‘High politics’ and its intellectual contexts

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Recent interest in the historiography of ‘high politics’ has centred mainly on historians writing in the 1960s and 1970s, above all Maurice Cowling. Less attention has been paid to the modified agendas pursued by the next generation of scholars. This article explores some pioneering attempts to make sense of the structural relationships between nineteenth-century British ‘high politics’ and its ‘intellectual’ contexts, focusing on a cluster of seminal 1980s studies by the historians Michael Bentley, Richard Brent, Boyd Hilton, and Jonathan Parry. Together these works demanded a fundamental rethinking of how Victorian politics operated.

Keywords: high politics; intellectual history; historiography; nineteenth century.

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‘High political’ history has always had its detractors. Michael Bentley remarked in 2001 that ‘historians who write about major political personalities and their thought-worlds’ had faced ‘persistent prejudice’, even running to assumptions of ‘simple-mindedness’.[1] Accusations of political unsoundness have sometimes amplified (or underpinned) the charges of intellectual vacancy. In the last two decades, however, there have been a series of attempts to rescue the first-generation historiography of ‘high politics’ from the partisan invective by which it was once surrounded, and which concealed some of its contributions to historical knowledge and method. In particular, historians have started to look with a colder eye at the work produced by Maurice Cowling during the 1960s and 1970s: this now appears not only to be full of penetrating analysis, but also to have anticipated more recent developments in the writing of modern British political history.[2] The effect has been both to situate ‘high political’ work much more robustly within the history of twentieth-century ideas, and to hint at its possible interpretative value even for historians who might once have seen it as anathema.

This article attempts to press forward on both these fronts. It moves the focus to the 1980s, to work on the ‘long’ nineteenth century, and to a cluster of pioneering studies which sought to expose the structural connections between British elite politics and its ‘intellectual’ contexts.[3]

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[1] Michael Bentley, *Lord Salisbury’s World: Conservative Environments in Late-Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2001), 3.

[2] David Craig, ‘“High Politics” and the “New Political History”’, *Historical Journal*, liii (2010), 453-75; Robert Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green and Richard Whiting, ed., *The Philosophy, Politics, and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism* (London, 2010); Robert Crowcroft, ‘Maurice Cowling and the Writing of British Political History’, *Contemporary British History*, xxii (2008), 279-96; Steven Fielding, ‘High Politics’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800-2000*, ed. David Brown, Robert Crowcroft and Gordon Pentland (Oxford, 2018), 32-47. See also Lawrence Goldman, *Science, Reform, and Politics in Victorian Britain: the Social Science Association, 1857-1886* (Cambridge, 2002), 7-10.

[3] Work on this problem in twentieth-century Britain took a different path: see Ewen Green and Duncan Tanner, ‘Introduction’, in *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate*, ed. E.H.H. Green and D.M. Tanner (Cambridge, 2007), 1-33. See also, for a style of cultural-intellectual-social-political history which has no Victorian equivalent, Peter Ghosh, ‘The Guv’nor: the Place of Ross McKibbin in the Writing of British History’, in *Classes, Cultures, and Politics: Essays on British History for Ross McKibbin*, ed. Clare V.J. Griffiths, James J. Nott and William Whyte (Oxford, 2011), 13-49.

Historiographical commentators have often isolated this shift towards taking thought-worlds more seriously as the key development within the 'second generation' historiography of 'high politics', not least because it took place at a time when modern British political history as a whole was starting to lay greater emphasis on ideas and languages.[4] The debates which similar moves inspired in social history and in the study of 'popular' politics were intense, and are well known.[5] There was no comparably spirited controversy about the destiny of 'high political' scholarship, because as applied to the elite, the conceptual innovations involved did not hack at the roots of a worldview. But the ways in which historians tried to stand across the gap between a traditional 'high political' approach and the now-conventional focus on ideas and arguments for their own sake are worth closer attention.[6] This literature is clearly important for our understanding of the historiographical dynamics of the 1980s, but it might also act as a spur to modern British political historians in the 2020s. It asks us to re-examine some of our assumptions about how precisely ideas and political action related to one another; about the empirical basis on which such claims can be made; and about how 'ideological' approaches can aid in the task of explaining concrete political phenomena.

The article centres on work by the four historians most often associated with this agenda: Michael Bentley, Richard Brent, Boyd Hilton, and Jonathan Parry.[7] That all four shared a connection with the University of Cambridge, and that all but one (Hilton) spent time at Peterhouse, is not a coincidence.[8] Cowling's emphasis on the stern challenges involved in explaining the interrelation between thought and public action clearly helped to motivate some of the main studies discussed here. In grappling systematically with a problem which

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[4] Susan Pedersen, 'What is Political History Now?', in *What Is History Now?*, ed. David Cannadine (Basingstoke, 2002), 36-56, at 42 (citing Bentley and Parry); Jon Lawrence, 'Political History', in *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore (2003), 183-202, at 185-7 (citing Bentley, Hilton, and Parry, among others); Green and Tanner, 'Introduction', 5 (citing Brent, Hilton, and Parry); and for the notion of a 'second generation' see David Craig, 'Political Ideas and Languages', in *Oxford Handbook*, ed. Brown et al., 13-31, at 20-1 (citing Bentley, Hilton (implicitly), and Parry).

[5] Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 1998), part I; Dror Wahrman, 'The New Political History: a Review Essay', *Social History*, xxi (1996), 343-54; David Feldman and Jon Lawrence, 'Introduction: Structures and Transformations in Modern British History', in *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History*, ed. David Feldman and Jon Lawrence (Cambridge, 2011), 1-23; David Feldman, 'Class', in *History and Historians in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Peter Burke (Oxford, 2002), 181-206.

[6] For recent signs of a disposition to undervalue this work see Alex Middleton, 'The State of Modern British Political History?', *Parliamentary History*, xxxviii (2019), 278-85, at 283.

[7] See note 4 above. The main works discussed are: Michael Bentley, *The Liberal Mind, 1914-1929* (Cambridge, 1977); Michael Bentley, *Politics Without Democracy, 1815-1914: Perception and Preoccupation in British Government* (London, 1984); Michael Bentley, *The Climax of Liberal Politics: British Liberalism in Theory and Practice, 1868-1918* (London, 1987); Richard Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics: Whiggery, Religion, and Reform, 1830-1841* (Oxford, 1987); Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: the Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (1988); J.P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867-1875* (Cambridge, 1986). Philip Williamson is the other historian most often cited as a leading figure within the 'second generation', and he certainly paid attention to political languages and concepts. He is excluded here because his 1980s work was exclusively twentieth-century, and because he has already been the subject of a recent appreciative treatment, in Fielding, 'High Politics'. But anyone seriously interested in the changing shape of 'high politics' must read his *National Crisis and National Government: British Politics, the Economy and Empire, 1926-1932* (Cambridge, 1992).

[8] Michael Bentley studied briefly at Peterhouse (under Cowling) as a postgraduate; Richard Brent was an undergraduate at Peterhouse, and later held a Research Fellowship at St John's; Boyd Hilton was a Fellow of Trinity; and Jonathan Parry was an undergraduate, postgraduate, and Fellow at Peterhouse, though he went over the road to Pembroke when he returned to Cambridge in the 1990s. It should be noted also that Bentley's and Parry's first books were both published in the series *Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics*, of which Cowling was an editor, and in which all his 'high politics' studies appeared.

Cowling had not in practice prioritised, however, these works all pushed into new territory.[9] The article is not, in any case, meant as a study in the transmission of Cowlingite ideas: the inclusion of Hilton emphasises that there were different routes towards this ground, and the aim here is to take the works in question on their own terms.[10] The article begins with some reflections on the historiographical background against which these studies were produced, followed by a discussion of what they had in common, before the subsequent sections deal in turn with the distinctive elements in the Bentley, Brent, Hilton, and Parry visions of politics.

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Contemporary reviewers did not hesitate to set our historians within a 'high political' tradition. The ascription was rarely neutral. All our protagonists were taken to task for not including more social, urban, or regional history in their studies; some accused them of perpetuating an 'overtly Conservative' or 'neoconservative' style of political history, or continuing by other means the materialist agenda of Lewis Namier.[11] As this suggests, the idea of 'high politics' continued to stir strong scholarly feeling through the 1980s, with opponents seeing its malign spectre around every corner.[12] The label was, however, becoming slippery. The original set of studies by Cowling, John Vincent and Alistair Cooke, and Andrew Jones had given way to a 'voluminous' wider literature, which followed at least some of the same precepts.[13] As Parry observed midway through the 1980s, 'it is possible to sustain different conceptions of what "high politics" is, and… each remains extremely problematical for the historian'.[14] For Brent, writing at the same time, 'high politics' had never really been coherent, and as an approach to writing history it was 'all but redundant'.[15]

Certainly, our historians wrote about the parliamentary and governing elite, which for some critics was all that was needed to qualify as a member of the 'high politics' fraternity. But few of the more specific interpretative characteristics which contemporaries took the label 'high politics' to designate – the treatment of Westminster as an insulated world, a detailed focus on day-to-day activity, a concentration on short-term calculation, an assumption that the political game could be studied without reference to higher goals, a concern with 'invisible' structures of political power, rigorous archival methods, a dismissive attitude towards published sources – were integral parts of the architecture of our 1980s work. On several of these interpretative fronts, in fact, it went in the opposite direction entirely. Rigid

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[9] According to Peter Ghosh, he considered the problem *a priori* insoluble: Peter Ghosh, 'Towards the Verdict of History: Mr Cowling's Doctrine', in *Public and Private Doctrine: Essays in British History Presented to Maurice Cowling*, ed. Michael Bentley (Cambridge, 1993), 273-321, at 306 (though cf. Craig, '"High Politics"', 464). All four of our historians contributed to this sometimes combative *festschrift*.

[10] Also significant, though harder to trace, was the influence of Angus Macintyre at Oxford, who supervised Brent and Hilton for their doctorates; and Derek Beales at Cambridge, who supervised Parry. Beales' possible wider importance for this literature is hinted at in Peter Stansky, *Victorian Studies*, xxxviii (1995), 465-8.

[11] Richard Price, 'Languages of Revisionism: Historians and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Journal of Social History*, xxx (1996), 229-51, at 240 (n.b. the J.H. Parry referred to here should be read as J.P. Parry, not the author of *The Spanish Seaborne Empire*); Josef L. Altholz, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xxvi (1996), 692-3, at 693; David Craig and James Thompson, 'Introduction', in *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. David Craig and James Thompson (Basingstoke, 2013), 1-20, at 7.

[12] See Allen Warren's description of a landscape divided between Cowlingites and 'mild' socio-economic determinists: *Parliamentary History*, vi (1987), 198-9, at 198; also Allen Warren, 'The Return of Ulysses: Gladstone, Liberalism and Late Victorian Politics', *Parliamentary History*, ix (1990), 184-96, at 184-5.

[13] Michael Bentley and John Stevenson, 'Introduction', in *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain*, ed. Michael Bentley and John Stevenson (Oxford, 1983), 1-3, at 1.

[14] J.P. Parry, 'High and Low Politics in Victorian Britain', *Historical Journal*, xxix (1986), 753-70, at 759.

[15] Richard Brent, 'Butterfield's Tories: "High Politics" and the Writing of Modern British History", *Historical Journal*, xxx (1987), 943-54, at 945-6.

methodological continuity is clearly not to be expected, not least because the thrust of recent work on the original 'high politics' historians has been towards disaggregation of their approaches. Sophisticated historiographical commentary has continued, even so, to assert the existence of a semi-continuous 'high politics' tradition which went beyond a basic concern with the political elite, sometimes setting up our 1980s historians as a 'second generation'.[16] This framing may not tell the whole story, but it is not arbitrary.

None of our historians sought to lower themselves bodily into the grooves cut by the original 'high politics' studies. All would have agreed with Peter Ghosh, who wrote in 1987 that 'the contribution made by the pioneers of the high political method was vital and valuable, but partial'.[17] Brent insisted in 1987 that the purpose of 'high politics' had been not to present Westminster as a closed world, but to explode a 'prevailing liberal highmindedness' in political history, and to offer a more plausible account of political behaviour based on human imperfection. Its defining qualities were 'pessimistic scepticism', and its treatment of politicians as people.[18] Parry has similarly argued, more recently, that the original 'high politics' studies were about rejecting pieties, and injecting greater professionalism and conceptual sophistication into the study of political history.[19] In other words, that literature was understood by at least some of our historians less as a methodological charter than a bracing challenge, which sought to disintegrate ossified assumptions, and to draw attention to interpretative problems. For Cowling, making sense of the relations between ideas and political action was among the most significant of these issues: by the 1970s he had come to see it as his central purpose.[20] That his scholarship did not seek to evacuate 'thought' from politics, as contemporaries accused it of doing, was clear to those who studied his trilogy on British parliamentary politics seriously.[21] Unlike the books written by the other first-generation 'high politics' historians, Bentley explained in 1983, Cowling's work breathed a sense that 'lineaments exist between the overt story of [the political] environment and the cosmologies of its actors', and Cowling had always been willing 'to grant significance to doctrinal or religious motivation or constraint'.[22] It was just that his focus had lain elsewhere.

The internal logic of Cowlingite 'high politics', then, offered a platform from which to think more seriously about the impact of ideas on practical politics. But as Philip Williamson has noted, Cowling's work identified a whole series of similarly vital questions.[23] The emergence of 'ideas' and 'ideology' as such a central issue in the 1980s was clearly driven by a wider set of historiographical currents. In the first place, a growing literature was already laying the

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[16] Craig, 'Political Ideas and Languages', 20-1.
[17] P. R. Ghosh, *English Historical Review*, cii (1987), 518-9, at 519. See also Lawrence Goldman, 'The Social Science Association, 1857-1886: a Context for Mid-Victorian Liberalism', *English Historical Review*, ci (1986), 95-134, at 95-6.
[18] Brent, 'Butterfield's Tories', 944, 953. Brent shared this scepticism, dismissing the 'fashionable pursuit of certainty' in his book: *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 18. Cf. Craig, '"High Politics"', 464.
[19] Jonathan Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity, and Europe, 1830-1886* (Cambridge, 2006), 31. This is certainly what some of the first generation had in mind, as is suggested by Andrew Jones' claim that the exercise had been about challenging '*idées reçues* about the relationship of parliamentary history to total structure', and posing a 'formidable indictment' to 'flaccid political inquiry': Andrew Jones, 'Where "Governing is the Use of Words"', *Historical Journal*, xix (1976), 251-6, at 251.
[20] Jonathan Parry, 'Cowling, Maurice John' (1926-2005)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
[21] For hostile responses along these lines see Craig, '"High Politics"', 454-6.
[22] Michael Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', in *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain*, ed. Michael Bentley and John Stevenson (Oxford, 1983), 123-53, at 130. See also Parry, *Politics of Patriotism*, 31; Craig, '"High Politics"'; Philip Williamson, 'Maurice Cowling and Modern British Political History', in *Philosophy, Politics, and Religion*, ed. Crowcroft et al., 108-52, at 126-7, 131.
[23] Williamson, 'Maurice Cowling', 119.

foundations for a more sophisticated treatment of the place of ideas in Victorian elite politics. From the 1960s on, and more concertedly from the 1970s, historians had begun to anatomise the political and social thought of the Victorian elite beyond the quorum of 'canonical thinkers', and to reflect more seriously on how debate and thought might be connected with political behaviour.[24] Some of the studies associated with these developments were highly sophisticated and thoughtful.[25] Perhaps most notably, as Peter Ghosh and Lawrence Goldman have explored elsewhere, Colin Matthew had begun in his introductions to the Gladstone diaries to make efforts 'to salvage political history as an organizing focus… by exposing its connections to highly evolved schemes of ideas and values in the areas of religion, political economy, and history'.[26] By 1983 Parry could observe that nineteenth-century historians had spent the last decade focused increasingly 'on attempting to elucidate the "intellectual" context of Victorian political history'.[27] This work clearly helped to draw historians' minds towards the question of how thought could be connected more robustly with political action.

Variants of this problem would seize the attention of modern British political historians of all stripes during the 1980s. Peter Clarke, who had made his name writing about the New Liberalism, began the decade arguing that ideologies should be given independent weight in the analysis of politics, because they helped social groups make sense of their positions and interests.[28] Shortly afterwards, Gareth Stedman Jones' *Languages of Class* (1983) sent waves through the study of popular politics, in making a similar case for the 'relative autonomy of the political' against the socio-economic and class-based analyses which had dominated the historiography for a generation.[29] Whether or not we choose to see these shifts through the lens of a 'linguistic turn' – and various other formulas have been suggested, not least the possibly more precise 'intellectual-historical revolution' – it is abundantly clear that there was a shift in the scholarly zeitgeist towards taking ideas more seriously.[30] By 1989, David

[24] For elite thought see J.W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: a Study in Victorian Social Theory* (Cambridge, 1966); Christopher Harvie, *The Lights of Liberalism: University Liberals and the Challenge of Democracy, 1860-86* (London, 1976); Christopher Kent, *Brains and Numbers: Elitism, Comtism, and Democracy in Mid-Victorian England* (Toronto, 1978). For ideas and political behaviour see D.M. Schreuder, 'Gladstone and Italian Unification, 1848-70: the Making of a Liberal?', *English Historical Review*, lxxxv (1970), 475-501, at 475; William Thomas, *The Philosophic Radicals: Nine Studies in Theory and Practice, 1817-1841* (Oxford, 1979); and earlier Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford, 1959).

[25] More attention should be paid, in this context, to Joseph Hamburger, *James Mill and the Art of Revolution* (New Haven, 1963), not least the penetrating discussion of 'public opinion' at 261-2. See also Joseph Hamburger, *Intellectuals in Politics: John Stuart Mill and the Philosophic Radicals* (New Haven, 1965).

[26] Lawrence Goldman and Peter Ghosh, 'A Brief Word on "Politics" and "Culture"', in *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain: Essays in Memory of Colin Matthew*, ed. Peter Ghosh and Lawrence Goldman (Oxford, 2006), 1-7, at 5. Ghosh and Goldman have themselves contributed importantly to this project: see P.R. Ghosh, 'Disraelian Conservatism: a Financial Approach', *English Historical Review*, xcix (1984), 268-96, esp. 268 for the 'seemingly unbridgeable gap between political principle and action'; P.R. Ghosh, 'Style and Substance in Disraelian Social Reform, c. 1860-80', in *Politics and Social Change in Modern Britain: Essays Presented to A. F. Thompson*, ed. P. J. Waller (Brighton, 1987), 59-90; Goldman, 'The Social Science Association'.

[27] J.P. Parry, 'The State of Victorian Political History', *Historical Journal*, xxvi (1983), 469-84, at 470. Parry noted elsewhere that this work had not satisfactorily integrated Westminster: Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 1.

[28] Peter Clarke, 'Political History in the 1980s: Ideas and Interests', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xii (1981), 45-7, at 46. See also Brian Harrison, *Peaceable Kingdom: Stability and Change in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1982), ch. 8.

[29] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983).

[30] Joe Bord, *Science and Whig Manners: Science and Political Style in Britain, c. 1790-1850* (Basingstoke, 2009), 6, using the phrase in a discussion of the historiography of early-nineteenth-century Whiggery.

Feldman could insist that '[n]o serious account of Victorian and Edwardian politics' could avoid the issue of how to 'relate political action to principle, ideology, and thought'.[31]

Few commentators have tried to position *Languages of Class* as a determining force behind the 'ideological' turn in the historiography of high politics. This is sensible, as the timing does not line up, though Parry did cite Stedman Jones' book as an influence on his concept of a 'political language'.[32] More common and tenacious, because clearly correct, has been the suggestion that the turn towards ideas in 'high politics' work was in some degree a response to developments in intellectual history. For contemporary reviewers, this was framed broadly, in terms of inspiration from 'the History of Ideas broadly interpreted', or even '*histoire des mentalités*'.[33] At the level of prevailing scholarly climates, there is obviously something in the link. Our historians belonged to a generation 'conscious of a revival of interest in political thought'.[34] Latterly, however, the spotlight has come to fix on the 'contextual' approach to political thought associated with Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock. For Jon Lawrence, the 'broadening [of] the method of the "high political" tradition' has to be tied to the 'more or less explicit' impact of the 'Cambridge School' (citing Bentley, Hilton, and Parry).[35] Ewen Green and Duncan Tanner (citing Bentley, Brent, and Parry) make the same connection.[36] But of the historians under review, only Bentley actually cited Skinner or Pocock, and that was partly in order to signal moderate dissent.[37] Brent, Hilton, and Parry's preoccupation with matters theological and ecclesiastical certainly cannot have owed much to an approach to intellectual history in which religion has famously been a blind spot.[38] It may be that an influence from the 'Cambridge School' was channelled indirectly through the work of Stefan Collini, but it is hard to see the approach making any definite imprint on our 1980s studies.[39]

Terminological confusion has always bedevilled writing about 'high politics', thanks to the interchangeable use of the label to describe both a sphere of political activity, and an approach to the analysis of politics. The point being made here is simply that casual use of the phrase 'high politics' to describe a historiographical tradition running forward from the

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[31] David Feldman, 'Class or Conjuncture? Explanations and Deductions of Liberal Politics', *Journal of British Studies*, xxviii (1989), 312-24, at 312.

[32] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 14, note 34, alongside Gordon S. Wood, 'Intellectual History and the Social Sciences', in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin (Baltimore, 1979), 27-41. On Stedman Jones' influence see Michael Bentley, 'Victorian Politics and the Linguistic Turn', *Historical Journal*, xlii (1999), 883-902, at 883; and, more temperately, Pedersen, 'Political History', 40-2.

[33] K. Theodore Hoppen, *English Historical Review*, ciii (1988), 142-5, at 142; Paul Smith, 'Liberalism as Authority and Discipline', *Historical Journal*, xxxii (1989), 723-37, at 730.

[34] Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', 123.

[35] Lawrence, 'Political History', 185-7. Lawrence also cites John Burrow in this connection.

[36] Green and Tanner, 'Introduction', 4-5. See also Green and Tanner's response to Helen McCarthy's review of this volume in *Reviews in History*, no. 661 (16/12/2009), which expands on their views of the relationship between political history and the history of ideas. The 'Cambridge School' connection is gestured to in a more roundabout way in Craig and Thompson, 'Introduction', 4-7 (Citing Bentley, Hilton, and Parry).

[37] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 5, notes 15 and 16; Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', 129; Bentley, *Climax*, xii-xiii. It is only relatively recently that Skinner and Pocock have become significant methodological reference points for students of Victorian elite politics: e.g. Stephen M. Lee, *George Canning and Liberal Toryism, 1801-1827* (Woodbridge, 2008), 7-12.

[38] Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory, ed., *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, 2009).

[39] Esp. Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880-1914* (Cambridge, 1979); Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, and John Burrow, *The Noble Science of Politics: a Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (Cambridge, 1983). It is however suggestive that the development of the 'ideas in context' approach to the history of political thought was contemporary with Cowling's insistence on the vital importance of close 'contextualisation' in the study of political behaviour.

1960s can obscure as much as it clarifies. There was clearly some rough identity of purpose between the original (so-called) 'Peterhouse School' historians. But by the 1980s, as influences mingled and new strains of historiography emerged, interpretative agendas started to look quite different: not just in the particular strand of literature being discussed here, but in other branches of the scholarship dealing with the high political sphere as well.[40] Our studies owed debts to the 'Peterhouse' critique, as is discussed below, but it was in their expanded sensibilities and sensitivity to other influences that much of their vitality lay.

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It has already been indicated that our historians were not pulling in precisely the same direction. The rest of this article explores what was distinctive about the approaches each of them took to tracing the impact of intellectual context on practical politics. But they did have a number of concerns, assumptions, and positions in common, which need to be laid out first.

In the first place, there were significant substantive overlaps. All our historians emphasised the study of 'liberal' politics, broadly conceived.[41] Certainly, there was a logic to exploring the impact of thought on politics in relation to the party which gave greater weight to debate and deliberation.[42] But it was clear too that this was where the scholarly action was, with chinks beginning to show in the Robert Blake-Norman Gash version of the nineteenth century in which Conservatives occupied most of the leading roles.[43] Three of our four historians – Brent, Hilton, and Parry – also aimed to draw out the role of religion in particular as a motive force behind political action.[44] They did not, of course, invent the notion that the Churches mattered in British politics.[45] In different ways, however, they sought to show that religion was more fundamental to political structures and languages than previous work had assumed.[46] All three set out, moreover, to draw these two themes together, and to show that 'liberalism' was not an etiolated, night-watchman creed, but one centred on broader aspirations and eternal convictions: that is, that religion mattered at least as much in shaping Victorian Liberalism as Jeremy Bentham, or Philosophic Radicalism, or James and J.S. Mill.

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[40] See especially, on the problems of 'party' and political leadership, Angus Hawkins, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics in Britain, 1855-1859* (Stanford, 1987); Angus Hawkins, '"Parliamentary Government" and Victorian Political Parties, c. 1830-c. 1880', *English Historical Review*, civ (1989), 638-69; T.A. Jenkins, *Gladstone, Whiggery and the Liberal Party, 1874-1886* (Oxford, 1988).

[41] Brent wrote about the Whig Party; Bentley and Parry (mainly) about the Liberal Party; and Hilton, a little more tenuously here, about the relations between liberal economics, 'liberal Toryism', and mid-Victorian Liberalism. On these historians and Liberalism see Peter Mandler, 'Introduction: State and Society in Victorian Britain', in *Liberty and Authority in Victorian Britain*, ed. Peter Mandler (Oxford, 2006), 1-21, at 9-11.

[42] H.C.G. Matthew, 'Rhetoric and Politics in Great Britain, 1860-1950', in Waller, ed., *Politics and Social Change*, 34-58.

[43] For the ascendency of Conservatives in the historiography, and seminal hints at an alternative reading, see Derek Beales, 'Peel, Russell, and Reform', *Historical Journal*, xvii (1974), pp. 873-82.

[44] On their contributions here see Simon Skinner, 'Religion', in *Languages of Politics*, ed. Craig and Thompson, 93-117, at 94-5. Bentley was interested in the religious caste of much Liberal language, and noted that religious issues were sometimes politically important, but he did not treat the subject systematically: e.g. Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 207-8; Bentley, *Politics Without Democracy*, 206.

[45] E.g. Richard Shannon, 'Victorian *Cahiers de doléance*', *Historical Journal*, xxxii (1989), 717-22, at 720; Peter Stansky, *Albion*, xix (1987), 654-8, at 656; Walter L. Arnstein, *American Historical Review*, xciii (1988), 1052-3, at 1052. Some regarded the significance of religious issues in nineteenth-century politics as already 'beyond dispute' before 1980: Norman Gash, *English Historical Review*, xciv (1979), 142-4, at 142.

[46] For some contemporaries, this literature formed part of a wider 'Peterhouse Campaign' (embracing the work of J.C.D. Clark) to replace religion at the centre of modern English history: Frank M. Turner, *Victorian Studies*, xxxi (1988), 590-2, at 591; also Thomas William Heyck, *Journal of Modern History*, lxi (1989), 603-4, at 603.

There was also significant shared ground methodologically. Consciously or unconsciously, our historians all accepted important planks of the 'Peterhouse' critique. All of them rejected the notion that elite political behaviour was driven in some indefinable way by the will of the 'masses'.[47] All accepted that political actors could be self-deceiving, wrong, inconstant, and ridden with infirmities. All thought that, generally speaking, politicians should be studied as component parts of a system, not on their own. All made archival research a touchstone, and consulted intimidating numbers of manuscript collections.[48] And all recognised that ideas were not just codes for class or personal interests, or simple outcrops of socio-economic circumstance. Their political role was situational, and they might in different contexts act as weapons, or rationalisations, or limitations on behaviour, as well as genuine motive forces.

In drawing the parameters of the political world, however, our historians did not train their lenses so closely on a few dozen actors at the 'centre' operating in tension with one another. What was distinctive about our 1980s studies was how they pulled the focus back. Where Cowling's 'fundamental unit' had been the individual, the 1980s work operated in terms of broader political groupings within and beyond parliament, for which our authors liked to invent consciously anachronistic terminologies; and, in some cases, in terms of abstract patterns of thought.[49] The point was to take proper account of a larger intellectual, clerical, and literary elite which – it was argued – to some extent shared, and to some extent helped to shape, decision-makers' values, assumptions, priorities, and rationales. This meant that public debates and published works had to be studied alongside private, manuscript sources. The hope was that, in so doing, it would become possible to pin down the place of 'ideas' within the architecture of political parties, and (for some of our scholars) within the practice of 'high politics' as a whole. So our historians were engaged, in Peter Ghosh's helpful formula, in the 'pioneering study of the *structural* interrelation of ideas and politics'.[50] As we will see, the conceptual framing was different in each case – roughly, Bentley wrote in terms of 'doctrine', Brent of belief, Hilton of 'underlying assumptions', and Parry of 'thought-worlds' – but it was the structural emphasis which lent this work its distinctive common flavour.

It was axiomatic for all these historians that the connections between ideas and politics were not simple.[51] David Craig has rightly stressed just how preoccupied the second-generation 'high politics' historians were with the conceptual issues involved in tracing the impacts of political ideas and rhetorics on events.[52] All four of our scholars wanted to improve on the straightforward assumptions about ideological influences and intellectual inheritances made by previous generations: Bentley was especially concerned to reject 'the idea that theory prescribes practice in some direct and causal way within the British political system'.[53] Indeed 'elaborated theory', of the kind furnished by Bentham or Ricardo or J.S. Mill, was generally suspect. All our historians assumed that politically important ideas were more

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[47] E.g. Bentley, *Politics Without Democracy*, 13.

[48] Bentley's *Liberal Mind* managed an eminently respectable 55; Hilton's *Corn, Cash, Commerce* pipped it with 56; Parry's *Democracy and Religion* jumped ahead to 67 (earning a special commendation for citing archives in all the constituent countries of Great Britain); while Brent's *Liberal Anglican Politics* took the laurel with 88, albeit in relation to the most closely defined subject.

[49] For Cowling and the individual, see Williamson, 'Maurice Cowling', 125.

[50] Ghosh, 'Mr Cowling's Doctrine', 306, fn. 175 (citing Brent and Bentley).

[51] Cowling had made this point, but other developments in modern British political history had pointed in the same direction, as did sociological and anthropological research: see Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', 128-9; Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 1-3.

[52] Craig, 'Political Ideas and Languages', 20-1.

[53] Bentley, *Climax*, xvii. See also Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 2; and Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', 134-6, for examples of these assumptions.

likely to be found on less elevated plains, Hilton for instance emphasising that it was 'amateur practitioners' of political economy who offered the best access to the 'official mind'.[54] Finding evidence of Victorian politicians' intellectual sympathies, moreover, given that so many of them were ideologically reticent, had to involve other kinds of detective work, and patronage appointments and University connections in particular became significant pieces of evidence in all the main studies discussed below.

There was, then, a considerable amount of common ground between our historians. From these shared foundations, differences in preoccupation, judgement, and reasoning issued in markedly different readings of how political and parliamentary life operated in the 'long' nineteenth century, and how it ought to be written about. The counterpoint between these visions casts important light on the problem of studying 'ideas in politics' more generally.[55]

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It is appropriate to begin the specific part of this discussion with Michael Bentley, both as the first historian to publish a 'high political' study centred on a concept of 'mind', and as the member of our group who remained most cautious about describing immediate connections between 'thought' and political action. Between 1977 and 1987, Bentley published a trilogy of studies on modern British politics, which developed different aspects of a basically stable interpretative agenda. *The Liberal Mind, 1914-1929* (1977), was 'a commentary on Liberal cosmology';[56] *Politics Without Democracy, 1815-1914* (1984), was a study of high political 'preoccupation' across a whole century; *The Climax of Liberal Politics, 1868-1918* (1987) was an expansive tour across Liberalism in theory and practice.[57] Distilling and extending the perspective behind these texts was the powerful synthetic essay of 1983, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', published in a collection on 'high politics' edited by Bentley and John Stevenson.[58]

By the end of the 1980s Bentley was being called 'a guru of the High Politics school', and he certainly outgunned all other practitioners in weight of publication.[59] Some commentators position him among the first generation of 'high politics' historians, and not without reason.[60] *Liberal Mind* acknowledged a 'profound and patent' debt to Cowling, an influence which remained unmistakeable in the 1980s studies.[61] But Bentley had his own priorities. The central commitment in his writing on British politics was 'to presenting political history as an account of contemporary consciousness', an approach which he sometimes referred to as employing a 'perceptual frame'.[62] Bentley argued that political analysis was 'anaemic' where it did not take account of contemporary actors' perceptions of the possible, and of the limitations which shared worldviews ('axioms and anxieties') imposed on their political

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[54] Hilton, *Atonement*, 6.
[55] For these historians' critiques of one another, see e.g. Parry, 'High and Low', 753-9 (on Bentley); Boyd Hilton, 'Whiggery, Religion, and Social Reform: the Case of Lord Morpeth', *Historical Journal*, xxxvii (1994), 829-59 (on Brent).
[56] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 1.
[57] *Politics Without Democracy* and *Climax* were both written on commission as introductory textbooks, but this did not cramp their ambition. *Climax* in particular was recognised by contemporaries as one of the most ambitious attempts to date to probe the relations between political practice, articulated theory, and the construction of electoral majorities: Feldman, 'Class or Conjuncture?', 316.
[58] Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought'. See also the more empirical Michael Bentley, 'British Parliamentary Institutions and Political Thought 1865-1914', *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, iii (1983), 35-46.
[59] Don M. Cregier, *Albion*, xx (1988), 504-5, at 504.
[60] E.g. Williamson, 'Maurice Cowling', 109.
[61] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, vii.
[62] Bentley, *Climax*, xvi.

speech and action.[63] His main conceptual concern – whether couched in terms of 'mind' or 'preoccupation' or 'cosmology' – was with the 'interconnexion between world and thought-world'.[64] That is to say, Bentley's ambition was to explain why things happened in politics, not to lay out what political actors thought as an end in itself. In his eyes, it was axiomatic that the 'circular relationship between theory and practice' could be elucidated only when set within 'the day-to-day milieu of political action'.[65] Close attention to chronology therefore remained fundamental, as did a focus on the manuscript sources left by leading politicians. The mind being assessed in *Liberal Mind* was almost exclusively one revealed in politicians' diaries and correspondence: the source-base broadened out as Bentley's trilogy progressed.

Looking at British high politics through this lens, Bentley did not find many instances in which 'theory' acted as a motive force. To assume that it did was to perpetuate an error indulged in by Bentley's historical subjects. Victorian and Edwardian Liberals, he observed, were convinced that the 'thought' generated by the universities, the Churches, and the press conditioned or even dictated political action, and that governing was to a considerable degree coextensive with commentating.[66] Those easy assumptions had been shared by historians until relatively recently. But they had all been wrong, and Bentley's explanation for this was structural. Political parties were not monoliths in which a similar weight of ideological commitment could be expected from different constituent groups.[67] The individuals who found themselves in leadership positions rarely had either the opportunity, or the capacity, to think in abstract terms.[68] Certainly a predilection for abstract thought rarely helped in ascending the greasy pole. Those who had made it to the top faced unique pressures, and lived in a different world from intellectuals, with different habits and codes. There were points of contact between their spheres, but ultimately '[l]ittle evidence' that the articulated thought of intellectuals 'readily informed high-political discussion'.[69] So there could be no good case for treating ideology as 'a bundle of ideas loosely assumed to trigger behaviour'.[70]

The world of the Liberal intelligentsia, as such, needed to be treated separately from that of the Liberal parliamentary party. In *Liberal Mind*, Britain's loose agglomeration of Liberal thinkers and writers was discussed not in terms of their theories, but as a constituency of support for the party; in *Climax*, their ideas were interrogated, but held at a distance from Liberal politics.[71] That distance varied, because politics was situational, and there were situations in which abstract thought could matter (or appear to matter) more than in others: most obviously, in Liberal politics just before the First World War.[72] More often, however, thought played an ornamental role, with intellectuals' function being to offer justificatory theories for politicians to choose from.[73] Bentley's view of the world of high politics was one in which 'ideals and metaphysics… tended to follow calculation and trimming rather than

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[63] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 1-2, 4.
[64] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 4.
[65] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 5.
[66] Bentley, *Climax*, 55.
[67] Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought'.
[68] Indeed even general 'party' principles could be of little use to the leading men delegated to confront 'immediate and complex problems… some of which derived from the very nature of their party as a sprawl of sentiment and enthusiasm': Bentley, *Climax*, 56.
[69] Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', 133. Cf. Cowling's *The Nature and Limits of Political Science*, as interpreted in Richard Brent, 'Butterfield's Tories', 949.
[70] Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', 152-3.
[71] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, ch. 5.
[72] Bentley, *Climax*, 112-13, but see 113-14.
[73] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 213. This helped to explain why it was usually the source of ideas which determined their apparent political power, rather than their abstract quality: Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', 138.

precede them'.[74] He also hinted, allusively, at more defined structural relations between action and theory.[75] But his point was that thought and politics were not a 'single continuum', but 'divergent areas of practice, each with its own sub-language and defence mechanisms'.[76]

Bentley did, however, diagnose vitally important political roles for 'ideas' in a broader sense. He was acutely aware, first, that politicians were often motivated by broader and higher-minded aspirations than simply the drive to triumph at the parliamentary game. Second, while suggesting that public rhetoric was often a 'facade', and therefore of limited use in trying to determine why politicians did things, it served other vitally important roles in the system of British politics.[77] He suggested that it was in this container that historians might be best off looking for traces of higher-level thought in British politics.[78] Most importantly for the architecture of his own studies, however, Bentley developed a distinctive notion of party 'doctrine' through which 'ideas' were channelled. By this he meant something very precise, and quite distinct from what other historians used the term to indicate in the 1980s.[79] In *Liberal Mind* doctrine was 'a nexus of assumptions, prejudices and maxims understood to be something separate from attitudes determining what was to take place in day-to-day political practice'; later Bentley expressed the concept more pithily as 'an embodiment of the formulaic, non-reflective aspect of political thinking'.[80] Doctrine was what gave political parties a sense of themselves, and were 'what is left of "ideas" and "theories" when parties have assimilated the bits they can cope with and turned them into a slogan' or 'a boxful of phrases'.[81] For Bentley, it was in such statements of the 'obvious' that the essence of Liberalism was to be found, in 'unthinking dogma and codified prejudice', not in specific policy positions or elaborated political thought.[82] Loose and potentially unifying notions like 'character', or unthinking loyalty to certain leading men, were what held parties together.[83] Bentley's fullest discussion of how the negotiation of 'doctrine' worked in practice can be found in his discussion in *Climax* of the recasting of Liberal politics in the two decades following the Home Rule crisis.[84] Even here, however, at a moment of exceptional systemic pressure, he was careful to stress that that the worlds of 'theory' and 'politics' remained distinct.

Drawing in part on seeds found within Cowling's political trilogy, Bentley in his own worked up a sweeping analysis of how thought and 'theory' worked in 'high politics', grander in its general conceptual ambition than any of the studies discussed in the rest of this article. But scepticism and uncertainty remained the dominant notes: Bentley's contribution over the 1980s was to make the case that the impact of theory on practical politics was 'partial, subtle,

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[74] Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', 140.
[75] After WWI, Liberal '[p]ractice and theory went lame simultaneously: they always do': Bentley, *Climax*, 126.
[76] Bentley, *Climax*, 96.
[77] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 127.
[78] Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought'. Cf. the agenda pursued more recently in *Languages of Politics*, ed. Craig and Thompson.
[79] Cf. Clarke, 'Ideas and Interests', 46. Though Cowling would begin publishing his study of *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* in 1980, he did not fully conceptualise 'doctrine' in the political trilogy, and Bentley was clearly innovating here.
[80] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 14; Bentley, 'Party, Doctrine, and Thought', 144.
[81] Bentley, *Climax*, 96. This was a dynamic process, doctrine being both 'a conditioner of how the political world will be conceived and… a predictable and serious consequence of action within that world': Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 4.
[82] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 15, 104.
[83] Bentley, *Liberal Mind*, 24.
[84] Bentley, *Climax*, ch. 6.

time-lagged, encoded and sometimes beyond recovery through documentary evidence'.[85] The rest of our subjects were all in their own ways more optimistic about what could be said. This was not least because they all chose to steer away from the secular, and to place their focus on the motives and aspirations associated with religious conviction, reasoning, and policy.

5

Richard Brent is not so widely cited in recent historiographical commentary as are our other protagonists.[86] But for contemporaries, his monograph *Liberal Anglican Politics: Whiggery, Religion, and Reform, 1830-1841* (1987) was an integral part of the new turn in the history of 'high politics'.[87] For K. Theodore Hoppen it sat alongside Parry's work as an illuminating attempt 'to identify a congeries of religious and moral ideas as the crucial determinants of political cohesion and difference', and other reviewers described it as drawing persuasive links between religious belief and political action.[88] It pursued these goals in the most carefully defined and deliberate way of any of our major 1980s studies.

Liberal Anglican Politics is not methodologically forthcoming, but Brent laid out his working assumptions in other contemporary reviews and articles. He rejected the 'cruder forms of social determinism', and in particular the idea that early-nineteenth-century politics was about containing pressure from new social and political groups created by industrialisation.[89] Politicians had agency. And in exercising that agency, he argued, their convictions and principles mattered. Brent's overarching goal was to rescue the Whig ministers of the 1830s from the Gashite charge that they were no more than 'political trimmers who responded to external pressures', and to show that they were in fact guided by broader aspirations.[90] At least, some ministers were: he recognised that Whiggery was not a 'monolithic unity', but instead a deeply fractured coalition.[91] Brent also gave weight to connections at the edges of the 'high political' world, and stressed the importance of ministerial relationships with the leaders of extra-parliamentary Dissent, and of the positions taken by the Dissenting press.[92]

Liberal Anglican Politics introduced itself as setting out to show that the Whig governments of the 1830s had a distinctive religious outlook, which could usefully be termed 'liberal Anglicanism', and that this outlook affected their policies and politics.[93] The significance of this for students of the early nineteenth century, the book argued, was that the leading questions in religious policy – those related to the rights and interests of Dissent – were 'to a very great extent, the determinants of Whiggery and Toryism'.[94] On a methodological and conceptual level, however, Brent's most significant claims were about conviction, and about the place of thought in driving policy. Liberal Anglicanism, he insisted, was more than just 'a rhetorical device to achieve office', as (implicitly) a more cynical historian might tend to

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[85] Bentley, *Climax*, xvii.
[86] This is in large part because left academia for the Bar.
[87] Richard Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics: Whiggery, Religion, and Reform, 1830-1841* (Oxford, 1987).
[88] K. Theodore Hoppen, *English Historical Review*, cviii (1993), 414-16, at 415; Jeffrey von Arx, *Victorian Studies*, xxxii (1989), 278-80, at 279; Geoffrey Finlayson, *History*, lxxv (1990), 348-9. Some reviewers saw Brent as writing 'Oxford school' history: R.J. Morris, *American Historical Review*, xcv (1990), 824.
[89] Richard Brent, 'New Whigs in Old Bottles', *Parliamentary History*, xi (1992), 151-6, at 154-6.
[90] Richard Brent, 'The Whigs and Protestant Dissent in the Age of Reform: the Case of Church Rates, 1833-1841', *English Historical Review*, cii (1987), pp. 887-910, at 887.
[91] Brent, 'New Whigs', 153.
[92] Brent, 'Whigs and Protestant Dissent'.
[93] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 1-2.
[94] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 7-8.

assume. In fact it had its political roots in ‘a re-working of Whig doctrine’, which could best be studied through published texts.[95] More than this, Brent argued that the Liberal Anglican creed was bolstered and in part defined by a group of University theologians, with whom Whig ministers were in personal contact. Liberal Anglicanism, Brent contended, was ‘a sincerely held political doctrine’, which owed more to these Anglican divines than it did to the secular theorists usually associated with the emergence of Victorian Liberalism.[96] The book’s introduction at last arrived at the contention that material changes in the organisation of national Church establishments were ‘the consequences of… more abstract speculations’.[97]

Brent was well aware that the relationship between thought and politics could not be taken for granted. He was careful about hedging his conclusions, stressing that it was quite possible to interpret liberal Anglicanism as a ‘cynical ruse’ and ‘merely a means to achieve office.[98] *Liberal Anglican Politics* does not skimp on the back-and-forth of partisan manoeuvrings. But in making an argument about sincerity, the book necessarily sought to make windows into men’s souls. Brent recognised that claims of genuine intellectual commitment could not be supported from the ‘political evidence’ (presumably, manuscript and official sources related to parliamentary and ministerial affairs). He argued, however, that once other kinds of evidence were taken into account, conviction became a more compelling reading than calculation.[99] From the working assumption that ‘religious faith is a historical fact’, he argued that the Whigs associated with advancing the liberal Anglican agenda possessed ‘definite and distinctive religious beliefs’.[100] These beliefs were probed through the examination of family backgrounds, personal connections, positive statements, private reading, and ecclesiastical patronage. But the real question was how these varieties of faith could be linked to policy.

As a step in making this argument, *Liberal Anglican Politics* aimed to show that public political writing could bear directly upon political practice. As in all our studies, rarefied ‘theory’ was at a discount: Brent’s case study was of the political and historical texts produced by the Whigs’ coming man, Lord John Russell, in the 1820s. Again, there was caution: Brent argued that Russell’s rethinking of party dogma was not deliberate, and that it only ‘inadvertently’ enabled sections of the party to support liberalising ecclesiastical reforms over the next decade.[101] Brent stressed also that the influence of Russell’s works was not due to any special intellectual or literary quality, but derived mainly from his status, and from the circumstances in which the texts were published.[102] The treatment of Russell’s writings ran the gamut, taking in his thoughts on subjects from Machiavelli and Rousseau, to ‘character’ and political virtue, to Turkey and France, to eighteenth-century theology.[103] But Brent’s theme was that Russell had reworked British and (particularly) Whig party history in a politically convenient fashion, framing it in a safer and more advantageous way than Macaulay offered in his exactly contemporary writings. Crucially, in prioritising the moral character of the state above the mechanical configuration of the constitution, Russell (and certain other writers) had by 1834 invented ‘a doctrine which could accommodate Dissent, and hence reform’.[104] The recasting of various aspects of the British polity during the 1830s

[95] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 16.
[96] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 16.
[97] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 17.
[98] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 103.
[99] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 103.
[100] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 105, 143.
[101] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 40.
[102] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 41.
[103] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, ch. 1.
[104] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 63.

depended, to some extent, on this 'revived reform doctrine'.[105] Factional battles had to be won before principle could be put into practice, especially over the appropriation of the surplus revenues of the Irish Church, in which conviction was just one of the moving parts.[106] But by casting Russell in this leading role, Brent was able to make the case not only that some politicians thought and wrote seriously, but also that there were circumstances in which their intellectual schemes could shift the boundaries of the possible in politics and policy.

The most novel part of Brent's attempt to pin down an intellectual context for Whig policy, however, lay in his analysis of the relations between ministers and two groups of Oxford and Cambridge divines: the Oriel Noetics and the Trinity (Cambridge) Liberals. *Liberal Anglican Politics* gave a full account of the published Christian writings of these men, 'in so far as they were of importance to liberal politics and politicians'.[107] Brent's case was that the practical political implications these divines saw as following from their doctrines were 'consonant with the church policies of the Whig governments'.[108] He strengthened this argument by describing practical collaboration between scholars and ministers, particularly on the subject of university reform, on which there developed 'political alliances which were to reaffirm the already extant religious and intellectual sympathies'.[109] Patronage was central to the book's case here, not least the highly controversial appointment of R.D. Hampden to the Regius Chair of Divinity at Oxford, which for Brent 'firmly associated the liberal government with the liberal theologians', as 'the outward mark of private relations of friendship and intellectual sympathy'.[110] In short, Brent's point was that while the more developed intellectual scaffolding surrounding legislative and executive action was necessarily difficult to make out distinctly, sometimes it really did matter, and sometimes it could be inferred at points where politics, scholarship, and divinity intersected. There were no easy assumptions here about the relations between ideology and practice. Equally, there was no smoking-gun documentary evidence, and Brent's arguments ultimately came down to analogy and probability. *Liberal Anglican Politics* could not go beyond showing that the schemes outlined by its Oxbridge divines were more than 'consonant' with the positions of liberal politicians on major religious issues.[111] But the book's argument was consciously about plausibility, and it showed just what a detailed case study could achieve with some moderate leaps of faith.

6

Boyd Hilton's *The Age of Atonement: the Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (1988) took a rather different approach to probing the relations between politics and its intellectual contexts. The book does not sit altogether comfortably alongside the other main studies discussed here, in part as it owed the least to Cowling, or the other 'high politics' work of the 1960s and 1970s. But although most of the debate it has inspired has centred on its claims about religion and theology, *Atonement* did also have a 'high political' agenda, as contemporary reviewers noted.[112] In trying to locate the intellectual drivers behind certain ministerial decisions, it looked in some unexpected places.

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[105] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 51.
[106] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, ch. 2.
[107] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 144 and ch. 4.
[108] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 143.
[109] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 184 and ch. 5.
[110] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 217.
[111] Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics*, 183.
[112] Maxine Berg, 'Progress and Providence in Early Nineteenth-Century Political Economy', *Social History*, xv (1990), 365-75, at 375; and for the debate see 'Postscript to the Paperback Edition', Hilton, *Atonement*, 386-93.

Atonement was not Hilton's first attempt to grapple with these issues. His first book, *Corn, Cash, Commerce* (1977), on Tory economic policy in the years after Waterloo, was a more straightforward study of cabinet and administrative politics. It was still, however, a work about how much theory mattered.[113] It made the case that pragmatism and political tactics rather than Ricardianism had mainly motivated the economic policies of the 1810s and 1820s; and that economic ideologies were less drivers of policy, than fig-leaves for political action.[114] In this sense it occupied some of the same argumentative ground as Bentley's *Liberal Mind*, published in the same year, and helped to identify Hilton as a coming 'high political' historian in the minds of other historians: the book indicated that it was possible to arrive at ostensibly Cowlingite conclusions by alternative intellectual routes. Having shown that there was some ethical content to economic thought, however, *Corn, Cash, Commerce* concluded by asserting that in fact a different, less secular set of economic ideas might have driven change. This was the suggestion that *Atonement* would pursue more forensically.[115]

In the interim, Hilton experimented with a more narrowly-focused case study of Robert Peel, which ventured beyond doctrinal conviction to cast of mind.[116] This article has been cited mainly for the peroration in which it identifies Peel as a towering symbol of the moral energy of the state, and as such 'the progenitor of Gladstonian liberalism': but the thrust of the piece was that Peel was intellectually rigid, a claim supported not only by reference to his economic assumptions, but also to his philosophy of mathematics.[117] Hilton's broader point was that, in examining the lenses through which political actors saw the world – hints towards which could be found not just in their political speeches and correspondence, but in their religion, cultural interests, social environments, emotional makeup, and intellectual habits – it was possible to make better judgements about why they took political decisions.[118]

Atonement stretched these insights across a much broader canvas, and in doing so invented a coruscating, allusive, kaleidoscopic style of 'ideas in politics' history which has never been successfully emulated. It sidestepped some of the trickier methodological issues involved in connecting ideas and political action, partly by self-deprecation, but mainly by precise definition of its remit.[119] The book's subject was not the policy-making process, but 'the formation of that public morality (or doctrine) in the context of which the new economic

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Hilton's comment in the bibliographical appendix that '[t]here have been few recent developments in political history' may however indicate that his primary focus was on other matters: 382.

[113] Boyd Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce: the Economic Policies of the Tory Governments, 1815-1830* (Oxford, 1977). The book is cautious and subtle in treating this theme: 'If it could be demonstrated that the breakdown of protectionist theory over diminishing returns, and its supersession by free trade philosophy, was a decisive cause of the policy change, this would be a fascinating example of how ideas, initially employed in a supporting role for debating purposes, could on occasions subsequently take over, twist, and dictate legislative changes' (122).

[114] '[T]he main purpose of theory was to justify, not originate, measures'; 'Economic policy [was] largely empirical and untouched by abstract dogma': Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce*, 304-5, 307.

[115] Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce*, 307-14; Hilton, *Atonement*, vii-viii. On this pivot see also Craig, 'Political Ideas', 22-3.

[116] Boyd Hilton, 'Peel: a Reappraisal', *Historical Journal*, xxii (1979), 585-614.

[117] Hilton, 'Peel', 614; see also Hilton, *Corn, Cash, Commerce*, 267-8. For later exercises along the same conceptual lines see Boyd Hilton, 'Gladstone's Theological Politics', in *High and Low Politics*, ed. Bentley and Stevenson, 28-57; Hilton, 'The Case of Lord Morpeth'; Boyd Hilton, 'Utilitarian or Neo-Foxite Whig? Robert Lowe as Chancellor of the Exchequer', in *Strange Survival*, ed. Green and Tanner, 37-61.

[118] Cf. the similar arguments made in Colin Matthew's wide-ranging work on Gladstone's politics.

[119] The book is winningly introduced as a work formed of 'quotations wrenched from context and scrunched together to furnish broad generalizations': Hilton, *Atonement*, x.

policy emerged and by which it was sanctioned'.[120] It dealt, in other words, not with the specific sets of ideas motivating elite politicians at particular junctures, but with 'underlying attitudes and assumptions'.[121] To simplify radically, the book's substantive case was that mechanically-minded pre-millenarian evangelicals thought differently from managerially-minded post-millenarian evangelicals, and that these divisions mapped (to some extent) on to divisions over politics and economics. *Atonement* argued that religion not only helped to rationalise economic policy, but also to shape it. This took the book beyond Bentley's scheme, and required it to make leaps of the same order as Brent in *Liberal Anglican Politics*.

Atonement found evidence for its 'underlying attitudes' across a massive variety of contexts. The book's search took it between geology, medicine, phrenology, fiction, fine art, juvenile correction, and any number of other subjects.[122] The assumption that this was a legitimate approach was based on a particular model of how Victorian society worked. For Hilton, there was a 'common context' to cultural debate, and 'resemblances between work in different branches of knowledge are not hard to find'.[123] The point was not to look for, or to expect, explicit acknowledgement of political inspiration: Hilton's case was that connections between economic and religious thought 'mostly took place below the surface of consciousness', and had to be read in gingerly to 'linguistic parallels'.[124] This was to go a step beyond Brent, and indeed most historians writing at the time, to a semi-literary understanding of Victorian ideas.

Reviewers who criticised the book for not outlining a fully developed account of how important ideas and values were in explaining political action, or for not offering positive enough demonstrations of the links between ministers' religious leanings and their economic policies, were therefore aiming a little wide of the mark.[125] *Atonement*'s arguments about the psychology of political decision-making were nonetheless highly suggestive and important. Most of its discussions of 'political' topics – including the introduction of limited liability in the mid-1850s, and the theological politics of Gladstone – stuck fairly strictly to the spheres of ideas and debate.[126] But Chapter 6, on 'The Politics of Atonement', was more expansive, and there are plenty of hints as to Hilton's broader vision of politics elsewhere in the book.

Hilton's main objective, from a political point of view, was to trace the patterns of thought behind the practice of early-nineteenth-century 'Liberal Toryism'. *Atonement* was aware that ministerial policy was determined by connection, prejudice, and pragmatism as much as anything else: Chapter 6 began with the salutary assertion that 'public life cannot be explained in terms of ideology alone'.[127] But Hilton wanted to argue that Liberal Tory activity could only be understood if certain kinds of evangelical religious belief were taken into account. Supporting claims of personal commitment to specific religious doctrines or

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[120] Hilton, *Atonement*, viii. As this quotation suggests, Hilton's notion of 'doctrine' was distinct from Bentley's, but it did not carry the same interpretative weight.
[121] Hilton, *Atonement*, 6.
[122] Hilton's own pick for the most 'inspiring and exhilarating' effort to place early-nineteenth-century politics (albeit not 'high' politics) in an intellectual context was Adrian Desmond's *The Politics of Evolution: Morphology, Medicine, and Reform in Radical London* (Chicago, 1989): Boyd Hilton, 'The Politics of Anatomy and an Anatomy of Politics, c. 1825-1850', in *History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History 1750-1950*, ed. Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, and Brian Young (Cambridge, 2000), 179-97, at 183-4.
[123] Hilton, *Atonement*, 149.
[124] Hilton, *Atonement*, 297.
[125] Randall McGowen, *Albion*, xxi (1989), 129-31, at 130; Norman Gash, *English Historical Review*, civ (1989), 136-40.
[126] For limited liability see Hilton, *Atonement*, ch. 7; for Gladstone see ch. 9.
[127] Hilton, *Atonement*, 203.

political-economic theories involved casting a wide net, and Hilton admitted that some of the evidence brought to bear was 'tenuous' and possibly distorting.[128] But there was plenty of it. *Atonement* showed that leading politicians listened to the preaching of (and entered into personal contact with) leading clerics, most importantly Thomas Chalmers, and read the works of others. It demonstrated that, in some cases, intellectuals mentored politicians, and that in others, politicians cited specific pieces of clerical economic writing as having guided their positions.[129] It showed also that some parliamentary debates mirrored those between economic philosophers, and that some especially thoughtful and articulate parliamentarians held exceptional influence over certain branches of policy.[130] The figures for whom *Atonement* was able to find the best evidence were not always those who formally dominated decision-making processes.[131] But the point was to create a cumulative effect, and to convey a sense that even though ministers were not 'primarily' inspired by ideology of any kind, 'moderate' evangelicalism established 'a moral hegemony over public life'.[132]

It was therefore appropriate – and perhaps necessary – to look for signs of the Liberal Tory-evangelical 'love of system' in areas beyond economic policy. Hilton suggested that it could be traced in George Canning's arguments about the proper approach to foreign relations, which he said ought to rest on fixed principles and notions of balance; in Peel's revisions of the criminal code in the 1820s, which were calculated to limit discretion and to promote predictability; and in the atonement-infused language Peel later used to rationalise the repeal of the Corn Law in 1846.[133] In making these connections, none of which was developed very far, Hilton was conscious that he was concerned mainly with correlation, and that fit was easier to demonstrate than inspiration.[134] In this he shared the caution of the whole cluster of historians discussed here about the relation between thought and action. What he did in *Atonement*, however, was to suggest that the history of 'high politics' could profitably be woven into vastly broader interpretative patterns, giving it new life. The reluctance of other scholars to follow his lead, while understandable given the challenges involved, is a pity.[135]

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Jonathan Parry, writing in 1983, identified Hilton's early work as perhaps the best example to date of how relating political action to its 'intellectual' contexts (his quotation marks) could aid historical understanding.[136] He insisted, however, that there was rather more that needed doing to compensate for long-standing inadequacies in nineteenth-century political history, and his early articles burned with impatience to see it done.

Parry argued that historians had mostly misunderstood why politicians did the things they did. Over-emphasising the role of ambition was a mistake, as was giving too much credit to rational thought in general. Hard-headed calculation mattered, certainly, but so did higher and more ethereal aspirations, and so too did temperamental, emotional, and environmental

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[128] Hilton, *Atonement*, 236.
[129] E.g. Hilton, *Atonement*, 201 (on George Combe's influence on Richard Cobden); *Atonement*, 223 (on Peel and bullionism).
[130] E.g. Hilton, *Atonement*, 129 (on bullionism); 133-5 (on Lord Overstone and monetary policy).
[131] E.g. Hilton, *Atonement*, 231-4, on Lord Grenville.
[132] Hilton, *Atonement*, 219-20.
[133] Hilton, *Atonement*, 221, 226.
[134] Hilton, *Atonement*, 226.
[135] For more, see Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (Oxford, 2006).
[136] Parry, 'State of Victorian Political History', 474, referring to *Corn, Cash, Commerce* and 'Peel'.

factors.[137] Focusing on individual politicians could only be of so much use in clarifying these issues, since politics could best be understood when the ideas and motives of all those involved in the system were known.[138] '[R]igorous contextualisation' was the watchword.[139] For Parry, next, an essential consequence of this position was that scholars needed to pay closer attention the framework and content of political debate. Historians, though well informed about the formal side of nineteenth-century political life, knew too little about the content of public political argument. There remained masses of 'largely unexamined' evidence in journals, pamphlets, and Hansard columns, which could be used to elucidate the discursive contexts of nineteenth-century domestic politics: as it stood, these were 'in large part, still all too obscure'.[140] In deciding which debates to prioritise, finally, historians still had work to do in reorienting themselves away from the twentieth-century lenses through which the Victorian era was too often seen, and back towards the issues which mattered to contemporaries.[141] The prize for getting all this right was more than just a better grasp of the dynamics of 'high politics', or of leading politicians' attitudes. The point of contextualising politics was to make sense of the workings of political society as a whole: it was about understanding the channels which connected political actors with the wider political nation.[142]

Parry's substantive attempt to confront all these problems was delivered in his *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867-1875* (1986). The book was widely heralded by reviewers, with Frank M. Turner describing it as 'the most important study of Victorian politics in many years'.[143] It presented itself, on one level, as a study of 'the Liberal mind': but its portrait of that mind as an entity 'in which the religious and the mundane were inextricably intertwined' was quite different from Bentley's, as were the methods, sources, and working assumptions through which it approached the subject.[144] It pursued so many reinterpretations at once that it defies epitome, but Parry was clearly a young man in a hurry, and his book was in many ways the most vital 'high political' production of the 1980s. *Democracy and Religion* was in part an argument that British politics during the 1860s and the 1870s was a fundamentally religious activity; in part a study of the 'ideological' context of Victorian politics more generally; in part an interrogation of the balance of power within Gladstonian Liberalism; and in part a study of the intellectual origins of the Liberal Party's split over Home Rule in the 1880s.[145] Along the way, it made broader arguments about the need to study the interconnections between ostensibly separate political issues; about how public 'political languages' generated party cohesion; and about the sometimes counter-intuitive relationships between public controversy and administrative reality.[146] Researching all this involved heroic acts of scholarship, and the book's bibliography is disquietingly long.

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[137] See e.g. the later critique of Matthew's work on Gladstone in J. P. Parry, 'Gladstone and the Disintegration of the Liberal Party', *Parliamentary History*, x (1991), 392-404, at 402.
[138] J. P. Parry, 'The Unmuzzling of Gladstone', *Parliamentary History*, iii (1984), 187-98, at 196. Cowling and Beales both made versions of this point: Brent, 'Butterfield's Tories', 952-3; Beales, 'Peel, Russell, and Reform', 882.
[139] Parry, 'Unmuzzling', 196.
[140] Parry, 'State of Victorian Political History', 472, 484.
[141] J.P. Parry, 'Religion and the Collapse of Gladstone's First Government, 1870-1874', *Historical Journal*, xxv (1982), 71-101, at 71.
[142] J. P. Parry, 'High and Low Politics in Victorian Britain', *Historical Journal*, xxix (1986), 753-70, at 757.
[143] Frank M. Turner, *Victorian Studies*, xxxi (1988), 590-2, at 591. For Paul Smith it was 'a powerful stimulus to the important task of attempting to set the politics of the Victorian age in a frame of reference which would have made sense to their practitioners': 'Liberalism', 730.
[144] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 9.
[145] For the Home Rule split see Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 46-7, 437-46.
[146] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 4, 14-16, 52.

Parry, like all our historians, was sceptical about the existence of direct relationships between 'elaborated theory' and policy formation, or indeed between 'developed beliefs' and 'day-to-day political life'.[147] He argued that the original proponents of 'high politics', in conjunction with other scholars, had demonstrated just how doubtful such connections were.[148] Parry insisted, however, that prejudices and less developed sorts of 'ideas' mattered enormously in politics.[149] Broad aspirations and ideals – especially religious ones – informed parliamentary behaviour, and the allegiances of extra-parliamentary Liberals.[150] Moreover, while 'abstract, academic philosophy' may have been largely detached from political practice, mediated and popularised (or 'half-baked') versions of the age's great 'isms' and schools of thought could exert considerable influence.[151] Parry was willing, also, to treat rhetoric as offering insight into motivation, arguing that it was an error to take public statements as 'necessarily, or even often, designed to mislead'.[152] *Democracy and Religion* was not shy about drawing out the interpretative consequences of these claims. When it came to the Home Rule split, the book asserted, arguments about principle were more influential than high political calculation or class interest.[153] For Parry, then, studying 'the intellectual setting in which political activity took place' was necessary to grasp 'the interest which politics evoked, the anxieties which it aroused, and the consequences of those anxieties for future developments'.[154]

Part I of *Democracy and Religion* evoked this 'intellectual setting'. It dealt with the 'thought-worlds' of the main alignments within elite Liberalism, and drew on a sea of periodical and newspaper articles, tracts, and books produced by politicians, writers, journalists, scholars, preachers, and leaders of working-class opinion. Attitudes towards ecclesiology were to the fore, but Parry's account of these 'thought-worlds' was expansive, sprawling outwards to consider natural philosophy, orientalism, positivism, history, archaeology, and Scotland. As this suggests, Parry shared Hilton's conviction that there were significant overlaps between the worlds of politics and intellectual culture, and was even more emphatic about their analytic significance. He argued that there were 'close, even incestuous' connections 'between the literary, social and political worlds', in which politicians did not just associate with 'philosophers, theologians, classicists, literary commentators and historians', but also contributed to their arts.[155] At the same time, men of letters (and scientists), in their writings and speeches, 'were consciously making contributions to the political debate'.[156] These figures were not just sniping impotently from the periphery: Parry argued that currents of literary opinion could shift climates of political expectation, and inform voting behaviour.[157]

Part II of *Democracy and Religion* was about how the Liberal party 'spectacularly lost its sense of direction' during Gladstone's first ministry.[158] It dealt in detail with the brutally complex sequence of bills, controversies, and manoeuvrings around religious issues which

[147] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 2, 52.
[148] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 1-2.
[149] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 3.
[150] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 47. See also, on 'aspirations', Parry, 'High and Low Politics', 754.
[151] Parry, 'State of Victorian Political History', 472.
[152] Parry, 'Unmuzzling', 197.
[153] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 9.
[154] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 3. This formulation struck Bentley, who cited it in *Climax*, xviii, note 11.
[155] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 27; Parry, 'State of Victorian Political History', 471.
[156] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 48.
[157] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 27, 48-9.
[158] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 429.

took place between 1868 and 1875.[159] The account it gave was focused on, but not limited to, Westminster and parliamentary politics: aiming to show that religious issues were the main vector through which the 'political public' was linked with the world of high politics, the book looked also at elections, constituency politics, school boards, universities, pressure groups, and organised nonconformity.[160] In the absence of any extensive cross-referencing, Part II has to be read attentively to make out its dependence on the schemes of belief, aspiration, and policy preference outlined in Part I. The connections come across most clearly in the treatment of Gladstone, who is of course uniquely susceptible to attempts at connected political-ideological treatment. But *Democracy and Religion* did not set out to suggest that political behaviour was *dictated* by patterns of publicly expressed conviction below the level of 'theory' or 'developed belief'. Its point was that it was impossible to make sense of what politics was about, or why political actors thought it was worth engaging in, without paying attention to the highly committed and joined-up Victorian cultures of scholarship and debate; and that, once that was done, striking overlaps between precept and practice began to emerge.

What is perhaps most remarkable about the vision of politics developed in *Democracy and Religion* is just how all-encompassing it is. This is not a text that is reducible to the argument that religion mattered, as it is sometimes treated. It touches on nearly everything that contemporaries would have understood as belonging within the category of 'politics', and more than that, it adopts a strikingly unsectarian approach to the interpretation of political phenomena. Its explanatory tools include ambition, pragmatism, temperament, and ideology: but it also discusses family networks, material interests, and generational shifts, develops international comparisons (both European and American), makes space for some light electoral sociology, and in general refuses to be trapped in any single conceptual or methodological box. It remains a mine of insight for political historians of all kinds.

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Since the 1980s there have been a number of further, highly innovative studies of the relations between political thinking and political action at the parliamentary and cabinet levels, which deserve separate scrutiny.[161] But as fashions have changed, making sense of the interface between 'high politics' and surrounding patterns of political, religious, social, and economic ideas has come seem less pressing: recent suggestions for where 'high political' history might go next have focused on how it might be connected with cultural history.[162] Within the comparatively luxuriant literature on political languages, symbols, and concepts, the challenging and complex claim that ideas matter in politics has increasingly been elevated back to a self-evident starting point.[163]

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[159] The comparative straightforwardness of this part of the book is underlined by the fact that the methodology used did not require any detailed justification: cf., for Part I, Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 47-53.
[160] Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, 52-3, and Part II.
[161] See esp. Peter Mandler, *Aristocratic Government in the Age of Reform: Whigs and Liberals, 1830-1852* (Oxford, 1990); Miles Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847-1860* (Oxford, 1995); Paul Readman, *Land and Nation in England: Patriotism, National Identity, and the Politics of Land, 1880-1914* (Woodbridge, 2008); Robert Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848-1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act* (Farnham, 2011); Ben Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2012).
[162] Fielding, 'High Politics', 45-6; Craig, '"High Politics"', 474-5.
[163] E.g. Philip Harling, 'Equipoise Regained? Recent Trends in British Political History, 1790-1867', *Journal of Modern History* lxxv (2003), 890-918, at 891-2.

David Craig has explored elsewhere the overlaps between Cowling's methodological precepts, and the practice of the more ideologically sensitive 'new political history'.[164] The studies discussed in this article clearly helped to bridge the scholarly gap between the two, with their systematic prioritisation of ideas, values, aspirations, and public moralities. In that sense, they certainly constituted a 'landmark' in political history. But what deserves emphasis is less where this literature stood on the road to our present condition, and more what it still has to teach. For twenty years, there have been calls for historians of modern British politics to go back to trying to explain things, and suggestions that this must involve integrating the different spheres of politics, and taking closer account of the 'hard' political structures which constrained the power of political language.[165] On all these fronts, the second-generation 'high politics' work can be seen as cutting a path forward.

'High politics' history, in its original form, was about politics at the 'centre'. Twenty-first-century work has increasingly submerged politicians at that 'centre' within a wider cultural, intellectual, and journalistic elite, treating them all as sources of political speech. What was distinctive about our 1980s studies was that they sought to hold these worlds structurally in tension. All our historians assumed that political ideas and languages were to be studied less for their own sake, than as a means of offering more satisfactory explanations for concrete political phenomena: be it policy decisions, voting behaviour, party fissiparity, or the authority of certain leaders. None argued that elaborated political thought was of much use in making sense of political behaviour, suggesting instead that the arguments which mattered were to be found at less exalted levels of political (and religious, and cultural, and scientific) debate. From these premises, they all attempted to show, in different ways, that constellations of ideas generated and sustained from outside the small circle of leading politicians helped to determine what it was politically possible and attractive for those figures to do. Finally, all our historians took it as read that their arguments must depend on the extensive exploitation of archival sources: and it was in their attempts to interrelate manuscript and printed material that much of the methodological distinctiveness of their work lay. For various professional, institutional, and intellectual reasons, few historians of nineteenth-century politics writing since the 1990s have managed to consult anything like as many collections, which means that their claims about the operation of the political system at Westminster are of a different order. So there is all the more reason to take account of the findings of the studies discussed here.

It may, of course, be that the turn away from trying to explain the structural interrelation between 'high political' action and its intellectual contexts simply represents a more realistic stance on the difficulties involved in doing so. The historians discussed in this article knew that they did not have it all worked out. As Parry has reflected in his most recent monograph, when it comes to charting the relations between political tactics, languages, and ideas, 'probably there is no entirely satisfactory answer'.[166] In thinking about new ways forward, however – both on the endlessly complex problem of 'ideas in politics', and on other equally challenging questions in the study of modern British politics – historians could profitably look again at these pioneering studies.

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[164] Craig, '"High Politics".
[165] Lawrence, 'Political History', 195-9; David Brown, Robert Crowcroft, and Gordon Pentland, 'Introduction', in *Oxford Handbook*, ed. Brown et al., 1-9; Luke Blaxill, *The War of Words: The Language of British Elections, 1880-1914* (Woodbridge, 2020), 5-9.
[166] Parry, *Politics of Patriotism*, x.