CHAPTER 2

Politics and Society, 1890–1914

Generalizations in history are dangerous. When closely examined, historical events and developments almost invariably reveal aspects that are individual and unique. For a true picture of the past, a grasp of the general pattern of development must be combined with an understanding of the individual features that in each country modified the pattern and gave to each nation's history its particular shape. Thus, after a broad survey of the factors determining the course of European history at the beginning of the twentieth century, we now turn our attention to the developments in the individual European nations. In their constitutional developments, the Western European states differed decisively from those in Central and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, elected parliaments determined the character of the governments and the course of their policies. By contrast, the monarchs in the Central and Eastern European great power states—Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia—had strong policymaking influence, though the extent of that influence and the constitutional arrangements in these countries differed.

GREAT BRITAIN

From the Victorian to the Edwardian Age

Of the great powers, Great Britain had advanced furthest in democratic evolution and in industrialization. Having made progress while preserving continuity, Britain gave the impression of remarkable political and social stability. The “miracle of its constitution”—the British two-party system, British parliamentarianism—seemed to offer an example of how the problems and tensions of the twentieth century could be overcome.

Yet at the close of the nineteenth century even in Britain one epoch seemed to come to an end and a new one to begin. Queen Victoria died in 1901. She was succeeded by her son King Edward VII (ruled 1901–1910). No more striking contrast can be imagined than that between the strict and dignified queen and her flamboyant heir. Edward indulged in all the pleasures of a gilded society. He
was devoted to beautiful women and good food. In his youth he gambled; in later years he played bridge from afternoon until late at night during his weekend visits to the country houses of the British rich. He had a stable of racehorses, and he was also a motorist. Together with his wife, Queen Alexandra, one of the great beauties of the age, the king was the recognized social leader of an ostentatiously opulent and luxurious society.

The sudden change from the dignified and aloof court of Victoria to the pleasure-loving and indulgent court of Edward VII had the effect not of impairing the position of the monarchy but of strengthening it. During Victoria’s reign the bourgeoisie through hard work—slowly and steadily—had transformed Great Britain into the leading industrial country of the world. By the turn of the century this work was done and its fruits could be enjoyed. Edward was the perfect representative of this stage of British economic development, and he was extremely popular.

With the wisdom of hindsight it is easy to see that the British economic position in the first decade of the twentieth century was not as brilliant as it appeared. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the tempo of British economic development had slowed down. Between 1885 and 1913, the rate of increase in Britain’s industrial production was 2.11 percent, while Germany’s increased by 4.5 percent and that of the United States by 5.2 percent. The actual output of steel, iron, and coal, the chief sources of Britain’s strength as an industrial and commercial power, was still very high. But Great Britain was no longer the leading producer of these goods. By 1906 it had been overtaken by the United States in the production of steel, iron, and coal and by Germany in the production of steel. Similarly, in the development of innovations connected with electricity, the motorcar, and chemicals Britain lagged behind Germany and the United States. Besides, these two countries possessed more modern industrial equipment than Great Britain. Other aspects of economic life were more favorable. In the shipping industry, in textile production, and as a center of trade Britain remained the leading power. Above all, during its period of economic growth, Britain had made immense investments in foreign countries, which now paid off and generated new investment possibilities. Thus, it was the world’s greatest capital market. Its banks enjoyed enormous prestige. The gold standard and the pound were almost synonymous. But Britain did not produce as much as it imported, although the receipts from its foreign investments concealed this deficit in the balance of trade. The basis for the economic difficulties it had to face after the First World War, and still more threateningly after the Second World War, had already been laid.

The golden glimmer of the Edwardian era was an evening glow, but few were aware of this. To most people, London was the capital of the world in the decades before the First World War, the embodiment of a luxurious style of life unequalled since the Roman Empire. The harmoniousness of the ruling group confirmed this impression of stable prosperity. Conflicts between the attitudes of a feudal and authoritarian military class and that of a bourgeois society did not exist in Great Britain. The British people had successfully fought against the standing army, which they viewed as an instrument of princely absolutism, and their insular position made conscription unnecessary. Moreover, the economic basis of a military caste—agriculture—had been almost eliminated. If in the first half of the nineteenth century the repeal of the corn laws and the establishment of free trade had signified the victory of the industrial and commercial classes over agricultural interests, this development was completed by the agricultural crisis of the 1880s. In a country unprotected by tariffs, competition against grain imported from Russia or America became impossible; the cultivation of grain was virtually abandoned, and the soil was used for grazing, dairy farming, or fruit farming. But the landowners remained wealthy. Many found that their soil was rich in coal, industrial settlements sprang up on their land, and they drew large incomes from rents. Landowners frequently became involved in industrial and financial activities. The amalgamation of the rising classes of businessmen with the old aristocratic ruling group represented no problem in Britain: “While business men were becoming peers, peers were becoming business men, so that when the new rich reached the Upper House they found themselves on familiar ground.”

The Politics of the Ruling Class

Politics mirrored this homogeneity of the ruling class. Although strife between the Unionists, as the Conservatives were officially named, and the Liberals was quite vehement, the social composition of the leadership in each of the parties was very much alike. After William Gladstone’s resignation in 1894 and the short-lived Liberal government under Lord Rosebery, the Conservatives held power for ten years, from 1895 to 1905: until 1902 the Marquess of Salisbury (1830–1903) was prime minister; from 1902 to 1905 Salisbury’s nephew Arthur Balfour (1848–1930). In both parties, descendents of the aristocratic families who had ruled Britain in previous centuries continued to be prominent. Salisbury and Balfour were Cecils; Grey’s and Ponsonbys were to be found on the councils of the Liberals. The leadership of both parties included aristocrats with industrial and financial connections, like the Liberal Rosebery, who was married to a Rothschild, and the Conservative earl of Derby, who had large coal mining holdings. In both parties, businessmen played significant roles. Conservative and Liberal politicians enjoyed the same strictly classical education. Attendance at one of the great public schools—Eton, Harrow, Rugby—followed by Oxford or Cambridge was the usual background for a political career and almost a requirement for it; prominence in the debating society of one of the two

universities marked a young man for political success. In this period, Oxford's Balliol College was the breeding ground of statesmen. Its master, Benjamin Jowett, the translator of Plato, attracted the most brilliant minds to his college and infused them with the idea that public service was the duty of the social elite.

The British ruling class had no doubt of the nation’s right to rule over other peoples, to maintain the empire, and to continue imperial expansion despite the increasing competition of other states. The most important leaders of both parties were conscious imperialists. The Conservative government of Salisbury used the occasion of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 to glorify Britain's world-spanning empire. But Liberals like Rosebery and Haldane were equally enthusiastic advocates of Britain's imperial role. Conservatives might be more concerned with maintaining their nation as the world's foremost power, while Liberals might emphasize its mission of guiding the colonial peoples to self-government and the other blessings of British society, but leaders of both parties were firmly resolved to be content with what Britain possessed and to compete actively for the African and Asian lands that were up for grabs.

This was the time when the visionary dream of a British Empire in Africa reaching from the Cape to Cairo made its impact on British policy. The first consequence was a serious clash between the British and the French. Seeking to enlarge their African holdings, the French had organized two expeditions, one starting from Ethiopia in the east and moving west, the other moving from Lake Chad to the east. They were to meet in the upper Nile Valley and there establish the French claim to this area, the possession of which would link French Somaliland in the east with the French colonies of Algeria in the north and Senegal in the west. This empire would cut straight across the continuous territory stretching from the Cape to Cairo that was sought by the British. Hence they quickly decided on countermeasures. They ordered General Herbert Kitchener (1850–1916) to move up the Nile into the Sudan, which, since the defeat of General Gordon in 1885, had remained in the control of the Mahdi. In 1898 the army of the Mahdi was overcome in two battles, at the Atbara River (April 8) and at Omdurman (September 2), and “the whole mass of the dervishes dissolved into fragments and into particles and streamed away into the fantastic mirages of the desert,” according to a description of the Battle of Omdurman by a participant, the young supernumerary lieutenant Winston Churchill. Kitchener moved quickly ahead along the upper Nile, for the French expedition under Colonel Jean Baptiste Marchand, coming from the west, had reached Fashoda, in the southeastern Sudan, and had planted a French flag there on July 10, 1898. With a few of his troops Kitchener sailed up the Nile, arriving at Fashoda on September 18. He asked Marchand to withdraw; Marchand refused. Kitchener and Marchand conferred and agreed to await the decision of their home governments; then they drank whiskey and soda together. Public opinion in Great Britain was so enraged by the French audacity in placing obstacles in the path of the British imperial plans that even if the government had wanted to make concessions, it could not have done so. The French were faced with the alternative of going to war against Great Britain or giving in. On November 3 the French government decided to surrender and ordered the unconditional evacuation of Fashoda.

The Labor Movement and Social Reform

The Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897 and Omdurman and Fashoda in 1898 represented the apex of British imperial power. Nevertheless, the coherence of society, the grasp of the ruling classes over the mass of the nation, was less firm and secure than one might have expected as a result of the unbroken success of British policy in the nineteenth century. Although Great Britain had passed the worst hardships and sufferings that accompanied industrialization in its early stages, misery among the masses of the working population was still great. The sacrifice of agriculture to industry, accelerated by a severe agricultural crisis in the 1880s, had forced small farmers and farmhands to migrate to the cities, thus increasing the number of unskilled workers. Housing conditions in the great industrial centers were bad. In the East End of London, families of eight or ten people often lived in one room.
From the middle of the 1890s to the outbreak of the First World War no severe economic crisis occurred in Great Britain. But wages, which had been steadily rising until the turn of the century, then began to stagnate—while prices increased. Moreover, the shadow of unemployment hovered perpetually over the industrial workers. At the end of their lives they were almost unavoidably dependent on charity and the very insufficient provisions of the Poor Law. The trade unions, which supplied almost the only protection the workers had, were handicapped by their limited financial means, and their rights were not clearly determined. Hence a new, more militant spirit arose in the trade unions: The conviction grew that a change of the economic system to provide collective ownership and control over production, distribution and exchange was necessary and that to effect this change, labor had to enter the political arena as an independent force. The driving personality in the new movement was James Keir Hardie (1856–1915), a Scottish miner and trade union organizer. Whereas previously trade union men elected to Parliament had joined the Liberals, Keir Hardie and his friends had succeeded by 1900 in persuading the trade unions to finance and to support at the forthcoming elections a slate of candidates who would represent the interests of the workers in Parliament. The Labor Party, then called the Labor Representation Committee, had come into life.

This development was helped by a movement among middle-class British intellectuals whose social consciences were deeply stirred by the contrast between the wealth of the ruling group and the misery of the workers. Calling themselves Fabians after the Roman dictator Fabius, whom they admired because he had waited patiently for the right moment but then had struck hard, the influential members of this movement were rather disparate. Among them were reform-minded radicals like Annie Besant, successful literary figures like the novelist H. G. Wells, and George Bernard Shaw, at that time not yet a dramatist but a music and literary critic, and scholars like the political scientist Graham Wallas. But the guiding spirit was that of a husband and wife whose closeness of aims is well testified to by the fact that they are usually named together as the Webbs. Sidney Webb (1859–1947) began as a civil servant but soon decided to devote himself to the problems of industrial society. Beatrice Webb (1858–1943) was a woman of great beauty from a socially prominent family who had a sensitive social conscience. From sporadic welfare activities, in which she had engaged as a young woman, she went forward to serious scientific study of social problems and became one of the great pioneers in the field of social reform in industrial society. One of the Webbs’ most lasting achievements was the founding of the London School of Economics, later a division of the University of London, which has been particularly devoted to the investigation of political and social problems in the modern world. The Fabians believed that the march of modern society was irrevocably set toward greater democratization. But democratization could be complete only if it was economic as well as political. And economic democratization meant socialization: the public authorities—local, regional, or central—were to have the right to organize basic industries and to determine how capital income would be used. Fabianism was socialism but not Marxism. It did not presuppose a revolution that would give all power to one class, the proletariat, and it did not advocate the end of the national state.

For a while the Fabians tried to convince the leaders of the existing political parties that they ought to adopt the Fabian program. Sidney Webb, who disapproved of spending money on clothes or jewels, permitted Beatrice to buy a new dress if doing so might make political leaders willing to listen to the Fabian program. But when both Conservative and Liberal leaders proved unresponsive, some of the Fabians turned to the idea of establishing a third party, which would realize socialism in Britain. They joined forces with Keir Hardie’s Labor Representation Committee, and their ideas soon began to dominate the young Labor Party. This alliance has remained in force in the Labor Party ever since, but by the late twentieth century, with the advent of Tony Blair’s “New Labor,” the trade unionist influence weakened considerably.

Both the Conservatives and the Liberals were aware that the founding of an independent Labor Party was a threat to the two-party system. They recognized that they had to make a greater effort to satisfy the demands of the laboring classes. Ever since Disraeli had coined the slogan “Tory Democracy,” a wing of the Conservative Party had placed emphasis on social reform. This movement received new impetus when in 1886 Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914), with a group of followers, broke with Gladstone and the Liberals and joined the Conservatives. Chamberlain, coming from industrial Birmingham, had made a name for himself as an advocate of radical reforms. As lord mayor of Birmingham he had introduced “municipal socialism”; he had improved public services and made them less expensive by placing streetcars, street lighting, and public utilities under the administration of the city government. Chamberlain had also modernized party politics by creating wards with party organizers who would get the masses to the polls. For a politician of this outlook “Conservative” seemed hardly the right label, and following his alliance with the Conservatives, they were officially named Unionists.

A similar tendency toward social reform could be observed in the Liberal Party. Nonconformists and radicals had always formed a strong element in this party. Such Liberals felt that leaders like Rosebery and the imperialists did not represent the true Liberal tradition, and many thought they ought to oppose the imperial expansionism which oppressed other peoples. They believed that the Liberal Party ought to concentrate on domestic problems and work toward the solution of the Irish question by seeking to obtain for Ireland its own government and parliament, home rule. The members of this group were sometimes called Little Englishers because of their doubts about the value of the empire. Their most respected leader, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (1836–1908), had held high government office under Gladstone and was regarded as Gladstone’s authentic heir, the man who would continue his reform policy. Among this group a new
leader arose in a young lawyer and brilliant orator from Wales, David Lloyd George (1863–1945), whose political passion was fired by the misery which he saw among the Welsh mine workers.

**Imperialism versus Domestic Reform**

The tensions between the imperialists and the domestic reformers were sharpened by Britain's conflict with the Boer republics in South Africa. In Salisbury's government Joseph Chamberlain had become secretary for the colonies. Partly because he saw little chance to move his Conservative colleagues toward social reform and partly because of the demands of his office, Chamberlain turned his great energies to the realization of an empire extending from the Cape to Cairo. French ambitions for the upper Nile Valley had been thwarted at Fashoda, but Transvaal and the Orange Free State, the independent Boer republics in southern Africa, still remained a barrier to these plans. A conflict between these independent states and Great Britain seemed unavoidable; its outbreak was accelerated by the discovery of gold in the Transvaal. The Boers feared that the immigrants streaming to the Transvaal in search of quick riches would soon outnumber them, limiting Boer political influence, and, since most of the immigrants (known as Uitlanders) were British, that they might decide to make the Boer republics part of the British Empire. There is no doubt that Cecil Rhodes, the dominating figure in the British Cape Colony, aimed at an absorption of the Boer republics by the empire. He believed that the unrest created by the tension between Boers and Uitlanders might provide the opportune moment. In 1896 he organized an invasion by a small force of 470 men under the leadership of Dr. Leander Starr Jameson, an adventurer. The expectation was that the march of this force into the interior of the Transvaal would give the signal for a rebellion in Johannesburg by the Uitlanders against the Boers. But no such upheaval occurred; Jameson and his men were quickly defeated and surrendered to the Boers. Rhodes's responsibility for the raid was incontestable, and he was forced to resign as prime minister of the Cape Colony. But the much-discussed question was whether Chamberlain, the British colonial secretary, had previous knowledge of the raid. The British government immediately declared all responsibility for the raid, and a committee of the House of Commons gave Chamberlain a clean bill of health. But doubts about Chamberlain's role were never entirely removed, and recent investigations have revealed that he knew much more about what was planned than he admitted at the time.

People outside England had no doubt that the Jameson Raid was a British defeat. The German emperor, William II, sent a telegram to the president of the Transvaal republic, Paul Kruger, congratulating him upon his success “in restoring peace and in maintaining the independence of the country against attacks from without.” This message, which rubbed salt in Britain's wounds, may have been unwise politically, but in giving vent to his indignation about British ruthlessness, William expressed the feelings not only of the German nation but of all the European continent. The Jameson Raid and the telegram of the German emperor made war between the Boers and Great Britain almost certain. To the British, conquest of the Boer republics had become a matter of prestige. On the other hand, the raid confirmed the Boers in their fear of the influence of the immigrants, while at the same time the public acknowledgment of the Boers' right to independence encouraged them to resist the British. Hence they continued their discriminatory policy against the Uitlanders, while the British took up the cause of these new immigrants and insisted that they should receive the right to vote. When negotiations proved fruitless, Britain sent troop reinforcements to the Cape Colony, and on the demand of the Boers for withdrawal of these troops, the British cut off all discussion. In October 1899 war broke out between the Boer republics (Transvaal and the Orange Free State) and the British.

The Boer War followed a pattern common to many colonial wars. The resistance of the indigenous forces proved to be more effective than had been expected, and initially the British had severe losses. But when the full force of the British was brought into play, the difference in strength proved decisive. Where the Boer War differed from most other colonial engagements was in the severity of the reverses suffered by the invading British forces, which were first repulsed, then encircled at Ladysmith and Kimberley and there besieged. They were relieved only at the end of February 1900, after large reinforcements from England had arrived and a change in command had taken place. The British offensive ended with the conquest and annexation of the Transvaal in September 1900. But military action continued for another year and a half. The Boers engaged in guerrilla warfare, and Kitchener, the British commander, proceeded against them ruthlessly, burning the farms of Boer guerrillas and internment the women and children of Boer soldiers in specially constructed camps. Finally, on May 31, 1902, a peace treaty was signed in which the Boers acknowledged British sovereignty.

The Boer War placed unexpected demands on the British people. Since the colonial army was not sufficiently large, troops had to be sent from England; three hundred fifty thousand men were needed to subdue sixty thousand Boers. In England families grew increasingly anxious over the fate of relatives and friends whose lives had been unexpectedly endangered by a colonial war. Moreover, all over Europe there was an outburst of fury against Great Britain. This sudden revelation of their unpopularity was a great surprise to the British, and although the European governments did not take any common action against them, they began to fear that their country might be confronted by a combination of all the continental powers. Thereafter British foreign policy gradually began to veer away from "splendid isolation" and into an acceptance of cooperation with other states. The Boer War had shown the obsolescence and clumsiness
of British military organization and raised serious doubts about the aims of British policy and the efficiency of British political processes.

Was the imperial expansion worth the loss of life and the expenditure of money exacted by the Boer War? At first, the opponents of the policy that had led to war were shouted down and socially boycotted. But as the conflict dragged on, the politicians who had resisted the wave of imperialist enthusiasm—men like Campbell-Bannerman and Lloyd George—gained in political stature. They found increasing support for their arguments that attention should be focused on domestic problems. Events confirmed the view that internal tensions were reaching a dangerous state. The newly militant trade unions had encountered fierce resistance by employers and had retaliated with local strikes against the employment of “free,” or nonunion, labor. The tenseness of this situation was aggravated by the Taff Vale decision (1901), which asserted that a trade union was financially liable for damage caused by all strikes in which its members took part. Indignation among the working population was immense because the decision underlined the precarious position of the trade unions and the helplessness of the working classes. The government also lost popularity as a result of the measures it instituted for reform in education. The need for such reform was generally recognized. Great Britain had only a limited number of elementary schools maintained by the state—that is, by the counties and towns. More than half the children of England and Wales received their elementary education at voluntary schools that were unable to maintain reasonable standards. The Education Act of 1902 placed all these schools under county and town control so that they were forced to adhere to recognized standards; if necessary, they would receive financial support from local taxes. The measure undoubtedly represented a great improvement in English education. But because it implied that tax money would be used to support Anglican and Roman Catholic schools, it aroused the vehement opposition of an important segment of the British population, the nonconformists.

The Triumph of the Liberal Party

The final cause for the end of ten years of Conservative rule was a split among the Conservatives themselves. Joseph Chamberlain had not abandoned his original radicalism when he turned from internal reforms to imperial expansion. On the contrary, he regarded a resolute imperial policy as a means for improving the lot of the masses. He believed that his country’s continued economic prosperity depended on the expansion of opportunities to emigrate to the colonies. He advocated protective tariffs that would limit foreign competition in the British market and, by giving preferences to the British colonies, would tie the empire together as a great economic unit. To promote these aims, Chamberlain organized the Tariff Reform League, and to devote himself to this campaign, he left the government. In Prime Minister Balfour’s view, British public opinion was not ready to accept protective tariffs. In a country dependent on the importation of agricultural goods the first result of protection would be an increase in the price of food, which would place another burden on the masses. Split over the tariff question, the Conservatives seemed to lack an economic policy, while the Liberals adhered to the hallowed tradition of free trade. Unable to control his own party, Balfour resigned in December 1905, and the Liberals took over. Campbell-Bannerman became prime minister, not without the displeasure of the imperialist elements in his own party. But he reconciled them by giving them strong representation in the cabinet. Sir Edward Grey (1862–1933) became foreign secretary; Herbert Asquith (1852–1928), chancellor of the exchequer; and Haldane, secretary of state for war. The radical wing of the reformers was also well represented. Lloyd George became president of the Board of Trade, and John Burns (1858–1943), president of the Local Government Board. The new government was an incongruous mixture of imperialists and social reformers. But at this time Great Britain was still prosperous enough to attempt simultaneously to maintain a powerful position in foreign affairs and to undertake reforms at home. In the elections of January 1906 the Liberals gained a sweeping victory, but it was a sign of the times that the new Labor Party gained twenty-nine seats.
Ten years of Liberal rule followed the Conservative defeat of 1906. This decade saw the accomplishment of reforms that had a wide-ranging effect. The first years of the new government did not give the impression that the change of government was different from those of earlier years—namely, that the ous were in and the ins were out. The Liberal government was chiefly occupied with redressing those measures of the Conservatives that had aroused passionate indignation and with repairing defects in the machinery of government that recent events had revealed. By giving self-government to the Transvaal, the Liberal government contributed to healing the wounds of the Boer War. The Taff Vale decision was annulled; a Trades Disputes Act legalized peaceful picketing and relieved trade unions from liability for damages caused by their members. Haldane carried through an army reform that fully proved itself in the First World War. The army was divided into two parts, an expeditionary force ready for immediate action on the Continent and a territorial force into which were merged traditional organizations such as the volunteers and the yeomanry. Moreover, Haldane created a general staff as had existed in Prussia since the nineteenth century and was regarded to be responsible for German military superiority. Like other successful military reforms, these measures also resulted in financial economies.

Even so, the results of the first years of Liberal rule were somewhat meager. The reason was that many measures the government advocated—among them changes in the Education Act that would have removed the objections of the nonconformists—were rejected by the House of Lords, controlled by the Conservatives. Moreover, Asquith, chancellor of the exchequer, pursued a traditional line in his financial policy and was disinclined to finance social experiments. This situation changed in 1908 when Asquith succeeded the dying Campbell-Bannerman as prime minister and Lloyd George took Asquith's place as chancellor of the exchequer.

A sudden acceleration in the policy of reform could be traced in part to this dynamic figure. Lloyd George was a Welshman of immense energy, of great ambition, impatient to get things done, and anxious always to be in the public eye. Moreover, he was the leader of the radicals in the Liberal Party, and he considered the success of the Labor Party in the elections of 1906 an indication that if the government remained relatively inactive, a good part of the radical supporters of the Liberals would desert to Labor. Therefore, Lloyd George resolutely used the power of the purse for social reform. The most important feature of this reform was the National Insurance Act (1911), patterned after the social legislation that Bismarck had sponsored in Germany. Contributions made on a compulsory basis by workers, employers, and the state were to provide payments to workers in case of sickness and unemployment. Social reforms were to be paid for by means of a revised system of taxation that placed the chief burden for the expenses of the new programs on the wealthy classes. Thus, Lloyd George's first budget, that of 1909, represented a radical departure. He raised the death duties, made a sharp distinction between earned and unearned income, and introduced a supertax to be levied on the possessors of large incomes. He also increased the taxes on tobacco and liquor.

Lloyd George emphasized the novel character of his budget by introducing it with a four-hour speech. Opposition formed at once. The Conservatives were particularly upset by a suggestion that later proved to be impractical and was abandoned: the taxing of increases in land value. Since much of the wealth of the British landowners came from estates having mineral resources like coal, this tax was regarded as a direct attack on the position of the propertyed classes.

The Conservatives fought the budget vigorously, and when it reached the House of Lords, it was rejected. Since the Liberals had been constantly blocked in their legislative proposals by the Lords, they were deeply aroused by this further frustration of their plans, particularly since tradition had established that the handling of finance bills was primarily a function of the House of Commons. The rejection of the budget by the House of Lords was regarded as a breach of the constitution.

As a next step the Liberal government introduced the Parliament bill, designed to eliminate the House of Lords as a partner equal to the House of Commons in the law-making process. If it passed, the House of Lords would be able only to
delay legislation, not to veto it absolutely. The great problem that faced the Liberal government was how to persuade the House of Lords to agree to its own diminution of power. This issue began to become more important than the details of the budget.

The debate over the Parliament bill was conducted with an animosity previously unknown in English political life. On one occasion Prime Minister Asquith was prevented from speaking in the House of Commons by a group of diehards shouting, “Traitor,” and drowning his voice in hoots and jeers. The struggle lasted for over two years and ended only after two dissolutions of the House of Commons, new elections, and the threat that the government would create enough Liberal peers to get the proposal through the House of Lords. The final vote, on August 10, 1911, took place under immense excitement because the outcome seemed uncertain; the bill was passed only after thirty-seven Conservatives and thirteen bishops decided not to abstain and cast their votes with the government.

**Intensification of Internal Conflicts: Women’s Rights and the Irish Question**

Edward VII died on May 6, 1910, in the midst of the struggle over the Parliament bill. With his death, British life seemed to lose some of its splendor. His son and successor, King George V (ruled 1910–1936), was a much less glamorous figure; in a sense his somberness corresponded to the dark and threatening atmosphere that prevailed in Great Britain in the two or three years before the outbreak of the First World War.

Even after passage of the Parliament bill it became evident that the conflicts and problems that had existed before were still there and unsolved; moreover, the bitterness the struggle had engendered gave a sharp edge to all political conflicts.

This was especially true of the long-simmering conflict over women’s right to vote. In Great Britain women had attained in 1894 the right to vote in municipal and county elections, but they were excluded from national elections. Believing this exclusion to be arbitrary and unjust, British women, backed by some members of the Labor Party, mounted an impassioned campaign for national suffrage. They presented their demands in the election meetings of various parties and continued their propaganda by distribution of leaflets, street demonstrations, and petitions to Parliament. It is perhaps questionable whether the movement for women’s rights would have made such an impact had it not been led initially by women of such boundless energy as Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, Christabel and Sylvia. The Pankhursts looked and dressed like ladies, but when their patience wore thin, they were increasingly prepared to adopt “uladylike” methods to get their point across. As Emmeline Pankhurst herself said, “The argument of the broken pane of glass is the most valuable argument of modern politics.” Clashes between militant suffragettes and the police led to the mass arrest of middle-class ladies, an unprecedented development on the British scene. When the court gave the accused the choice between fines and prison, the suffragettes frequently chose the latter; there they went on hunger strikes, to which the government replied with forced feeding. Pictures showing police roughness in handling women demonstrators or women prisoners resisting forced feeding caused outcries about police brutality. Ironically, as home secretary Herbert Gladstone, the former prime minister’s son, was responsible for the behavior of the police although himself in favor of women’s right to vote. Yet until 1911 the outbreaks of violence remained sporadic, because as long as the fight on the Parliament bill continued, the suffragettes hoped that frequent elections would finally result in a Parliament that would give them the vote. But when the struggle over the Parliament bill had ended and Parliament showed no sign of widening the franchise, a systematic policy of militant demonstrations was adopted by the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), as the organization of the suffragettes was called. Targets of attack were no longer only the Parliament building or government offices; disturbances were extended to all spheres of life in the hope of achieving the surrender of the ruling male politicians. For instance, on March 1, 1912, 150 well-dressed women marched along the main shopping streets in the center of London—Oxford and Regent streets—and, with hammers concealed in their handbags, smashed the
windows of the large department stores in the vicinity: Burberry, Liberty’s, Marshall and Snelgrove. This was the beginning of a concerted campaign of destruction that included cutting telegraph wires, burning railroad cars, smashing exhibits in the Tower of London, slashing pictures in the National Gallery, and setting fire to private homes of prominent politicians. A tragic culmination was reached at the Epsom Derby on June 4, 1913, when one of the most active suffragettes, Emily Davison, threw herself in front of the king’s horse, ending her life. Those who retrieved her body found a banner inscribed with votes for women sewn into her coat. Militant suffragette actions continued until the outbreak of the First World War, but it can be questioned whether they were not becoming counterproductive. People who might have been neutral began to turn against the suffragettes, and their demonstrations began to meet counter-demonstrations. Moreover, among the suffragettes themselves, opposition arose, and while Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, who were most insistent on continuing the violence, remained leaders at the core of the movement, several splinter groups pursuing a more conciliatory policy were formed. It is difficult to say whether without the war, when women had to take over many of the jobs men had done, the aims of the suffragettes would have been realized in the near future. However, it is clear that if the movement had not directed public attention to the question of the female franchise, the war would not have brought about female suffrage. Women received it in the Representation of the People Act of 1918.

The Irish question became urgent because of the intricacies of the English parliamentary situation. Gladstone’s home rule proposals in the nineteenth century had always been wrecked by the resistance of the House of Lords. The Irish nationalists therefore, under the leadership of John Edward Redmond, supported the Liberal government in its attempt to curtail the power of the House of Lords. The support of the Irish nationalists became crucial when, in various elections held to clarify the trends of public opinion in the struggle over the Lords, the Liberals lost their majority and kept government control only with the help of the Irish nationalists. After the struggle was over, the nationalists asked to receive their reward; a home rule bill was drafted by the government in 1912. But this proposal led to a critical situation because of changes in Ireland since the times of Gladstone’s abortive home rule legislation. Although the Conservative government, which had followed Gladstone, opposed home rule, the Conservatives had been aware of the need to allay misery and discontent in Ireland. By a Land Purchase Act they had made it possible for the tenants on the large estates to become owners of the land they cultivated, and a certain amount of self-administration on the local level was introduced.

These measures coincided with the beginning of the movement for an Irish cultural renaissance. The Irish people, now economically less oppressed and more conscious of their national identity, became increasingly resentful that almost all the high positions in the administration of Ireland were in the hands of Protestant Englishmen. Despite the improvements brought about by the Conservative government, the demand for home rule had gained in strength rather than diminished. Moreover, the stress on Irish Catholic traditions made home rule less acceptable to the English Protestants in Ireland who were particularly strong in Ulster. “Home rule is Rome rule” was the Protestant slogan, and they formed organizations of volunteers ready to resist the introduction of home rule. One of their most influential and most passionate leaders was a prominent lawyer, one of the great orators of the time, Sir Edward Carson. What is astonishing is that the appeal for rebellion that Carson and other Ulstermen uttered was defended and encouraged by the leaders of the Conservative Party in England. Clearly the Conservatives regarded home rule legislation as a way to get rid of the Liberal government.

The Asquith government tried to effect a compromise, according to which the status quo might be maintained in the northern Protestant section and that part of the country be excluded from home rule. But since neither the Irish nationalists nor the Ulstermen were pleased with such a compromise, no agreement about the frontier to be drawn between home rule Ireland and Ulster could be reached. By the spring of 1914 the period of delay that the House of Lords was still able to interpose was over, the home rule bill had passed through all the

A violent protest. The suffragette Emily Davison throwing herself in front of the king’s horse at the Derby on June 4, 1913. At this time action photographs were rare and usually obtained only by chance.
parliamentary stages, and a most explosive situation had come about. Officers of a regiment stationed in Ulster, most of them Conservative, many of them descended from the Protestant Irish, demanded a pledge from the government that they would not be asked to coerce Ulster; otherwise they preferred to resign. Weapons to equip volunteer formations were landed in the north and south of Ireland. Only the outbreak of the First World War prevented a test of the resolve and power of the government to carry through its Irish policy. In contrast to the question of the women's vote, however, the war did not bring about a solution to the Irish problem. Although in a patriotic outburst all the divided forces—Irish nationalists and Ulstermen—expressed their willingness to defend Great Britain against Germany, the conflict continued to smolder. It would explode two years later in an uprising known as the Easter Rebellion of 1916.

The Waning of Confidence

The violence that accompanied the suffragette cause and the agitation for home rule legislation occurred because these movements lay outside the traditional constitutional framework. In both movements one finds reflected the feeling that parliamentary institutions did not function properly under the pressures of the rapidly changing world of the twentieth century. The sight of the people against the Lords gave further impetus to the notion that the existing institutions were a hindrance to full democracy. In the years before the war the statistics of a contemporary best seller were frequently quoted: in Great Britain, with a total population of 45 million people, 38 million had hardly more than half the national income, whereas one hundred twenty-five thousand rich had more than a third. Although these figures were estimates and exaggerated, the popularity of this pamphlet revealed the growing resentment existing toward British class society. This view was particularly strong among the workers, and in the years before the outbreak of the First World War their discontent was well grounded. Prices had increased in consequence of the inflationary process that had been set in motion with the discovery of the South African gold fields, and although the wages of the workers had also increased, they had not risen enough to compensate for the rise in prices. Industrialists were hesitant to raise wages because of the competition of Germany and the United States on the world market. The impression of class rule, of suppression of workers by the rich, established ruling group, was also reinforced by a court decision that denied trade unions the right to collect political contributions. Consequently, the Labor Party, which the trade unions saw as representing their interests, was weakened and unable to repeat in subsequent elections the success it had had in the elections of 1906. Confidence in attaining better economic conditions by means of parliamentary action through the Labor Party was shaken.

Disillusionment about the efficacy of the pressure exerted by their party led elements of the labor movement to look favorably upon other recipes for correcting the ills of their economic situation. They became attracted by the idea, which reached Britain from the Continent, particularly from France, that direct action—strikes—was the appropriate weapon for workers seeking to improve their situation. Thus, economic and political motives lay behind a number of strikes in 1911 and 1912. The most notable were a seamen’s strike, a general railway strike, a strike of the coal miners, and a strike of the dockers. Most of them were accompanied by violence, looting, and sabotage of the machinery in the factories. Frequently troops had to be used since the police were not able to keep order. Some of the strikes were ended quickly by concessions on the part of the employers. The miners’ strike resulted in the introduction of the Miners’ Minimum Wage Act, a tacit admission by the government of the hardships faced by the mine workers. But some of the strikes simply collapsed, partly because the wage lag began to be made up and partly because the public, tired of economic unrest, began to turn sharply against the trade unions.

The attitude of the Liberal government in these labor disputes was ambiguous. Whereas Lloyd George demonstrated his sympathy for the cause of the workers, others were more inclined to propose legislation that would forbid strikes in essential services like the railroads. There was also no agreement on the question of how far the government should go in fixing and enforcing minimum wages. Irritation about the restlessness of the workers and hesitancy to spend money on social reforms was also increased by tension on the international scene. Churchill, who in the earlier years of the Liberal government had been Lloyd George’s strongest ally in supporting social reforms and the beginnings of a welfare policy, had become first lord of the admiralty. As such he favored the building of large warships, the so-called dreadnoughts. This brought him in conflict with Lloyd George. Asquith, the prime minister, succeeded in effecting a compromise and preventing a breakup of the government, but it was evident that the tension between the imperialists and the radical wing of the Liberal government was again coming into the foreground. After the First World War, when the problems of government intervention in economic life and social reforms once more would dominate political discussion, the Liberal Party would split and gradually become eliminated as decisive factor in British political life. But even before the war its failure to develop a clear, unified program caused cracks within the party that reflected larger uncertainties in the nation.

FRANCE

Social Basis of French Parliamentarism

During the decade before the First World War France was the most democratic of the powers on the Continent. France too had a parliamentary system. The head of the state, the president, had little power, and the executive arm of the government, led by a prime minister, was dependent on the confidence of elected representatives—the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. In a formal sense, France was even more democratic than Great Britain, for the French upper