

Peterloo

The role played by Henry 'Orator' Hunt in the Peterloo massacre, and its impact on the parliamentary Whigs and Whig politics; by John Belchem.

Henry Hunt, Peterloo

From the onset of distress after Waterloo, Hunt insisted – where others equivocated – on full democratic radicalism and mass mobilisation, a programme he took to the north during a triumphant earlier visit to Manchester in January 1819.

AS THE 200TH anniversary of the Peterloo massacre passes, it is timely to reconsider and reassess the role of Henry 'Orator' Hunt, the star attraction at the ill-fated meeting on St Peter's Fields, Manchester, on 16 August 1819. E. P. Thompson's judgement was harsh in his magisterial study *The Making of the English Working Class*, categorising Hunt as a vain demagogue who 'voiced, not principle nor even well-formulated Radical strategy, but the emotions of the movement. Striving always to say whatever would provoke the loudest cheer, he was not the leader but the captive of the least stable portion of the crowd.'¹ As depicted in Mike Leigh's recent epic film of the massacre, the white-hatted Hunt appears as a conceited, gentlemanly figure, far removed from the north, its poverty and distress, swanning into Manchester in August 1819 for a one-off headline appearance before adoring large crowds. Such portrayals fail to do justice either to Hunt or the people who flocked to hear him. From the onset of distress after Waterloo, Hunt insisted – where others equivocated – on full democratic radicalism and mass mobilisation, a programme he took to the north during a triumphant earlier visit to Manchester in January 1819. Hailed by northern workers as the 'intrepid champion of the people's rights', Hunt was tireless and unbending in the escalating extra-parliamentary campaign for universal manhood suffrage, annual parliaments and the ballot. Undeterred by government repression, the spy system, or the cost to his own finances, it was the fearless Hunt, with his stentorian voice and showman's headgear, who mobilised workers in the north and across the country to demand their rights in the build-up to Peterloo. Amidst the demobilisation, deflation and distress of the post-war years after Waterloo – never a worse time to be working class, according to Robert Poole² – Hunt was the central figure in the creation of a popular movement

for parliamentary reform that surpassed anything seen in the 1790s.³

Hunt's rural upbringing in Wiltshire – he was born on 6 November 1773 at Widdington Farm, Upavon – gave no indication of his subsequent notorious political career. Educated at indifferent boarding and grammar schools in preparation for Oxford and the Church, the headstrong young Hunt insisted on following his father into full-time farming. An innovative gentleman farmer, he enjoyed considerable prosperity in the wartime agricultural boom. On his father's death, he came into ownership or occupancy of 3,000 acres in Wiltshire, including the old family estate at Enford, and property in Bath and Somerset, including the manor and estate of Glastonbury. A hasty and unfortunate mésalliance, his marriage to the daughter of the landlord of the Bear Inn, Devizes, came under strain on their removal to Chisenbury Priory, an elegant mansion where Hunt flaunted his prosperity in 'uninterrupted gaiety and dissipation'. During this 'giddy round of mirth and folly' he fell in love with Mrs Vince, the unhappily married wife of a friend. Unable to conceal their emotions, the couple eloped. Hunt duly arranged a formal separation from his wife in September 1802 with provision for their children. Thenceforth, extravagance was curtailed. Hunt spent the rest of his life in devoted fidelity to Mrs Vince. Having flouted social convention, however, Hunt found himself ostracised by the Wiltshire establishment, a contributory factor in his conversion to radicalism. His relationship with Mrs Vince and his prowess as a farmer were later the subject of heated dispute with William Cobbett, issues which cut deeper than any political differences in their tempestuous collaboration in the radical cause.⁴

Like Cobbett, Hunt had initially been a fervent loyalist until outrage at the mounting corruption and incompetence in the war against

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Henry 'Orator'
Hunt (1773–1835);
watercolour by
Adam Buck, circa
1810 (© National
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London)

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Napoleonic France took them both over into the reform camp as supporters of Sir Francis Burdett. Much in line with the programme and ideology of the old country party, the patrician Burdett stood forward as an independent gentleman seeking to purge corruption and oligarchy by restoring 'purity' to the Commons. Hunt's maiden speech on the platform, at the Wiltshire meeting called to protest at the financial misconduct of Pitt's close friend, Lord Melville, the First Lord of the Admiralty and Treasurer of the Navy, concluded with a string of resolutions expressing 'general condemnation of all speculations and speculators'. His proposals, he later came to understand, were 'too sweeping, as they cut at the Whigs as well as the Ministers': at the time, he allowed himself to be wheedled out of the 'main jet' of his proposals by the more experienced Whigs on the platform. Although inhibited by the Grenville alliance, the Whigs, as Hunt acknowledged, gained considerable party advantage from the Melville affair, enjoying 'the confidence of the thinking and honourable portion of the people.' By the time the Foxite–Grenville coalition took office in 1806, Hunt was 'one of Mr. Fox's most enthusiastic admirers ... I own I indulged the most confident hope that he would now realise all his former professions.' These fond expectations were soon blasted. The first act of the new ministry, the bill enabling Grenville to hold the post of First Lord of the Treasury at £6,000 a year and at the same time the office of Auditor of the Exchequer at £4,000 a year 'to audit his own accounts' constituted 'a death-blow to the fondly-cherished hopes of every patriotic mind in the kingdom'. In their later actions, Hunt fulminated, the new ministers 'not only trod in Mr. Pitt's steps, by adopting all his measures, but they greatly outdid him in insulting the feelings of the people'. The Ministry of All the Talents revealed the Whigs in their true colours as 'a despicable, a hypocritical, and a tyrannical faction': throughout the rest of his long political life, Hunt constantly reminded the people of this damning record of apostasy, betrayal, profligacy and corruption.⁵

For those disappointed and disillusioned by Whig politics, Burdett pointed the way forward. He secured a sensational election victory in 1807 in Foxite Westminster, achieved not through his purse (exhausted by early contests in Middlesex) but by 'purity of election' or rather the organisational efficiency of the new Westminster Committee, composed of small shopkeepers and tradesmen, several of whom were former members of the London Corresponding Society (LCS) from the Jacobin 1790s.

Burdett's gentlemanly lifestyle, however, precluded close attention to parliamentary duties, frustrating hopes that he would galvanise and lead a radical group in the Commons. He preserved his credentials as 'Westminster's Pride and England's Glory', however, by identifying his name with the most advanced programme discussed in 'legitimate' political circles: direct taxation (or household) suffrage, equal electoral districts and annual parliaments.⁶

Encouraged by Burdett's success, Hunt threw himself into electoral politics in freeman Bristol where he had business interests. It was a rumbustious but formative experience, taking him towards a more democratic view of reform in which the economic well-being of the common people – the real victims of wartime taxation, inflation and dislocation – was the first consideration. The champion of the crowd, he gained few votes but his bustling intervention in the elections of 1812 was sufficient to discomfit the local 'progressive Whigs', middle-class moderate reformers who sought to return Sir Samuel Romilly against the wishes of the local oligarchs.

Having gained some notoriety, 'Bristol' Hunt was encouraged by Burdett to enter the Common Hall in the City of London, to advocate 'general not partial liberty', and expose the factionalism of Robert Waithman, the 'City Cock'. Waithman, the patriotic linen-draper, had fought long and hard to transform the city from a bastion of Pittite loyalism into a stronghold of peace, retrenchment and reform, but he retained close connection with the Whigs.⁷ Hunt's stormy exchanges with Waithman in this arena of ratepayers' democracy brought him to wider attention, not least amidst the tavern world of metropolitan ultra-radicalism where the political underground merged with the underworld. Hard-line ideologues, committed to Thomas Spence's programme to transform the land into the people's farm, mixed with ultra-radical physical-force activists, itching for a putsch. Amidst deepening distress, compounded by adverse climatic factors – the spring and summer of 1816 were the worst in recorded history, the result of unprecedented volcanic eruptions in the Pacific obscuring the sky for months on end – these militant radicals looked to a well-attended public meeting as the best springboard for insurrection. All reform celebrities of the day (Hunt included) were invited to address a meeting of 'Distressed Manufacturers, Mariners, Artisans, and others' at Spa Fields on 15 November 1816.⁸ Hunt alone accepted, having satisfied himself that he was not being drawn into a revolutionary plan

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to abolish private property in land. In a private interview with Dr Watson, the impecunious apothecary and leading ultra-radical strategist, Hunt insisted there must be no reference to Spencean principles and no incitement to riot. The meeting would be strictly constitutional, a legitimate extension of political activity enabling the distressed masses to enrol in a campaign of petitions and memorials to 'save the wreck of the constitution' by the instauration of universal (manhood) suffrage, annual parliaments and the ballot.

On the day, Hunt upstaged the absent moderates and confounded the insurrectionists. Worthy of his newly acquired sobriquet, 'Orator' Hunt displayed a remarkable ability to control vast crowds and prevent disorder. When diehards led by Watson's son, tried to implement their original insurrectionary plan at a second meeting on 2 December 1816, their disastrous failure underlined the utility of Hunt's 'mass platform' of constitutional ways and means to which Watson senior was now firmly wedded. Militant ultra-radicals put insurrectionary ways and means on hold to support escalating mass platform activity, cumulative pressure from without to mobilise the people – and maximise numbers – before decisive confrontation. Provincial radicals quickly fell in line. When delegates from the north arrived in London with their reform petitions to attend the Hampden Club Convention in early 1817, they rejected the direct taxation proposals favoured by Cobbett, the veteran Major Cartwright and Burdett (who absented himself) in favour of Hunt's Spa Fields programme of universal manhood suffrage.

Open to all, the Spa Fields meetings of 1816–17 broke through the constraints of extra-parliamentary protest, a development which frightened the Whigs just as it compelled the government towards repression. When Waithman and his associates formed themselves into a dining group known as the Friends of Economy, Public Order and Reform, to promote cooperation with the parliamentary opposition, they failed to attract any Whig support. Henry Brougham, once the great hope of the Westminster reformers, was delighted to regain party favour by leading the attack on the radical extremists when the reform petitions were presented in the Commons.

The radical mass platform was crushed by the 'dungeon parliament' of 1817. The spectre of Spencean revolution haunted the 'green bags' – the 'evidence' presented to the parliamentary committees of secrecy in the wake of Spa Fields – providing ample pretext for the

suspension of habeas corpus, a new Seditious Meeting Prevention Act, and a general clamp-down on radical societies and the radical press, which prompted Cobbett, a belated convert to universal suffrage, to flee the country (much to Hunt's consternation). 'Alarm' proved self-fulfilling, forcing radicals underground into the milieu of the agent provocateur: the committees of secrecy were soon set to work again to investigate the provincial risings of 1817. Believing that radicals had a duty to do all they could to assist those entrapped by the likes of the infamous Oliver and other spies, Hunt called upon Burdett's Westminster Committee (or the Rump as it was known, having shed its LCS members) to arrange a meeting to promote a subscription to defray the legal expenses of Jeremiah Brandreth and others captured in the Pentrich rising. He was appalled by the reply he received. 'We Reformers, are far from wishing to countenance or identify ourselves with any man guilty of murder, robbery or riot', Thomas Cleary expostulated: 'I COULD ALMOST HANG THEM MYSELF for playing the game of the tyrants so well'. Hunt set off to the trials at Derby and attended the whole proceedings, duly confirmed in his initial belief that the rising was 'a horrible plot, to entrap a few distressed, poor creatures to commit some acts of violence and riot, in order that the Government might hang a few of them for high treason'.⁹ After his dutiful attendance at Derby, Hunt could rely on the gratitude and support of militant elements in the provinces for the next stage of unsullied constitutional agitation.

As repressive legislation remained in place, Hunt sought to promote the democratic radical message through legitimate political channels. Having long since despaired of Burdett's indolence in parliament, he decided to stand against him and his running mate, Kinnaird, at the general election of 1818. He grasped the opportunity to debunk the temporising Burdett and his electoral committee, the caucus of '*petty shop-keepers*, and little *tradesmen*, who under the denomination of *tax-paying housekeepers*, enlisted themselves under the banner of Sir Francis Burdett, in order to set themselves up as a sort of privileged class, above the *operative* manufacturer, the artisan, the mechanic and the labourer'.¹⁰ In true radical fashion, he insisted on keeping the poll open for as long as possible to promote 'Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments, and an opposition to all laws that have a tendency to curtail the Liberties of the People, and oppress and starve the Poor.' The Rump, anxious not to offend the respectable householders who dominated the constituency,

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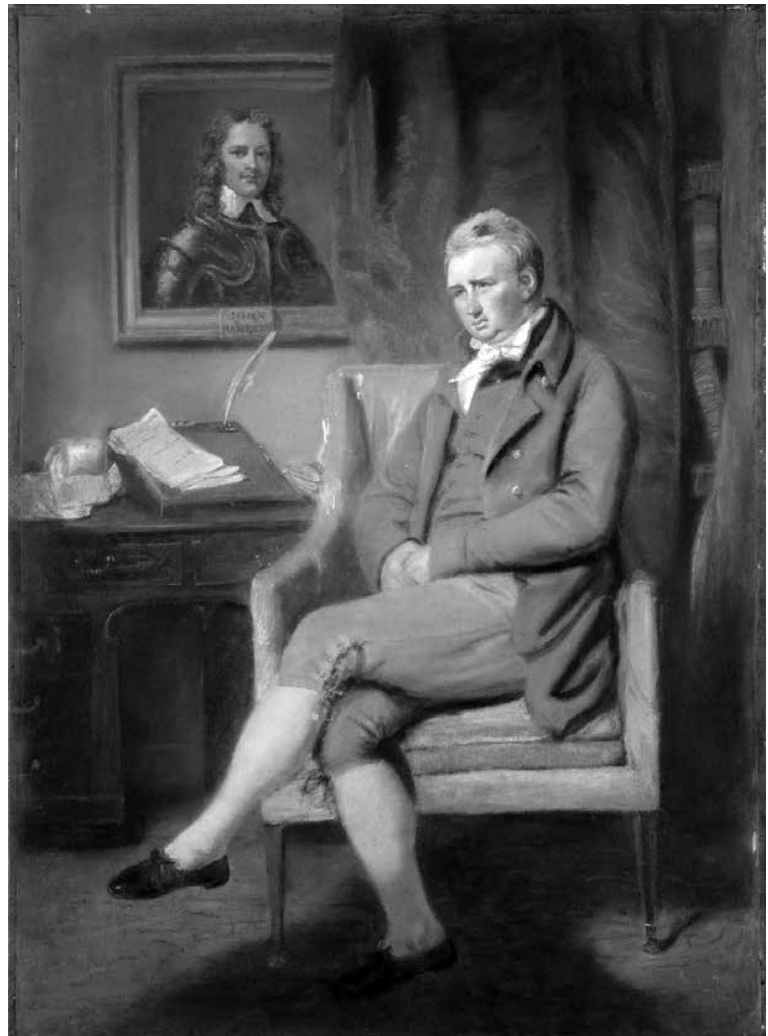
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tried every form of contumely and innuendo to silence and discredit him. Hunt was the undisputed choice of the crowd but not of the restricted electorate. He won the show of hands on nomination day but finished well at the bottom of the poll with a derisory eighty-four votes. Even so, as at Bristol, the election demonstrated his ability to disconcert moderate reformers. The final result was not without irony: Burdett was forced to jettison Kinnaird, but still finished a sorry second to Romilly, the fractures and dissension among the reformers enabling the popular Whigs to recapture the former Foxite stronghold.

During the election campaign, Hunt gained the support of a new generation of militant radicals, most notably the publicists who came to the fore in Cobbett's absence: William Sherwin, whose *Political Register* was the paper of choice of Dr Watson and his group; Sherwin's associate, Richard Carlile, who published Hunt's campaign material and furnished the famous red flag (later proudly displayed at Peterloo) with 'UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE as a motto, surmounted by a Cap of Liberty, surrounded with the inscription of Hunt and Liberty'; and Thomas Dolby, the leading radical bookseller and distributor, who brought out a pamphlet extolling Hunt's virtues and campaigned industriously on his behalf. Up in Lancashire, Samuel Bamford arranged a subscription to help with the expenses, and wrote to the Westminster electors enjoining them to vote for Hunt, the 'People's Man'.¹¹

Once the Seditious Meetings Prevention Act had run its course, Hunt, encouraged by the new radical paper, the *Manchester Observer*, set off for industrial Lancashire in January 1819 to enlist northern workers in the next stage of the radical campaign. At a mass meeting on St Peter's Field and other gatherings, he confirmed and legitimised his leadership, deploying characteristic rhetorical tropes, unattractive to present-day audiences, but fully in pitch with Regency political convention. In the absence of any formal mechanism of accountability, Hunt felt the need to assure his audiences he was not 'trading' in politics, hence the repeated declarations of his uncompromising allegiance to the cause and recitation of his sufferings (financial and otherwise) on the people's behalf:

I am, as you see me, a plain man: I have a little landed property by inheritance. Of the income which I derive from it, I live upon one half, and the other I devote to your service, in endeavouring to recover your rights. If ever I desert the principles which



William Cobbett (1763–1835), chalk drawing by John Raphael Smith, 1812, believed to have been produced while Cobbett was in Newgate prison. (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

I have professed, may that colour (*pointing to one of the flags*) be my winding sheet. (*Loud applause*).

His gentlemanly status was the very earnest proof of his probity, independence and ability to confront their oppressors. From the days of John Wilkes through to the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor, it was widely believed that only the gentleman knew the forms and language of high politics, could cut a brave figure on the hustings, or belabour the ministers in their own tongue. 'They have represented me as a most infamous and rascally fellow', Hunt protested at his treatment in the Manchester loyalist press: 'I am an humble country Gentleman, and when I have been before the public I have dared to advocate the cause of truth'.¹² The image delighted the northern radicals. 'The good old character of an independent country Gentleman was surely there in him,' a correspondent wrote to the *Manchester Observer*. 'I had almost compared him to an English Baron in the time of Magna Charta, but that Mr Hunt's motives were so much more

praiseworthy; he was not there as they met that worthless King at Runnymede, to advocate the rights of a few, but of all'.¹³

From then on radicals worked through an escalating repertoire of open platform agitation towards decisive confrontation, exploiting constructive ambiguities in contested understandings of the law, constitution and history. Marshalled by Hunt, the people stood forward in heroic guise as the true loyalists, upholding the constitution which had been 'won by the valour and cemented with the blood of our ancestors'. By legitimising protest activity in this way, the radicals put the authorities on the defensive while embarrassing the apostate Whigs – the ultimate constitutional right of resistance remained a fundamental principle of Whig political thought. In Hunt's brand of populism, appeals to the constitution and the memory of glorious past struggles were combined with a compelling sense of a hitherto latent popular will, now transforming itself into something both purposeful and irresistible. 'By great public meetings being peaceably but firmly conducted', Hunt instructed, 'the Public Feeling of the whole country may be so concentrated as to cause the consummation of all our wishes'.¹⁴

Undaunted by the rejection of petitions and remonstrances, he sanctioned a major escalation of open-ended platform activity in the summer of 1819 to mobilise a 'national union', a 'Political Union in the cause of Universal Civil and Religious Liberty'. To this end, the Manchester meeting, announced for 9 August, was to be the greatest display of radical strength in the provinces, the regional climax of an unprecedented series of local mass meetings – great outings for whole families, trades and communities – prior to a monster assembly in London on his return. Hunt stipulated that the demonstration should be 'very publick . . . rather a meeting of the *County of Lancashire* etc. than of Manchester alone'. In his intercepted correspondence with Joseph Johnson, brushmaker and secretary of the Manchester Patriotic Union Society, he gave detailed instructions of the kind of 'management' required to ensure the meeting would be the largest ever, attracting people 'from almost all parts within 20 miles round'. 'We have nothing to do but concentrate public opinion', Hunt wrote as he prepared to leave for the north, 'and if our Enemies will not listen to the voice of a whole People, they will listen to nothing, and may the effects of their Folly and Wickedness be upon their own Heads'.¹⁵

By this time, a tense mood of confrontation had developed in which each side hoped the other would be the first to overstep the mark,

transgress the constitution and lose public sanction. The authorities were quite confounded by the nature of the radical challenge of summer 1819. The Home Office grappled to find a means of prosecuting the radicals who stayed within the law but who organised meetings which evidently terrified magistrates. After the mass meeting at Halifax on 2 August, Horton, the local magistrate, wrote to Whitehall that he did not consider the 'peaceable Conduct observed by these Meetings is so very favourable a circumstance'. The Home Office agreed, noting that it was 'not the mode in which the English character usually exhibits Discontent'.¹⁶ Despite repeated pleas from magistrates in the north, Sidmouth, the home secretary, refused to introduce special legislation to counter what he described as the 'unprecedented Artifice with which the Demagogues of the present day contrive without transgressing the Law, to produce on the Public Mind the same effect which used only to be created by means unquestionably unlawful'.¹⁷

Well versed in the law, Hunt was determined not to be cowed by the magistrates when they banned the 9 August meeting, advising the people to 'Abstain at their peril' from the meeting, a grammatical solecism which Hunt relished. Determined to maintain the legal high ground, he issued his own 'Proclamation' asserting the legal and constitutional right of public meeting; insisted that radicals abandon arming and drilling on the Lancashire moors: they were to come to the rearranged Manchester meeting on 16 August 'armed with no other weapon but that of a self-approving conscience; determined not to suffer yourselves to be irritated or excited, by any means whatsoever, to commit any breach of the public peace'. Having heard a rumour that the magistrates had issued a warrant against him, he offered himself up to the authorities on the Saturday before the meeting to leave them no pretext for breaking up the proceedings.¹⁸ The Manchester magistrates, however, decided to 'bring the matter to issue'. 'If the agitators of the country determine to persevere in their meeting', the stipendiary magistrate announced, 'it will necessarily prove a trial of strength and there must be a conflict'.¹⁹ On 16 August, the magistrates gained their bloody victory. At least eighteen people were killed and many hundreds injured when the magistrates sent in the inebriated publicans, butchers and shopkeepers of the local yeomanry to arrest Hunt and other leaders on the platform, and then ordered in the 15th Hussars to disperse the peaceable crowd.

The Peterloo massacre inflamed radical spirits, aroused middle-class public opinion and

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unnerved the government – but it also fractured the unity previously displayed on the mass platform. For militant ultra-radicals, the outrage of Peterloo – ‘high treason committed against the people’ – meant that the time had surely come for the oppressed people to exercise their sovereign right of physical resistance as sanctioned by history, Blackstone and other authorities. His frequent evocation of the glorious ancestors notwithstanding, Hunt chose to interpret the outrage in different manner, as a moral propaganda coup that could be used not only to bring the murderous perpetrators to justice but also to shape public opinion and shame the authorities into reform. Seen in this light, the priority was to maintain the moral high ground, to abstain from agitation and mobilisation that might sully their aggrieved, righteous and superior stance.

While cautioning against any further platform activity, Hunt revelled in his own enhanced celebrity. Huge crowds flocked to see him as he travelled back and forth from the New Bailey to Lancaster Gaol and the Assize Court, and then on his return in triumph to London. The undisputed hero of the hour, Hunt let his vanity get the better of him, altering the route of the London procession and taking the chair at the dinner. Watson had never thought that ‘the hero of the piece would ever wish to become the master of ceremonies’.²⁰ To make matters worse, Hunt left Watson holding the bill: three months later he was gaoled for its non-payment. In the interim, the working alliance forged at Spa Fields, collapsed in acrimony.

While the radicals split in their response to events at Manchester, the government regained confidence. In the courts, the authorities – already thanked by the prince regent – were exonerated without question, Hunt’s unremitting efforts to bring them to justice notwithstanding. Back in control, the government asserted its power. Parliament was specially convened in late 1819 to pass the Six Acts, an attempt to return to the narrow political participation of the eighteenth century: ‘taxes on knowledge’ were imposed on the press, and the right of public meeting was limited by a series of measures prohibiting banners and flags, and restricting attendance to those actually resident in the parish. Reinforced by its new repressive powers the government was able to launch a sustained campaign of prosecution: by summer 1820 all the leading radical orators, organisers, journalists, publishers, and distributors were confined in prison.

To confound Hunt’s discomfiture, public outrage over Peterloo benefited the established

opposition, not the radicals. ‘Who would have speculated on the Manchester affair or on its approval’, George Ensor, the Benthamite intellectual, wrote to Francis Place, ‘the profit of these two capital blunders is incalculable ... they were victories gained to us by the enemy over themselves.’²¹ But while the government and the authorities were roundly condemned, Hunt and the working-class radicals received little praise. The Westminster reformers agonised over the problem of how to exploit the massacre without giving some credit to Hunt, ‘a man who had vilified and abused them so outrageously’.²² Burdett avoided any reference to Hunt in his famous letter condemning the massacre and the ‘bloody Neroes’, for which he was later prosecuted.²³ Byron wrote to his friend John Cam Hobhouse, the unsuccessful Rump candidate at the 1819 by-election, to advise the Westminster reformers against any reconciliation with the likes of Hunt:

If the Manchester yeomanry had cut down Hunt only, they would have done their duty ... our classical education alone should teach us to trample on such unredeemed dirt ... if to praise such fellows be the price of popularity, I spit upon it as I would in their faces.²⁴

Despite strong lobbying by popular Whigs, party leaders were reluctant to stand forward over Peterloo, dreading some intervention by Hunt and the radicals. ‘If matters are left to themselves’, Brougham tried to convince Grey, ‘we shall have a green bag, which is worse than Hunt. And really the tendency of things at present – to end in a total separation of the upper and middling from the lower classes, the property from the population – is sufficiently apparent and rather alarming.’²⁵ It was not until Fitzwilliam forced the issue by agreeing to a Yorkshire meeting on the strict issue of an inquiry, that the party decided to take to the county platform. The county meetings produced some grandiloquent rhetoric about the rights of the freeborn Englishman, but not a word was said about reform. Joseph Mitchell, Hunt’s lieutenant in the north was manhandled off the platform at York when he tried to raise the issue.²⁶

Viewed with historical hindsight, outrage at Peterloo served to foster a new middle-class political consciousness, an important step towards the Reform Act of 1832. Robert Poole notes how middle-class liberals deplored radicalism (and of course Hunt) but were no less critical of the political partisanship of the

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state and the erosion of civil rights. Over time, this stance, Poole maintains, helped 'to create a political centre ground in an otherwise polarised society, nourishing a new language of principled opposition and a new and powerful sense of middle-class political identity ... as the responsible class, bringing about essential but limited reform by holding the ring between the nobility and the mobility – the nobs and the mobs'.²⁷ On release from Ilchester 'Bastille' (where he served a sentence of two and a half years, having been convicted on just one of six charges over Peterloo, that of intention to foster sedition), Hunt was soon embroiled in the contentious politics of 'Corn, Cash and Catholics' throughout the 1820s, clashing in the process with Whigs, moderate reformers and those who now described themselves as 'liberals'.

Hunt left prison hoping to recapture popular support and to recoup the personal fortune lost through agitation and persecution. He enjoyed considerable business success with an extraordinary range of products, including his tax-free 'Breakfast Powder' and his 'matchless' shoe-blackening, bottles of which were embossed with the slogan 'Equal Laws, Equal Rights, annual Parliaments, Universal Suffrage and the Ballot'. Despite his concentration on business, he maintained a special interest in agricultural matters and county politics. The persistence of distress in the early 1820s produced a strong demand for reform at a time when high taxes and a deflationary currency policy cut into consumer spending and stifled demand.²⁸ Agriculturalists were joined on the county platform by William Cobbett, now an advocate of currency reform, and by Whigs promoting a programme of moderate reform and retrenchment. In the vain and forlorn hope of reviving the post-war national union, Hunt too took to the county platform, *faute de mieux*, to raise the people's banner of universal suffrage, annual parliaments and the ballot, trusting to isolate the landowning establishment and radicalise the farmers and labourers, prior to their joining the workers and manufacturing interest in an overwhelming challenge from without.

Given his business interests, most of Hunt's political energies were centred on London. He re-entered city politics to champion the commonalty, the rate-paying livery, against the establishment, the corrupt corporation, notorious for their 'guzzlings and gormandizing'. A popular choice as auditor, he became well placed to expose corrupt malpractice in which Waithman, 'their worthy Alderman, the ultra Whig' was allegedly implicated.²⁹ Any further political advance was thwarted by tacit

cooperation between Waithman and the Tories: unrestrained scurrilous attack on his private life and political principles ensured heavy defeat whenever he tried to gain election to the Common Council, the 'Little House of Commons'.

At the same time as struggles for reform in the city (and also in his local vestry in the Borough), Hunt was engaged in furious contention with the leading metropolitan reformers, the now fashionable Westminster 'liberals'. The division was perhaps most stark over Catholic emancipation and the plight of the Irish. Liberals were concerned with civil rights, or more specifically, the removal of those civil disabilities which hindered the professional careers of middle-class Catholics. Hunt, now briefly reconciled with Cobbett, drew attention to the dire distress of the Irish poor, and campaigned for economic and social amelioration as well as the recognition of the political rights of all, Protestant and Catholic, rich and poor. To Hunt and Cobbett, Catholic emancipation was merely the starting point, a necessary preliminary to the really important Irish reforms: disestablishment of the Church, abolition of tithes, and the introduction of a proper poor law system financed by the landowners. By itself, the elimination of civil disabilities would benefit only the middle classes, not the starving Irish poor, whose desperate plight was overlooked by liberals who preferred to sympathise with affluent Spaniards, Neapolitans and Greeks.³⁰ Hunt and Cobbett were scandalised by the Emancipation Bill which Burdett presented in 1825, notably the infamous 'wings': state payment of the Catholic clergy, and the disfranchisement of the forty-shilling freeholders. Relations deteriorated drastically when Burdett decided to stick his knees into Canning's back on the treasury benches and support Liberal Toryism. Thenceforth there were pitched battles at the annual anniversary 'purity of election' dinners to celebrate Burdett's victory in 1807: on one occasion, Hunt had to protect himself by forming 'a *chevaux de frize* [sic] with the chairs turned upside down'.³¹ As the 1829 dinner approached, both sides prepared for all-out conflict. Catholic emancipation was at the centre of the dispute, as the Westminster reformers openly approved of the recent settlement which sacrificed the rights of the forty-shilling freeholders. But there were several other issues which divided radicals from liberals, the most important of which was Warburton's 'Dead-Body' Bill.

Amidst the furore caused by the Burke and Hare murders, the Benthamite Henry Warburton brought forward a bill which sought to remedy the deficiency of cadavers for dissection

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and teaching purposes, by sending surgeons the bodies of paupers dying unclaimed in workhouses and hospitals. Such a utilitarian solution to the pressing needs of science was much applauded by the liberals and 'advanced' radicals like Richard Carlile, but it horrified popular radicals like Hunt and Cobbett who were joined in opposition by many old Tories. Here was an issue which adumbrated the divisions over the new Poor Law in the 1830s when class resentment was reinforced by Tory paternalism. For all its efficiency and rationality, Warburton's bill was a blatant piece of discrimination against the poor, offending deeply held popular attitudes towards death, burial and the human body: it condemned the poor, Hunt and Cobbett protested, 'to undergo the degradation which our forefathers allotted as part of the sentence of the murderer'.³²

Hunt arrived at the 1829 dinner with a long list of questions on the 'Dead-Body' Bill, the disfranchisement of the Irish freeholders and various other issues. But it was Hobhouse who took command of the proceedings. In a powerful and witty speech, he defended the Irish disfranchisement 'for the sake of the good which accompanied it', and looked forward to the day when Hunt and Cobbett would 'do credit to a scientific dissection, and afford us an example calculated to enlighten and illustrate us in a physical, if not in a moral, point of view. (Cheers and laughter)'. At this point, Hunt and Cobbett beat a hasty retreat, a wise decision since the Rump had packed the Crown and Anchor with 'hired ruffians'.³³ It was the final parting of the ways. Radicals and liberals took their separate paths at the very time when parliamentary reform was placed on the agenda of 'high politics'.

In the early stages of the Reform Bill crisis, after Wellington resigned and the Whigs came into office, Hunt emerged triumphant at the Preston by-election in December 1830 caused by Stanley's elevation to government office. Dismayed by Stanley's answers to questions about the reform intentions of the Whigs, the local radicals decided to nominate Hunt. Stanley, Hunt noted on arrival in the town, had 'let the cat out of the bag': his answers confirmed that the ministers 'intended to do nothing ... He, Henry Hunt, believed, all that could be done, without the vote by ballot, and a repeal of the corn laws, to be a mere nothing – all trash ... Reform, indeed! he was old enough to recollect the jockeys when they were in office before, in 1806 and 1807.' The 3,730 electors who voted for him received a celebratory medal, but Hunt, the archetypal independent gentlemanly

leader, considered himself accountable to a much broader but otherwise unrepresented constituency. The great champion of popular constitutionalism, he entered parliament as the self-proclaimed 'representative of the great mass of the industrious population of this country, to advocate their interests, and to regain and maintain for them their rights'. As 'John Bull's Watchman' and 'the Poor Man's Protector', he cast a critical eye over the Reform Bill proposals introduced by the Whigs. While recognising that the bill went further than expected, he refused to participate in the euphoria with which it was greeted, not least because its property franchise would disenfranchise his poor potwalloper constituents. As a democratic radical, he 'opposed, or rather exposed the Bill, because it did not come up to any of the points he had advocated'. His adoring Preston constituents apart, Hunt was attacked on all sides, having to battle against liberal propaganda, reformist sentiment and popular prejudice. Even so, he was undaunted in fulfilling his parliamentary duties – he spoke over a thousand times during his brief parliamentary career and kept to his pledge to present every petition sent to him, including a pioneer petition for female suffrage. No longer an ally, Cobbett subjected every aspect of the Preston Cock's parliamentary conduct to critical scrutiny, censure and ridicule. Among 'the hackerings, the stammerings, the boggings, the blunderings, and the cowering down of this famous Cock', it was Hunt's refusal to give unqualified support to the Whig Reform Bill which angered Cobbett, fearing that such inexplicable behaviour would 'cause one of two things, the *rejection of all reform*, or the *producing of a convulsive revolution*'.³⁴

Hunt's democratic opposition to the Whig Reform Bill cost him his health, his business and, at the first elections under the reformed system in December 1832, his parliamentary seat.³⁵ Thereafter he was rarely in good health. He suffered a severe stroke on a business trip to Hampshire and died soon afterwards at Alresford on 13 February 1835. Hunt died before he could recapture the popular support he had once enjoyed, but shortly thereafter he was accorded pride of place in the Chartist pantheon by penitent working-class radicals facing the horrors of the new Poor Law, the defeat of the short-time movement and the attack on trade unionism. Sent to an early grave, broken in heart and spirit by the folly and ingratitude of the people during the Reform Bill crisis, 'ever-to-be-loved' Hunt was honoured by the Chartists not only for his part in 'never-to-be forgotten' Peterloo but also for his foresight,

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the great prophet who had tried to warn the non-represented people of the deleterious consequences of middle-class 'liberal' reform. First proposed in 1835, a monument to Hunt was unveiled in Ancoats in 1842. The dedication ceremony, planned to coincide with the anniversary of Peterloo, played a crucial role in Chartist history itself: it brought all the major leaders together in Manchester at the time of the 'plug plot' or 'general strike', a high point of working-class political and industrial militancy in early Victorian England. But after the demise of Chartism, Hunt's reputation went into steady decline and the Ancoats monument fell into disrepair. Planned by the radicals, built by the Chartists, it was demolished in the name of civic pride by the Open Spaces Committee in 1888, the stones being sold to a builder for £3.³⁶

John Belchem is Emeritus Professor of History, University of Liverpool. Having published extensively on the history and culture of Liverpool, his adopted city, he is currently revisiting his initial area of research from his student years at the University of Sussex in the 1960s and 1970s: popular protest and radicalism in early nineteenth-century Britain.

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- 32 Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London, 1988).
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