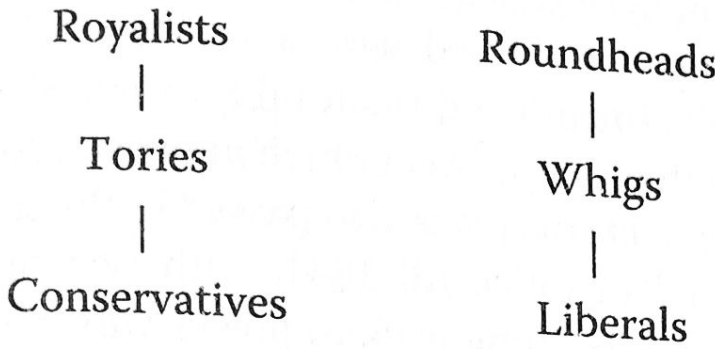


## **The Origin and Growth of Political Parties in England**

The origin of political parties in England may be traced back to the Civil War that took place during the Stuart period. The supporters of the king were known as '**Royalists**', who later came to be known as '**Tories**' (from the Irish term *tóraidhe* meaning 'outlaw'). The Tories are popularly known as the **Conservatives** today. The supporters of the Parliament were called '**Roundheads**' because of their close haircuts. The Roundheads, later known as '**Whigs**' (originating from

a Scottish word meaning 'mare drivers'), developed into the modern day **Liberal Party**. Both names, 'Tories' and 'Whigs', were thus originally terms of contempt. Generally, the Tories were associated with the gentry and the Church of England, while the Whigs were considered to lean more towards trade and money matters.



The Whigs and the Tories were the two chief parties during Queen Anne's reign. The Tories were the supporters of the Crown and the Anglican Church, while the Whigs were mostly dissenters. There was a lot of political rivalry during her reign. However, Queen Anne supported the Tories, whom she considered her well-wishers.

After the death of Queen Anne, the question of her successor arose. The Tories wished to continue the Stuart line by inviting James, the Old Pretender, the son of James II and Mary of Modena. It was the Whig party which was responsible for bringing in the Hanoverians. George I, the first Hanoverian king, therefore regarded the Whigs as his friends and the Tories as his enemies. The Whig politician **Sir Robert Walpole**, generally considered to be the first Prime Minister, controlled the Commons on the king's behalf.

The Whigs continued to hold the reigns of the country for several years. However, during the eighteenth century, more importance was given to individuals rather than to the political party. There were several eminent politicians, such as the **Earl of Bute**, **George Grenville**, **Lord Rockingham**, **William Pitt the Elder**, and **Lord North**, who dominated British politics from 1743 to 1782. There was a lot of political instability during this period. The parties or factions at this time clustered around prominent persons who, when they came to power, brought with them their followers. When these people went out of power, most of their followers also slipped into obscurity.

After the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, the Tories held office. They feared that any change or reform would pave the

way to a revolution in England too. The Tories were determined to preserve the position of the upper classes. One of the most prominent Tory leaders of this time was **William Pitt the Younger**.

In the general election of 1830, the Whigs returned to power. There was a crying need for **reform in England**, which was undergoing drastic changes due to the Industrial and Agrarian Revolutions. The Whigs were filled with a zeal for reform. The first Reform Act of 1832 introduced electoral reforms. Slavery was abolished in 1833, and the Factory Act (which improved conditions for children working in factories) was also passed in the same year.

The Whigs remained in office till 1841, with two brief Tory intervals. In 1841, the Tories came back to power with **Sir Robert Peel** as Prime Minister. They adopted a policy of conservatism. Peel created the world's first professional police force in London.

With the progress of the century, especially during the mid-Victorian era (roughly 1846–68), there was a growing need for liberalism. During that period, the Tories never had a majority in the Commons. The Whigs, whose politics now reflected more liberal overtones, enjoyed greater political favour. However, one should remember that both political parties were still divided and poorly organised. It was impossible to say who formed a strong majority in the Commons. Political factions still pivoted around individual leaders. It was also during this period that the names 'Conservatives' and 'Liberals' came into usage.

The Whig party, now known as the Liberal Party, dominated political life for almost two decades from 1868. In general, Liberals favoured changes to traditional social and political practices. Two of the most famous Liberal Prime Ministers were **Benjamin Disraeli** and **William Gladstone**. Gladstone's support for Irish home rule weakened the Liberal Party, and once again the Conservatives returned to power in 1886.

The Conservatives enjoyed a long period of success with just two brief Liberal interludes in 1892 and in 1895. Till the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of the two-party system was kept alive and active in England.

In the meanwhile, with the growing problems of the working classes (an offshoot of the Industrial Revolution), **socialism** began to make itself felt in England for the first time. Karl Marx and his *Das Kapital* had an impact on England, and there was a growth

of socialist ideas. Agencies such as the **Salvation Army**, founded in 1878 by General William Booth and his wife, and the **Fabian Society**, founded in 1884 and having distinguished members like George Bernard Shaw and Beatrice and Sidney Webb, kindled the Victorian conscience. English socialism was mild and idealistic and did not believe in the violent overthrow of capitalism.

Socialism, however, could not make much political headway without the financial support of the trade unions. The trade unions were not very interested in politics. For a long time, they voted with the Liberals, and their candidates were known as 'Lib-Labs'. Slowly, the need for a separate party was felt, and the **Labour Party** was born from the union representatives of cooperatives, socialists, trade unions and other working-class organisations. From this humble beginning arose the successful Labour Party that we know today.

Till 1924, the Liberals and the Conservatives alternately held the political reigns of England. For a brief period in 1924, the Labour Party won a majority in the Parliament with the support of the Liberals. **Ramsay MacDonald** became the first Labour Prime Minister. The Labour government could not last long, as most of the ministers were new and inexperienced. They were also acutely conscious of the Liberals' support, and dared not do anything to displease them. The party lost to the Conservatives, who came back in 1924 and remained till 1929. When the Labour Party next won the elections in 1929, it was again an unfortunate period in the history of the country, as it was going through an intense economic depression. Again, the second Labour government ended in frustration and failure. The Conservatives enjoyed political supremacy from 1935 to 1945.

**Sir Winston Churchill** enjoyed great popularity as the wartime Prime Minister. At the end of World War II, however, the war-weary nation wished for a change. The election manifesto of the Labour Party, promising social security and welfare measures for everyone 'from the cradle to the grave', was irresistible. Under the Labour government, Britain became a **welfare state**.

During the next election in 1951, the Labour Party did not have anything new to offer, and the Conservatives were voted back to power and remained there for the next thirteen years. They continued the welfare measures begun by the Labour government. Successive Labour and Conservative governments slowly re-built

the country through the 1960s and the 70s. Towards the end of this period, trade unions slowly became very powerful and enjoyed many rights and privileges. The country seemed to be slanting dangerously towards the left.

In 1979, the Conservatives won the elections, and **Margaret Thatcher** became the Prime Minister. There was a well-marked shift back to the right when Thatcher curbed the growing power of the trade unions and brought in privatisation. The Conservatives enjoyed an uninterrupted period of success when **John Major**, the next Conservative leader, took over from Thatcher in 1990. Conservative rule, which began in 1979, came to an end in 1997, when John Major lost to **Tony Blair**, the new Labour leader.

After eighteen long years, the Labour Party came back to power and began making its presence felt. According to a survey, Tony Blair and his government enjoyed a record wave of public popularity. He continued the liberal economic policies of the Thatcher era, and gradually weakened his party's links with the trade unions. Blair strongly supported American foreign policy, and actively participated in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and in the 2003 attack on Iraq. Blair holds the record of being the Labour Party's longest-serving Prime Minister, and the only one to have led the party to three consecutive victories in general elections. In 2007, he was succeeded by **Gordon Brown** as the leader of the Labour Party and as Prime Minister.

In 1981, a number of moderate members of the Labour Party quit the party and established the **Social Democratic Party**. The Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party formed an alliance, and eventually merged to form the **Liberal Democratic Party** in 1988. Gradually, The Liberal Democrats gained an increased number of seats in the House of Commons.

In the election of 2010, the Conservatives won the largest number of seats, but fell short of an absolute majority. An agreement was reached between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, and a coalition government was formed with **David Cameron**, the leader of the Conservative Party, as the Prime Minister. The **Fixed-term Parliaments Act** was passed in 2011; according to this, elections could be conducted hereafter only once in five years. Prior to this, the Prime Minister had the power to call for an election at any point.

In the general election of 2015, the Conservatives won again and David Cameron continued as Prime Minister. In his election manifesto, he had promised to hold a referendum to decide if the UK should continue to remain a member of the European Union (EU). Cameron campaigned forcefully to remain within a 'reformed EU'. This referendum came to be known as '**Brexit**', a portmanteau of 'British' and 'Exit'. When the country ignored his entreaties to vote in favour of remaining in the European Union, Cameron felt that he could no longer continue as Prime Minister. He resigned in July 2016, and was replaced by **Theresa May**.

In 2017, Theresa May requested for a snap election (that is, an election called earlier than it is due), which was approved by the Parliament (exercising an exception to the recent Fixed-term Parliaments Act). She wanted to have a clear mandate to lead the country after the division caused by Brexit. She had hoped for a greater majority for the Conservatives, but was disappointed as it lost seats instead. May and the Conservatives remained in power thanks to the support of a minor party.

The **current British political scene** is dominated by two major parties with nation-wide support: Conservatives and Labour (the latter having replaced the Liberals as the main party contending with the Conservatives to govern the UK). The Conservatives have traditionally favoured British unionism, that is, the belief that England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland should remain a single political unit. The Labour Party is moderate and centrist with socialist leanings.

There exist a number of smaller minority parties that enjoy support at the local level, and sometimes even make their voices heard nationally. The Liberal Democrats support liberal socio-economic and political reforms. The **Scottish National Party** (SNP), the third-largest party in the UK, supports independence for Scotland. The **Sinn Féin** wants a sovereign and united Ireland, while the **Plaid Cymru** (Party of Wales) would like to see Wales secede from the UK. The **Green Party** is committed to environmentalism and social justice. The **UK Independence Party** (UKIP) is a radical right-wing populist organisation that is anti-immigration and anti-EU.

## THE ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN ENGLAND

*Synopsis* : Introduction – origin of political parties in England – Whigs and Tories – party spirit in the eighteenth century – parties not well organized – Walpole the greatest Tory – renaming of political parties as Conservatives and Liberals – the connotation of the two terms – fluctuating power politics – formation of the Labour party – conclusion.

The origin of political parties in England can be traced as far back as the Stuart period. In the time of Charles I there was struggle for power between the King and the Parliament. Those who supported the King were called Royalists or Cavaliers and those who supported the Parliament were known as Parliamentarians. Most of the supporters of the Parliament were Puritans and because they cut their hair very short they were called Roundheads. In the scramble for power, the Civil War broke out and ended with the execution of King Charles I in 1649.

The Commonwealth set up after the Civil War collapsed and monarchy was restored in 1660. Towards the end of his life Charles II showed leanings towards Roman Catholicism. More than that, after the death of the King his brother James, Duke of York, a professed Catholic, was to succeed him. This was too much for some people to endure and so to prevent James from succeeding to the throne they brought a Bill called the Exclusion Bill. Those who supported the bill were called Whigs and those who opposed the bill came to be known as Tories. The brain behind the bill was Anthony Ashley Cooper whom the King had made Earl of Shaftesbury. Thus the Earl of Shaftesbury became the father of the party system in England. It was the combined effort of these two parties which brought about the event which Englishmen called the Glorious Revolution. This great event took place in 1688.

The Tories who were far more numerous than the Whigs, represented the landed interest. The Whigs were a minority of land-owning men in close connection with commercial men and commercial interests. In religion the Tories were members of the Anglican Church but the Whigs were Dissenters or Puritans.

As far as politics was concerned, Tories were Royalists or supporters of the King, but the Whigs stood for the rights and privileges of the Parliament. In the early part of the eighteenth century party spirit ran rampant and this is evident from the account which Addison gives in two of his *Spectator* essays. In his inimitable style, which is a fine blend of humour and gentle satire, the writer recounts how as a child he had difficulty in finding St. Anne's Street. When we speak of the Tory party and the Whig party it must be remembered that for the most part of the eighteenth century the word "party" implied no political organization. From 1714 to 1784 Great Britain had only a kind of group system and not a party system as such. Each prominent politician had a group of supporters and when he assumed office his friends benefited by getting jobs, pensions, or honours. When he went out of office, with him went most of his supporters into obscurity. Since there was no party organization and discipline, many of the members of the House of Commons did not belong to any of these two political parties, they were mostly independents. Not all members attended the Parliament, and even those who attended did not attend all the sessions. As a matter of fact, the chamber itself was not big enough to accommodate all the members. The famous House of Commons destroyed during World War II in 1941 and rebuilt in 1950 retains the traditional features including the inadequacy to seat more than about half the total membership of the House.

One of the great political figures of the early part of the eighteenth century was the Whig statesman Robert Walpole, who remained in power as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Prime Minister for nearly twenty years. He is usually considered to be the first Prime Minister. By following a policy of non-interference he gave England peace and a chance for economic growth. His motto was "Let sleeping dogs lie". To keep himself in power he did not hesitate to purchase votes and support of important men like the squires. In those days of public polling of votes in the country elections, the support of the squires meant much because the number of voters in each country was small and they would almost automatically vote for the leading man of the place or for the man in whom the squire or parson was interested. It should also be borne in mind that those were days when elections in boroughs could be won by anyone who could



spend enough money on bribery and eating and drinking or other kinds of election propaganda. It was an election of that type which Charles Dickens had in mind when he described the Eatanswill scene in his famous novel *Pickwick Papers*. The name is three words run into one "eat and swill". Another great politician of the latter half of the eighteenth century was William Pitt, afterwards Earl of Chatham, the greatest of the Tories. He was an imperialist to the core and as such wanted to reduce the French power in America to a minimum. For this purpose he along with Edmund Burke, the orator, advocated a policy of conciliation with the Americans.

An event which made the party division clearly marked out in England was the French Revolution. Most of the Tories considered the initial Revolution objectionable as it deprived the French King and the aristocracy of their rights. Most of the Whigs, on the other hand, welcomed it as a belated decision to adopt the principles of the English Revolution in 1688. These opposing attitudes kept England wavering for some time. But when the Revolutionary Government of France offered to help any country which was willing to imitate their example, there was a hardening of party lines. By that time there were only fewer independents and it became not very difficult to decide who was for the Government and who was against. Thus it was easy for the younger William Pitt, the Tory leader, to declare war against France in 1794. After that event better attention was paid to electioneering, but even then the party organization as such had not become a regular feature. It was after 1832 that most of the local party organizations were established.

After the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832 the political parties were renamed Conservatives and Liberals. For the passing of the Reform Bill the Whigs played a prominent part. The Tories felt it was time for them to change the name of their party. The name Conservative was adopted apparently by way of consensus of opinion to indicate that the British Constitution was in danger from "Reformers" and had to be conserved or protected. The Whigs made use of the opportunity to call themselves "Liberals" as they posed to be more liberal-minded people.

In 1841 the Conservatives won a majority and Robert Peel became Prime Minister. He was a manufacturer's son and

therefore interested in promoting business interests. The majority of his supporters were the landed gentry who disliked the new factory system. The conflict came to a crisis over the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. After the Napoleonic Wars, the Corn Law had been passed to protect the interests of the English agriculturalists but it had the adverse effect of raising the prices of corn and the wages of factory workers. The Anti-Corn Law League, supported by the Whigs who were opposed to a rise in wages, agitated for the repeal of the Corn Law. The great potato famine in Ireland in 1845-46 forced Peel to repeal the Corn Law Act. This made him unpopular among the Conservatives. It gave occasion for British politics to be divided into two clear groups. By the middle of the nineteenth century the party that stood for the landed interests were called the Conservatives. The other party consisting of Whigs, Radicals or liberal Conservatives stood for manufacturers, businessmen and free trade. Again, towards the end of the century there was a further change in policy and thus the Conservative Party represented "property" and the Liberals represented all those who lived on salaries and wages. In any case the party system became so predominant that in 1882 W.S. Gilbert wrote:

"How nature always does contrive  
That every boy and every girl  
That's born into this world alive  
Is either a little Liberal  
Or else a little Conservative."

The Liberals failed to represent the interests of the wage-earning class effectively. So the Labour Party representing the interests of the workers of all kinds entered the political arena by the beginning of this century. They rallied such quick and wide support that within a period of twenty-five years they were able to supplant the Liberals. At present the two powerful parties in England are the Labour Party and the Conservatives.

The party system in England brought to the forefront of politics quite a good number of men of extraordinary caliber. Some of them served as Prime Ministers in the time of Queen Victoria. They were Robert Peel, Palmerston, Disraeli and Gladstone who became Prime Minister not less than four times.

The man who strode British politics like a colossus in the twentieth century was Winston Churchill, the arch-imperialist. But the one who expedited Indian Independence was the Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee.