Introduction to this book

At the beginning of the 20th century a British citizen might have been forgiven for believing that he or she lived in the richest and most powerful country in the world. Britain was the world's greatest trading nation and lay at the centre of an empire covering almost a quarter of the globe. In the second half of the 19th century, millions of people left Britain as emigrants – mainly to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The city of London was the heart of world banking, finance and investment. Britain was a leading industrial nation building 60 per cent of the world's merchant ships and supplying much of the world's textiles, machinery, iron and steel. The Royal Navy guarded both Britain and its worldwide empire and was larger than the navies of any other two nations put together.

In 1906, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland had a population of 43 million. Most British workers were employed in industry: textiles in Leeds, Bradford and Lancashire; coal mining in South Wales, Yorkshire and the north east; shipbuilding in Liverpool, Glasgow and Belfast; engineering in Birmingham and the West Midlands; and steel in Sheffield. A 'North–South divide' already existed. Agriculture now accounted for only a small proportion of the workforce. Employment was, however, increasing both for men and women in services such as retailing, transport, banking and education. Domestic service as maids, cooks and gardeners was the biggest single category of occupation in 1906, especially for women. New industries such as electricity, chemicals and motor cars were also being established by 1906, but they were not yet fully developed.

Although Britain was a great empire and an industrial giant, there were serious underlying problems. Britain's industrial and commercial supremacy was being challenged. By 1906, the United States and Germany had overtaken Britain in manufacturing. There were also stark contrasts between wealth and poverty. A third of the national income went to 3 per cent of the population; 10 per cent of the people owned 90 per cent of the country's wealth. At the other extreme, there was desperate poverty. Some 4 million people lived at or below subsistence level largely as a result of low wages, irregular employment, illness or old age.

Some of the anxieties about British society had been intensified by the experiences of the South African, or Boer, War of 1899–1902. The war in South Africa against 60,000 'Boers' (Dutch-speaking settlers) had exposed serious military failings and dented national self-confidence. The army had also been alarmed to discover the poor physical condition of huge numbers of the working-class men called up to fight. Government reports into the problems raised concerns about poor health and the impact of poverty and malnutrition.

Not surprisingly, there was also a growing demand for social and political reform. Living conditions in the poorest areas were appalling. Educational opportunities were still limited for the vast majority. Women and many men did not yet have the right to vote in parliamentary elections. England dominated the United Kingdom but in Wales, Scotland and above all in

Fig. 1 *Pomp and Circumstance. Edward VII, king from 1901–10, pays a visit to Newcastle in 1906. His mother, Queen Victoria, reigned for 63 years, and Edward had to wait until he was 59 to become king*

Ireland, there were demands for greater influence over their national affairs. By 1906, movements were already underway to remedy some of these injustices.

During the 19th century, Britain had become a largely industrial nation, with a massive shift in population from the countryside to large towns and cities. Despite these changes, Britain's political system of **parliamentary monarchy** remained remarkably stable. Unlike many European countries or even the United States, Britain had not experienced revolution or civil war in the 19th century. Men's right to vote had been widened in 1832, 1867 and 1884. Working people had founded trade unions to protect their interests, and new political parties had emerged. At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain seemed to be a model democracy. Nevertheless, politicians and political parties faced a whole series of controversial domestic issues at the beginning of the 20th century – poverty, trade unionism, democracy and, in Ireland, Nationalism. Four political parties represented the voters in the United Kingdom parliament at Westminster, though only two of these were capable of forming a government in their own right in 1906.

Key term

Parliamentary monarchy: although great constitutional powers remained with the sovereign – King Edward VII in 1906 – these were exercised by the prime minister and his cabinet who were responsible to parliament and ultimately to the voters for their policies. Parliament in 1906 consisted of an elected House of Commons and an unelected House of Lords.

The political parties to 1906

The Conservative Party

The Conservative Party was often referred to as the Unionist Party, because it was associated with fighting Home Rule and keeping Ireland in the Union. (In 1886, Home Rule for Ireland had split the Liberals, with many Liberal Unionists joining the Conservatives – hence the title 'Conservative and Unionist Party'). On the whole, the Conservatives were seen as the party of the great landowners, of the Church of England and of big business. Since the 1870s, however, the Conservatives had also been winning support amongst the middle and working classes and by 1900 more Conservative MPs had a background in industry, trade and the professions.

Between 1886 and 1906, the Conservatives won three of the four general elections and formed the government for 17 years out of 20. They also had an overwhelming majority of seats in the House of Lords. Support for the Conservatives was strong, not only in rural areas but also in the industrial towns and cities, such as Sheffield, Manchester and Birmingham.

Various factors help to explain this Conservative dominance. Lord Salisbury, Conservative leader from 1885 until 1901, skilfully exploited the Liberal split over Home Rule. He promoted limited reforms in government such as the introduction of elected county councils in 1888 and free elementary schooling in 1891 in order to satisfy some of the demands of the Liberal Unionists. When the Liberal Party was briefly in power between 1892 and 1895, Salisbury used the Unionist majority in

the House of Lords to frustrate their programme, for example by blocking Gladstone's renewed attempt to bring in Home Rule for Ireland.

Key profiles

Lord Salisbury

Robert Cecil, Lord Salisbury, was leader of the Conservative Party and prime minister, in 1885–6, 1886–92, 1895–1900 and 1900–2. As an aristocrat, he was the last prime minister to govern from the House of Lords. He was particularly interested in foreign affairs and often combined the post of Foreign Secretary with that of prime minister. Salisbury was shrewd enough to understand the need for the Conservative Party to adapt to social change, although, despite some useful rural and local government reforms, he neglected urban social reform.

William Ewart Gladstone

Gladstone was a giant figure in the Liberal Party and was prime minister four times between 1868 and 1894. He was a famous orator and moral crusader who saw himself and his party as key to progress and reform – but his career ended in failure because of the divisive issue of Home Rule for Ireland. All Gladstone's attempts to pass a Home Rule bill failed; and the Liberal Party was hopelessly split in 1886. After Gladstone's death, the Liberals began to move away from Gladstonian ideas towards the 'New Liberalism'.

Social changes, especially the growth of a lower middle class of clerical workers, shopkeepers, teachers, foremen and junior managers, benefited the Conservatives. These groups aspired to be property owners, perhaps buying a house in the new suburbs. The Conservative leadership set out to win support from 'Villa Toryism' by targeting such voters in their speeches, through organisations like the **Primrose League**. The Primrose League enabled the Conservatives to give these male voters, and especially their wives, a role in the local party and a chance to mix with higher social groups.

The Conservatives were also able to attract some support amongst the working classes. In rural areas this was due to deference towards traditional landowning families such as the Earl of Derby in west Lancashire. However, the Conservatives also had considerable working-class support in the urban areas of counties like Lancashire. Partly this was because Lancashire cotton mill-owners traditionally supported the Liberals and so their workers voted **Tory**. In cities such as Liverpool and Glasgow, support for the Conservatives was based on opposition to immigrants, primarily the Irish who were seen as taking jobs and lowering wages. There was sometimes an unpleasant sectarian edge to local politics. The Conservatives also attracted support by projecting an image of patriotism and of pride in empire and by 'standing up' for British interests abroad. In 1900, the Conservatives exploited the expected victory over the Boers by calling and winning the 'khaki' election. But their political dominance was not only down to Conservative strengths; it was also due to the weaknesses of their opponents.

The Liberal Party

The Liberal Party was the other leading party in British politics before 1906. Liberalism was founded on an alliance between **Whig** aristocrats,

Key terms

Primrose League: founded in 1883 as a means of connecting the landed classes in the Conservative Party with the middle and working classes. It organised social activities, often held on the estates of local landowners, but was also active during elections distributing leaflets and persuading voters. By 1900, it had over a million members. The League was also important in involving women from all social classes in politics, though in an auxiliary role.

Tory: another name for Conservatives. 'Tory' like 'Whig' can be traced back to the late-17th century and was originally a term of abuse. From the 1870s, 'Conservative' began to replace 'Tory'. Similarly, 'Liberal' began to replace 'Whig'.

Whig: aristocratic families such as the Russells (Dukes of Bedford) and the Cavendishes (Dukes of Devonshire) played a major role in British politics between the late-17th century and the late-19th century. Their country houses were centres of political activity, especially when parliament was not in session, and with their wealth and large estates they wielded great political influence before the age of mass democracy. Lord Hartington, who helped form the Liberal Unionists, was the son of the 7th Duke of Devonshire.

Did you know?

By the Boer War of 1899–1902, British soldiers had ceased to wear the traditional red coats on the battlefield and adopted a khaki uniform instead. The term 'khaki' came from India and meant earth or dust coloured. Khaki was adopted from the 1880s because red coats were conspicuous and made their wearers easy targets for enemy marksmen.

Key term

Nonconformists: sometimes called dissenters, were British Protestants who did not belong to the Church of England (which was the 'Established' Church). Traditionally, nonconformists supported the Liberals, but in the later years of the 19th century their support for that party had weakened. They were particularly strong in Wales but also influential in the industrial areas.

sections of the middle classes, **nonconformists** (a religious group that did not agree with the beliefs and practices of the Church of England), and radical working men. Under the leadership of William Gladstone, the Liberals had been in government four times between 1868 and 1894 but had suffered badly from the internal divisions over Home Rule.

'Gladstonian' Liberals were mostly agreed on certain broad policies. They were strongly in favour of Free Trade – keeping trade free of tariffs (taxes placed on imports) and quotas, in order to foster competitiveness and efficiency. Another Liberal principle was 'laissez-faire' (literally 'to leave alone') – the belief that the State should intervene as little as possible in society or the economy. Liberals often spoke of the need to keep the role of government limited, having low taxation, and protecting the interests of the nonconformists against the established Church of England. Perhaps, above all, Liberals were reformers, promoting education, defending the rights and freedoms of the individual, and pressuring the ruling classes to lessen the effects of privilege.

After 1886, however, Liberal electoral fortunes declined. For only 3 of the 20 years after 1886 did the Liberals form a government. Gladstone's support for Home Rule for Ireland caused a deep split in the party. Liberal Unionists broke away and drifted into alliance with the Conservatives. Further divisions occurred over the empire. Traditionally, the Liberals were hostile to imperialism but a group of Liberal imperialists led by Lord Rosebery wanted the party to take a more positive attitude towards it. The division became even more bitter during the Boer War of 1899–1902. Again, the Liberals divided between those supporting and those opposing the war.

When the dominating personality of William Gladstone was removed by his resignation as Liberal prime minister in 1894, following the House of Lords' veto of the Home Rule Bill passed by the Commons, the Liberal Party was plunged into a prolonged dispute about the leadership and about the general direction of party policy. Liberal support became narrowly based on the 'Celtic fringe' in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and on the northern industrial areas of England. The main emphasis of Liberalism in these areas differed. In Wales, a major issue was the disestablishment of the Anglican Church; elsewhere the major concerns were the Boer War, the financing of church schools, or the struggle between the temperance wing of the party and the brewing industry.

The Labour Party

The Labour party was small in 1906 but already a growing political force. Attempts had been made in the 1880s to found a political party to represent the trade unions and working classes. None, however, had succeeded in getting MPs elected. There were a few working-class MPs, mostly trade unionists, but they sat with the Liberals and were often called Lib-Labs. In 1892, Keir Hardie, founder of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), took his seat as the first Labour MP. He lost his seat in 1895 and it was not until 1900 that the modern British Labour Party really began, when representatives from some trade unions, the ILP and various socialist societies formed the Labour Representation Committee (LRC). The LRC managed to gain two seats in the election of 1900 and made a political breakthrough by winning 29 seats in 1906. At that point it changed its name to the Labour Party.

Key profile

Keir Hardie

Keir Hardie (1856–1915), the 'father' of the modern Labour Party was a self-educated Scottish miner and trade unionist. Originally a Liberal, he aimed to bring socialists and trade unionists together in a separate Labour movement. He was the first elected Labour MP (and insisted on wearing a cloth cap instead of a top hat, to demonstrate his class sympathies). Hardie founded the Independent Labour Party in 1893 and played a central role in the formation of the LRC in 1900. In 1906, he became the first leader of the Labour Party. He did not live long enough to see Labour in government.

The LRC was a group of trade unions and socialist organisations rather than a party. Membership came through **affiliation** and party funds were very limited. In many ways it was more of a **pressure group** than a political party. Its purpose was to form a distinct group in parliament, to promote legislation that would benefit trade unions and manual workers generally. It also aimed to get more working class and trade union **sponsored MPs** into the House of Commons. More specifically, it aimed at legislation to reverse previous legal decisions against the interests and rights of trade unions. Though its leader, Hardie, was committed to building **Socialism** in Britain, not all supporters of the LRC shared the same aims. The Labour Party did grow – from two MPs in 1900 to 42 MPs in the election of December 1910 – but Labour was overshadowed by the Liberals in the years before 1914.

The Irish Nationalist Party

The Irish Nationalist Party (INP) was founded in the 1860s to promote the idea of **Home Rule for Ireland**. Its support came almost entirely from the predominantly Catholic areas of Ireland. As a result of the brilliant leadership of Charles Stewart Parnell, it regularly returned around 80 MPs to Westminster and became a significant force in British politics. In 1885, and again in 1892, the Irish Nationalists held the balance of power at Westminster. Parnell's career, however, ended in 1891 with his disgrace and early death. This divided the party and caused a long leadership struggle. The party's new leader from 1900, John Redmond, never had the same control over his party as Parnell had had. Moreover the Liberals no longer wished to be tied to Irish Home Rule; and the INP had no hope of ever passing Home Rule by themselves. Redmond had to wait for a political situation that might bring support from the main parties for Irish Home Rule. This did not occur until 1911.

The political situation from December 1905 to January 1906

In December 1905, the Conservatives were in government but faced mounting criticism and a downturn in trade. The Conservative prime minister, A. J. Balfour, did something unusual. Rather than call a general election, he decided simply to announce his party's resignation from government. As a result, a Liberal government took over and in January 1906 the Liberals, under their leader Campbell-Bannerman, called a general election.

Key terms

Affiliation: means to link to. Gradually in the 1900s more and more trade unions linked up with the LRC/Labour Party providing members and money.

Pressure group: an organisation of like-minded people who promote a certain cause, and put pressure on parliament or on the government to legislate in favour of that cause. They seek to influence government rather than become the government.

Sponsored MPs: MPs who received support and funding from bodies outside of parliament such as trade unions. Before 1911, MPs did not get a salary from the State and so working-class MPs needed financial support from their trade unions.

Socialism: implies equality and, in its most extreme form, common ownership. The Labour Party's new constitution in 1918 included the famous clause 4 about 'common ownership of the means of production' which sounded far more 'socialist', and therefore frightening to the propertied classes, than it really was.

Home Rule for Ireland: between the Act of Union in 1800 and the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, the whole of Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. Home Rule was the proposal that Ireland should have its own parliament and government whilst remaining within the United Kingdom. Two attempts to pass Home Rule in 1886 and 1893 failed. The first was defeated in the House of Commons the second was vetoed by the Unionist dominated House of Lords.