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ARTICLE

Cobden, Peel, the Anti-Corn Law League, and the Politics of Feeling in Mid-Victorian Britain

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Abstract

The repeal of the Corn Laws in June 1846 was a key moment in the consolidation of a political culture that emphasized rationality, restraint and aversion to the politics of passion. Both the prime minister, Sir Robert Peel, and the Anti-Corn Law leader, Richard Cobden, laboured to ensure that Corn Law repeal took place in an atmosphere of calmness and control. Cobden and Peel embodied syncretic variants of an ascetic politics which eschewed sentimentalism, elements of which could be found in both the Conservative Party and the Anti-Corn Law League. Although the League sometimes struggled to strike the right balance between these rival forms, by the mid-1840s, thanks in part to Cobden's leadership, the League's affective politics had been fine-tuned. Had that fine tuning not taken place, it would have added significantly to Peel's difficulties in 1846. By drawing on recent work on the history of emotions, this article develops a new approach to the study of political culture which foregrounds the central, albeit contested, role of feeling. It concludes with a discussion of the affective basis of the mid-Victorian 'age of equipoise', to which repeal contributed significantly.

On 9 July 1842, the prime minister, Sir Robert Peel, received a delegation from the Anti-Corn Law League, then campaigning for the total and immediate repeal of the duties on corn. According to a League member who was present, Peel was clearly uncomfortable during the audience, managing only to ask several perfunctory questions which kept strictly to facts. Much to the irritation of the delegation, the prime minister displayed few signs of feeling despite being presented with harrowing accounts of hunger and poverty, other than a less-than-disguised sense of relief when they departed. Beyond this, Peel was 'almost as motionless as a statue'.¹ Such was his apparent cold-heartedness that in an account of the interview in the popular anti-Corn Law periodical, the *Struggle*, the delegate felt compelled to ventriloquize what he felt Peel's response ought to have been: heartfelt thanks for furnishing him with first-hand testimony of distress, sympathy for the plight of the famished, and a courageous determination to rid the country of those evils.

¹ *Struggle*, No. 30. In fairness to Peel, the report of the meeting in the League's *Anti-Bread Tax Circular* (hereafter *ABTC*) did state that he offered his sympathy at the close of the meeting, though this had not been evident throughout the interview when he asked only perfunctory questions which kept strictly to facts. *ABTC*, 14 July 1842.

Peel's (e)motionlessness suggests that Whitehall was not the place for such sentimental outpourings (and, as we shall see, it may not be a coincidence that Peel had a well-established reputation for coldness by this stage of his career, even with his own party).² A similar exchange had taken place two years earlier when, once again, 'there was scarcely a tearless eye' among the Anti-Corn Law League delegation while 'ministers looked with perfect astonishment at a scene so unusual to statesmen'.³ Sentimentalism might have a place on the public platform or in League propaganda (an aspect of the League that remains under-explored), or even to some extent in parliament, but it was not going to move ministers who adhered to a more restrained, cool and detached set of feeling rules – or affective politics as they will be termed here. As one newspaper editorial observed in 1842, 'It is a rarity to see Peel in a passion', whose own affective politics emerged from a liberal tory and Pittite tradition which grounded public probity in emotional restraint. However, Peel and his followers appear to have taken this even further in the 1830s and 1840s: it is hard to imagine Peel being moved to tears upon hearing an evangelical preacher, as was alleged to have happened with Lord Canning.⁴ Noticeably absent on 9 July 1842 was Richard Cobden, 'master spirit of the League', in Peel's telling judgement.⁵ Cobden embodied a different, rival brand of affective politics to that of sentimentalism – an ascetic radicalism averse to unbridled passion, one that had notable synergies with the prime minister's. Had Cobden been part of the delegation that day, he would have been just as uncomfortable as Peel. The master spirit of the League had come to appreciate that while sentimentalism certainly had its place, it needed to be kept in its place.

When repeal of the Corn Laws finally came in 1846, there was more at stake than free trade and the creation of a disinterested state. Also at issue was the place of feeling in the public sphere – as Peel made abundantly clear when introducing repeal – a debate that had far-reaching implications for the consolidation of the rational, liberal male citizen in the mid-Victorian decades. Although a voluminous scholarship now exists on the mechanics of mid-century political and social stability,⁶ very little has been written on why and how particular feelings came to be seen as politically suspect, or, crucially, on why a sharper distinction came to be drawn between reason and feeling. It seems churlish to berate this classic scholarship for the absence of serious discussion of feeling, given that the history of emotions is still a relatively young field, but its absence is remarkable considering how often historians have

²Norman Gash, *Mr Secretary Peel: the life of Sir Robert Peel to 1830* (London, 1961), pp. 5, 662, 664; Norman Gash, *Sir Robert Peel: the life of Sir Robert Peel after 1830* (Totowa, 1972), pp. 20, 386.

³Archibald Prentice, *History of the Anti-Corn Law League* [hereafter *ACLL*] (2 vols., London, 1853), I, pp. 155–6.

⁴Boyd Hilton, *A mad, bad and dangerous people?: England, 1783–1846* (Oxford, 2006), p. 191; Paul Langford, 'Politics and manners from Sir Robert Walpole to Sir Robert Peel', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 94 (1997), p. 114; William Anthony Hay, *Lord Liverpool: a political life* (Woodbridge, 2018), p. 7; Stephen M. Lee, *George Canning and liberal toryism, 1801–27* (Woodbridge, 2008), p. 140.

⁵Peel to Sir James Graham, 16 Aug. 1845, in Charles Stuart Parker (ed.), *Sir Robert Peel from his private papers* (3 vols., London), III, p. 193.

⁶For a critical overview of this scholarship, see Philip Harling, 'Equipose regained? Recent trends in British political history, 1790–1867', *Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003), pp. 890–918.

juxtaposed the different moods of the early Victorian era and the mid-Victorian decades.⁷

The mid-Victorian notion that the political sphere ought to be a rational arena based on reason, not feeling, represented an important shift away from a different set of feeling rules which had characterized the later Georgian and early Victorian years. The laughter induced by the scurrility of political satire in the age of Gillray; the tears of Fox and Burke in the Commons in 1791 occasioned by their irrevocable parting; the anti-Jacobin response to the French Revolution which warned of the dangers of using cold reason rather than feeling as a basis for politics; the impassioned oratory and heart-rending accounts of slavery by the abolitionists; the sentimental outpouring of the nation in response to the plight of Queen Caroline in 1820; and the moral outrage of reformers over factory slavery and the poverty of the masses – each testify to a political culture that was marked by intense feelings as befitted the age of sentimentalism and romanticism.⁸ While aspects of this affective politics endured into the 1830s and 1840s,⁹ it was beginning to be challenged by a new set of feeling rules – asceticism – espoused, pre-eminently, by Peel and Cobden, albeit for different reasons. Though not a theme pursued here, it is worth noting that the whigs, too, and their liberal allies, were also moving in a similar direction, in which a legacy of enlightenment rationalism and sociability, political economy and a governing style that responded in a reasoned and measured way to the problems of the age combined to produce a similar affective politics.¹⁰ The ideal of the rational male political actor, both within and beyond parliament, was deeply gendered, and both Peel's and Cobden's affective asceticism was related to 'manly simplicity'.¹¹ According to this set of assumptions, 'Men were not expected to be unfeeling or unemotional, but they should not be at the mercy of their emotions'.¹² As late as the early 1840s, little progress appeared to have been made in this direction. There was increasing concern within parliament that appeals were being made to the passions of the people, and charging this to one's political opponents was becoming part of political debate, with the implication that those levelling the charge appealed only to reason. Debates on the Corn Laws were no exception.¹³

In his biography of Peel, Norman Gash observed that 'The striking feature of the repeal of the Corn Laws was the calmness and control with which it was carried through'.¹⁴ This assessment may be questionable as far as some of the intemperate

⁷Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian frame of mind* (New Haven, CT, 1957); Boyd Hilton, *The age of atonement* (Oxford, 1988); Vic Gatrell, *The hanging tree: execution and the English people, 1770–1868* (Oxford, 1994).

⁸Vic Gatrell, *City of laughter: sex and satire in eighteenth-century London* (London, 2006); Elaine Hadley, *Living liberalism: practical citizenship in mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago, IL, 2010); Thomas Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: portrait of a nation in tears* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 114–16; Matthew Roberts, *Democratic passions: the politics of feeling in British popular radicalism, 1809–48* (Manchester, 2022).

⁹G. S. R. Kitson Clark, 'The Romantic element – 1830 to 1850', in J. H. Plumb (ed.), *Studies in social history* (London, 1955), pp. 209–39.

¹⁰Joe Bord, *Science and whig manners: science and political style in Britain, c.1790–1850* (Basingstoke, 2009).

¹¹John Tosh, 'Gentlemanly politeness and manly simplicity in Victorian England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2001), pp. 455–72.

¹²Ben Griffin, *The politics of gender in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 173.

¹³E.g., Hansard, Commons, 28 Jan. 1840, vol. 51, col. 668; 2 June 1841, vol. 58, col. 1016–17; 9 May 1843, col. 69, col. 91; 27 Jan. 1846, vol. 83, col. 323–5.

¹⁴Norman Gash, *Peel* (London, 1976), p. 283.

voices in and out of parliament were concerned, but it is true of Peel and Cobden. Gash attributed this to Peel's personal authority. This article contends that much of the anchoring of that authority was underpinned by Peel's affective composure. When approached in this way, the otherwise puzzling tribute (widely remarked upon, then and since) that Peel paid to Cobden in his resignation speech in June 1846 becomes more explicable: several members of Peel's own party were deeply angered by the prime minister's praise for Cobden, not least because Peel was, by implication, validating the demotic protest orchestrated by the League, an organization that he had previously censured as dangerous and subversive.¹⁵ Of crucial relevance here is Anthony Howe's astute observation that, by 1846, Cobden had 'gained the sense of Peel's own moral qualities'.¹⁶ This article explores how and why that happened, and in a way that brings together historiographies that have often been separated to the detriment of explanations for repeal: biographies of Cobden and Peel and of the League (relatively small, though the latter is, when compared to the voluminous scholarship on Chartism). As Cobden and Peel well knew, feelings and feeling rules were more than mere epiphenomena, and calibrating them was essential to the smooth and safe running of a polity. When introducing controversial legislation such as Corn Law repeal, Peel invariably warned of the dangers of fomenting the passions of the people.¹⁷

While the League, Peel, parliament and public opinion might disagree over the place of feeling, each would have conceded that it had played a central role in the extra-parliamentary campaign for repeal. Historians of the League have not been unaware of the importance of feeling: Morgan, for example, has shown how affective bonds were built between Cobden and his supporters through a carefully choreographed iconography and material culture, while Janette Martin has explored the declamatory performances of the League's lecturers, and most recently Masahiro Konishi has touched on the intense feelings of those who were involved in the spate of Peel effigy burnings in the early 1840s.¹⁸ Yet, the fact remains that the role of feeling has not been explored systematically from the perspective of the history of emotions, and the same can be said of the debates in parliament: historians have focused on the arguments, but not on the arguing.¹⁹ As the work of Simon Morgan,

¹⁵Hilton, *Mad*, p. 554.

¹⁶'Introduction', in Anthony Howe (ed.), *The letters of Richard Cobden: Vol. 1 - 1815-1847* (Oxford, 2007), p. liv. This volume is the first of a four-part series, edited by Howe, with the assistance of Gordon Bannerman and Simon Morgan, with the latter co-editing the final two volumes. As these published editions were based on a selection of Cobden's letters, those that did not appear have now been made available digitally via the Cobden Letters Project, at www.cobdenletters.org.

¹⁷*Hansard*, Commons, 15 May 1846, vol. 86, col. 694; 18 May 1841, vol. 58, col. 641; 9 Feb. 1842, vol. 60, col. 202.

¹⁸Simon James Morgan, *Celebrities, heroes and champions: popular politicians in the age of reform, 1810-67* (Manchester, 2021); Janette Martin, 'Oratory, itinerant lecturing and Victorian popular politics: a case study of James Acland (1799-1876)', *Historical Research*, 86 (2013), pp. 30-52; Masahiro Konishi, 'Free trade without words: popular public rituals and Corn Law repeal in the early 1840s', *History*, 108 (2023), pp. 87-107.

¹⁹George Kitson Clark, 'Hunger and politics in 1842', *Journal of Modern History*, 25 (1953), p. 370; Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League, 1838-1846* (2nd edn, London, 1968); Anthony Howe, *Free trade and liberal England, 1846-1946* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 32-3; Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *The people's bread: a history of the Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 2000); Morgan, *Celebrities*, p. 268.

Peter Gurney and others has shown, Corn Law repeal was increasingly presented as a moral issue, not least because it was seen as a way to foreground feelings as a firmer foundation for campaigning. We know something about *why* the League did this, but not *how*. As Rob Boddice and Mark Smith have recently underlined, feeling and the senses were and are conflated. Morality is always something that is experienced, and the ‘*value* of experience is and has always been established by or filtered through what experience *felt* like’. ‘In other words, the moral compass exists in the realm of *feeling*’.²⁰

Paying close attention to the relationship between feeling and the senses, which some historians of emotion have recently begun to explore, enables us to see much more clearly how the League tried to appeal to popular audiences as well as to apply pressure to parliament. Cobden spoke of ‘communities of suffering’ to foreground the role of adversity in fashioning cross-class constituencies of ‘rational’ support for the League.²¹ But what did he mean by rationality, and what place did it occupy in his moral politics? By probing the affective basis of morality – via a careful re-combing of Cobden’s letters, speeches, anti-Corn Law periodicals and print culture – new light is cast on the nature and effectiveness of Cobden’s (as well as Peel’s) moral politics and the League’s propaganda. We know much less about Cobden’s moral politics compared to his political accomplice John Bright’s, but this has had a distorting effect: G. R. Searle, for example, has argued that ‘the activities of the ... League make much more sense if Bright’s, rather than Cobden’s, characterization of the movement is accepted’.²² As we shall see, Cobden appreciated Bright’s sentimentalism and sought to harness it while simultaneously delimiting it.

Feelings and thoughts about feelings were just as important in Cobden’s and Peel’s affective politics as in Bright’s, notwithstanding their contrasting affective styles. As Rob Boddice notes, ‘restraint is a form of expression, but also inescapably a form of action to change how a feeling feels’.²³ For all the distinction between reason and feeling – a distinction that remains central to Habermasian arguments about the rise of a rational public sphere in the modern period²⁴ – claims of rationality and political reason were, and are, themselves forms of affective politics. If we fail to recognize this by over-rationalizing the study of politics – by presenting it, for example, as a contest over ideas – then we risk divorcing politics from an important part of what contemporaries thought it meant to be human.²⁵ In other words – and to put this in the language of the history of political thought – what counts as a valid argument in politics is not just ideational content, but also tonal form. Focusing on tone, temper and feelings enables the historian to access what Stefan Collini has termed the

²⁰Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, sense, experience* (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 12, 15; Rob Boddice, *The history of emotions* (Manchester, 2018), pp. 192, 202.

²¹Peter Gurney, *Wanting and having: popular politics and liberal consumerism in England, 1830–70* (Manchester, 2015), xi.

²²G. R. Searle, *Entrepreneurial politics in mid-Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1993), p. 18.

²³Boddice, *History*, p. 62.

²⁴Nicole Eustace, ‘Emotion and political change’, in Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns (eds), *Doing emotions history* (Urbana, IL, 2014), pp. 163–83.

²⁵Joanna Bourke, *What it means to be human: reflections from 1791 to the present* (London, 2011).

‘pre- or sub-political level of moral and aesthetic sensibilities’ that shaped political character.²⁶

I

On 2 July 1842, the *Illustrated London News* published one of its many pen-portraits of MPs of the day. The subject was Richard Cobden, still a relatively new MP. The article was something of a double biography – not, as might be expected, of Cobden and his close political companion, John Bright (still yet to enter parliament), but William Busfield Ferrand, the noisy and passionate parliamentary spokesman of the Protectionists (the opponents of Corn Law repeal). Cobden emerged as the moral victor through the comparison: while Ferrand ‘follows in the wake of the sentimental school of politicians’, Cobden possessed a ‘better command of his temper’.²⁷ Following a lecture tour of Scotland in the winter of 1843, the *Perthshire Advertiser* observed that ‘Not a few of the Anti-Corn Law agitators ... have addressed themselves more to the passions than the judgement of their audience. But Mr Cobden is of a different and higher order. He speaks to the reason, and to the reason alone. He is earnest, but calm’.²⁸ It was not just commentators who presented him in this light; Cobden saw himself that way. ‘He was not accustomed to deal in sentiment’, he told an anti-Corn Law audience at Drury Lane in 1843.²⁹ This style endured throughout Cobden’s political career.³⁰

As these descriptions suggest, Cobden was something of an ascetic in politics. In this, he was not unusual among popular radicals. Ascetic radicalism was a set of feeling rules that emphasized manly restraint, rationality, and an aversion to unbridled passion. Asceticism has connotations of austerity, self-denial, and stoicism. This is not to imply that ascetic radicals disclaimed all appeals to feeling; only that their stated aversion to appeals to the passions was an important part of their affective politics. The purpose was not to purge passion but master it and integrate it into one’s private and public life. Noteworthy here was Cobden’s cultivation of what he called ‘Bonapartian feeling’, meaning disciplined perseverance in the face of adversity and an optimistic sense of eventual success, which he associated with the meteoric rise of the French emperor. This, he told his timid and gloomy brother, was ‘the feeling that spurs me on’, the recipe for his rise to success as a businessman. ‘To tell the truth’, he continued, ‘the world has hardened me into such stern stuff that I can no longer sympathize with those morbid sensibilities’ (personified by his brother, Frederick).³¹ Implicit here is Cobden’s juxtaposition of his own restrained manliness with a feminized sensibility swayed too easily by passion. Like Peel, Cobden embodied the punishing work ethic and standard of self-discipline that were at the heart of Victorian manliness. Cobden advised Frederick –

²⁶Stefan Collini, ‘“Manly fellows”: Fawcett, Stephen and the liberal temper’, in Lawrence Goldman (ed.), *The blind Victorian: Henry Fawcett and British liberalism* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 52; Hadley, *Living liberalism*, p. 13.

²⁷*Illustrated London News*, 2 July 1842.

²⁸*Perthshire Advertiser*, 19 Jan. 1843.

²⁹*Struggle*, No. 69; British Library (BL), Francis Place Collection, Set 9, vol. 4, f. 193.

³⁰*Daily News*, quoted in *Elgin Courier*, 7 Apr. 1865. For Disraeli’s praise of Cobden’s moderation and temperateness, see *Hansard*, Commons, 3 Apr. 1865, vol. 178, col. 676.

³¹Manchester Central Library (MCL), M87/2/1/11, Richard Cobden papers, Richard Cobden to Frederick Cobden, 30 Jan. 1832.

who was increasingly left in charge of the family's calico printing business as his brother devoted more time to public life – to adopt a cool business style based on 'temperate intercourse', avoidance of 'extremity of tone' and, when advising and censuring, to do so 'without passion'.³²

Cobden's asceticism was also meant to serve as protective armour to deflect hostility and opposition. 'There is one quality which I wish you to cultivate', he entreated his wife, Kate, at the height of the repeal campaign, 'that of self-esteem which teaches us to despise the fear of being slighted'. The reference to cultivation hints at the core affective assumptions of asceticism – the ability, through discipline and practice, to restrain and even alter one's feelings. As Cobden went on to elaborate, 'I never am out of temper with anybody for neglecting or slighting me' because he was 'able to take refuge in a certain self-esteem which tells me I am not despicable, whatever other people may think'.³³ Even by his own admission, Cobden was not always successful in disciplining his feelings, but it is noteworthy that when he fell short of his own ascetic standards, he regretted it afterwards.³⁴ Ascetic radicalism mandated expressing the right feelings, in the right place, at the right time. Drawing attention to episodes when this failed to happen was part of the armoury of this brand of radicalism in its many battles with the aristocracy and their supporters.³⁵ He was ever on the lookout for 'false sentiment, deluded sympathy, and amiable ignorance'.³⁶ Some of these views were the product of a thrusting young man making his way in the worlds of business and later politics. But Cobden was no mere Bounderby, inventing feeling rules which licensed the selfish pursuit of wealth. His vision of an industrial and commercial society was to be regulated by a moral code which 'was to act as a natural restraint upon vaulting ambition and greed' – a view that Peel came to share.³⁷

Also aiding Cobden's restraint was the fact that he was untouched by evangelical Christianity and its associated intense feelings.³⁸ Cobden was not irreligious – as he confessed to the phrenologist George Combe (his 'father confessor'), 'I have a strong religious feeling'. Revealingly, though, he immediately qualified this declaration by explaining that he had a 'sympathy for men who acted under that impulse, and, ever the shrewd political activist, that what he really appreciated was the power of religion to mobilize: 'it had done glorious deeds for liberty'. Perhaps mindful of saying what his father confessor wanted to hear, Cobden further qualified his religious sentiments with the assurance that 'It is fortunate for me, that, whilst possessing

³²West Sussex Record Office (WSRO), Add. MS 601q f. G9; CP 23, Cobden papers, Cobden to Frederick Cobden, 21 Oct. 1836, accessed via *Letters of Richard Cobden*, at <https://www.cobdenletters.org/> [accessed 11 Nov. 2025].

³³BL, Add MS 50,748, Cobden papers, Cobden to Catherine Cobden, 15 Aug. 1843, f. 61.

³⁴Wendy Hinde, *Richard Cobden* (New Haven, CT, 1987), pp. 32, 46, 105, 113, 157.

³⁵For instances of this in Cobden's commercial and political life, see Nicholas C. Edsall, *Richard Cobden* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), *passim*.

³⁶Richard Cobden, *Russia* (1836), reprinted in *The political writings of Richard Cobden* (2 vols., London, 1903), pp. I, 215; Peter Cain (ed.), *The political and economic works of Richard Cobden: speeches Volume 1* (London, 1995), p. 3.

³⁷Cain, *Cobden: political writings*, Vol. 1, pp. vii, x.

³⁸John Vincent, *The formation of the British Liberal party, 1857–1868* (London, 1976), p. 17, n.6.

a strong logical faculty, which keeps me in the path of rationalism, I have this religious sympathy which enables me to cooperate with men of, exclusively, religious sentiment'.³⁹

If vital religion was not a wellspring, phrenology was, hence the extensive correspondence between Cobden and Combe, of which the letter cited formed a part. While Cobden's indebtedness to Combe and his influential *The Constitution of Man* (1828) has been recognized by his biographers, the centrality of bodily feelings in Combe's thought and their democratizing impact on Cobden's radicalism have been overlooked.⁴⁰ One of Combe's major worries was 'his inability to control his own passions', and so he devoted much of his life to cultivating calmness, a quality that Cobden appreciated.⁴¹ As the correspondence between the two men attests, not only did Combe serve as something of a mentor, it also meant a great deal to Cobden to earn Combe's approval. In several letters – some written at the height of the repeal campaign – he singled out his mentor's 'calm and philosophical' demeanour as something worthy of imitation.⁴² Combe found in phrenology a materialistic philosophy of mind through which man could divine moral sentiments. In *The Constitution of Man*, Combe sketched a vision of human development in which man's rational faculties gradually gained dominion over his 'animal propensities'. As John Morley appreciated in his biography of Cobden, it was not so much the ability to read character by studying the skull that explained Cobden's attraction to phrenology as the connection that Combe drew between the health of the mind and the states of the body. This was because it held out the possibility of modifying character by 'attending to the requirements of bodily organization'. Through a disciplined bodily regimen of restraint, moral conduct and temperance – practices that Morley tellingly dubbed ascetic in his biography of Cobden – it was possible to change how one felt.⁴³ As Cobden told the Preston temperance and anti-Corn Law campaigner, Joseph Livesey, a sober Englishman has a 'self depending & self governing instinct which carries him through triumphant ... all difficulties & dangers'. Cobden tried to practice what he preached, telling Livesey that his own temperate habits helped him to work effectively, and he also expressed interest in teetotalism and the 'water cure'.⁴⁴ Crucially, for all the apparent opposition between evangelicalism and phrenology, both preached virtues and values that were almost identical, notably the conquest of base passions – an affinity that Cobden recognized. This would prove to be a significant factor in the convergence of Cobden and Peel's asceticism, which, in the case of the latter, was influenced by providentialist and vital religion.⁴⁵

³⁹BL, Add MS 43660, Cobden to George Combe, 1 Aug. 1846, accessed via *Letters of Richard Cobden*, at <https://www.cobdenletters.org/> [accessed 25 June 2026].

⁴⁰David Stack, 'Phrenological friends: Cobden and his "father confessor" George Combe', in Anthony Howe and Simon Morgan (eds), *Rethinking nineteenth-century liberalism* (Abingdon, 2006), pp. 23–38.

⁴¹Hilton, *Age of atonement*, p. 190.

⁴²BL, Add MS 43,660, Cobden Papers, Cobden to George Combe, 25 Mar. 1843, f. 17, Cobden to Combe, 23 Feb. 1845, f. 21.

⁴³John Morley, *The life of Richard Cobden* (London, 1905 [1881]), pp. 93–4.

⁴⁴BL, Add MS 43,668, Cobden papers, Cobden to Joseph Livesey, 10 Oct. 1849, fos 540–2; MCL, MS 923.2 S333, John Benjamin Smith ACLL letters, vol. 3, Cobden to J. B. Smith, 5 Dec. 1842, fol. 436.

⁴⁵Hilton, *Atonement*, pp. 194–5, 222.

The assumption that people had the capacity to change how they felt was a cornerstone of ascetic radicalism and had two democratic implications. First, it advanced claims to citizenship – not just in the demand for enfranchisement, but also in campaigns such as the anti-Corn Law movement – on the basis that it was both possible and necessary for the people to curb their base passions. This was no insignificant desideratum, as one of the key arguments used by the elite to delegitimize popular radical movements like the Anti-Corn Law League was not only that they appealed to base passions, but also that the people were inexorably the prisoners of crude feeling.⁴⁶ Second, ascetic radicals such as Cobden believed that everyone had the same affective capacity and that any brutishness among the masses resulted from political corruption and exclusion. Based on this reading, the Corn Laws brutalized the people, dangerously making them creatures of raw feeling – a message that Cobden and the League asserted regularly (see [Section II](#)).

Clearly, there was a tension within ascetic radicalism between the assumption that people had the capacity to change how they felt and the assumption that any brutishness resulted from the extraneous imposition of legislative evil. But those like Cobden were always clear that reform had to begin at home, with an assertion of ‘Bonapartian feeling’, Spartan privation and strength through adversity (one of the reasons why Cobden so admired the Prussians).⁴⁷ Unnatural impediments such as the Corn Laws were to be repealed immediately, but democratic rights, notably the vote, were to be held out as a reward for rational perseverance and checking one’s animal propensities. Suffering was meant to be a salutary experience: ‘I hope the working class will gradually learn by their sufferings’, Cobden wrote, in response to the Chartists’ hostility to co-operating with the middle classes.⁴⁸ And here the dividing line was revealed between Cobden’s middle-class radicalism – which held out democratic rights as a reward for right feeling and moral conduct – and working-class radicalism’s insistence that their immediate enfranchisement would remove any unfeelingness or brutishness on the part of the masses.⁴⁹ For Cobden, only when the skulls of the people had been reshaped – as the organs of veneration, cheerfulness and hope (a phrenological trilogy that he often recommended) – would democratic advances be made. Gloominess and brutishness were incompatible with democratic advance.⁵⁰

II

Pitted against Cobden’s ascetic radicalism was a rival brand of affective politics: sentimentalism – the other panel in the *Illustrated London News*’ diptych. It was not just some of Cobden’s political enemies, such as Ferrand, who adhered to this rival brand; it was also present in popular politics. To some extent, this was a vestige of the different feelings rules that had held sway in late Georgian and early Victorian

⁴⁶ *Lincoln Gazette*, quoted in *Anti-Corn Law Circular* [hereafter *ACLC*], 24 Dec. 1839; *Quarterly Review*, Dec. 1842; Roberts, *Democratic passions*, intro.

⁴⁷ Cobden to Frederick Cobden, 11 Sept. 1838, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 139.

⁴⁸ Cobden to Edward Watkin, 11 Mar. 1842, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 262.

⁴⁹ Roland Quinault, ‘Cobden and democracy’, in Howe and Morgan, *Rethinking*, pp. 59–67.

⁵⁰ Cobden to C. P. Villiers, 2 Sept. 1843, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 336; Cobden to Catherine Cobden, 19 June 1845, in *ibid*, p. 392.

Britain, which had licensed, and even demanded, more intense public displays of feeling, the receding of which was part of the 'march of mind' and the rise of a more sober, respectable and restrained society.⁵¹ The exigencies of popular politics also mandated its survival. Cobden and the League knew that invoking liberal political economy to justify free trade exposed them to charges of callousness. With apologists such as Nassau Senior declaring, 'It is not with happiness, but with wealth, that I am concerned', it is easy to see why League arguments that market forces, rather than the moral economy, should guide economic policy were vulnerable to Chartist and Protectionist attacks as unfeeling.⁵² While the Protectionists were liable to accusations of selfishness, they at least had on their side the weight of a paternalistic tradition as well as an organic, harmonious vision of society in which kindly feelings of paternalism and deference operated – at least in theory.⁵³ From the perspective of the Chartists, the whole project of liberal political economy was designed to banish feeling from the economy, hence the callous sacrifice of obsolete groups such as handloom weavers. Equally unfeeling was the opposition to factory reform – Cobden, characteristically, dismissed this as misplaced sentimentalism.⁵⁴ The League's careful deployment of its own brand of sentimentalism can be seen as a shrewd response to the popular perception that it was unfeeling. Because he was temperamentally unsuited to such a task, Cobden was content to leave this to others, provided it was confined to selective channels. Such rhetoric could even be used to prioritize repeal over Chartism. In the words of the *Orkney and Shetland Journal*, a keen supporter of repeal, in part deriving from the inability of the islands to produce enough grain to feed their populations: 'Let no wild Chartists ... persuade us that we, our wives, and children, ought to starve until their theory of universal suffrage is first carried'.⁵⁵

Sentimental radicalism – with its harrowing descriptions of working-class poverty and the dangers hunger posed to the social order – was part of the League's strategy to transform Corn Law repeal from a cerebral issue of cold political economy into a moral and humanitarian concern.⁵⁶ This was an astute move on the part of the League, as it built on an emerging emotive discourse around food and the hungry masses.⁵⁷ Nationally, this strategy would not be accentuated until the early 1840s, but the origins of it were plain to see as early as 1839, especially in Scotland, where the campaign for cheap bread had been presented much more as a moral and religious issue, in part because of the significant participation of religious dissenters who lent their chapels and coffers to the cause.⁵⁸ As well as religious dissenters,

⁵¹Gatrell, *City of laughter*, part iv.

⁵²Quoted in J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America* (London, 1969), p. 74.

⁵³On the Protectionist worldview, see Angus Macintyre, 'Lord George Bentinck and the Protectionists: a lost cause?', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 39 (1989), pp. 141–65.

⁵⁴Morley, *Cobden*, p. 187. One of the fullest statements of the League's hypocrisy and harshness can be found in John Almack Jr., *Character, motives, and proceedings of the Anti-Corn Law Leaguers* (London, 1843).

⁵⁵*Orkney and Shetland Journal*, Feb. 1839; Henry Miller, 'Popular petitioning and the Corn Laws, 1833–46', *English Historical Review*, 127 (2012), p. 882.

⁵⁶MCL, BR MS F 337 2 A1, ACLL letter book, 1838–40, vol. 2, James Acland to John Ballantyne, 23 Apr. 1839, f. 165.

⁵⁷Gurney, *Wanting and having*; Carl J. Griffin, *The politics of hunger: protest, poverty and policy in England, c.1750–c.1840* (Manchester, 2020).

⁵⁸MCL, ACLL letter book, 1838–40, vol. 2, J. H. Shearman to J. B. Smith, 20 June 1839, f. 232.

this strategy was also designed to mobilize women, the working class and youth.⁵⁹ This was a shrewd way to counter the perception that free trade was an abstruse debate among economists, not readily intelligible to the public. As the Young Men's Anti-Monopoly Association emphasized, 'The Corn Law question is one of simple, elementary, moral principle ... the subject requires an unsophisticated moral sense [rather] than any peculiar expansion of intellect'.⁶⁰ League propaganda was often characterized by a highly sentimental view of the family in which women were appealed to as wives and especially mothers, and presented as more feeling and caring than men. 'It is not the husband and father who have to still the heart-rending cry of starving childhood for food', the *Anti-Corn Law Circular* editorialized. 'Hunger breaks stone walls', the *Circular* continued, 'but you [mothers] may yet perform a greater wonder; [by] turn[ing] heart[s] of stone into hearts of flesh'.⁶¹ Persuading these constituents and others of the righteousness of the cause necessitated the politicization of feeling – from guilt-induced sympathetic humanitarianism to a politics of fear which played on the threat posed by the Corn Laws to the social and political order. Cobden appreciated the importance of this from the movement's beginning.⁶² Yet it was only in the early 1840s that this strategy came into its own, when the League secured the services of the ex-Unitarian minister W. J. Fox, the impassioned anti-slavery orator George Thompson, and John Bright. As one of the League's detractors appreciated, the best way to John Bull's support was through an appeal to the senses: not just his hunger, but his indignation and wounded feelings when met with cold-hearted scorn: 'Let John Bull be insulted sufficiently, & he will do anything', Cobden mused.⁶³ Integral to this strategy was 'rousing the moral feelings ... of the people'.⁶⁴

Rousing the people's moral feelings takes us to the heart of sentimental radicalism. While the accent in ascetic radicalism was reason aided by a controlled appeal to feelings, sentimental radicalism was reason *through* feeling. As Cobden put it to Bright in 1843: 'You have roused the feelings of the people, & discussion & conviction must follow'.⁶⁵ This dialectic between the sentimental and the ascetic made its way into League propaganda – often in the same publication. A good example is a handbill from 1842 entitled, 'Hint for the People about Starvation & Corn Laws; Plenty & Repeal'. In the first half of the handbill, sentimentalism is dominant: 'The landowner makes *Corn Laws* that *he* never feels, – but the poor feel them'. In the second part, the register shifts to the ascetic when discussing what action the people should take to redress their grievances: 'They must suffer something for it. They must practice self-denial for it. ... Until the people carry this peaceful revolution, they must be frugal, peaceful, temperate, honest, patient, persevering, energetic, in earnest'.⁶⁶ A similar

⁵⁹Simon Morgan, 'Domestic economy and political agitation: women and the Anti-Corn Law League, 1839–46', in Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (eds), *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 123; Pickering and Tyrrell, *People's bread*, pp. 55–7, 93–5.

⁶⁰MCL, F1841/2/A, Broadside: Corn Laws, Young Men's Anti-Monopoly Association, Nov. 1841.

⁶¹ACLC, 31 Dec. 1839.

⁶²Cobden to Frederick Cobden, 5 Oct. 1838, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 145.

⁶³Cobden to Villiers, 19 Dec. 1841, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 249.

⁶⁴Cobden to Henry Ashworth, 7 Apr. 1842, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 266.

⁶⁵Cobden to John Bright, 21 June 1843, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 327.

⁶⁶Copy in The National Archives, HO 45/267, fos 21–2.

dialectic appears in a tract the League sent to electors in the mid-1840s, entreating them to vote for candidates who supported repeal. Voting was an act of 'awful responsibility' – on the shoulders of the elector rested the 'happiness or misery of millions of your poorer fellow-creatures'. After the injunction to 'Think solemnly and carefully', the register shifts to rationality: 'examine the evidence which is now placed in your hands' (the contents of the tract). Shifting back to the sentimental and religious, the message concluded with: 'Remember, above all, that your decision will be recorded on high'. This was a carefully crafted statement of affective politics designed to manipulate middle-class feeling.⁶⁷

Presenting Protectionists as unfeeling and cold-hearted was fundamental to sentimental radicalism, the inference being that it was not the people but the landed classes who were unfeeling, and therefore sub-human. Protectionism as a form of monopoly was delegitimized as base passion: 'It is covetousness, selfishness, and sordidness. It is utterly at variance with every moral principle, every social affection, and every generous and noble sentiment'.⁶⁸ The effect of this was to disorder the passions of the elite. 'Luxurious cravings' had hardened the feelings 'of a heartless and pampered oligarchy'.⁶⁹ The fat monopolist 'has a heart, [but] locks it up for security. He will not suffer anything to touch that heart: it is panoplied in steel ... beyond the reach of sympathy'.⁷⁰ The disordered passions of the elite were writ large on their very bodies; their bloated size was frequently remarked upon, visualized in League propaganda and juxtaposed with emaciated working-class bodies.⁷¹ Only middle-class people, so the logic of this self-justifying argument went, had bodies of the right size and the attendant equilibrium of feelings. This bodily politics was central to the League's efforts to establish a cross-class populist rhetoric against bloated oligarchy. Some of the League's visual propaganda also registered this. For example, the hugely popular broadsheet 'The Pictorial Anti-Corn Law Almanac' featured an image directed towards the tenants and labourers in which a fattened cow ready for an agricultural show was depicted alongside an emaciated farmworker, the inference being that they were a victim of the farmer who employed them, just as they were of the landowner whose land they tilled.⁷² While the League laboured publicly to win over the farmers and detach them from landowners, frustration in this goal led some of the more ardent Leaguers to berate the farmers as unfeeling. A League supporter from Boston, Lincolnshire, who had tried to induce his local poor law guardians to sign a petition in favour of repeal, complained privately to headquarters about 'those "Barn door savages" the farmers who could turn up their nose and ridicule the idea of the suffering poor'. The farmers, he continued, 'are a stony hearted sordid set of beings' who 'have no bowels of compassion for the suffering poor', a characteristic description and bodily location of the tender passions during this period.⁷³

⁶⁷MCL, M87/4/1/3, Political papers of Richard Cobden, 'You are an elector', n.d.

⁶⁸Jesus Christ not a monopolist and monopolists are not Christians (London, 1841), p. 3.

⁶⁹ACLC, 28 May 1839 (Cambridge); ABTC, 24 Mar. 1842.

⁷⁰Bread Basket, No. 1.

⁷¹Corinna Wagner, *Pathological bodies: medicine and political culture* (Berkeley, CA, 2013), ch. 5; *Struggle*, No. 14 ('John the spinner'), No. 61 ('Rejoicing in potatoes'), No. 92 ('Agricultural show').

⁷²MCL, F1844/15, Broadside: Corn Laws, 'The pictorial Anti-Corn Law almanac, 1844'.

⁷³MCL, ACLL Letter Book, 1838–40, vol. 3, C. F. Barber to J. B. Smith, 26 Mar. 1840, f. 458. On the bodily locations of the passions, and their political significance, see Roberts, *Democratic passions*, pp. 63–7.

Faced with such stony-hearted contempt, was it any wonder that the masses were brutish, reasoned the sentimental radicals in the League. Livesey's *Struggle*, for example – a periodical already encountered in the opening report of the League's meeting with Peel – maintained that the poor's bad temper was caused by their hunger: 'Persons feel best tempered after a meal'.⁷⁴ Sentimental radicals not only excused the brutishness of the people but used it to accentuate a politics of fear designed to intimidate the government and landed classes into conceding repeal. The *Morning Chronicle*, a militant supporter of the League, was quick to rebuke those like Peel and Croker who accused the League of inflaming the passions of the people in the heady summer of 1842. Passion was not only to be expected but required: 'Such persons would disgrace the form of men did the proof leave their minds in a cool, smirking ... state. The apostles never could have said to such beings, "we are men of like passions with yourselves"'. After concluding that 'A frigidly calculating, unmoved speaker on the corn laws is not a man', the article appended a quotation from Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which could be taken as the point of departure for sentimental radicalism: 'Great evils ask great passions to redress them'.⁷⁵ A. W. Paulton, one of the League's early lecturers known for his impassioned declamatory style, spoke of 'the blind passions of necessity', while another League supporter, the Rev. Thomas Spencer, demanded immediate repeal 'before hunger provokes passion to overcome reason'.⁷⁶ This sort of rhetoric was directed towards the government as well as the middle classes.

The poetry of Ebenezer Elliott, the Sheffield 'Corn Law rhymers', as well as other poems published in the League's propaganda, was another outlet for sentimental radicalism. 'What is poetry but impassioned truth', Elliott declared.⁷⁷ The sentimental radicalism of the League reached its apogee in Joseph Livesey's periodical the *Struggle* (1841–6), as well as a series of other short-run periodicals, notably the *Bread Basket* (1843) and the *Free Trader* (1844). Not only did these periodicals publish sentimental poetry, but they were also frequently adorned with woodcuts and other arresting images in the style of street ballads and chapbooks. 'The Corn Laws are evil, unmingled with good', began one poem in the *Struggle*. By taxing the working man's food, they entered his home: 'They enter his spirit – they force the deep sigh/They wring him with anguish: – yet mock and decry'.⁷⁸ As with several popular accounts of hunger during this period, hunger was conceptualized not just as physical want but as a feeling that also eats at the heart ('How his heart bleeds'), the effect of which was to diminish patience. By highlighting the affective dimensions of suffering, the poet was not just seeking to license working-class anger; he was also drawing attention to the humanity of the workers who had the same capacity for feeling as their social betters. This expanded definition of hunger was a riposte to the prevailing view that hunger was a condition to be endured because it was unavoidable and fell only on morally flawed individuals.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ *Struggle*, No. 68.

⁷⁵ BL, Place Collection, Set 9, vol. 2, f. 288; *Free trader*, 19 Feb. 1842 ('Mere appeal to the passions').

⁷⁶ ACLC, 12 Nov. 1839 and 21 May 1840.

⁷⁷ Ebenezer Elliott, *The splendid village, Corn Law rhymes and other poems* (London, 1844), p. 49.

⁷⁸ *Struggle*, No. 24. See also No. 12 ('The bread tax'), No. 113 ('An appeal to the women of England').

⁷⁹ James Vernon, *Hunger: a modern history* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

The corrosive effect of scarcity on the family was another theme emphasized in sentimental propaganda. League lecturers such as James Acland and Sidney Smith dwelt on how hunger was corrosive of the good feelings within and between classes that were vital to social stability. Lurid accounts were meant to shock and frighten as well as elicit sympathy. 'Famine at once converts man into a mere animal', Smith warned, and 'produces selfishness, bad temper, [and] heartlessness'.⁸⁰ The cruelties of forced emigration were also singled out as sundering the bonds of familial love consequent on the breakup of families.⁸¹ Even Cobden could approach sentimentalism on this score: 'What would be the feelings of that audience, if, by a vote of the aristocracy, they could be doomed to emigration ... Let them bear in mind that the working classes had as keen affections – ay, and keener, too' than their social betters.⁸² For all that the existence of a sentimental current within the League suggests that there was a sympathy for the plight of the poor, there was, however, a tendency to present the poor as passive victims whose only recourse, ultimately, is either death or rising in violent revolution. The poor, in this reading, were only capable of expressing two feelings: despair and anger. In these portraits, the masses were always goaded and acted upon through furious appeals to passion, rather than presented as active citizens in their own right, thus further marking the boundary between the League and Chartism.⁸³

III

Cobden's sentimental account of the impact of emigration on working-class families was the occasion for a remark that we have already encountered: 'He was not accustomed to deal in sentiment'. This was, of course, consistent with his asceticism. So, too, was his revelation to close confidants that he was uneasy on the public platform and often had to feign the requisite passion necessary to move audiences. However, it should be noted that some of this difficulty arose from the stresses and strains that Cobden was experiencing in his public and private lives at particular moments. This underlines the tension that politicians so often encountered between their public image and inner, private emotional lives.⁸⁴ Neither is it a coincidence that he asked not to be judged by those performances.⁸⁵ Cobden's ascetic radicalism, however, did not preclude a politics of feeling. From the early stages of the campaign, he believed that it was imperative to strike fear into the government and landed classes. 'We must continue to frighten them', he told his fellow leaguer, Henry Ashworth.⁸⁶ On the one hand, the League's cultivation of a politics of fear was justified as responding like-for-like: as the reports from the League's lecturers make

⁸⁰ ACLC, 9 July 1839.

⁸¹ ACLC, 25 Mar. 1841.

⁸² *Struggle*, No. 69; ABTC, 3 Nov. 1842 (untitled poem by 'Amicus').

⁸³ MCL, ACLL letter book, 1838–40, vol. 1, Henry Sefton to John Ballantyne, 25 Feb. 1839, f. 112.

⁸⁴ Morgan, *Celebrities*, p. 206.

⁸⁵ Cobden to Catherine Cobden, 19 June 1845, Cobden to George Wilson, 16 July 1842, Cobden to Earl Grey, 1 June 1846, in Howe, *Letters*, pp. 392, 279, 430.

⁸⁶ Cobden to Henry Ashworth, 14 June 1842, in Howe, *Letters*, 272. See also Cobden to Villiers, 17 Feb. 1838, in *ibid.*, p. 127, Cobden to J. B. Smith, 1 June 1840, in *ibid.*, p. 190.

plain, from the very beginning of the campaign, they met with intimidation, violence and scaremongering, especially in the countryside.⁸⁷

On the other hand, it is hardly surprising that much of this 'irrational politics' was hidden from view, and that those like Cobden presented repeal – in the name of reason and compassion – as the means to allay 'excited passion'.⁸⁸ This targeted politics of fear certainly played its part in persuading the House of Lords to accept repeal in 1846. However, we should not underestimate the Duke of Wellington's steady, guiding hand, who, in many respects, also personified a similar asceticism to Peel.⁸⁹ Cobden was more comfortable stalking the committee rooms and lounges in the House of Commons, frightening them with lurid accounts of unrest in the manufacturing districts.⁹⁰ But he was clearly uncomfortable with using fear – or so he claimed on the platform and in his correspondence – and justified it as a regrettable necessity.⁹¹ As we have seen, he preferred to leave the politics of fear, as well as the outpourings of sentimental radicalism more generally, to others better suited temperamentally.⁹² As Cobden told the electors of the City of London during a by-election in 1843, 'The question we have to submit is not very well fitted for declamatory appeals ... we have to address ourselves to your judgments'. He went on to make the same apology that Peel often made: 'we must beg your attention to what may appear very dry matter'.⁹³ Cobden, just like Peel, appreciated that on occasion dullness, not excitement, made for the best politics.

Cobden's task was to create a space for sentimental radicalism within the League while simultaneously delimiting it. In his view, and that of the moderates on the council of the League, there was no place for unvarnished sentimental radicalism in the council chambers or in the propaganda directed towards the respectable middle-class membership. Violent and emotive language, much less practice, might undermine their case; hence the League's distancing of itself from the minor wave of effigy burnings of Peel in 1842, which one activist dismissed as a display of passion.⁹⁴ Powerful hostile opinion, led by the *Times* at that stage, lost no opportunity to berate the League for these outbursts: 'Among its leaders are men whose vehemence of feeling rises above every effort to conceal it'.⁹⁵ Cobden later confessed that in the early days of the League, he and the other leaders had not got this balance right between 'brute force and clamour' and 'moral means'.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that, as the League progressed, Cobden increasingly saw his role as a restraining one which disclaimed appeals to the passions, a

⁸⁷MCL, ACLL letter book, vol. 2, J. H. Shearman to Ballantyne, 27 Apr. 1839, f. 176, 20 May 1839, f. 208, vol. 3, Thomas Pethebridge to George Wilson, 2 Mar. 1840, f. 395.

⁸⁸Prentice, *History*, I, p. 83.

⁸⁹Cobden to James Mellor, 5 Mar. 1846, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 417; McCord, *Anti-Corn Law League*, p. 203.

⁹⁰Cobden to J. B. Smith, 28 Apr. 1842, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 272.

⁹¹Newcastle Courant, 9 Jan. 1846 (Cobden speaking at Newcastle); Cobden to Villiers, 17 Feb. 1838, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 127.

⁹²Cobden to J. B. Smith, 4 Dec. 1842, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 248.

⁹³Cain, *Cobden: speeches*, vol. 1, pp. 81, 157.

⁹⁴Konishi, 'Free trade without words', p. 102. On the growing ascendancy of the moderates in the League, see McCord, *Anti-Corn Law League*, pp. 37, 57, 109–11, 128–9, 157, 166.

⁹⁵*Times*, 27 Nov. 1843.

⁹⁶BL, Place Collection, Set 24, vol. 5, f. 699v.

trajectory, also, that his parliamentary speeches generally followed.⁹⁷ Tactically, the League itself was moving in a similar direction: the targeted appeal to women and religious groups in the early 1840s could be seen as a concerted effort to distance itself from the violent street politics it had engaged with in the early years – at the Walsall by-election of 1841, for example – and to build a reputation for respectability. Soirees, bazaars, and tea parties did wonders in that respect. And in another crucial respect, so too did the organizing, laborious committee work, repeated rounds of fund-raising, petitioning and its associated ‘subscriptional culture’, and fighting elections, each of which proved far less transient than whirlwind, whistle-stop harangues, as the meteoric rise, and then fall, of the fortunes of the League in Wales illustrates only too well.⁹⁸ This evolution was also reflected in the change to the title of the League’s principal periodical in 1843: it ceased to be the *Anti-Bread Tax Circular* and became simply the *League*. Similarly, as Peter Gurney has shown, the League’s populist rhetoric – of a cross-class movement against bloated oligarchy – began to unravel during and after the heady summer of 1842, when members of the League, especially the northern millowners like Bright, were confronted by the wave of strikes associated with the Chartist movement.⁹⁹ When coupled with accusations that northern millowners had deliberately provoked these strikes to pressure the government to concede repeal, it is no surprise that the League distanced itself from the sentimental radicalism that had helped raise the popular political temperature.

This distancing was evident in the concerted effort from 1843 to make Cobden the League’s sole public face, however much he disliked it.¹⁰⁰ The sentimental brand of affective politics did not disappear; it was carefully shunted into very specific channels – such as periodicals and ephemera directed towards the working classes – but it had no part to play in the League’s shift towards the politics of electoral pressure and parliamentary lobbying. Again, this did not preclude the subtle use of feeling: Cobden and the League deliberately set out to frighten Peel, the Tories and Whigs, but through the subtle application of electoral pressure rather than histrionics on the platform. The electoral strategy of voter registration – of enfranchising League supporters and striking off Protectionists – the securing of pledges from candidates and the contesting of elections would, as Cobden pointed out, prove much more frightening than anything sentimental radicals doled out in their shrill histrionics. The actions of the League in the voter registration courts on its own ‘put Peel in a damn’d fright’.¹⁰¹ This subtle politics of frightening the political elite was, then, central to Cobden’s strategy of simultaneously pressuring Peel and ensuring the

⁹⁷E.g. MCL, M20, George Wilson papers, vol. 4, Cobden to George Wilson, 1 Sept. 1841; Hinde, *Cobden*, pp. 144, 147, 161; Henry Ashworth, *Recollections of Richard Cobden and the Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 1876), p. 211.

⁹⁸Ryland Wallace, *‘Organise!, organise!, organise!’: a study of reform agitations in Wales, 1840–1886* (Cardiff, 1991), ch. 2. On the role of petitioning and ‘subscriptional culture’, see Henry J. Miller, *A nation of petitioners: petitions and petitioning in the United Kingdom, 1780–1918* (Cambridge, 2023), ch. 6.

⁹⁹Gurney, *Wanting*, pp. 47–8.

¹⁰⁰Simon Morgan, ‘From warehouse clerk to Corn Law celebrity: the making of a national hero’, in Howe and Morgan, *Rethinking*, p. 42.

¹⁰¹Prentice, *History*, II, pp. 252–3; John Prest, *Politics in the age of Cobden* (London, 1977), ch. 5 (quote at 88). See also Cobden to Robert Hyde Greg, 7 Feb. 1846, in Howe, *Letters*, p. 413.

League's respectability. This ascetic imperative can be tracked across a range of practices, from the instructions that Cobden gave Alexander Somerville upon hiring him to chronicle rural poverty (with 'the absence of all acrimonious feeling') through to the electoral politics of the League and, finally, to quelling the opposition in the League to Peel's measure because it fell short of their demands.¹⁰²

Without Cobden's ascetic radicalism, the League would have added considerably to Peel's difficulties in 1845–6, as he moved towards Corn Law repeal. Tellingly, the advice that Cobden gave the League when Peel announced that his government would repeal the Corn Laws was to 'keep cool'.¹⁰³ The dominance of asceticism in the League by 1845 created a favourable context of which Peel could take advantage: this is what the *Times* implied in its review of the League in the aftermath of repeal, when it praised Cobden's persevering moderation as the factor which 'unconsciously convince[d]' Peel.¹⁰⁴ This was why Peel not only paid tribute to Cobden's role in bringing about repeal in his resignation speech of 29 June 1846, but explicitly pointed to Cobden's ascetic politics: 'the name of one who ... made appeals to our reason, and has enforced those appeals with an eloquence the more to be admired because it was unaffected and unadorned'.¹⁰⁵ Boyd Hilton has observed that Peel's tribute to Cobden 'astonished contemporaries and still puzzles historians, since previously Peel had censured Cobden severely, [and] he loathed the tactics of the League'.¹⁰⁶ True, Peel may have loathed a particular wing of the League, but he did not loathe Cobden and those like him, at least not after the early 1840s.

The contretemps between Peel and Cobden in parliament in 1843, when both men lost their tempers – though Peel more so – suggests that the two had gotten off on the wrong foot. During the early 1840s, when the League was rivalling the rhetoric of some of the more extreme Chartists and Cobden had yet to fully exercise his restraining influence, relations between the two men were hostile. Dismayed by the government's lacklustre response to the prevailing distress in the country, Cobden had charged Peel with being individually culpable for the unrest, which Peel interpreted as tantamount to an invitation to assassination, an accusation that Cobden denied.¹⁰⁷ Whether Peel's overly sensitive response was a calculated attempt to delegitimize the League (the view unsurprisingly taken by many in the organization) or the result of the recent assassination of his private secretary (the assassin having mistaken him for Peel) is a moot point.¹⁰⁸ Judging by the flood of testimonials that reached Cobden from the League rank-and-file, the episode was seen as a failed attempt by Peel to feign victimhood by manipulating feelings to damage the

¹⁰²WSRO, Cobden Mss 2/1, J. B. Smith to Cobden, 29 Jan. 1846, fos 5–7; Alexander Somerville, *The whistler at the plough and free trade* (Manchester, 1852), p. 8.

¹⁰³MCL, M20, George Wilson papers, vol. 8, Cobden to George Wilson, 4 Nov. 1845.

¹⁰⁴*Times*, 4 July 1846.

¹⁰⁵Hansard, Commons, 29 June 1846, vol. 87, col. 1054.

¹⁰⁶Hilton, *Mad*, 554; M.R.D. Foot and H.C.G. Matthew (eds), *The Gladstone diaries vol. three: 1840–1847* (Oxford, 1974), p. 547; Richard A. Gaunt (ed.), *The last of the Tories: political selections from the diaries of the fourth duke of Newcastle-under-Lyne, 1839–1850* (Chichester, 2021), p. 257.

¹⁰⁷Hansard, Commons, 17 Feb. 1843, vol. 66, col. 839.

¹⁰⁸Morley, *Cobden*, p. 260; Gash, *Peel*, pp. 274–83.

repealers, which, unsurprisingly, was dismissed by the League with indignation, who rushed to Cobden's defence, singling out his 'self-composure' in the debate.¹⁰⁹

What is significant about the altercation is that Cobden's and especially Peel's response was seen as uncharacteristic losses of affective composure: Peel's more immediately, who, by all accounts, soon forgot and forgave; Cobden's more short-term in his holding of a personal grudge toward Peel until the circuitous intervention of various third parties secured an apology from the prime minister in February 1846.¹¹⁰ As we shall see, the contretemps of 1843 was the affective exception that proved the rule in the public conduct of both men, something that was implicitly recognized at the time: 'It is a curious fact, that there are not two members in the House less liable to be carried off by vehement feeling than Sir Robert Peel and Mr Cobden'.¹¹¹ This rapprochement was an affective necessity between the two men in the final stages of Corn Law repeal in 1846, not least because Peel and Cobden were suffering psychologically from a long, hard-fought campaign, Peel arguably more so given the onslaught of invective unleashed by the Protectionists against him, and all this while suffering from overwork and illness.¹¹² This had once again almost led to a loss of composure on his part in late May 1846, when the days of his government were numbered, prompting the diarist Charles Greville to quip that 'for the first time in his life, probably, he [Peel] lost his self-possession'.¹¹³ Seen from this perspective, Peel's valorisation of Cobden's asceticism in his resignation speech – a speech described tellingly as 'a smothered volcano of emotion'¹¹⁴ – was a rebuke to the sentimentalists behind him on his own benches. Peel must have realized that such a paean was bound to enrage and disgust the Protectionists, and, if he did, he must also stand condemned as a less-than-subtle manipulator of feeling, as such provocation only served to further his rebuke.¹¹⁵

At the height of the industrial unrest in the summer of 1842, Peel had remarked that 'The Anti-Corn Law League have excited the passions of the people'.¹¹⁶ By 1846, he was no longer accusing the League of this. While Peel had his own motives for repeal, there can be little doubt that the tribute was meant as a validation of a particular form of manly affective politics that he identified with, and identified with Cobden: the cool, rational, respectable man in politics who moves slowly, responding rationally to evidence. However much this was *ex post facto* justification on Peel's part, it is notable that he singled out the ascetic over the sentimental. Peel was

¹⁰⁹WSRO, Cobden 522, Abernethy Anti-Corn Law Association, 13 Mar. 1843; Cobden 538, Crayford Anti-Corn Law Association, 6 Mar. 1843; Cobden 542, Forfar Anti-Corn Law Association, 16 Mar. 1843.

¹¹⁰BL, Add MS 40585, Sir Robert Peel papers, Harriet Martineau to Peel, 22 Feb. 1846, Peel to Martineau, 23 Feb. 1846, fos 287–92.

¹¹¹*Northern Warder*, 23 Feb. 1843.

¹¹²Cobden's exhaustion was the main topic of conversation between himself and his friend, Andrew Combe, a Scottish physician and brother of George: WSRO, Cobden Mss 2/1, Andrew Combe to Cobden, 10 Mar., 3 Apr. and 27 June 1846, ff. 17–18, 26–7, 43–5. On Peel's exhaustion, see BL, Add MS 47777, Memorandum of W. E. Gladstone on conversations with Peel, f. 229.

¹¹³Charles Greville, *A journal of the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1852* (3 vols., London, 1885), II, p. 392; Gash, *Peel*, p. 277.

¹¹⁴By the Bishop of Oxford, quoted in Richard A. Gaunt, *Sir Robert Peel* (London, 2010), p. 106.

¹¹⁵For the disgust this provoked amongst the Protectionists, see *Agricultural Advertiser and Tenant-Farmers' Advocate*, 6 July 1846; Greville, *Greville memoirs*, II, p. 402.

¹¹⁶Quoted in Norman Longmate, *The breadstealers* (London, 1984), pp. 158, 167.

widely viewed as austere and the personification of dignified calmness, at least in public, if not always in private – while he appeared cold to many tory backbenchers, those closest to him (an admittedly small cadre) found him warm and friendly.¹¹⁷ As a younger man, Peel had been particularly sensitive to accusations of dishonour and had even demanded satisfaction on several occasions. Still, while he remained sensitive to such charges,¹¹⁸ it is perhaps telling that he was increasingly reluctant to seek satisfaction through duelling, as was the case for a growing number of gentlemen – yet another manifestation of the more restrained emotional culture that was dawning at this time.¹¹⁹ Peel's political style had always been business-like; his preferred ground was administrative and executive function, which could 'borrow no excitement from political feeling'. He made similar declarations when discussing Corn Law repeal in the 1840s.¹²⁰ In addition, Peel, like Cobden, had done battle with the sentimentalists in his own party – over currency, Catholic emancipation, factory and poor law reform, the sugar duties, Maynooth, and now corn. This had left him scarred, contemptuous and disgusted with tory backbenchers who, in his view, refused to recognize the imperatives of governing in the national, rather than their own sectional, interest.¹²¹ Asceticism was exactly the kind of dampening affective politics that, in their respective orbits, was needed as an antidote to the unleashing of the politics of the passions – Chartism, Irish Repeal, tory-radicals, and rabid protectionists (Ferrand, Bentinck). Peel underlined this when visited by a deputation from a group of factory reformers in 1842, telling them that he valued moderation and calmness – further evidence that the corridors of Whitehall were impervious to emotion and a less-than-subtle rebuke to the sentimentalism of tory-radicalism and emerging Protectionism.¹²²

In the eyes of his critics, notably Disraeli, Peel also had a reputation by 1846 of giving in to public opinion – in 1829 over Catholic emancipation, in 1832 over the Reform Bill, and now again in the 1840s. No account of the deteriorating relations between Peel and the tory backbenchers would be complete without acknowledgement of the feelings of betrayal and outrage that they felt in response to Peel's latest 'apostasy'. It is no coincidence that Protectionists often spoke of honour, an aristocratic code that was underpinned by a cluster of feelings and intensely so when transgressed, which could lead to feelings of betrayal, shame, and disgust. How fitting that this cluster of feelings found a parliamentary voice and a heart in Lord George Bentinck, described by his friend Disraeli as a man of quick temper and

¹¹⁷ Angus Hawkins, *The forgotten Prime Minister: the fourteenth earl of Derby – ascent, 1799–1851* (Oxford, 2007), p. 284; Gaunt, *Peel*, pp. 14, 104, 106–7, 113; Kitson Clark, 'Hunger', p. 361; J. T. Ward, *Sir James Graham* (London, 1967), p. 229. On Peel's private warmth to his political allies, see Boyd Hilton, 'Peel: a reassessment', *Historical Journal*, 22 (1979), pp. 613–14; John Morrow, 'The paradox of Peel as Carlylean hero', *Historical Journal*, 40 (1997), p. 107.

¹¹⁸ James Grant, *Random recollections of the House of Commons* (London, 1836), pp. 114–15.

¹¹⁹ Stephen Banks, *A Polite exchange of bullets: the duel and the English gentleman, 1760–1850* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 234–42.

¹²⁰ Hansard, Commons, 9 Mar. 1826, vol. 14, col. 1214, 18 May 1841, col. 641, 16 Feb. 1842, col. 610.

¹²¹ D. R. Fisher, 'Peel and the Conservative party: the sugar crisis of 1844 reconsidered', *Historical Journal*, 18 (1975), p. 297.

¹²² Donald Read, *Peel and the Victorians* (Oxford, 1987), p. 109.

possessed of 'a too sensitive heart'.¹²³ Pointing to the quietist side of the Anti-Corn Law League and singling out Cobden was an attempt – arguably a misguided one – on Peel's part to pretend that he had changed his view on Corn Law repeal, which he had converted to some years before.¹²⁴ Less cynically, making these sorts of timely concessions was not just a matter of statecraft, as important as that was; they also flowed from a manly toughness of heart. This form of manliness emphasized energy, strength, courage, decisiveness and endurance in the service of social responsibility, in this case, carrying on the queen's government when no one else would or could, and subordinating loyalty to one's immediate peers to social stability and the preservation of political and social order through timely concession. Where Peel erred, of course, in relation to this manly code was his lack of straightforwardness – at least in the eyes of the Protectionists who claimed that Peel had been planning for some time to sacrifice the agricultural interest. In Peel's defence, the 'manly man was someone who paid more attention to the promptings of his inner self than to the dictates of social expectation', and this required sacrificing the Protectionists, a regrettably painful necessity as he repeatedly claimed in his subsequent memoirs.¹²⁵ Further, Peel was determined that parliament, not the people via the politics of pressure from without, would settle repeal, as he feared that an election would risk inflaming the public and therefore prevent the question from being settled dispassionately.¹²⁶

From the moment when Peel had announced that the Corn Laws were no longer defensible, he tried to impose his own asceticism on the discussion of the issue.¹²⁷ As early as June 1839, in response to C. P. Villiers' annual motion to repeal the Corn Laws, Peel had stated that, even at the risk of being tedious, he intended to approach the question in a calm, dull manner, as opposed to 'more popular and exciting appeals'.¹²⁸ Peel reiterated this plea in January 1846, no doubt in part to try to dampen down Protectionist ire, but also, in opening his speech with such a plea, to indicate the importance he attached to the place of feeling in politics, a stratagem that Disraeli spotted instantly.¹²⁹ Such pleas and stratagems by Peel were themselves a form of affective politics, notwithstanding the appeal to reason and its juxtaposition with excitement, as they were designed to assuage or nullify negative feelings such as anxiety, fear, and anger.¹³⁰ Some of these anxieties were shared acutely by Peel, possibly more acutely than was the norm among the political elite: having reached maturity against the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars and unrest, Peel was

¹²³ Benjamin Disraeli, *Lord George Bentinck* (London, 1852), pp. 40, 80, 108; Mary Lawson-Tancred, 'The Anti-League and the Corn Law crisis of 1846', *Historical Journal*, 3 (1960), p. 179. On honour as a feeling, see Ute Frevert, *Emotions in history: lost and found* (Budapest, 2011), introduction.

¹²⁴ Hilton, 'Peel', pp. 600–1.

¹²⁵ Tosh, 'Gentlemanly', p. 460; Robert Peel, *Memoirs* (2 vols., London, 1857), II, pp. 105–6, 159.

¹²⁶ Peel, *Memoirs*, II, p. 166.

¹²⁷ Hansard, Commons, 3 Apr. 1840, vol. 53, col. 516.

¹²⁸ ACLC, 25 June 1839. Donald Read has correctly observed that dullness was part of Peel's popularity with the middle classes: Peel, pp. 9–10, 19, 22.

¹²⁹ Hansard, Commons, 27 Jan. 1846, vol. 83, col. 283; Disraeli, *Bentinck*, p. 52. Not coincidentally, it was said that Peel reserved his temper and his warmth for his friends in private: Richard Gaunt, 'Gladstone and Peel's mantle', in Roland Quinault et al (ed.), *William Gladstone: new studies and perspectives* (Abingdon, 2016), pp. 33, 37.

¹³⁰ Richard Gaunt, 'Sir Robert Peel as actor-dramatist', in Peter Yeandle, Katherine Newey and Jeffrey Richards (eds), *Politics, performance and popular culture* (Manchester, 2016), p. 223.

especially anxious about the sanctity of property, crime and social discontent.¹³¹ His public avowals of asceticism served to assuage these anxieties, both his own and the classes for whom he spoke.

Peel's asceticism was alluded to, by implication at least, in a satirical phrenological reading of his head, which appeared in the mid-1840s (Figure 1). Unlike Cobden, Peel, as far as we know, was not a student of phrenology, but this did not stop the publisher, John Follit, from including the prime minister in his series of phrenological surveys of public figures (though, interestingly, he did not commission one for Cobden). At first glance, the phrenological reading of Peel appears to have little to say about emotion, focusing instead on personality traits. The reading – which could be described as conforming to the Protectionist case against Peel – emphasizes his indecisiveness, propensity to change his opinions, and secretiveness (the widely held belief that Peel had been plotting for some time to repeal the Corn Laws). While clearly meant to be satirical and critical, the reading, on closer inspection, implies a great deal about Peel's affective capacities – more by what is absent than by what is present. A notable absence is one of phrenology's key faculties – combativeness, a catchall term for a cluster of feelings which could include anger and hatred. Also absent is amativeness, and while that might be because this faculty tended to be associated with sexual instincts, it also signified love and the tender passions. The other key faculties are present, though again it is telling that they do little to advance the perception that Peel was a man of feeling: benevolence, for example, was meant to signify kindness and compassion, and adhesiveness, affection and friendship (though the slight bump on Peel's skull may imply that his capacity for benevolence was more developed). Another notable absence – which was, again, central to the Protectionist case against Peel – is the suggestion that Peel was craven and fearful in the face of the League. In fact, the suggestion is – by way of 'firmness' (no. 3) that Peel is being supported by the League, and 'cautiousness' (no. 9) in trusting to fate – that Peel is displaying equanimity. In short, the satirical image does little to dent and, in fact, does much to support the view of Peel as an ascetic in public life. Another satirical depiction in *Punch*, 'The man who works the automaton', in which Peel is portrayed as a machine operated by a hidden Cobden, can be interpreted similarly. While the main message is akin to the much more famous depiction of Cobden as an organ-grinder orchestrating the high politics of repeal, this image focuses much more closely on Peel himself than on government, presenting him as an automaton engaged in a cerebral game of chess, further stripping him of emotion.¹³²

IV

Asceticism was central to the political strategy of both Cobden and Peel in their pursuit of Corn Law repeal. While Cobden and Peel prided themselves, and were seen by others, as appealing to reason rather than feeling, as we have seen, neither was an unfeeling automaton: on occasion, they could lose their tempers, while Peel was a

¹³¹Peter Ghosh, 'Gladstone and Peel', in Peter Ghosh and Lawrence Goldman (eds), *Politics and culture in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 49–52.

¹³²*Punch*, vol. 10 (1846), pp. 68, 89.

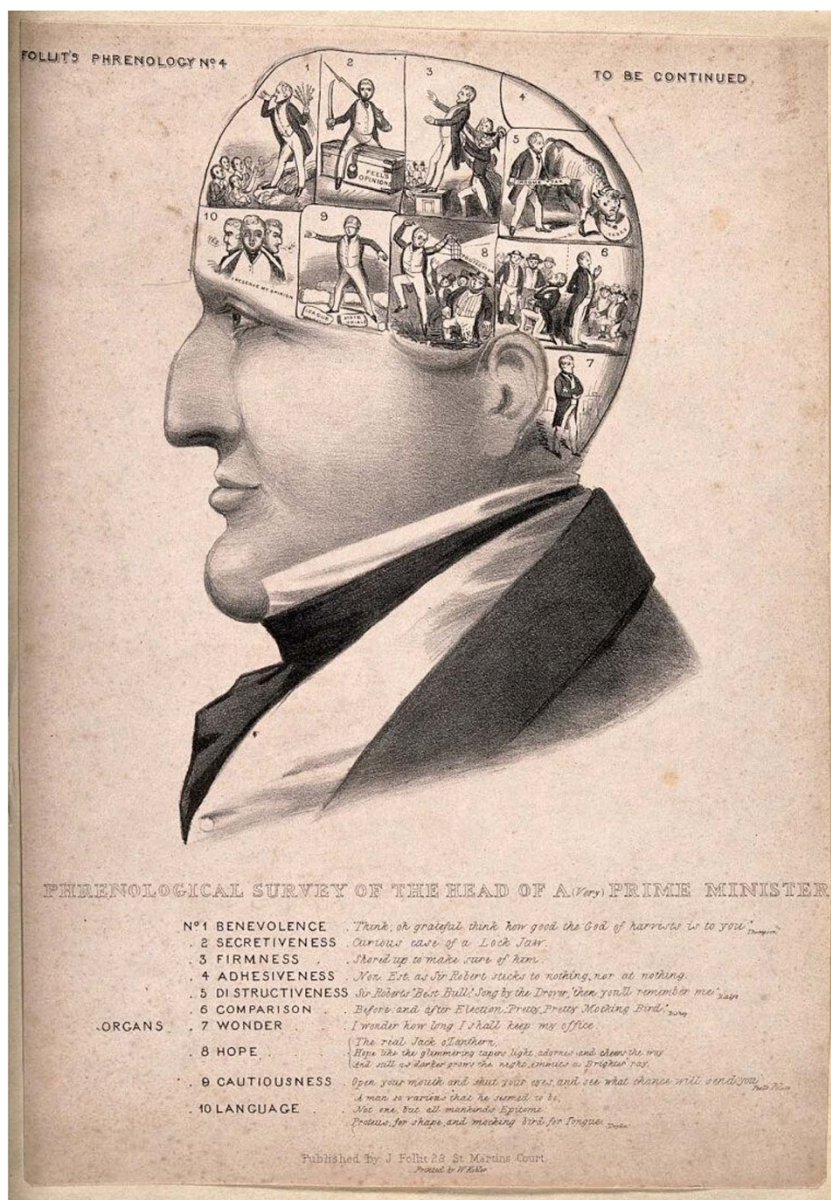


Figure 1. Phrenological head of Sir Robert Peel as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Lithograph, c. 1844 (London, n.d. c. 1844). Source: Wellcome Trust, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/tqs6jg3j>.

prideful man, Cobden an impatient one, and both were feeling acute stress by the time the Corn Laws were repealed. This begs the question of what claims are being made here about affective politics, and specifically the two contrasting emotional styles which have been sketched. The contention here is that there were identifiable groups of ascetic and sentimental politicians and, following from this, that political

constituencies were created in a manner similar to ideologies. While it is possible that individual politicians could shift between these two different styles to suit the changing sensibilities of the age, this was far from easy: those who remained wedded to sentimentalism found themselves out of step with the emotional ethos of the age, perhaps from reasons of individual psychology, values, attitudes, assumptions, context, religious belief or simply because the public performance of a specific affective politics created expectations among their supporters and peers in ways that constrained their ability to shift emotional styles.

This also suggests that the quest for a politics of reason took an emotional toll, and it is further contended in this article that affective politics, more generally, exacts a toll on all involved in the political process, an aspect of political culture that merits far more attention than it has so far received.¹³³ After all, forms of affective politics premised on the banishing of the passions from politics were themselves based on a particular kind of feeling. In some respects, asceticism is more manipulative in its approach to feeling, especially considering its associated disciplined affective regimen – of only displaying the right feelings in the right place at the right time. Thus, asceticism could be accused of demanding what the historian of emotion William Reddy called ‘emotional effort’ (‘Maintaining a goal or action plan despite rising suffering due to goal conflict’) and ‘emotional suffering’ (‘An acute form of goal conflict, especially that brought on by emotional thought activation’).¹³⁴ This raises the question of how a politician’s public affective style might belie their own private, inner emotional life – we have seen some of the challenges that this posed for both Peel and Cobden. When they erred, they found themselves censured. The very existence of this tension suggests that participation in politics can induce emotional suffering for all involved, not least because politicians have only a limited range of emotional repertoires to choose from, though further study of different periods and contexts is needed on the shifting and possibly limited range of affective politics that have shaped political culture.

The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, and in particular Peel’s resignation speech on 29 June 1846, marked not only a fundamental change in commercial policy but also the dawning of a political culture in which the public sphere was increasingly seen as a dispassionate arena. Indeed, at the risk of pushing the argument too far, it could be argued that it was the latter, rather than the former, which was more important, if only because the Corn Laws were not, in fact, repealed in 1846, but reduced while implementation was delayed for three years (in other words, repeal was neither total nor immediate – the two demands of the League).¹³⁵ As Peel made clear when introducing repeal, his overriding objective was to remove jealousy and dissension between the classes (and, he might have added, their political representatives) by repealing a law which had come to symbolize naked class legislation.

¹³³For two suggestive approaches in this direction, though with different points of departure than the one taken here, see Travis L. Crosby, *The two Mr Gladstones: a study in psychology and history* (New Haven, CT, 1997); Andrew Brunatti, “‘It must end, or I must end’: Castlereagh, mental health and politics in regency Britain’, *Parliamentary History*, 42 (2023), pp. 348–76.

¹³⁴William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of feeling: a framework for the history of emotions* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 129.

¹³⁵John Prest, ‘A large amount or a small? Revenue and the nineteenth-century Corn Laws’, *Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), pp. 467–78.

It was not that feelings had no part to play in this arena, but politicians – and by extension political citizens – ought to strive to conduct themselves in a cool, rational, business-like manner, with feeling conjoined but fundamentally subordinated to reason.¹³⁶ Becoming a political citizen in Victorian Britain was about more than just voting rights, duties, and the capacity to reason;¹³⁷ it was also about learning how to feel in the public sphere, which feelings were permissible, and which not, and when and where certain feelings were required. While Victorian public moralists might emphasize the importance of feeling over reason in the cultivation of moral sense, the role of politicians when interacting with the people was ‘to restrain rather than encourage the unruly instincts of the masses’.¹³⁸

In Cobden’s case, it was this asceticism which, in part, insulated him from the alarmism, martial values and patriotic passions that swept the country in 1848, in response to the rise of Napoleon III, and subsequently from the enduring Russophobia that led to the Crimean War. True, much of this can be attributed to Cobden’s enduring hostility to aristocratic corruption, but his pacifism and cosmopolitanism were also rooted in his often stated aversion to how patriotism and aggressive foreign policy appealed to ‘feelings of pride, revenge, hatred, and jealousy’.¹³⁹ Asceticism and its associated rational liberal political culture were by no means unchallenged forms of affective politics – as the ‘Papal aggression’ crisis of 1850–1, the Crimean War and the jingoistic popularity of Lord Palmerston each testify.¹⁴⁰ But it is revealing that, even before his untimely death at the age of forty-six in 1848, the Protectionist leader Lord George Bentinck had already torpedoed his chances of leading the tory rump largely because of his uncontrollable rage. As early as July 1846, an article in *Fraser’s Magazine* warned the Protectionists that displays of ‘angry feeling’, rather than ‘great management of the passions of other men’, would sink their cause.¹⁴¹ It is equally revealing that by the early 1850s, the Protectionist leader, Lord Stanley, now the Earl of Derby, was also counselling that the suffering brought about by the repeal of the Corn Laws should be discussed calmly.¹⁴² The Peelites were not just advocates of free trade, but also personifications of an affective politics that emphasized restraint and rationality over feeling: Peel’s right-hand man, Sir James Graham, for example, was similarly perceived as cool and unemotional.¹⁴³ Palmerston, for all his jocularly, was also celebrated for his ‘invincible temper’.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁶Michael Freeden, ‘Liberal passions: reason and emotion in late- and post-Victorian liberal thought’, in Ghosh and Goldman, *Politics and culture*, pp. 136–49.

¹³⁷Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian nation* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 57–62.

¹³⁸Jon Lawrence, *Electing our masters: the hustings in British politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 33–4; Stefan Collini, *Public moralists, political thought and intellectual life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991), p. 65.

¹³⁹Cain, *Cobden: speeches*, vol. 1, p. 79.

¹⁴⁰W. L. Burn, *The age of equipoise* (London, 1968), pp. 82–6.

¹⁴¹*Fraser’s Magazine*, 34 (199), July 1846, p. 124.

¹⁴²K. Theodore Hoppen, *The mid-Victorian generation: England, 1846–1886* (Oxford, 1998), p. 134; *Hansard*, Lords, 15 Mar. 1852, vol. 119, cols. 1008–9.

¹⁴³J. B. Conacher, *The Peelites and the party system, 1846–52* (Newton Abbot, 1972), p. 65; Ward, *Graham*, p. 214.

¹⁴⁴Antony Taylor, ‘Palmerston and radicalism, 1847–1865’, *Journal of British Studies*, 33 (1994), p. 177.

Asceticism reached its apogee in the rationality of popular Liberalism, notwithstanding the charismatic leadership of that sentimental survivor into an ascetic age, Mr Gladstone. It also found echoes in Disraelian Conservatism (even his attacks on Peel had been delivered in a cool, mocking, and sarcastic tone), and in popular Conservatism.¹⁴⁵ Both parties juxtaposed the rational, manly political citizen against women, for example, who were seen as too emotional to be granted formal political citizenship. However, this did not stop either party from incorporating support for women (while still trying to subordinate it).¹⁴⁶ Those men who transgressed this set of feeling rules in the political sphere, and elsewhere, were branded unmanly. The rise of asceticism was also linked to the waning of a broad range of cultural movements and an associated gender politics that had placed great emphasis on sentimentalism, notably evangelicalism, Tractarianism, and chivalry. From around mid-century, sentimentalism was increasingly defined pejoratively.¹⁴⁷ Thus, whether viewed from the perspective of party politics or broader cultural trends, asceticism was a set of feelings that was integral to the dawning calm of the mid-Victorian 'age of equipoise'. As the *Liberal Sheffield Independent* observed in 1854, the repeal of the Corn Laws had removed a major cause of dissension and acrimony between the classes. As a result, 'Angry denunciation has become rare. A headstrong disregard of consequences and fervid appeals to the passions are out of fashion'. Some three months earlier, Cobden told the Liberals of Sheffield that it was 'a time of great political calmness'.¹⁴⁸ It was a mood and tone which he, along with Peel, who had died tragically four years earlier, had done more than most to bring about.

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¹⁴⁵Gash, *Sir Robert Peel*, p. 469.

¹⁴⁶Vincent, *Formation*, intro.; Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, retrenchment and reform: popular liberalism in the age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992), intro.; Brian Harrison, *Peaceable kingdom: stability and change in modern Britain* (Oxford, 1982), p. 341; Joseph S. Meisel, 'The importance of being serious: the unexplored connection between Gladstone and humour', *History*, 84 (1999), pp. 278–300; Paul Smith, *Disraeli* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 74–5, 142.

¹⁴⁷Griffin, *Politics*, ch. 6 (esp. p. 173); Collini, *Public moralists*, p. 186.

¹⁴⁸*Sheffield Independent*, 1 Apr. and 21 Jan. 1854.

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