The Historical Journal, 40, 1 (1997), pp. 97–110

THE PARADOX OF PEEL AS CARLYLEAN HERO*

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ABSTRACT. *Thomas Carlyle's promotion of Sir Robert Peel as a heroic statesman capable of presiding over a strongly interventionist state is paradoxical in light of the latter's rejection of paternalistic government. This paradox is heightened by Carlyle's hostility to the whigs: some members of this party identified an active role for the state and struggled against tendencies in whiggism which were connected to the 'liberal toryism' of Peel and his followers. An examination of Carlyle's knowledge of, and attitude towards, Peel shows that he was aware of his attraction to liberal economic ideas. However, Carlyle believed that Peel's sense of moral purpose and his cool view of conventional parliamentarianism were indicative of heroic potentials that were not possessed by whig politicians. The popularity which Peel enjoyed in the late 1840s was attributed by Carlyle to a widespread appreciation of his distinctive qualities; this provided the grounds for a generalized heroism which could be focused in an active state that was freed from the trammels of both economic liberalism and parliamentarianism.*

In the *Latter-day pamphlets* of 1850 Thomas Carlyle suggested that the late prime minister, Sir Robert Peel, might take up the mantle of political heroism which had last been worn in England by Oliver Cromwell.[1] He also poured scorn upon other members of the parliamentary classes and was withering in his condemnation of the present (whig) ministry. The opening sentences of a fragment in which Carlyle explained and defended his high regard for Peel indicate that he expected his position to be controversial.[2] This unpublished statement reinforced the qualifications which are a muted, but significant, feature of his published claims on behalf of his putative hero. In the fragment

* I wish to thank Mark Francis and Mark Garnett for their comments upon an early version of this article. I am also grateful for observations offered by members of the audience at the Cambridge Historical Society, the History of Political Thought seminar, Institute of Historical Research, University of London, and Politics Department seminars at the University of East Anglia and the University of Edinburgh.

[1] Thomas Carlyle, *Latter-day pamphlets* (1850), hereafter cited as *L.D.P.*, numbers 3 and 4; 'Ireland and Sir Robert Peel', *Spectator*, XXII (1849), 1085. Unless otherwise specified all references to Carlyle's writings are from *Thomas Carlyle's Works* (20 vols., London, 1893). Important aspects of the relationship between Carlyle and Peel are discussed by Jules Seigel; he also reproduces a fragment in which Carlyle quite self-consciously defends his admiration for Peel; see Seigel, 'Carlyle and Peel: the prophet's search for a heroic politician and an unpublished fragment', *Victorian Studies*, XXVI, 2 (1983), 181–95. For other comments on Carlyle's attitude towards Peel see Chris Vandem Bossche, *Carlyle and the search for authority* (Columbus, Ohio, 1991), pp. 125–6, 128–9. While the present writer is indebted to Seigel, his reconsideration draws upon recent historical literature to extend and in some cases revise aspects of his analysis.

[2] Carlyle, '[Peel fragment]' reproduced in Seigel, 'Carlyle and Peel', p. 192.

Carlyle wrote that his admiration for Peel was 'perhaps not an immeasurable one', a reservation which is confirmed by his observation that the former prime minister was not totally free of the vices of parliamentary practice: 'Falsities enough spoken in Parlt, by Sir R. and others God knows!'[3] These qualifications contrast strongly with Carlyle's fulsome endorsement of Cromwell as hero and point to elements of paradox in Carlyle's attitude towards Peel. These result from the fact that many of Carlyle's policy preferences were closer to those of a number of important whigs than they were to Peel's. The resolution of this paradox throws light upon Carlyle's appeal to Peel and helps to elucidate the bearing of his conception of heroism on politics and the state.

I

In 'Signs of the times' (1829) *Chartism* (1839) and *Past and present* (1843) Carlyle criticized 'mechanical' conceptions of human nature and their tendency to promote grossly inappropriate solutions to educational, scientific, social and religious difficulties; he also bewailed the spread of the *laissez-faire* or 'do-nothing' conception of government. These two lines of criticism came together in the claim that proponents of *laissez-faire* took a mechanical view of human nature – they ignored those 'dynamic' aspects of humanity which were expressed through art, poetry and religion – and regarded the machinery of social and economic interaction as the only way of responding to human needs. Market society was a machine in which government played a minor and overwhelmingly negative role.

In response to this theory of 'non-government', Carlyle argued for an active state that was informed by an understanding of the dynamic aspects of human nature, urging it to assume an authoritative role in identifying and pursuing social goals. From time to time Carlyle lighted on various areas which he thought required urgent government action – the treatment of paupers; popular education; factory conditions; public health and sanitation – but the general point lying behind these specific suggestions is that contemporary problems could only be solved by an active, interventionist state.[4]

It seems clear that Carlyle's conception of government differed sharply from that adhered to by Peel and other 'liberal' tories. In the first place, Peel thought of society as a machine and used this image in support of an extensive programme of administrative and financial reform.[5] These initiatives were

[3] Seigel, 'Carlyle and Peel', pp. 192, 193; Carlyle, *L.D.P.*, p. 145; see also the journal entry from 1850 in which Carlyle notes his reservations on Peel's 'strict conservatism and even officiality of view'; John Anthony Froude, *Carlyle's life in London* (2 vols., London, 1896 edn), II, 49–50 (1850). Carlyle usually viewed both conservatism and 'officiality' with suspicion.

[4] See Carlyle, 'Signs of the times', *Critical and miscellaneous essays*, II, 233–50; *Chartism*, ch. X; *Past and present*, bk IV, ch. III.

[5] Boyd Hilton, *The age of atonement. The influence of Evangelicalism on social and economic thought* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 220–1, 230–1; Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic government in the age of reform. Whigs and liberals 1830–1852* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 203–4. Hilton prefaces his account of Peel's views on this issue with a reference to Carlyle's critique of mechanicalism.

related to Peel's attraction to the theory of *laissez-faire*, but this was tempered in practice by a moderating pragmatism.[5] Nevertheless, he believed that the social machine would run more effectively and would accord more closely with a divinely established system of checks and rewards if it was freed from the intrusions of interventionist government. These intrusions, which could usually be traced to a desire to protect a sectional interest at the expense of the community, had the morally detrimental effect of creating arbitrary and capricious forms of administration which interfered with the system of 'natural' discipline which was instituted by God and was reflected (in part at least) by the operation of the market. In practical terms, this perspective gave rise to a preference for *laissez-faire* on moral rather than wealth-maximising grounds, and to a rejection of the 'managerial' interventionist state favoured both by conventional paternalistic 'high' tories and also by radicals like Carlyle.[7]

The paradox of Carlyle's admiration for Peel is deepened if the latter's views are considered in relation to the strongly interventionist strand which ran through the political thinking of some of his whig opponents in the 1830s and 1840s. Although there was an influential group within parliamentary whiggism whose opposition to interventionism paralleled that of Peel, a number of whig party leaders promoted an active, interventionist view of politics. These figures, the self-conscious heirs of a tradition of 'grand whiggery', believed that the power of the state should be used to forge and enhance a long-established and mutually beneficial relationship between the populace and the great whig families.[8] State action on public health, factory conditions and public education would reaffirm the popular ethos of the whig party in a new, increasingly industrialized and urbanized environment; it would also prepare the population at large for a fuller assumption of their political rights. Since the whig party in the 1830s and 1840s included a significant body of opinion which rejected interventionism, the clash between the parties on this issue was blurred to some degree, but there were a number of occasions when the aspirations of the 'grand whigs' and the Peelites came into open conflict.[9]

If one takes account of these aspects of the politics of the 1830s and 1840s, Carlyle's elevation of Peel to heroic status and his open contempt for the whigs is paradoxical. Before attempting to come to grips with this paradox, however, it is necessary to deal with two issues which may be thought to make it purely formal. First, consideration must be given to the possibility that Carlyle was ignorant of the politics of the 1830s and 1840s, in which case his preference for Peel was due to a misunderstanding of his views and of those of his opponents. Alternatively, Carlyle's admiration for Peel may have occurred at a time when

[6] See Paul Adelman, *Peel and the tory party* (London, 1989), p. 39.

[7] Hilton, *The age of atonement*, pp. 224–6, 230–1; Peel's 'managerial' conception of government is discussed in this work and in Hilton's earlier article, 'Peel: a reappraisal', *Historical Journal*, XXII, 4 (1979), 585–614.

[8] Mandler, *Aristocratic government*, pp. 35–8.

[9] Mandler, *Aristocratic government*, discusses clashes on factory legislation (p. 240); public health (p. 245); and the Poor Law (p. 251).

he had abandoned the strongly interventionist conception of the state which emerged from *Chartism* and *Past and present*.

The first of these possibilities seems implausible in light of Jules Seigel's observation that the essays which Carlyle published in the late 1840s reflected a significant engagement with the 'world of public affairs'.[10] This judgement may, in fact, be extended back into the 1830s. Light is thrown on the issue of Carlyle's knowledge of whig policy by his close association with Charles Buller, Carlyle's former tutee and a whig M.P. In 1835 when Carlyle wished to secure a position on the National Education Commission Buller recommended him to Lord John Russell.[11] While Carlyle's interest in the Commission suggests knowledge of, and a certain sympathy for, whig initiatives in this area, his relationship with Buller connected him with one of the most fervent proponents of state intervention.[12] This association does not provide overwhelming proof of Carlyle's knowledge of whig policy, but if it is set in the context of Carlyle's well-documented interest in public affairs it should make us wary of imputing his anti-whiggism to ignorance alone.

Much the same can be said of Carlyle's knowledge of Peel's views. Having sent Peel a copy of his edition of Cromwell's letters and speeches in 1845, Carlyle had a number of conversations with the former prime minister in the late 1840s, becoming increasingly impressed with him on closer acquaintance.[13] There are indications, however, that this admiration co-existed with an awareness of Peel's attachment to political economy. The first 'Latter-day pamphlet', 'The present time', concludes with an imaginary speech by a 'Chief Governor' who has recognized the enormity of the problem posed by 'British and Irish Pauperism'.[14] There is, of course, much of Carlyle in this peroration, but in light of Peel's appearance in later pamphlets in this series, it is likely that he is the 'Chief Governor' of the first pamphlet. This attribution is strengthened by some of the details of the speech, particularly those addressed to a large and vocal body of 'Respectable Professors of the Dismal Science' in the audience. The Chief Governor makes it clear to these people that his new role involves a departure from their ways and also from his.

[10] Seigel, 'Carlyle and Peel', p. 183.

[11] Edwin W. Marrs, Jr, ed., *The letters of Thomas Carlyle to his brother Alexander with related family letters* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 387 note 2. Carlyle's relationship with Charles Buller began in 1822 and continued until the latter's death in 1848; see John Anthony Froude, *Carlyle's early life* (2 vols., London, 1896 edn), I, 144–5 and Froude, *Carlyle's life in London*, I, 483.

[12] During the 1830s Buller was associated with the Benthamites but he later gravitated to the Foxite whigs. In a speech before the house of commons in 1844 Buller defended Lord John Russell's proposed ten hour day and promoted a 'new and bold principle of legislation'. This principle made government responsible for 'properly organizing [the working classes], guiding them by religion, bettering them by education, restraining them by police, ensuring their comforts by sanitary regulations, and checking the growth of mischievous social habits among them by legislative interference.' Cited Mandler, *Aristocratic government*, p. 244; Carlyle can hardly have asked for more.

[13] Froude, *Carlyle's life in London*, I, 465; II, 44, 48–9; Seigel, 'Carlyle and Peel', pp. 186–7.

[14] Carlyle, *L.D.P.*, p. 33.

Respectable Professors … I know what you say. For my sins I have read much in those inimitable volumes of yours … and, in these last forty years of theory and practice, have pretty well seized what of Divine Message you were sent with to me. … Once I even tried to sail through the Immensities with them, and to front the big, coming Eternities with them, but I found it would not do. … You rejoice in my improved tariffs, free-trade movements and the like, on every hand; for which be thankful, and even sing litanies if you choose. But here at last, in the Idle-Workhouse movement – unexampled yet on Earth or in the waters under the Earth, – I am fairly brought to a stand.[15]

This statement points to Carlyle's awareness of Peel's attachment to *laissez-faire*. It also makes clear that Carlyle himself had not become a convert to these views. To the contrary, the *Latter-day pamphlets* present Carlyle's most developed argument for an active state. In the fourth of these pamphlets, 'The new Downing Street', Carlyle evoked a future in which the government's role in maintaining internal order and dealing with foreign affairs was minimised, but in which it took on a range of other functions which it presently neglected. These new duties included assuming responsibility for public education to ensure appropriate training for both leaders and followers, and the maintenance of a system of colonial administration that would make the colonies training grounds rather than increasingly ramshackle adjuncts of a society blighted by *laissez-faire*.[16] However, Carlyle believed that pauperism lay at the core of the 'condition of England' problem, and it was here that the need for state action was most pressing. He argued for the abandonment of the tragically misnamed '*workhouse*' system of poor relief and for the establishment of schemes that would provide real work for the unemployed. Carlyle focused on the possibilities for labour presented by the under-utilized wastelands of Ireland and the colonies, but he stressed that these would not be realised unless the workforce were 'regimented'. Private initiatives would play an important role in this process, but these would be effective only if they took place in an environment which was invigorated by an active and extensive state. The state should embody a standard of order and responsibility to which a new class of responsible employers, the 'Captains of Industry', would be obliged to conform.[17] This development would provide the starting point for a radical reorganization and extension of governmental activity. 'The State, as it gets into the track of its real work, will find that same expand into whole continents of new unexpected, most blessed activity.'[18]

[15] Carlyle, *L.D.P.*, pp. 38–9.

[16] Ibid. pp. 142, 127ff.

[17] *L.D.P.*, pp. 134, 140–1. An earlier statement of his view appeared in an article which Carlyle wrote for *The Spectator*; see 'Irish regiments (of the new aera)', *The Spectator*, xxii (1848), 464–5. Carlyle's general impression of irresponsible Irish landlords and the ineffectual work provisions of poor law administration were confirmed and sharpened by contrast with a land improvement programme he observed at King William's Town in Co. Cork; see Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences of my Irish journey in 1849*, ed. J. A. Froude (London, 1882), pp. 146, 148–51, 201–2. Carlyle's ideas on the role of the state in relation to the performance of the private sector are not dissimilar to some socialist views of the role of the state in a mixed economy. For a well-informed contemporary comment on the socialistic implications of Carlyle's 'regimentation' of paupers see the review of *L.D.P.* in the *North British Review* (Nov. 1850) by David Masson, a friendly critic; Jules Paul Seigel ed., *Thomas Carlyle. The critical heritage* (London, 1971), pp. 349–52.

[18] Ibid. p. 139.

The paradox of Peel as Carlylean hero is thus confirmed by the examination of his engagement with contemporary politics and by his reaffirmation of previously stated views on the need for an active state. Since this paradox is double-sided – it results from Carlyle's positive attitude to Peel and his disdain for the whigs – its resolution must address both of these facets.

II

By 1850 Carlyle's antipathy to whiggism was of long standing. In 1831 his radical instincts prompted grudging praise of the 'purging' effect of Lord John Russell's ministry upon the 'Old Dundas System' of corruption and management which had long been a force in Scottish parliamentary and local politics, but this comment is a rare exception in a catalogue of dismissive assessments of particular whigs and of whiggism itself.[19] Indeed, when the whigs came into office in 1830 Carlyle expected nothing from them, and by the winter of 1832/3 his impressions of 'polite' society in Edinburgh helped to engrave this judgement on his mind. Reporting on his introduction to the saloon culture of the 'Athens of the north', Carlyle gave a vivid political bearing to scenes of acute social embarrassment: 'my utterances fall like red-hot aërolthes, or bursting bombs into the peaceful tea-gardens of their existence, and they look upon me with astonishment and an incipient shudder.' Edinburgh lacked 'Benthamite, or Islamite, or other even false Believer'; it was inhabited by 'respectable Whigs, that know not the right hand from the left, and desire of all things to eat their pudding in peace.'[20]

To Carlyle's mind there seemed to be an almost natural antipathy between himself and the whigs. Traditional toryism, utilitarianism or even radicalism were outmoded or inadequate beliefs, but they were more deserving of respect than whiggism since this ideology was not a faith at all. 'Unbelieving mediocrity, barren, dead and death-giving, speaks forth more and more in all [the Whigs] do and dream. The true Atheist in these days is the Whig; he worships and can worship nothing but Respectability'. The typical whig epitomized 'Dilettantism'; he was 'a man of altogether mechanical intellect, looking to Elegance, Excitement, and a certain refined Utility, as the Highest; a man halting between two opinions and calling it Tolerance; to whom, on the whole, that Precept… [To live resolutely a whole, good and true life] were altogether a dead letter.' Unlike traditional tories who believed in 'infinite remembrance', or radicals whose faith was 'infinite hope', whig beliefs had no substance, no relationship to the infinite forces which had once been embodied in religious faith and practice but now needed to find a new expression in social and political life.[21]

Although whiggism was empty of substance, its devotees were adept in those forensic skills which were highly rated in parliamentary politics. For Carlyle,

[19] Charles Richard Sanders et al., eds., *The collected letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* (Durham, NC, 1979–), v, 294. Subsequent references to this edition will appear as *CL*.

[20] *CL*, v, 204 note 17; vi, 329.

[21] Ibid. vii, 84; 22–3; v, 289; vii, 23.

however, the whigs' successes in this arena merely reflected the fact that the political culture of the modern age was stamped with the mark of dilettantism. Carlyle's critique of contemporary government in his 'Downing Street' pamphlet involved a sharp attack on two consequences of whiggism, one relating to its impact on administration, the other to its ethos. Lacking a plausible conception of the aims of government, administration was badly conducted and misguided.[22] Carlyle opined that these weaknesses were characteristic of contemporary government, but he was particularly scathing towards Palmerstonian foreign policy. The foreign office was stuck in a time-warp of elegantly formulated irrelevancies; it was a 'protocolling establishment' engaged in tradition-bound, wasteful interventions in foreign struggles between 'sham-kingship' and 'ballot box anarchy'.[23] Constitution-mongering in the colonies reflected the same lack of relevant direction in the colonial office. Colonial and foreign policy exhibited a particular application of what Carlyle regarded as the distinguishing political vice of the whigs, that is, their pathological attachment to conventional parliamentary politics and to the ethos of parliamentary government.

Carlyle thought that this disease inflicted most of the political elite of England. However, his animus against the whigs' heroes of the English revolution[24] and his identification of the whigs with dilettantism indicates that he identified this vice particularly with them. In light of the role played by the lurking menace of Irish pauperism in the *Latter-day pamphlets* it is significant that Carlyle had earlier linked the shortcomings of the whigs' Irish policy to their ill-founded faith in electoral reform. In an article published in the *Spectator* in 1848 Carlyle had praised Lord John Russell's prompt and effective resort to coercion in early 1848, but was characteristically scornful of the remedial measures which he proposed. Russell's bills to improve voter registration were a 'lean instalment' of the vast debt of justice which England owed to Ireland. For Carlyle, however, the state of mind these proposals revealed was even more alarming than their parsimony:

> Does our chief governor calculate that England, with … Chartism under deck, and such a fire-ship of an Ireland indissolubly chained to her … can keep the waters on those terms? By her old constitutional methods, of producing small-registration bills, much Parliamentary eloquence, and getting the supplies voted … ? Is it by such alchemy he will front the crisis? – A chief governor of that humour, at the present juncture, is surely rather an alarming phenomenon![25]

In *Latter-day pamphlets* Carlyle offered a more trenchant and even less tractable critique of parliamentary government than had appeared in his

[22] Carlyle, *L.D.P.*, pp. 74–5. [23] Ibid. p. 76.

[24] For an account of Carlyle's application of his analysis of Cromwell to contemporary politics see John Morrow, 'Heroes and constitutionalists: the ideological significance of Thomas Carlyle's treatment of the English revolution', *History of Political Thought*, XIV, 2 (1993), 205–24, 214–15, 221.

[25] Thomas Carlyle, 'Ireland and the British chief governor', *The Spectator*, XXII (13 May 1848), 464.

earlier works. He insisted that any reform of parliament was futile unless it followed the creation of a 'new' Downing Street presided over by a heroic figure with the power to select officials without regard to their parliamentary standing. Extending the maritime metaphor introduced in his *Spectator* article, Carlyle likened current parliamentary leaders to pilots who rely for their sense of bearing on shouts from the crew and from observers on the shore. Moreover, he claimed that prolonged exposure to parliamentary rhetoric and the development of the skills necessary to succeed in this environment were spiritually enervating. 'To become a "brilliant speaker"... considerable portions of [an M.P.'s] natural internal endowment must have gone to the surface, in order to make a shining figure there, and precisely so much the less... must remain available in the internal silent state' which is the source of veracity in human thought and action.[26]

III

Regardless of the bearing of the whig's policies, their attitude towards politics, their bondage to the ethos and the 'dead' history of parliamentarianism,[27] and above all their congenital dilettantism, disqualified them from the heroic role that Carlyle thought must be assumed by someone in contemporary society. Peel was not immune from the dehabilitating influences prevalent in English political culture but Carlyle believed that he, alone among his fellows, had the capacity to be a 'heroic' chief governor of the 'new' Downing Street. Carlyle's remarks on Peel point to three sets of factors determining his award of this accolade; these have to do with Peel's conduct; his attitude towards politics, and his personality.

Carlyle believed that Peel's interests in administrative reform could be extended to include the cleansing of the Augean stables of Whitehall and its environs.[28] Moreover, he regarded Peel's determination over the repeal of the Corn Laws and his attitude towards Irish pauperism as significant signs of the underlying basis of his vision. On the first of these issues Carlyle was particularly struck by what he took to be Peel's indifference to parliamentary and extra-parliamentary discussions of the case for and against protectionism. For Carlyle, these debates were irrelevant and he imputed a similar view to Peel. Having observed the embattled prime minister in the chamber of the house of commons, Carlyle noted that Peel made it 'perfectly plain that [he] must prevail'.[29] This comment shrewdly captured Peel's perception of how the

[26] *L.D.P.*, pp. 93, 98. This comment relates closely to Carlyle's claims concerning the positive significance of the opacity of Cromwell's speeches; see Carlyle, *On heroes, hero-worship and the heroic in history* (1841), p. 201 and Morrow, 'Heroes and constitutionalists', p. 216.

[27] For Carlyle's distinction between 'dead' and 'living' aspects of the past see Morrow, 'Heroes and constitutionalists', pp. 206, 221.

[28] Carlyle, *L.D.P.*, p. 78.

[29] Marrs, ed., *Letters*, p. 631; see also p. 629. Carlyle thought that the Corn Laws ought to be repealed because they discriminated against the bulk of the population and were, therefore, unjust. However, he brushed aside an attempt to recruit him for the Anti-Corn Law League in 1842 with the remark that he had 'already engaged for a far bigger *League* (that of the oppressed Poor against the idle Rich; that of God against the Devil)'; Marrs, ed., *Letters*, pp. 545–6.

Corn Law issue should be handled. He refused to discuss this matter with his backbenchers or to make it the focus of an appeal to the electorate; as he later put it, 'As heads see and tails are blind, I think heads are the best judges as to the course to be taken.'[30] Carlyle attributed Peel's intransigence to his conviction that the Corn Laws were fundamentally unjust. Peel's conclusion and the determination to act upon it, were a consequence of heroic insight, not something that could be arrived at by debating.

On the issue of Irish pauperism, Carlyle applauded Peel's encouragement of attempts to set up economically viable enterprises in Ireland.[31] Peel's response in these cases was governed by his fundamental belief that while individual acts of paternal responsibility were necessary for salvation, a paternalistic state was morally regressive. However, his general preference for *laissez-faire* was not applied dogmatically. Both in famine-inflicted Ireland and during an economic crisis which struck the Scottish town of Paisley in 1841–3, Peel was prepared to countenance the direct application of funds from central government to create and/or revive economic activity.[32] In practice, therefore, Peel was prepared to use the power of the state to confront economic crises and this meant that, while there is no evidence that Carlyle shared Peel's underlying economic views, and much to the contrary, his understanding of the purpose of state action led him to the same practical short-term conclusions as Peel. The importance difference was that while Peel regarded government intervention as an occasionally justified exception to the general principle of *laissez-faire*, Carlyle, as we have seen, believed that future salvation depended upon an active and extensive state. It is important to note, however, that since Peel's preference for *laissez-faire* was based upon moral rather than narrowly focused economic considerations it placed the discussion of social and political questions in what Carlyle thought of as the appropriate realm. In any case, the fact that Peel's policy preferences sometimes coincided with his own was not the only basis of Carlyle's endorsement of Peel's heroic potentialities. To the contrary, Peel's determination to repeal the Corn Laws and his stance on Irish pauperism were particularly important because of the attitude towards politics that they revealed.

Like his earlier reluctant acquiesence in Roman catholic emancipation and

[30] C. S. Parker, ed., *Sir Robert Peel from his private papers* (3 vols., London, 1899), III, 474. In the same letter Peel vowed that he would never again 'burn my fingers by organising a party.'; see also Adelman, *Peel and the conservative party*, p. 76.

[31] [Thomas Carlyle] 'Irish regiments', pp. 463–6, 464–5; 'Legislation for Ireland', *Examiner*, 13 May 1848, p. 308; 'Ireland and Sir Robert Peel', *The Spectator*, XXII (1849), 1085. These articles are discussed by Seigel, 'Carlyle and Peel', pp. 182, 184–9. Commenting on the last of these pieces in his journal, Carlyle said that he was 'very cruel upon Russell, commanding him to get about his business for ever'.; see Froude, *Carlyle's life in London*, I, 486.

[32] For Peel's views of the state as an agency which could promote relief by encouraging economic development in Ireland see Parker, ed., *Sir Robert Peel*, III, 502, 509; for his intervention in the Paisley crisis see Tony Dickson and Tony Clarke, 'Social concern and social control in nineteenth-century Scotland: Paisley 1841–1843', *Scottish Historical Review*, LXV (1986), 48–60. The authors' ascription of Peel's role in this case to the need to maintain 'social control' reflects his general concern for strong, effective government; this ideal was, of course, shared by Carlyle.

his subsequent willingness to reform aspects of the established church, Peel's position on repeal was determined by his belief that political activity must be directed by a concern for 'national' rather than sectional or party interests. This belief was reflected in Peel's adherence to what Norman Gash has described as a 'ministerial' conception of officeholding, and in his attitude towards parliamentary opposition: in both cases, political duty was focused on the crown and the nation rather than on the party. Ministers must provide strong and effective government; their party should support them in this task and they should not be impeded by an opposition determined to constrain government merely for the sake of party advantage. A corollary of this attitude towards government was a lofty and detached view of the relationship between a prime minister and his party. He

> will not condescend to humiliating submission for mere party purpose; will have neither time nor inclination to be considering how many men will support this public measure, or fly off to gratify some spite or resentment....[33]

Peel's instrumental view of party, his stress upon the national interest and his belief that all parliamentarians had a duty to facilitate strong and effective rule, reflected an attitude towards government which was very similar to that promoted by Carlyle in the *Latter-day pamphlets* and cannot but have been congenial to him. Moreover, Carlyle's belief that Peel's policy preferences and his attitude towards politics were significant indicators of heroic qualities was confirmed by his evaluations of the former prime minister's character. They thus played the same role in Carlyle's treatment of Peel as his accounts of the battles of the English revolution did in his retrospective tracking of Cromwell's career. For Carlyle, military skill, political astuteness and determination were portents of a character capable of taking a 'heroic' stance towards politics. 'Heroism' was a deeply located psycho-moral attribute which enabled some human beings to grasp the underlying realities of the universe and to see through 'untruths' and 'shams'. Peel lacked the aura of divine, prophetic, priestly, literary or poetic heroism possessed by the figures that Carlyle had celebrated in his lectures *On heroes, hero-worship and The heroic in history* (1840), and his deeds were of a different order to those of Cromwell or Napoleon. Nevertheless, he seemed, especially when compared with his contemporaries, to possess administrative, moral and political qualities which Carlyle thought were necessary if the English were to realize the potentialities of the modern age and to avoid its dangers. While all heroes understood the requirements of their own age, and possessed the strength of character to meet these, their special insights and abilities were only appropriate in particular circumstances. Carlyle did not, therefore, have to delude himself into thinking that Peel was a Cromwell. It was sufficient that he possessed attributes necessary to forge

[33] Cited Adelman, *Peel and the conservative party*, p. 29; see also ibid. pp. 12–13; Norman Gash *Sir Robert Peel* (London, 1972), pp. 708–10; Ian D. C. Newbold, 'Sir Robert Peel and the conservative party', *English Historical Review*, CLVIII (1983), 529–57 for accounts of Peel's attitude towards party. Cf. Seigel. 'Carlyle and Peel', p. 182 where Peel is described as a 'staunch party man.'

British government into an agency that was capable of solving the problems caused by the early stages of industrialization; he would thus make it possible for his contemporaries to take advantage of a new range of opportunities for bringing order to the universe. Carlyle justified Cromwell's domination of the English commonwealth on the grounds that only he was capable of giving political and religious form to the spirit of puritanism. He promoted Peel as a modern hero because he thought he was capable of utilising the potentially progressive forces released by the withering of traditional forms of religious and secular authority and the rise of industrial society.

A capacity for heroic political action showed itself in an individual's physiology, demeanour and behaviour.[34] Carlyle's growing admiration for Peel can thus be charted in his increasingly warm remarks on the former prime minister's physical characteristics, in the insights into his character which occurred during their conversations, as well as in his pursuit of lines of action which Carlyle himself promoted. Having satisfied himself on Peel's heroic potentialities and having confirmed this by comparing him with his political rivals, Carlyle was able to discount the significance of aspects of Peel's past which did not correspond with his own political preferences. As we have seen, Carlyle was clear-eyed and well-informed on Peel's attachment to some of the orthodoxies of political economy, but this predilection did not disqualify him from heroism. In Carlyle's judgement, Peel had shown enough in his face, his voice, his mind and his actions to indicate that he possessed the potential for heroic statesmanship. Historians have observed that many of Peel's contemporaries regarded him as unnaturally cool and rationalistic, but there was another side to his character. As Boyd Hilton has shown, those who were closest to Peel regarded him as an inspiring figure endowed with great spiritual strength and warmth.[35] Although Carlyle's acquaintance with Peel was brief, an act of astute sympathetic insight allowed him to glimpse aspects of his hero's character which were fully appreciated only by Peel's intimates. However, Carlyle did not merely identify Peel as a political hero; he also thought it necessary to point out to him that heroism was incompatible with

[34] These signs of heroism are apparent throughout Carlyle's writings on Cromwell; they also play a prominent role in Carlyle's reports of his meetings with Peel. See Froude, *Carlyle's life in London*, I, 465–6; II, 46. For discussions of the idea of political heroism in Carlyle's writings see Thomas Calviner, 'Heroes and hero-worship: not so simple in *The French Revolution*', *Victoria Institute Journal*, XIII (1985), 83–96; Philip Rosenberg, *The seventh hero* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), pp. 176–204; Vandem Bossche, *Carlyle and the search for authority*, pp. 97–102.

[35] Hilton, 'Peel: a reappraisal', pp. 613–14. The view of Peel as rationalistic is advanced by Norman Gash, *Mr. Secretary Peel* (London, 1961). It is not clear that these interpretations are mutually exclusive: Peel may have been committed passionately to a rational conception of administration designed to eliminate impediments to acts of providence. This possibility is reflected in Peel's warning to the house of commons that before attributing the Irish famine to an 'all-wise and merciful Providence' its members should satisfy themselves that its privations 'have not been caused, they have not been aggravated by laws of man restricting, in the hour of scarcity, the supply of food!'; cited Hilton, *The age of atonement*, p. 250. On social occasions Peel's rationality was accompanied by a sense of humour: Carlyle observed that Peel's 'quiet talk' was 'distinguished by its sense of the ludicrous shining through a strong official *rationality* and even seriousness of temper.'; Froude, *Carlyle's life in London*, II, 45.

both parliamentarianism and political economy. The references to Peel in *Latter-day pamphlets* convey an appeal and a public endorsement; they also, however, like the presentation copy of *Oliver Cromwell's letter's and speeches* which opened their relationship, provide the putative hero with guidance about what that status entailed.[36]

IV

A reconsideration of Carlyle's remarks on Peel in the *Latter-day pamphlets* and related sources, points to a number of distinctive features of his final, developed statement on politics. These writings present an image of politics in which heroism (understood not as an attachment to particular policies, but as a stance towards politics) took centre stage. 'Men not measures' was the rallying cry of this position, one that applied both to Carlyle's identification of Peel as hero and to his more wide-ranging concern with establishing heroic meritocracy as the principle basis for distributing political power.[37]

An important implication of this meritocratic view was that leaders must be insulated from the capricious and morally corrosive practices of parliamentary politics. Indeed, Carlyle presented heroism as a clear and necessary alternative to parliamentary government.[38] The 'Chief Governor' of Carlyle's 'new' Downing Street will not owe his standing to parliamentary procedures, nor is he bound by these in his choice of heroic assistants. It is true that in the *Latter-day pamphlets* Carlyle recognizes a 'sounding board' role for popularly elected assemblies but this is conditional upon their exclusion from legislative or executive functions.[39] Moreover, in this work, and in his unpublished fragment on Peel, he stressed that a heroic leader will be recognized by the people and will have their respect. The fact that Peel *was* both recognized and respected was evident in the esteem he enjoyed out-of-doors after the corn law crisis and was confirmed by the shocked public reaction to his unexpected death.[40] For Carlyle, Peel's growing popularity with a broad cross section of the population

[36] Carlyle's and Cromwell's tutorial roles are clearly signalled in the letter accompanying these volumes; see Froude, *Carlyle's life in London*, I, 403–4.

[37] In an incomplete and unpublished essay on 'Democracy' which sketched many of the themes of *L.D.P.*, Carlyle stressed the importance of 'career open to talent'; see Froude, *Carlyle's life in London*, I, 461 which reproduces a journal entry from 5/3/1848.

[38] Cf. Seigel, 'Carlyle and Peel', p. 191: 'Carlyle's faith in Peel has changed his contempt for parliament into hope, a hope based on faith in honest people.' This judgement obscures the fact that Carlyle wished to transform parliament in a way that would deprive it of its conventional characteristics or roles.

[39] *L.D.P.*, p. 204. Later, in his *History of Frederich II of Prussia, called Frederick the Great*, II, 114–31, Carlyle attributed these functions to Friedrich's 'Tobacco Parliaments' but these were not even elected bodies.

[40] This point is stressed in Carlyle, '[Peel fragment]', pp. 193–5. Carlyle's thoughts on this issue unwittingly echo those of his hero. Peel argued that if a leader's pursuit of the public interest was frustrated by his party he should 'retire from office, but not from power; for the country will do justice to his motives, and will give him the strength which his party has denied him'; cited Adelman, *Peel and the conservative party*, p. 29. For an account of Peel's contemporary and posthumous reputations see Donald Read, *Peel and the Victorians* (Oxford, 1987).

reflected an awareness of his capacity to grasp the realities of the situation. Like other heroes, Peel's actions struck a chord with the population because they discerned that he could articulate the needs of contemporary society. However, the prominence that Carlyle gave to the popular recognition of heroic leadership did not mean that he placed his hero in a parliamentary, far less a democratic, setting. Many of Carlyle's contemporaries thought of parliamentarianism as a system of *government*, not as a popularist adjunct of a system of rule in which political power was divorced from successful participation in the representative process and in the assembly which it filled. By contrast, Carlyle's heroic leadership was (as some contemporary reviewers noted) an *alternative* to parliamentary government, not an aspect of it. In dealing with the corn law question Peel had 'flung' himself 'direct upon the good sense of the country, upon the substantial fact of the case', a proceeding which reflected the hero's capacity to identify what Carlyle thought of as the 'general will' of the community. The fact that this approach had little to do either with parliamentary government or indeed, with representative democracy, gives Carlyle's choice of Peel as hero an air of plausibility.[41] Moreover, when he was prime minister Peel adopted a lofty attitude towards politics which stressed disinterested and rational administration and sought to insulate himself from the pressures of party and from the parliamentary rank and file.[42]

As has already been observed, Carlyle was impressed by the administrative ethos of the Peelites and devoted much of the *Latter-day pamphlets* to promoting reform of the machinery of government. He emphasised, however, that these reforms were only preliminary stages in a re-orientation of politics, one in which great importance was ascribed to the creative role of an heroic statesman. Moreover, while Carlyle related administration to heroism, he also saw the state itself in these terms. Although Carlyle rejected the traditional state which Coleridge had attempted to refurbish he applied the idea of heroism to a new state, a '*luminous vitality* permeating with its light all provinces of our affairs',[43] and drawing upon the potentialities for heroism which existed within society. Thus while the *Latter-day pamphlets* convey images of future debasement, they also contain glimpses of hope which reflect Carlyle's assessment of the heroic capabilities of some of his contemporaries. In *On heroes and hero-worship* Carlyle had asked 'If hero mean *sincere man*, why may not every one be a hero?' and in the *Latter-day pamphlets* he claimed that England's immediate prospects were more favourable than those of other European countries because she still possessed a 'State': 'heroic wisdom is not yet dead, and quite replaced by attorneyism.'[44] These signs of guarded

[41] Carlyle, '[Peel fragment]', p. 192. For contemporary remarks on the radically unconstitutional implications of Carlyle's arguments in *L.D.P.*, see the reviews by Aytoun and Masson in Seigel, ed., *The critical heritage*, pp. 325, 327, 359–61.

[42] See above p. 105.

[43] Carlyle, *L.D.P.*, p. 84.

[44] Thomas Carlyle, *On heroes, hero-worship and the heroic in history* (1840), ed. H. M. Buller (2 vols., London, 1926), II, 16; *L.D.P.*, p. 114.

optimism were underwritten by a belief that the 'luminous vitality' of the state was identical with heroism. If Peel could utilize these potentialities and ensure that heroic leadership became the acknowledged principle of government, he would restore the 'State' to its necessary and rightful place in the regulation of human affairs.