 June 1832. At the same time his ally, Mrs. Bolton, was contacting nonconformist leaders on his behalf and wrote to him on 6 June, "... tomorrow I hope to give you some consolation about those broad brims. Imagine them in 'Pink and White' [Disraeli's colours]." Hughenden Papers, A/IV/G/1.

30 Bulwer who had secured for Disraeli the endorsement of several prominent Radicals became alarmed when his friend's campaign took an anti-Government turn. He had been somewhat misled by Disraeli regarding local conditions at Wycombe. See especially Hughenden Papers, B/XX/Ly/15, Bulwer to Disraeli, 17 June 1832.

The outrageously flamboyant style Disraeli adopted in his first Wycombe contest,[31] though it suited his theatrical impulse, was definitely calculated to catch the eye of potential supporters soon to be voters when the borough was "opened". He treated the by-election as a preliminary round in which he could begin to execute his strategy to circumvent the dominant power in the borough. By artifically distinguishing his position from that of the established reform party at Wycombe and presenting himself as an independent popular Radical, he hoped to pass them on the left while also winning support from the Tory right. Between the first and second contests he scarcely broke stride, holding a meeting attended by an odd mixture of extreme Radicals and Tories only two weeks after the June defeat.[32] His was an eccentric posture, but it served to reinforce the main thrust of the campaign he was launching. The central theme, independence, was well-judged, for it had long been a peculiarly sensitive issue in Bucks politics.[33] As his attack developed Disraeli adopted such democratic planks as the ballot, manhood suffrage, and triennial parliaments, but did so in terms which made his devotion to their principle doubtful and certainly separated him from other Radicals. He proclaimed them necessary as tools to "emancipate" the borough from the oppressive domination by the Whig Government.[34] The fact that his main opponent, Grey, had the appearance of a ministerial nominee, he naturally used to full advantage. In the course of the campaign he began expounding an elaborate theory of Whig oligarchism which, however historically specious, was to be of much use in the future. His strategy evidently did win over most of the Tory faction at Wycombe as well as Radical and other disaffected voters, but the total was not sufficient. At the poll in December, he lost again by a substantial margin.[35]

The second defeat at Wycombe was a very severe setback to Disraeli. He had been genuinely optimistic to the last[36] and, in addition to his exhausting personal effort, had sacrificed much more money that he could afford in his elaborate campaign. The disillusioning result forced him to rethink his position carefully. To begin with he resolved not to contest Wycombe again,[37] less from a loser's bitterness

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31 The only detailed account of Disraeli's campaigns is found in C.L. Cline, "Disraeli at High Wycombe: the Beginning of a Great Political Career", *University of Texas Studies in English*, XXII (1942), pp. 124-44, which provides an interesting but not very useful narrative.

32 *Bucks Gazette*, 7 July 1832. The report in this Whig organ was decidedly hostile, accusing Disraeli of being a Tory in disguise. At the time of his nomination, while declaring as a Radical, he had indeed welcomed the Tory support he was receiving, but claimed it was coming unsolicited because the Tories perceived he had the support of the people. *Ibid.*, 30 June 1832.

33 Davis, *Political Change and Continuity*, p. 86 ff.

34 See Disraeli's "Address to the Independent Electors of Chepping Wycombe", *The Times*, 5 October 1832.

35 Disraeli trailed with 119 votes to Grey's 140. The fact that most of Disraeli's supporters had voted only for him and not given their second votes to either of his opponents indicates, however, that he had been quite successful in attracting the disaffected extremes of the political community, both Radical and Tory.

36 Blake, *Disraeli*, p. 90.

37 He seems to have stated this to his opponent, Col. Grey; see Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/543, Sarah Disraeli to Disraeli, 12 December 1834.

than from a recognition that his style of attack had created a lasting hostility in powerful local circles. He had also to re-evaluate the short-range opportunism which had led him to adopt his posture of egregious independence at Wycombe. By adapting to immediate conditions, he had made himself a creature of circumstance, for after the election his vaunted independence meant only an awkward isolation. This sour outcome proved at least instructive; henceforth Disraeli began to see party affiliations and, indeed, party itself in a different light. He modified his approach and, while still alive to any opening, turned to pursue the longer term goal of building himself a solid base in politics through an association with powerful interests.

In the months following the second electoral defeat, Disraeli's political movements did appear to become more strikingly inconsistent than ever. They make some sense, however, in the perspective of his desire to build bridges which could end his isolation. His entering the Bucks County race under semi-Tory colours only days after the Wycombe poll was not the rash gamble it seemed. He had no expectation of gaining a seat and could not afford another expensive contest so soon; by issuing an address one day and withdrawing in favour of a Tory squire with better credentials the next,[38] he was performing an elaborate gesture designed to identify himself with the county agricultural interest. More particularly, he wished to establish a connection with the Marquis of Chandos, the acknowledged leader of that interest and a rising power in Bucks politics. Chandos, "the farmers' friend", was intent on creating a new country party beginning with the agricultural movement in Bucks. As an extreme "ultra" he was far removed from mainstream Toryism and Disraeli did not need to declare as a Tory to ally with him.[39] Though Disraeli found he could not obtain instant intimacy with the lofty heir of the Grenvilles, linking himself with the nascent farmers' movement was a good start towards broadening his own local base. Some weeks later he hastened to subscribe to the supposedly non-partisan Bucks Agricultural Association,[40] newly-formed by Chandos,[41] and over the following two years he assiduously, if intermittently, cultivated this valuable new connection.

Disraeli's somewhat startling swing back to extreme Radicalism in the Marylebone by-election only three months after his Bucks candidacy appeared much more like simple, *ad hoc*, opportunism. He did enter at Marylebone in a speculative frame of mind, but his handling of the situation reflects the same broader motives as in Bucks. This time he made two abortive starts, the second being the more revealing with regard to his thinking. In his first appearance he issued an address suited to the democratic character of the populous constituency, but withdrew well in advance of the poll.[42] His second start some weeks later was occasioned by the rumour that the victory of Sir Samuel Whalley, a moderate Radical, was likely to be overturned on petition. This time, however, he entered into clandestine, preliminary negotiations, of which he wrote home:

38 For the general circumstances see Monypenny and Buckle, *Beaconsfield*, I, pp. 220-2.

39 See Disraeli's explanation for withdrawing, dated 13 December 1832 and published in the *Bucks Herald*, 16 December 1832.

40 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/45, to Sarah Disraeli, 12 January 1833.

41 On this and all of Chandos' activities, see Davis, *Political Change and Continuity*, p. 118 ff, and *passim*.

42 On closer inspection he realized he could not succeed with the Radical support divided as it was. See *The Times*, 11 March and 13 March 1833.

> I have been closeted the whole morning with the leader of the Whalley party. I profess moderate radical principles . . . only what I announced at Wycombe . . . . Circumstances have occurred which render it not impossible that the Whigs will not oppose me.[43]

The arrangement, he felt, offered "every prospect of success", but his elation owed most to his having formed a working association with mainstream metropolitan Radicalism. He would now be running with a "party" at his back and had even a chance of the sort of *modus vivendi* with the Whig Government which many Radicals enjoyed. However, no final agreement was reached[44] and, in any case, the second by-election at Marylebone never did materialize.

It was in the context of the Marylebone venture that Disraeli produced his short polemic with the arresting title *What is he?*[45] The pamphlet featured a strong attack on Whiggism and a bold call for a new "National party". Yet most notable perhaps is the fulsome praise it simultaneously gave to Radicalism and to traditional country Toryism, the two political forces with which the author had sought to ally himself over the previous months. They made an improbable combination, but Disraeli did have more in mind than simply providing two strings for his own bow. He actually thought it possible to use both strings together, as his actions were later to show. His public proposal of a grand Radical-Tory alliance, though unrealistic, was by no means flippant.

The publication of the pamphlet in mid April turned out to be a sort of valedictory gesture. With the failure at Marylebone, Disraeli brought his many months of intense political involvement to an abrupt end and set aside the active pursuit of politics for most of the following year.[46] The focus of his life shifted once again to literature, to social climbing, and, by his own estimate, to idleness. He was also diverted, commencing in the spring of 1833, by the torrid romantic affair with Lady Sykes, so fully recorded by Jerman. Discouragement did play some part in Disraeli's retirement as well, but perhaps also the possibility that he had, at length, begun to learn the value of patience.

When Disraeli emerged from his temporary retirement, he was better prepared to play the political game. His approach, though still opportunistic, was a good deal more sophisticated and cynically methodical, if not notably more cautious, than it had been. High level politics had become the focus of his attention. When it came to judging the direction of the wind, he had the advantage of much sounder intelligence than before, drawing benefit from his success in upper social circles. His enthusiasm for politics did not revive in any evident way, however, until mid May of 1834 when, unexpectedly, signs appeared that Lord Grey's great reform ministry was nearing its end.[47] The

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43 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/52, to Sarah Disraeli, 6 April 1833.

44 See Hughenden Papers, B/I/A/53, Sir Samuel Whalley to Disraeli, 10 April 1833. Though he saw Disraeli's position as "in perfect unison" with his own, Whalley believed he should maintain "strictest neutrality" in the event of a by-election.

45 For text see W. Hutcheon, ed., *Whigs and Whiggism* (London, 1913), pp. 16-22.

46 Even political gossip virtually disappeared from his domestic correspondence.

47 The intense interest in politics returned quite suddenly; see Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/79, to Sarah Disraeli, 25 May 1834.

pressure destroying it issued from the left, not from the still impotent Tory right. Extreme Radicalism, Disraeli judged, was on the ascendant and its leaders would inherit power; the new phase would advance, not reverse, the trend begun by the Reform Act. It did not take him long to decide to resume his Marylebone posture and play his Radical card in earnest; a letter to his sister revealed his decision and the analysis underlying it:

> Everything is confusion . . . the Ministry cannot exist . . . . I think it must end in a dissolution, & that ultimately the Ultra-Liberal party will carry everything before them. I think myself, & I hope so that a Conservative Government may be formed for a short time, as we are certainly not matured sufficiently, though gaining gigantic strength every hour. But the Tories give up the game in despair.[48]

He had no sincere attachment to the policies of the Radicals,[49] but the conviction that they would win coloured his attitude for the balance of the year. It was other considerations which eventually deflected him to the Tory side.

The loose collection of individuals and small factions called Radicalism had begun, by early 1834, to look more like a proper party. One sign of this transition was the founding of a meeting place for the advanced Liberal elite, the Westminster Club, which was obviously intended to fill the same sort of role as Brookes and the Carlton. Disraeli enrolled himself in the club as one means of cementing his Radical connections.[50] To the same purpose he sought links with the leading lights of "ultra-Liberalism", hoping to secure their active patronage. It is ironic, in view of the fierce animosity later to colour their relations, that his first important contact was with Daniel O'Connell whom he found very "agreeable"; he told his sister, "I am not in his toils, and I wish I were, for everyone seems to lean on him in this storm."[51] This favourable encounter seems to have reinforced his decision to follow the Radical option.

It appeared to all that the true man of the hour was the Earl of Durham, and "Radical Jack" became the object of Disraeli's most earnest courting. Fortunately, a bridge was at hand; Durham frequented the social and literary circle of Lady Blessington to which Disraeli had ready access. He was following once more in the footsteps of Edward Bulwer who had, with Blessington assistance, already formed a close association with the radical Earl.[52] Disraeli's success was not to prove so complete, but he arranged to meet Durham at a dinner party, they chatted at length, and he considered the result encouraging.[53] When a few days later the great man paid a polite call at his residence, he took this to indicate an alliance was formed; he reported home in some triumph, "I am also right in politics as well as in society, being now

48 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/75, 2 June 1834.

49 See Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/76, to Sarah Disraeli, 4 June 1834. Disraeli implies misgivings about Durham's "violent" position.

50 The club was inaugurated in December, 1833. Disraeli had certainly become a member by the following summer, but tried hard to obscure the circumstances a year later when he was forced to defend his conversion to Toryism. A short history of the Westminster Club is given in *Nineteenth Century*, (May 1878), pp. 912-5.

51 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/75, 2 June 1834.

52 M. Sadleir, *The Strange Life of Lady Blessington* (New York, 1947), p. 301.

53 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/78, to Sarah Disraeli, 16 June 1834.

backed by a very powerful party, and I think the winning one."[54] Clearly, however, his assessment, whether honestly believed or not, was over-optimistic, for Durham had not in fact responded all that warmly to his doubtful new acquaintance nor was he prepared to make him an intimate associate.[55]

Although during the summer season of 1834 Disraeli may still have been interested in maintaining the second string to his bow, he clearly did not engineer, as he had with Durham, his first encounter with Lord Lyndhurst. Ironically, he discovered in the former Tory Lord Chancellor a far more approachable and congenial contact than Durham. Though separated by thirty years in age and supposedly by political outlook as well, the personal rapport between the two men was instant.[56] Their common ground lay in the fact that they were cut from the same cloth. Lyndhurst, lacking wealth or connections, had raised himself to great prominence by talent alone. Like Disraeli, his immoderate style in life as well as in politics had earned him a reputation more than a little shady, and the two shared a rather cynical cast of mind. Over the following half-dozen years, Lyndhurst was to exert on his young friend a decisive formative influence, but less through his rather ineffective patronage than through the model he provided. It is interesting to note the snobbish but acute remark of Lady Salisbury on first meeting Disraeli some time later, "...at times his way of speaking reminded me so much of Lord Lyndhurst, I could almost have thought him in the room. He is evidently very clever, but superlatively vulgar."[57] But at this point, Disraeli still judged that "the Tories [were] lost forever"[58] and saw, pragmatically, no profit in a serious political connection with Lyndhurst.

Unintended though this was, Disraeli's relationship with Lyndhurst did turn into a political partnership. Their personal closeness grew apace through the summer and autumn months. It followed a path complicated by the involvement of a third person, Lady Sykes, whom Lyndhurst was evidently pursuing with some passion. The operation of this triangle remains uncertain, but Disraeli, at least initially, did not try to exploit his mistress' influence over her second suitor.[59] He remained on his Radical course and it was Lyndhurst who took the initiative to recruit his young friend into a partnership. Towards the end of October, he disclosed to him a plan to upset the Whig Ministry and invited his participation. Since the goal was suited to his own established aim, Disraeli could join without hesitation. What Lyndhurst wished was to effect an alliance with the Marquis of Chandos and to arrange to challenge the Whigs on the malt tax and other agricultural issues when parliament resumed. Disraeli's acquaintance with Chandos and continuing link with the agricultural interest in Bucks made

54 Belvoir Castle MSS., to Sarah Disraeli, 19 June 1834.

55 This is made evident by the fact that Disraeli had to enquire of Lady Blessington, "What the opposition mean to do, and what is to happen." Princeton University, Parrish Collection, A.M. 19732, 2 July 1834.

56 Disraeli, ed., *Lord Beaconsfield's Correspondence*, pp. 26-7, 11 July 1834.

57 Carola Oman, ed., *The Gascoigne Heiress* (London, 1968), p. 248.

58 Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge University), to Sarah Disraeli, 16 July 1834.

59 For the story of this triangle, see Jerman, *Young Disraeli*, p. 233, and *passim*. The fact that Lyndhurst, who was not a landed proprietor nor even a very wealthy man, possessed no direct electoral influence anywhere no doubt made him, in Disraeli's eyes, much less eligible as a patron than someone such as Durham or Chandos.

him a natural go-between. He took up this role enthusiastically, not to improve his Tory connections, but because it suited his love of intrigue and allowed him a first excursion into the realm of high politics. Most of all, however, he was enormously flattered by Lyndhurst's freely-given intimacy.[60] The effect on his relations with Lyndhurst was the most lasting result of the project. Chandos proved, as always, a difficult customer and the alliance was far from being consummated when, on 15 November, the sudden fall of the government made all such scheming redundant.

The change of government followed the pattern which Disraeli had earlier anticipated, the Whigs being replaced by an interim right-wing Ministry with the likelihood that a more general reconstruction would soon follow. Its abruptness, however, caught him offguard and he was forced, in the crisis atmosphere, to move more quickly than he wished. Although his confusing movements over the next few weeks have the appearance of desperate scrambling, his course in fact had some method behind it and was consistent with the position he had been developing since Wycombe. He turned immediately to Durham and appeared to follow up his work of the previous spring. That at least is the way his intentions have been understood, but he was actually executing an ingenious manoeuvre which might have allowed him to straddle, as he wished, the Radical and Tory interests.

Disraeli's letter to Durham has often been quoted; it seems a simple plea for assistance:

> My electioneering prospects look gloomy. The squires throughout my own county look grim at a Radical, and the Liberal interest is split . . . . At present I am looking after Aylesbury, where young Hobhouse was beat last time, and will be beat this, if he try, but where, with my local influence, your party would succeed. If you have influence with Hobhouse, counsel him to resign in my favour . . . remember me and serve me if you can. My principles you are acquainted with . . . .[61]

To this he added some witticisms at the expense of the Tory leaders. He certainly wished to ingratiate himself with Durham, but was not merely fishing for general patronage. The borough of Aylesbury in Bucks was much under the sway of the Marquis of Chandos. It was not a nomination borough, for the electorate was relatively large and the local reform party sufficiently strong to make a fight, but the Grenville family influence had usually been decisive.[62] Disraeli, who was in virtual day-to-day contact with Chandos, was sure of his good will. Quite clearly, he hoped that, after displacing "young Hobhouse",[63] he could stand at Aylesbury as a Radical favouring the farmer's cause and, with the acquiesence of Chandos, gain the seat. Carried into parliament by a combination of Radical and agricultural Tory support, he might then choose to join either, according to the way the wind blew; the chance might even emerge to take a leading part in a Radical-Tory alliance consistent with his published ideal.

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60 Disraeli's own diary account of this operation is in Monypenny and Buckle, *Beaconsfield*, I, pp. 262-5. The deep impression made on the young man is quite clear.

61 Quoted in *ibid*, p. 267.

62 See Davis, *Political Change and Continuity*, pp. 125-6. The *Bucks Gazette* frequently attacked Chandos' "domination" of Aylesbury.

63 T.B. Hobhouse, brother of John Cam Hobhouse, the cabinet minister.

Durham replied quite promptly that he was not in a position to "interfere" at Aylesbury and added only some friendly but conventional-sounding good wishes.[64] Though he may possibly have perceived Disraeli's motives, the change of Government was in any case leading him, with other Radicals, back towards a common front with the Whigs. Whether he trusted Disraeli or not, Durham could no longer easily accept his strident anti-Whiggism, the only principle for which the man clearly stood. Disraeli was no doubt disappointed, but he slipped back to the Tory stream with the ease of shifting from one foot to the other; a letter of 24 November to his sister reflects this change:

> My affairs on the whole have a very favourable aspect but . . . at present all is uncertainty. I rec'd . . . a friendly letter from Durham. The Lord Chancellor is my *staunch friend*, nor is there anything for my service which he will not do. Chandos wrote to me this morning . . .[65]

Though his optimism was somewhat forced, he had no doubt of standing well in the Tory camp; indeed, he had never given up his role as go-between for Lyndhurst and Chandos.[66] The problem lay in deciding how to define his relationship with the Tories and how to employ their support to advantage.

With his Aylesbury scheme lost, Disraeli was forced to consider the possibilty of contesting High Wycombe, contrary to the resolution he had made in 1832. Conditions there had not altered and he did not like his chances even with full Tory support.[67] That support did come readily; in short order, Lyndhurst arranged that a letter endorsing his candidacy be sent to Lord Carrington over the Duke of Wellington's signature.[68] However, when Disraeli visited the constituency at the end of November for a preliminary meeting with supporters, what he found only confirmed his fear that it would be a forbidding uphill battle. Nor at this stage was he at all optimistic about the general prospects of the infant Tory Government itself.[69] He thus found himself facing a dilemma; he was forced to decide either to return to Radicalism or to make firm his allegiance to the Tories and hope for the best. After some hesitation which reflected the difficulty of the choice, on 4 December he at last committed himself decisively to the Tory road.

The timing of Disraeli's move was of considerable significance. Since Peel had not yet returned to England, the moderation of the official Tory position wrought by the Tamworth Manifesto played no part in his decision. If ideology was important at all, it was the traditional Toryism of Wellington and Lyndhurst which attracted him.

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64 Hughenden Papers, B/XXI/D/448, 20 November 1834. Disraeli did not receive the letter until 24 November.

65 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/82.

66 Their negotiations continued, but turned now on the question of Chandos' terms for supporting the new Tory Government.

67 The political intelligence from home was clearly unfavourable; see Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/537, Sarah Disraeli to Disraeli, 23 November 1834.

68 Hughenden Papers, B/I/A/32, Wellington to Carrington, 27 November 1834, and Cf. Monypenny and Buckle, *Beaconsfield*, I. p. 268.

69 In a letter of 26(?) November 1834 Chandos scolded him for adopting "so gloomy a view of the state of things". Hughenden Papers, B/XXI/B/1120.

He may have been obeying his original Tory instincts, but it appears that the most important element of all was personal compatibility. Specifically, the friendliness of Lyndhurst, who in truth had been overtly attempting to recruit him, brought Disraeli into the Tory party. Embarking on his course with no immediate or certain advantage in view, he was performing something like an act of faith in the future. Moreover, he was acting, at least partially, in defiance of opportunism.

Disraeli took his decisive step by way of a personal letter to Lyndhurst. While he continued to express some hesitation, this was calculated to achieve an effect. The document is extremely interesting, deserving quotation in full:

> My dear Lord —
>
> It is with extreme reluctance, I may even say with extreme pain, that I tease you any further respecting my affairs. I assure you, it is very difficult for me to express the deep sense of gratitude which I feel for your kindness.
>
> I have just received a communication from Lord Durham which imperatively commands my decision. The circumstances of my recent absence from town, and his quitting it this morning, allow me time I *cd* not have well obtained. Lord D. has offered me a seat in the expected Parl*t* for the mere legal expenses, and, alarmed as I apprehend from some rumors which have reached him, entreats me in case I decline his proposal not to enter the house, but wait the result of the great experiment, as he is confident it will be all over in six months. He assured me this conduct will not affect his future disposition towards me.
>
> I have only to observe that altho' I am myself far from sanguine as to your success, I *wd* sooner lose with the Duke and yourself than win with Melbourne and Durham, but win *or* lose I must. I cannot afford to be neutral. How then, my dear Lord, am I to act.[70]

Here was a truly extraordinary mixture of honest feeling and dissimulation. Together with the expression of gratitude to Lyndhurst, the sentiments of the final portion, that is the declaration of preference for the Tory party, seem sincere. What preceded this, however, was just as clearly designed to obtain maximum leverage with Lyndhurst; Disraeli, not without justification, was simply trying to extract the best possible price for his allegiance. The alleged offer from Durham was almost certainly either a complete fabrication or a gross exaggeration constructed from the merely polite favour the Radical leader had shown. There is no documentary corroboration of its existence, it was highly improbable, and, also worth noting, Disraeli had made a false claim of precisely this sort at least once before.[71] The manoeuvre was potentially dangerous, but he was desperate enough for it and, in particular, determined to escape, if at all possible, the fate of once again contesting High Wycombe.

Because he did not evade this fate, the fact of Disraeli's conversion in early December was obscured for some time after. Lyndhurst did respond, as Disraeli had

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70 MS in the possession of the Primrose League, London, and almost certainly to be dated 4 December 1834. This is believed to be the only extant letter from Disraeli to Lyndhurst and its existence was not apparently known until 1978, when a copy was obtained for the Disraeli Project.

71 In a letter to John Murray of 30 March 1832; Monypenny and Buckle, *Beaconsfield*, I, p. 210.

hoped, by doing his best to secure for him a more promising constituency. After failing to arrange his entry as a running-mate with Lord George Bentinck at King's Lynn,[72] he made an appeal to Granville Somerset as chairman of the Tory election committee to find a safe opening for him elsewhere.[73] Had these efforts succeeded, Disraeli would certainly have appeared as a Tory in the general election, but by the second week of December it was evident that no alternative to Wycombe could be found. There, to retain his Radical support, he was compelled to stand once more on an independent platform and, at least at the beginning, avoid any overt Tory connection.[74] He ran, nevertheless, with the maximum quiet assistance which the party could provide; Lyndhurst obtained him a five hundred pound subsidy from the central election fund[75] and continued to put the greatest pressure on Carrington to throw his local influence into the balance for his protégé.[76] He was partly successful here,[77] but this, with the Treasury influence at Wycombe also placed behind Disraeli,[78] was not sufficient to carry the borough. The candidate was well satisfied with all the effort on his behalf and wrote home:

> It is impossible for anyone to be warmer than the Duke or Lyndhurst . . . . Everything looks prosperous and well, and although I am not myself sanguine about Wycombe, I cannot help believing that with such zealous friends all will yet go right . . . .[79]

His more rational side judged correctly, however, and at the poll in early January he suffered, as he had feared, his third Wycombe defeat.

Benjamin Disraeli did not appear as a Tory in a fully official sense until he contested Taunton some four months after the general election. Clearly, however, his conversion had taken place in early December of 1834, significantly earlier than has traditionally been acknowledged. Higher considerations, in particular the congenial

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72 This was the episode which occasioned Greville's remark on Disraeli's odd politics; *ibid*, p. 268.

73 Hughenden Papers, A/I/B/83, to Sarah Disraeli, 8 December 1834.

74 In his principal election speech, later printed as "The Crisis Examined", he adopted an ostensibly neutral posture, but indicated his willingness to support the Tory Government as opposed to the party. See Hutcheon, *Whigs and Whiggism*, pp. 23-41. In the later and more desperate stage of the contest, however, he declared himself bluntly as a Tory when canvassing privately; see, for example, New York Public Library, Montague Collection, Disraeli to John Mathie, 1 January 1835, in which he wrote, "... this is the last struggle of that party, thro' whose influence at the present moment ... England can alone be saved. I unwillingly came forward here again, but I felt it a point of duty to yield to the solicitations of that great man [Wellington] who has delivered Europe and saved England."

75 Blake, *Disraeli*, p. 121. Disraeli seems to have made this an essential prerequisite.

76 See Parrish Collection, A.M. 17270, to Sarah Disraeli, 11 December 1834.

77 See Hughenden Papers, A/I/C/8, Disraeli to Maria Disraeli, 20 December 1834. "[Grey] is bitter against the Smiths but says they can only command ten or twelve votes . . . . He says Niele and Ashton [Carrington's agents] are working against him but he defies them."

78 Direct ministerial influence at Wycombe was small, but Disraeli did complain to the office of the Post Master General when, contrary to his expectation, the local postmaster favoured the Whig side. See Hughenden Papers, B/I/A/4, 4 January 1835.

79 Parrish Collection, *loc. cit.*

ideology and warm atmosphere that he had found in Toryism, had brought him into the party. In the light of his original bias, his entry may also be seen as a homecoming. Conversely, he had not in the process ceased to be, nor did he ever cease to be, an opportunist. The ruthless but imaginative pragmatism which always informed his politics was to make him over the ensuing decades the best opposition leader in British parliamentary history. What he had gained, above all, from these difficult first years was a more mature view of party. He had begun by looking on party as a matter of pure expediency and had been prepared to switch his allegiance as a golfer might change clubs or, perhaps more appropriate to the age, as a shooter might change the bore of his gun according to the target in sight. He attempted, indeed, to capitalize on the political fluidity of the times and the imprecision of party lines and to turn these to personal advantage. But experience taught him to understand the larger significance of party, not only to his private interest but also to the political system as a whole. Much of this new appreciation came in a negative way through his harsh encounter with the power of the Whigs; the first political principle he adopted with consistency, strong anti-Whiggism, was actually quite negative in nature. More amiable contact with leading Radicals and Tories helped to develop his understanding of party as the chief source of discipline in politics and the engine required to achieve movement in any direction. Perhaps he never abandoned his view of party as an instrument, a means to an end, but he had come to see its full importance. After joining the Tory party, Disraeli became a fiercely partisan politician and, whatever his deeper motives may have been, he henceforth made that party the object of an intense loyalty.

Résumé

A la lumière de certaines sources récemment mises à jour, l'auteur se propose de jeter un nouveau regard sur les débuts de la carrière politique de Benjamin Disraeli, c'est dire sur les années qui précèdent son affiliation au parti conservateur. Si les historiens ont perçu le caractère désordonné et quelque peu excentrique de ces années comme étant tout simplement imputable à l'opportunisme de Disraeli, on estime ici que cet opportunisme doit être qualifié et que l'évolution qu'il a subit au cours de ces premières années a été vitale dans l'option apparemment abrupte qu'a prise Disraeli en faveur de ce parti.

Ces années ont, de fait, été des plus utiles. Les premières défaites ont vite instruit l'homme des enjeux de la politique et elles l'ont incité à reviser sa stratégie en fonction de buts à plus long terme; de plus, il appert que, même si Disraeli a d'abord brigué les suffrages en tant que radical, il fut toujours, jusqu'à un certain point, un conservateur déguisé. Enfin, l'auteur souligne que, contrairement à ce que l'on a toujours cru, sa décision de se joindre aux conservateurs a été antérieure au manifeste de Peel et qu'elle n'a rien à voir avec les changements qui se sont opérés par la suite au sein du parti.

En somme, Disraeli s'est joint au parti de Wellington et de Lyndhurst et non à celui de Peel. Sa décision reflétait son désir de réintégrer une idéologie avec laquelle il avait des affinités; elle manifestait sa confiance dans le futur et témoignait du mûrissement de sa perception d'un parti politique.