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INDIA AND BRITISH PARTY POLITICS IN THE 1870'S: CONFLICTING ATTITUDES OF EMPIRE

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The 1870's, and particularly the latter half of that decade, was one of those rare periods in the nineteenth century when India became a major preoccupation of British politics. Even more unusual, India became, perhaps to a greater extent than at any time since the days of Edmund Burke, a party question. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the reasons for these developments, to examine the various issues involved not in any comprehensive or exhaustive manner but primarily in terms of the differing party attitudes, and finally, to assess the significance of the developments for India.

A number of factors combined at this time to bring India into the British political limelight and to make her a centre of controversy. Foremost among these was the election of a strong Conservative government under Disraeli in 1874. India was central to his scheme of enhanced imperial grandeur and her protection the justification for much of his "spirited foreign policy." Oriental empire appealed to his imagination as is revealed in a hairbrained scheme outlined in his novel *Tancred,* published in 1847. In it a Middle Eastern potentate urged Tancred to

> Go back to England and arrange this... Let the Queen of England collect a great fleet, let her stow away all her treasure, bullion, gold plate, and precious arms; be accompanied by all her court and chief people, and transfer the seat of her Empire from London to Delhi. There she will find an immense empire ready-made, a first-rate army, and a large revenue... We will acknowledge the Empress of India as our suzerain, and secure for her the Levantine Coast. If she like she shall have Alexandria as she now has Malta: it could be arranged. ...You see! the greatest empire that ever existed; besides which she gets rid of the embarrassmest of her Chambers! And quite practicable; for the only difficult part, the conquest of India, which baffled Alexander, is all done![1]

Far-fetched as this scheme was, it embodied a vision which formed the basis for much of Disraeli's actual policies in the 1870's. India naturally took on a new importance and policies aimed at strengthening her internal and external security and tightening her bonds with Britain were mooted. When Lord Northbrook, the incumbent Liberal

[1] *Tancred,* ch. 32.

Viceroy, refused to carry out the new imperial policies and resigned in 1876, he was replaced by Lord Lytton, a poet-diplomat who fully shared Disraeli's imperial sentiments and went to India as the avowed agent of the Conservative government.

Some members of the Liberal party may have sympathized with Disraeli's imperial ideas but the vast majority, still under the spell of the Manchester School, preferred commercial to territorial empire. Few were prepared, it was true, to relinquish India at that time but neither did they wish to see it become the centre of a revitalized and militaristic empire. Ever since the great Mutiny and Revolt of 1857 the general tendency of the party had been to ignore the problems posed by the possession of India, but with Disraeli's activist policies that was no longer possible. Moreover, the radical section of the party had always been alert to the interests of the Indian people and quick to point out the shortcomings of British rule. During the 1870's they were joined by the Irish Home Rulers who attacked the very foundations of that rule. Finally, in this period a new element appeared on the scene – namely the politically articulate Indian middle classes. Educated in the ideas of philosophical liberalism and looking forward to the extension of British political institutions to India, they appealed to sympathizers within the Liberal party to resist Conservative policies and redress India's grievances. Reluctant as many moderate Liberals were to see India become a party political question, the tenor of events drove them unremittingly in that direction.

The specific issues which arose during these years can be conveniently divided into three categories : first, questions concerning the nature, purpose and direction of British rule in India; secondly, questions regarding India's external security and the expansion of frontiers; and finally, questions involving the adjustment of conflicting financial and economic interests between India and Britain.

The general question of the character and direction of British rule in India lay at the heart of a number of specific policy measures, the first and most controversial of these being the Royal Titles Bill of 1876. The Bill was designed to add to the titles of the sovereign that of "Empress of India," an idea which had first been mooted in 1858 when the crown had assumed direct control of the country. But no action had been taken at that time because, to use Disraeli's words, "our swords were reeking with carnage in terminating a mutiny of almost unequalled magnitude." [2] However, after nearly two decades of ensuing peace and particularly after the successful

[2] *Hansard,* vol. 227, 17 Feb. 1876, 425.

visit of the Prince of Wales to India in the latter part of 1875, the moment seemed opportune, and it was on the joint initiative of Disraeli and Queen Victoria that the idea was revived.[3] Introducing the Bill in the Commons, Disraeli referred to it as "a matter of high policy" and maintained that it would demonstrate unequivocally

> the unanimous determination of the people of this country to retain our connection with the Indian Empire. And it will be an answer to those mere economists and those foreign diplomatists who announce that India is to us only a burden or a danger.[4]

The latter statement represented a direct indictment of Liberal attitudes and policies and they responded with unexpected vigour. Party members of all shades of opinion, with the exception of a tiny minority who had served in India, roundly attacked the measure on the grounds that the word "Emperor" connoted military despotism and that the Bill was designed to put a stamp of permanent approval on this type of imperial rule in India. They did not, of course, deny that in practice British rule was still largely despotic. Nor did they share the facile assumption of pre-Mutiny days that India would be quickly regenerated along British lines. Yet there was a strong belief that, although the time when India might be granted self-government was remote, constitutional development was nonetheless a basic goal of British rule. Speaker after speaker on the Liberal side in both Houses of Parliament emphasized this point though it was perhaps most clearly stated by the member for Glasgow, George Anderson, who succinctly summed up the Liberal case against the Bill.

> There were [he declared] many educated Natives who recognized and appreciated our institutions... Was the House to stamp that despotic title [of Empress] upon them in perpetuity, and would it not be far more worthy of the country and safer for our rule, to leave India a share in our own constitutional title, and a hope that they might in time without revolution, and without upsetting the British Raj, work out for themselves by degrees some of those constitutional forms of government which were the chief glory of ourselves and our colonies, but which were hardly compatible with the title of Empress.[5]

The response of Disraeli and other Conservative leaders to these arguments was to avoid the question of the future constitutional direction of British rule and to contend instead, though not very convincingly, that the title of "Empress" carried no despotic connotations. A number of rank and file members of the party were more candid however. Constitutional government, as one of them explained,

> was not... a sovereign specific for all nations, and it was opposed to the innate instincts, traditions, and sympathies of the people of

[3] W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli* (London, 1920), vol. V, pp. 456-58.

[4] *Hansard,* op. cit., 410, 427.

[5] *Ibid.,* vol. 228, 140-41.

> India. The attempt to foist a constitutional government like that of England upon India would be, indeed, a silly and cruel experiment, which would never be attempted by that House. The Queen was at the head of the Constitution of this country, and therefore here was Queen; but in India she was at the head of a despotic Government, and therefore her title must be Empress.[6]

This view seemed to be implicitly accepted by Disraeli himself when, during the third reading of the Bill, he argued that its main purpose was to protect India from the approaching menace of Russian power in Central Asia by giving to the British sovereign a title equivalent to that of "Emperor" of Russia.[7]

Nothing could have been more designed to alarm the Liberals than this analogy with the imperial despotism of the Tsars. During the committee stage of the Bill their leader, Lord Hartington, had introduced an amendment objecting to the proposed title but it had been defeated by a vote of 305 to 200, the division being overwhelmingly along party lines.[8] But after Disraeli's remarks during third reading, the Liberals took the unusual step of trying to prevent the passage of the Bill through its final stage. Once again, however, the Conservatives with their majority in the House prevailed.[9] The same pattern was repeated in the Lords where an amendment by the Earl of Shaftesbury, praying that the Queen adopt a title more in keeping with the history of the nation, was defeated by a substantial majority.[10] The Bill thus became law and at a great durbar in Delhi in January 1877 Lord Lytton enthusiastically proclaimed the new title to India and the world.[11]

At that time it was not clear what implications, if any, the measure would have in terms of practical policies. While Lytton assured the British Indian Association that it was "a great historical event, the social and political effects of which will . . . be . . . far-

[6] *Ibid.*, 108.
[7] *Ibid.*, 500-01.
[8] *Ibid.*, 160-64. According to the party affiliation of members recorded in *The Times* following the general election of 1874, approximately a dozen Liberals, none of whom spoke in the debate, voted with the Government. No Conservatives voted against the Government.
[9] *Ibid.*, 517-19. The vote, which followed party lines even more completely than in the previous division, was 209-134.
[10] *Ibid.*, 1039-94.
[11] Lytton originally had not planned such a grand display, but after learning of "the Opposition speeches" he resolved to make the occasion "an immense and startling success in India, which will immediately react on public opinion at home." [Lytton to Disraeli, 30 April 1876, Disraeli Papers, B/XX/Ly/231. Hughenden Manor, High Wycombe, England.] This was to become typical of the way in which Lytton attempted to use his position to help the Conservatives at home.

reaching and permanent,"[12] his proclamation speech at Delhi gave no indication of significant policy developments. The Indian middle classes, who had largely welcomed the measure in the hope that closer imperial ties would result in a greater liberalization of British rule, were undoubtedly disappointed.[13] But they certainly did not anticipate that the Act would be followed by any regressive constitutional measures. Nor is there evidence of any such intention behind Disraeli's initiative. Yet, it was significant that the Secretary of State for India, Lord Salisbury, had already expressed grave reservations about the continued freedom of the press in India, a view which Lytton readily endorsed. While the subsequent legislation controlling the vernacular press was not directly linked with the Royal Titles Act, it confirmed the apprehensions which so many Liberal Members of Parliament had expressed and left no doubt in Indian minds of what the new imperialism implied.

Freedom of the press had been established in India in 1835 on the bold initiative of Sir Charles Metcalfe. As education expanded the number of English and vernacular newspapers proliferated and by the 1870's the Indian middle classes regarded the freedom of the press as their most cherished constitutional right. By that time, too, the effect of the Mutiny, which had been to impose a psychological restraint on Indian assertiveness, was waning and newspaper editors were developing a new spirit of criticism. English officialdom regarded this development with a mixture of feelings varying from mild concern to extreme alarm. Liberal statesmen tended to take the former view while the permanent bureaucracy and many Conservative statesmen were closer to the other end of the continuum.

The opposing attitudes were clearly outlined in the official discussions which took place on the question while the Liberal Viceroy, Lord Northbrook, was still in India. When pressed by a local official to tighten control over the vernacular press, Northbrook declined, emphasizing instead the advantages of a free press in India.

> Criticisms are, on the whole, an advantage, [he declared]. We are very ignorant of the feelings of the people; we have no representative institutions to give us the advantages of hostile criticism of our meas-

[12] Reply to address of B.I.A., n.d., *Times of India* (Overland Weekly Edition), 5 Feb. 1877.

[13] *Ibid.*, 11 Dec. 1876 and 1 and 8 Jan. 1877. This hope was based largely on the Conservative record of recent decades. A Conservative government had been responsible for the Proclamation of 1858, a measure which the Indian middle and upper classes widely regarded as their Magna Charta. Furthermore, it was the Conservatives who in 1868 had initiated a scholarship scheme to enable a limited number of Indians to go to Britain to study for the Indian Civil Service examinations — a scheme which was promptly revoked by the Liberals when they came into power.

> ures before they are put into . . . law, and the press may to a certain extent supplement the deficiency . . . It is far more safe that . . . things should be said openly than . . . without the knowledge of Government.[14]

He also tended to be indulgent towards the Indian newspapers. "Some of the best papers are very fair and moderate," he wrote, "others sin only from ignorance." [15] He was more critical of the Anglo-Indian press which was often outspoken in its criticisms of government and blatantly racialist in its attitude towards Indians. Lord Salisbury, on the other hand, took just the opposite position. He considered that in a "despotic" country like India a free press was "an unmixed nuisance." [16] He was most concerned about the vernacular newspapers whose language, in his opinion, was sometimes seditious and encouraged Northbrook to increase his "preventive power over them." [17] But Northbrook, still holding to the "safety valve" theory, declined to take any action. [18]

There the matter rested until Lytton took it up with his accustomed vigour. Fully concurring with the views of senior officials, most of whom regarded the slightest Indian criticism of government as dangerous and grossly exaggerated the seditiousness of the vernacular press, Lytton resolved on repressive legislation. [19] With the prior approval of Salisbury, Lytton's Government, at a single sitting of the Legislative Council in March 1878, passed a Vernacular Press Act, a measure exempting English language publications but establishing rigid censorship over vernacular newspapers, all decisions resting with the executive rather than the judiciary. [20]

The problem of reconciling a free press with autocratic rule was admittedly difficult and the official policy of the Liberal opposition in Parliament might well have been to overlook the legislation had it not been for the prodding of the radical minority and the outcry of the Indian middle classes. Under this combined pressure

[14] Northbrook to Sir George Campbell, 20 July 1872, Northbrook Papers, vol. 13. India Office Library, London.

[15] Northbrook to Grey, 12 July 1875, *ibid.*, Family collection.

[16] Salisbury to Northbrook, 21 May 1875, *ibid.*, vol. 12.

[17] Salisbury to Northbrook, 5 March and 21 May 1875, *ibid.*

[18] The existing Penal Code permitted punishment of outright sedition, but there was a danger that a public trial might turn any Indian offender into a national martyr.

[19] Minute, 22 Oct. 1877, Parliamentary Papers, vol. lvii (1878), No. C. 2040. The view of senior officials was well illustrated by the opinion of Ashley Eden which Lytton cited in his Minute: "They preach rank sedition, and even talk of a war of independence – horrid rubbish no doubt, – but rubbish we should not stand."

[20] For a full description of the Act and Lytton's speech supporting it, see Lady Betty Balfour, *Lord Lytton's Indian Administration* (London, 1899), pp. 506-17.

Gladstone eventually forced a debate on the subject in the Commons. While Liberals themselves differed in the degree of opposition to the legislation, the debate revealed fundamental distinctions between them and the Conservatives. In a hard-hitting speech Gladstone described the Act as a "grievous error" perpetrated by a Legislative Council whose members lacked "the smallest practical knowledge of the working of... free institutions"; an Act which, without the slightest real justification, completely overturned "a cardinal part of the legislation of the country." [21] Other Liberal speakers were even more outspoken, many of them emphasizing the unfortunate effects of the legislation on Indian public opinion. This point was most forcefully made by Sir Henry James who argued that the Act, "being neither just in itself nor in its distribution," struck a hard blow at "the possibility of Native loyalty" and was likely to cause more disaffection "than could be produced by newspaper writing in 100 years." [22]

The Conservatives, by contrast, voiced no such apprehensions. Leading speakers admitted that interference with the freedom of the press was regrettable but they argued that under the circumstances the Act was fully warranted. They failed, however, to cite examples of seditious writing, thus implicitly admitting that Lytton had exaggerated the disaffection. As in the case of the Royal Titles Bill it was the rank and file members who were most candid and enthusiastic. One member claimed that the object of the Act was "to nip incipient rebellion in the bud" [23] while another cogently put the case for control when he declared :

> The Government was conducted by a handful of Europeans, who were conquerors, aliens in blood and religion; and the endeavour to carry on an arbitrary government in India, tempered... with a free Press, ... constituted a condition of affairs which must prove mischievous and dangerous.[24]

Nearly all the Conservative speakers emphasized the importance of up-holding the authority of the Government of India in such a difficult matter. Many Liberals shared that view and, in deference, Gladstone had reduced his motion to "the bounds of... utmost moderation" [25] – namely, to a request that all proceedings under the Act be reported regularly to Parliament. Even at that Government leaders appealed to him not to force a division, but he declined on the grounds that they had failed to justify the necessity for the legislation. As on the previous issue the Conservative majority pre-

21 *Hansard*, vol. 242, 23 July 1878, 48-66.
22 *Ibid.*, 116-17.
23 *Ibid.*, 87.
24 *Ibid.*, 77.
25 *Ibid.*, 125-26.

vailed and Gladstone's motion was defeated by 208 to 152 votes.[26] Many Liberals, however, refused to let the matter drop and, increasingly distressed over other features of Conservative policy in India, became more outspoken against the Press Act, no longer regarding it as an isolated measure but as a major component of an overall imperial policy. In his famous Midlothian election campaign Gladstone described the Act as a "gagg[ing] . . . law" which was a "contradiction to the spirit of the age . . . and a disgrace to British authority."[27] By thus making it an election issue he virtually committed the Liberals to the repeal of the Act, a commitment duly fulfilled in 1882.

On this issue, as well as that of the Royal Titles Bill, the Liberals emerged as strong defenders of the constitutional *status quo* in India. But even they remained largely silent when it came to constitutional advances which the Indian middle classes were increasingly demanding – namely, extended employment in the higher ranks of the civil service and representation in government. It was true that when the question of the age limits for the service examinations came up in 1875, Lord Northbrook recommended that they be raised partly with a view to enabling more Indians to compete.[28] But when Lord Salisbury and the India Council took the opposite position and reduced the age limits the party did not protest. Admittedly, that great friend of Indian aspirations, John Bright, presented a number of Indian petitions on the subject to the Commons in 1879 but even he did not force a debate.[29] In practice then, the Liberals were little more prepared than the Conservatives to open that valued preserve of the English middle class, the Indian Civil Service, to free Indian competition.

The voice of the party as a whole was equally muted on the question of extending representative institutions to India though, thanks to the initiative of Sir David Wedderburn, a radical of pro-Indian sympathies, the subject was raised in the Commons. Wedderburn approached the question as one of practical utility rather than "abstract . . . justice."[30] It was important, he argued, to confer

[26] *Ibid.*, 127-29. The Liberal vote would have been slightly larger had it not been that a number of their party ended up by mistake in the Conservative lobby. At least four Conservatives voted with the Liberals though none of them spoke during the debate.

[27] W. E. Gladstone, *Political Speeches in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1879), p. 201.

[28] E. C. Moulton, *Lord Northbrook's Indian Administration, 1872-1876* (Bombay, 1969), ch. 3. Northbrook recommended that the existing limits of 17 to 21 years be changed to 19 to 22. Salisbury reduced the limits to 17 to 19 years.

[29] *Hansard*, vol. 246, 12 June 1879, 1723-24.

[30] *Ibid.*, vol. 250, 13 Feb. 1880, 593-98.

> upon the people of India some measure of representation, either in the Legislative Councils, or otherwise, in order that the Indian Government may have greater facilities than those at present existing for ascertaining Native opinion upon public questions...

To prove that Indians were well capable of such responsibilities he pointed to the successful working of the Bombay Municipality where the representative principle had been in force for some years. The time had come, he maintained, to extend that principle to the legislative councils. Reasonable and well argued though the case was, it evoked no support. Replying for the government, the under-secretary for India, Edward Stanhope, argued that representative institutions were unsuited to India and could not be extended there without endangering British rule. Significantly, not a single Liberal member rose in the House to challenge that proposition. Wedderburn and a small minority of radicals continued to support the idea of representation but the majority of the party remained unsympathetic.[31] On this issue, like that of the Indian Civil Service, the difference between the Liberal and Conservative parties was one of degree rather than substance.

If important constitutional issues such as these failed to evoke much party enthusiasm or controversy, that pattern certainly did not apply when it came to questions of the external security of India and the expansion of her frontiers — questions brought sharply into focus by the second Anglo-Afghan War which began in November 1878.

The basic concern over India's external security arose from the persistent southward expansion of Russia in Central Asia. By the mid-1870's the Russian armies had approached to within several hundred miles of the northern frontiers of the buffer state of Afghanistan. This was a development which neither British political party could ignore though they differed greatly in the significance and danger which they attached to it. In general, the Liberals considered that Russian expansion was caused by precisely the same factors which, in the course of a century, had led British power in India to expand from the Bay of Bengal to the natural mountain barriers of the Punjab. "Both Empires," as Goldwin Smith expressed it, "have grown in the same manner, and one as naturally as the other, by extension in a sort of political vacuum, where nothing opposed them but the arms of barbarous or half-civilized powers."[32]

[31] When Lord Ripon, in 1881, proposed a scheme similar to Wedderburn's, Hartington would have nothing to do with it. [S. Gopal, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Ripon, 1880-1884* (London, 1953), pp. 84-85].

[32] Goldwin Smith, "The Policy of Aggrandizement," *The Fortnightly Review,* CXXIX (Sept. 1877), p. 320.

Few Liberals, therefore, saw anything sinister in the Russian advance. Gladstone was undoubtedly expressing the general view of the party when, in an article published in 1876, he wrote:

> I know of no reason why Affghanistan . . . should not for an indefinite time separate Russian from Indian Asia; no reasons for imputing to Russia an ambition of aggressiveness, which, in my opinion, is not less absurd than guilty . . . [33]

Leading Conservative statesmen, increasingly preoccupied as they were by the menace of Russian expansion in the Balkans, were naturally far more apprehensive over developments in Central Asia. It was true that in their public statements both Disraeli and Salisbury denied any Russian threat to India but privately they expressed different views. As late as June 1877 Salisbury assured Parliament that the danger of "a Russian inroad on the frontier of British India" was remote, [34] but in correspondence with Northbrook during 1874 and 1875 he had repeatedly emphasized Russia's potential threat to the Indian empire. Disraeli, who was much more of an alarmist than Salisbury, confidentially suggested during one stage of the Eastern crisis that it might be necessary for the Empress of India to "order her armies to clear Central Asia of the Muscovites, and drive them into the Caspian." [35]

With such opposite viewpoints over the motives and implications of Russian expansion, it naturally followed that the parties differed on the appropriate British response. Liberals tended to argue that the real key to British security in India lay in the "good government" of the country. "Depend upon it," as Northbrook admirably stated the case, "if we govern India well and economically, and give fair consideration to the legitimate aspirations of the educated Natives for employment in the administration of their country we may look with perfect calmness at any projects of Russian advance." [36] Liberal opinion, still influenced by the disaster of the first Afghan War, overwhelmingly rejected the idea of any counter expansion on the British side, maintaining that, apart from being unjustified, such an advance was bound to have disastrous financial, political, and strategic consequences. Conservative opinion, on the other hand, was drawn increasingly to the idea of a "forward policy" for India; a policy which was based on the explicit belief that Russia had aggressive

[33] W. E. Gladstone, "Russian Policy and Deeds in Turkestan," *The Contemporary Review*, XXVIII (1876), p. 882. The Liberal confidence regarding Afghanistan was based partly on the fact that, in an exchange of diplomatic notes in 1869, the Russian Government had explicitly acknowledged that Afghanistan was within the British sphere of influence.

[34] *Hansard*, vol. 234, 11 June 1877, 1564-66.

[35] To Queen Victoria, 22 July 1877, quoted in Monypenny and Buckle, op. cit., vol. VI, p. 155.

[36] To Ponsonby, 7 Aug. 1884, Northbrook Papers, Family collection.

designs on India and which advocated that Britain should attempt to forestall that threat by establishing advanced military positions in Afghanistan and some form of protectorate status over that country.[37] The ultimate aim was a "scientific frontier" for India, a frontier which, in contrast to the existing one on the eastern edge of the mountain ranges, would control those ranges and the western entrances to all the strategic passes. Though the scheme had two basic weaknesses – failure to take account of the enormous financial cost or of the zealous determination of the Afghans to maintain their independence – Conservative leaders viewed it with varying degrees of support. Salisbury was decidedly cool, Disraeli more sympathetic, while Lytton, who had been appointed Viceroy to carry out a spirited policy in Central Asia,[38] was most enthusiastic of all. It was Lytton's desire to rectify the frontier, but more especially his determination to strike a blow at Russian influence and to bring Afghanistan firmly within British control, which accounted for his vigorous counter-measures in response to a Russian mission to Kabul in mid-1878. When the Afghans, who had good reason to be apprehensive, refused to receive a British mission, Lytton cheerfully embarked on war. The ministry in Britain, still basking in its triumph of "peace with honour" at the Congress of Berlin, was far less enthusiastic, but Lytton had the initiative and at the crucial moment the cabinet supported him.[39]

Predictably, the war aroused heated and sustained debate in Britain. To the Liberals it was an unjust and unnecessary war of aggression against an independent kingdom with which the British nation had no legitimate quarrel. Only a few days before the outbreak of war Disraeli had publicly spoken of the need for a "scientific frontier"[40] and this, they maintained, rather than the Afghan rejection of the British mission, was the real cause of the war. The apparent unfriendliness of the Amir of Afghanistan they attributed to Lytton's earlier efforts to get him to accept permanent British representatives in his country, and argued that the refusal to receive the British mission of September 1878 was not sufficiently "positive... or ... couched in such terms as to justify... force of arms."[41] In Liberal opinion the behaviour of the Amir indicated a desire to

[37] The principle exponent of this policy was Sir Henry Rawlinson, who, as Chairman of the Political Committee of the India Council, was in a strong position to influence official policy.

[38] Disraeli to Queen Victoria, 22 July 1877, loc. cit.

[39] For a detailed examination of the immediate events leading up to the war and the views of Lytton and the cabinet see Maurice Cowling, "Lytton, the Cabinet, and the Russians, August to November 1878", *The English Historical Review*, LXXVI (Jan. 1961), pp. 59-79.

[40] Monypenny and Buckle, op. cit., pp. 390-91.

[41] Marquess of Hartington, *Hansard*, vol. 243, 5 Dec. 1878, 107.

preserve his independence rather than hostility towards the British. The only legitimate complaint was against Russia whose despatch of a mission to Kabul constituted a provocative measure. British action ought therefore to have been directed not against Afghanistan but against Russia. Moreover, diplomatic action would probably have been sufficient, Liberals argued, pointing out that Russia had demonstrated by the Congress of Berlin her desire to avoid a confrontation with Britain. [42]

Though the Liberal arguments were largely valid, a fact generally acknowledged by recent scholarship, [43] the party was at a real disadvantage during the early stages of the war. Fighting had already been in progress for several weeks when Parliament assembled and under these circumstances the Liberals, like today's opponents of the Vietnam war in the United States Congress, felt obliged to support the troops in the field. The government played down Disraeli's references to the "scientific frontier," arguing that it was "not a war of ambition, . . . of aggression, [or] of annexation but . . . a war for the honour of the Crown, the dignity of the nation, and the safety of our Indian Empire." [44] With emotional appeals such as this and the British invasion proceeding favourably, Conservative members enthusiastically supported the ministry and a Liberal censure motion was defeated by a vote of 328 to 227 in the Commons and by an even larger majority in the Lords. [45] The real moment of triumph for Conservative policy, however, came in May 1879 when the newly installed puppet ruler of Afghanistan accepted a treaty ceding to the British control of a number of the strategic mountain passes and permitting the stationing of a permanent Resident at Kabul as well as the garrisoning of various other centres. [46] It was indeed a remarkable achievement for within a matter of months the Conservatives had attained their objectives; they had, as Disraeli aptly stated in his congratulations to Lytton, "secured a scientific and adequate frontier for our Indian Empire." [47]

[42] The Russian mission to Kabul had been despatched prior to the conclusion of the Congress of Berlin and therefore at a time when a confrontation between Britain and Russia in Europe seemed imminent.

[43] Robert Blake, in his recent biography of Disraeli, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967) for example, writes: "Posterity has correctly judged the Second Afghan War as unnecessary. There is no evidence that Russia harboured any deep-laid plans . . . The blame [for the war] can be varyingly apportioned between Cranbrook's slackness and Lytton's 'gaudy vanity.'" p. 663.

[44] Earl of Ravensworth, *Hansard*, op. cit., 5.

[45] The vote in the Lords was 201 to 65. In the Commons some five Liberals voted with the government while one Conservative voted with the opposition.

[46] For the details of the treaty and the negotiations leading up to it see Lady Betty Balfour, op. cit., pp. 314-30.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 331.

The triumph, however, was shortlived, for no sooner had British troops withdrawn from Kabul than the Afghan soldiers rose in rebellion and massacred the British Embassy under Sir Louis Cavagnari. For the Conservatives it was an unmitigated disaster, the scope of which was graphically described by Lytton.

> The web of policy so carefully and patiently woven, [he wrote], has been rudely shattered. We have now to weave a fresh, and I fear a wider, one, from undoubtedly weaker materials. All that I was most anxious to avoid... has now been brought about by the hand of fate — the complete collapse of all the national conditions of independent government in Afghanistan, the obligation to occupy Kabul, and the great difficulty of evacuating it without risk of renewed disaster to... any... puppet ruler, on whose behalf we must now be content to undertake the virtual administration of the whole country... These conditions, now unavoidable, involve the further vexation of increased military expenditure and political uncertainty... [48]

In short, the government was not only obliged to undertake a second and more extensive war in Afghanistan but was committed to the indefinite occupation of the country.

These were precisely the sort of disastrous consequences which so many Liberals had warned would follow from any British war with Afghanistan. Understandably, therefore, they attacked the whole policy of the government with renewed vigour. As the general election approached and the prospect of either a military or political solution to the Afghan problem remained remote, the Liberals made the war a major campaign issue. For Gladstone it had now become the most iniquitous instance of Tory expansionism and during his campaign in Scotland he attacked the war with some of his most powerful invective. It was a "wilful, unjust, and destructive war"; a war of "wanton invasion" which had broken Afghanistan "into pieces [and] made it a miserable ruin"; a war of horrible cruelty in which "villages were burned to the ground, and the women and children... driven forth to wander and perish in the snow"; a war in which the British nation was seeking to destroy the cherished "freedom" of the Afghan people; a war, finally, which, far from strengthening the Indian Empire, placed new and untold burdens upon it. [49] Liberal leaders, as a part of their overall assault on Disraeli's foreign policy, undertook to reverse the policy in Afghanistan, to suspend hostilities as quickly as possible, and to retreat to the traditional frontiers of India. Despite much Conservative protest, these commitments, with one minor exception, were duly

[48] To Beaconsfield, 6 Sept. 1879, quoted in Lady Betty Balfour, *Personal and Literary Letters of Robert, First Earl of Lytton* (London, 1906), vol. II, p. 169.

[49] W. E. Gladstone, *Political Speeches in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1879 and 1880), vol. I, pp. 49, 203 and vol. II, pp. 58, 294.

fulfilled by Gladstone's ministry following the Liberal electoral victory of 1880.[50]

The Afghan war not only involved fundamental questions of Indian external policy but gave rise to one of the major issues of the period concerning financial relationships between India and Britain. The issue was, Who should pay for the war? – a subject on which the political parties were almost as sharply divided as on the war itself. Basically the Liberals maintained that since the war involved imperial as well as purely Indian considerations Britain should pay a substantial proportion of the cost. The position of the Conservative government was more ambivalent. On the one hand, it acknowledged that the war, to use Disraeli's words, "concern[ed] the character and influence of England in Europe."[51] When it came to the question of paying for it, however, government leaders argued that it was "a mere Frontier war"[52] fought to preserve the security of India. India should therefore defray the expenditure and the government introduced a resolution to that effect following the opening of Parliament in December 1878.

To many Liberals the question involved a fundamental principle regarding British rule in India – namely, whether it was primarily designed to promote the interests of India or of Britain. Liberal leaders, in theory at any rate, held strongly to the former view and therefore argued that it would be unjust to saddle India with the full cost of war. Their position was admirably summed up by Gladstone when he declared:

> In India, there was a war for which the Indian people were not responsible – a war which grew out of our policy and action in Europe; and . . . [it was unfair] to make the Indian people, who were not self-governed and not represented, pay every six-pence of the cost.[53]

Another Liberal put the case more caustically: "The Jingoes bluster and the ryots pay."[54]

While government leaders reacted strongly against such invective, they also differed from the Liberals over the fundamental principle which lay at the heart of the issue. Magnanimous treatment of India had little place in their hardening imperial attitudes. For example, when in 1875 Liberals had objected to charging India with

[50] The exception was the retention of the districts of Pishin and Sibi in the area of Quetta and the Bolan Pass. For further information on that subject and the general Afghan policy of the new Liberal government see S. Gopal, op. cit., pp. 6-47.

[51] *Hansard,* vol. 243, 10 Dec. 1878, 519.

[52] *Ibid.,* 882.

[53] *Ibid.,* vol. 251, 926.

[54] *Ibid.,* vol. 243, 918.

any of the cost of the Prince of Wales' visit, Disraeli dismissed the notion as one of "unfounded sentimentalism" which should be abandoned.[55] Salisbury's comments were even more revealing when he privately congratulated Disraeli for having so effectively "put a stop to the idea that England ought to pay tribute to India as a kind of apology for having conquered her."[56] It was this basic attitude which undoubtedly accounted for the government position regarding payment for the Afghan war. Under Liberal pressure they agreed that Britain might make some contribution if Parliament desired, but they denied that India deserved compensation as a matter of right. The party largely endorsed that position and a Liberal amendment stating that it was "unjust" for India to pay the extraordinary expenses of the war was defeated by a large majority.[57] Encouraged by the strong feeling of the Indian middle classes on this question, the Liberals continued to hold to their original view. Though the final cost of the war (£23,000,000) grossly exceeded original predictions, Gladstone's ministry of 1880 paid India £5,000,000, thereby substantially honouring the position which the party had taken while in opposition.

On the other major issue of the period involving financial relations between the two countries – that of removing the 5% Indian import tariff on British cotton goods – the party differences were less substantive. It was true that when in 1875 Salisbury, under pressure from Lancashire, urged the Liberal viceroy, Northbrook, to remove the tariff he refused on the grounds that "the duty of the Government of India is to govern India for the best interests of the people of India, and not for the interests of the Manchester manufacturers."[58] Influential Liberal leaders in Britain supported that view and considered Salisbury's actions were dictated by political considerations. Admittedly, Conservative members of Parliament tended to be most vocal on the issue, but as the Lancashire industry became more depressed Liberal representatives of the county joined with Conservatives in demanding the complete remission of the duties.[59] Under these circumstances Liberal leaders departed from their earlier position. When Lytton removed the duties in 1879, Liberal protests were merely over the timing and not the inequitable principle involved. It was undoubtedly a significant indication of the overriding influence of the new imperialism that on an important

[55] Quoted in *The Times*, 16 July 1875.
[56] Letter, 16 July 1875, Disraeli Papers, B/XX/Ce/52.
[57] *Hansard*, vol. 243, 17 Dec. 1878, 968-1038. The vote was 235 to 125.
[58] Northbrook to Sir Louis Mallet, 6 Sept. 1875, Northbrook Papers, vol. 23.
[59] *Hansard*, vol. 235, 10 July 1877, 1085-1128, and vol. 245, 4 April 1879, 375-436.

financial and economic question such as this the Liberals were as ready as the Conservatives to sacrifice the interests of India to those of Britain.

The wide-ranging British debate on India during the 1870's formed an important part of the ongoing discussion over Britain's mission and place in the world. The issue with respect to India was not whether British rule there was imperial but the nature of that imperialism. The Indian educated classes assumed at the outset that closer ties with Britain would mean a greater liberalization of British rule. They expected tangible concessions to accompany the proclamation of the title of "Empress of India" but were treated instead to a mere display of pageantry. Disraeli, who had shown such bold and imaginative initiative when it came to reform in Britain, failed to comprehend the mood of the new India. Limited concessions in 1877 either in the form of increased opportunities for Indians in the civil service or representation in the legislative councils would have not only strengthened British rule in India but promoted Indian middle class identification with the Conservative party. Instead of reform, however, Lytton and Disraeli took away the cherished freedom of the press and embarked on an aggressive frontier war at the expense of the Indian taxpayers. Far from strengthening British rule the result of Conservative policy was to create more unrest in India than at any time since the Mutiny of 1857.

Under these circumstances the role taken by the Liberal party was of crucial significance. As the decade advanced it increasingly assumed the position of Her Majesty's Opposition for India. The party closely identified itself with the Indian middle class agitation against Conservative policies and promised to reverse many of these policies when returned to power. Though there were limitations, as we have seen, on how far the party was prepared to go in granting reforms to India, the Liberals convinced the educated classes that principles of equity, justice, and constitutionalism still lay at the heart of British rule. The result was that these leaders of the new India not only identified themselves with the Liberal party, but, more important, remained committed to constitutionalism for the next quarter of a century, a formative period in the development of political organization in India.