

The Greatest Briton

ESSAYS ON
WINSTON CHURCHILL'S LIFE
AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Jeremy Havardi



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Introduction

Churchill and the war on terror

THE EVENTS of September 11th 2001 have left an indelible imprint on the modern psyche. On that deadly autumn morning, nineteen Islamist terrorists carried out the single most devastating attack on American soil, claiming the lives of nearly three thousand people. In a well co-ordinated and planned operation, they assaulted the heart of the American political and economic system by attacking the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre. These attacks, a classic example of asymmetric warfare, were rightly described as ‘an act of war’ and not just an act of terror.¹ For many Americans, they induced a heightened sense of national vulnerability that was reminiscent of Britain’s experience in the Blitz.

In the aftermath of the atrocity one wartime leader loomed large in the American imagination: Winston Churchill. Speaking to survivors of the attack on the Pentagon, Donald Rumsfeld said: ‘At the height of peril to his own nation, Winston Churchill spoke of their finest hour. Yesterday, America and the cause of human freedom came under attack.’² The phrase ‘cause of human freedom’ would have struck a chord with Churchill. Churchill often portrayed Britain’s struggle against Nazi Germany in simple moral terms. In his famous broadcast announcing the imminent ‘Battle of Britain’, he declared that nothing less than ‘the survival of Christian civilisation’ was at stake. He told Parliament that if Britain lost, ‘the whole world, including the United States’ would ‘sink into the abyss of a new dark age.’³

President Bush appeared certain of the significance of 9/11. What was at stake in the war on terror was nothing less than the survival of the same freedoms that were threatened in 1940. ‘Every civilised nation has a part in this struggle,’ he declared, ‘because every civilised nation has a stake in its outcome.’ The war on terror was a pledge ‘for the freedom and security of [the] country and the

civilised world'. For Al Qaeda 'attacked not just our people but all freedom-loving people everywhere in the world'. On the eve of the invasion of Afghanistan, President Bush told the American people: 'We will not waver, we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.' He was echoing Churchill's resonant declaration in 1941: 'We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire.'

Both men were using Manichean phraseology in which the battles to come reflected simple moral opposites: good versus evil, freedom versus slavery, liberty versus tyranny. For many in Britain's modern secular culture, this terminology often appears alien and discomfiting, a throwback to the moral certainties of Victorian times. But as the embodiment of British resolve and indomitability, it is likely that Churchill would have approved of Bush's 9/11 phraseology, if not all of the President's subsequent policies. Though not a religious man, Churchill was profoundly aware of the potency of language and its role in political leadership.

Parallels were also drawn between the behaviour of New York mayor Rudy Giuliani and that shown by Churchill at the height of the Blitz. Giuliani will be remembered on 9/11 for his consoling words and his unwavering belief that New Yorkers would emerge stronger from their shattering experience. Like Churchill, Giuliani learnt the vital importance of *appearing* certain of victory. Without downplaying the havoc the terrorists had wrought, Giuliani talked and walked with an air of authority and inner belief. As the late Lord Jenkins put it: 'What Giuliani succeeded in doing is what Churchill succeeded in doing in that dreadful summer of 1940. He managed to create the illusion that we were bound to win.'⁴ In 1940, Churchill did the same. He sent out a memo ordering his staff not to appear sullen, dejected or defeatist but to radiate confidence in Britain's cause and its ability to survive. It was a confidence trick – but it worked.

Giuliani admitted in an interview that Churchill had long been his hero although he 'never used to tell people that'. Churchill had 'helped him a lot, before, during and after' the September 11th attacks. He admired the way that he 'had revived the spirit of the British people when it was down ... and [I] used Churchill to teach me how to reinvigorate the spirit of a dying nation.'⁵ *Time* magazine named Giuliani Man of the Year for 2001 and his popularity enabled him to pose as the Republicans' 'security' candidate in the race for the 2008 presidency.

It was therefore no accident that many Americans turned to Churchill after 9/11. It helped that he was a half American on his mother's side and that he had often romanticised the links between the English speaking peoples. Americans remembered that as a war leader he was indomitable, courageous, vigorous, optimistic and possessed of a deep moral conviction about the causes he espoused. They admired his pristine moral clarity in arguing that accommodation with Nazism was impossible and that appeasing Hitler was a short sighted betrayal of British values. For Churchill viewed Hitler, not as a simple-minded nationalist, but as one of a terrifying new brigade of ideological revolutionaries.

Today Europe, and the wider world, faces an unnerving challenge from the forces of radical Islam. Like Nazism, radical Islam (or Islamism) seeks no long term accommodation with its foe and demands no redress for merely localised grievances. Instead its jihadist supporters want to create a global Islamic state ruled by Sharia law, one in which the central freedoms of secular, Western societies are eradicated. This goal 'requires terror and unrelenting terror until its ends are achieved'.⁶

The advocates of radical Islam reject the separation of church and state, the notion that beliefs can ever be confined to the private realm. In their pure Islamic state, all behaviour must be in rigid conformity to the perceived tenets of the faith. Any values which conflict with their interpretation of Islamic law, such as freedom of speech, religious pluralism, democracy and sexual liberalism must be abolished. Radical Islam is therefore an inherently totalitarian ideology with religious foundations.

Like Nazism, Islamism is inherently anti-Semitic at its core. In the writings of leading Islamist ideologues, such as Muhammad Wahhab, Sayyid Qutb and Ruhollah Khomeini, the Jew is portrayed as a demonic enemy of Muslims and a malignant influence in the world. Jews are seen as having a treacherous and deceitful character, making them ripe for political suppression or eventual slaughter. Depictions of the Jew in the Arab world today frequently borrow the most virulent images from Nazi newspapers.⁷ Like the Nazis, Islamists thrive on a victim centred theory of history to explain and justify their murderous obsessions. Just as the Nazis lamented the Treaty of Versailles for emasculating German power, the Islamists point to the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 as the starting point for their jihadist crusade.⁸ The call to arms against a perceived enemy, whether Jews

or infidels, has a seductive power for Muslim radicals, just as it did for Germans in the 1930s.

Churchill would certainly have grasped the Islamic dimension to today's terror threat. As a young man in Sudan, he noted certain characteristics of Islamic rule that repelled him and was unsparing in his choice of words: 'How dreadful are the curses which Mohammedanism lays on its votaries. Besides the fanatical frenzy, which is as dangerous in a man as hydrophobia in a dog, there is this fearful fatalistic apathy. Improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggish methods of commerce, and insecurity of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule or live.'

He also condemned the Islamic law that stipulated that 'every woman must belong to some man as his absolute property', arguing that this hindered 'the final extinction of slavery'. Despite his favourable comments about the bravery of individual Muslim soldiers, he believed that Islam paralysed 'the social development of those who [followed] it'. In summary, there was 'no stronger retrograde force in the world'. In today's politically correct age, it is safe to assume that no Western leader would offer such a damning critique, at least not in public.

Churchill also realised that as a 'militant and proselytising' faith, it was a potent rallying cry for its devotees.⁹ In *The History of the Malakand Field Force* he wrote that whereas Christianity 'must always exercise a modifying influence on men's passions', Islam, 'increases, instead of lessening, the fury of intolerance'. He went on: 'It was originally propagated by the sword, and ever since, its votaries have been subject, above the people of all other creeds, to this form of madness.'¹⁰ His description of the Pashtun fakir, Mullah Mastun ('the Mad Mullah') as 'a wild enthusiast, convinced alike of his divine mission' who 'preached a crusade against the infidel' could easily be applied to jihadist leaders today.¹¹

Together with Egypt and Pakistan, the epicentre of twentieth-century radical Islam was Saudi Arabia. As Colonial Secretary, Churchill met the founder of the Saudi state, Ibn Saud, and in his dealings with him became familiar with the doctrine of Wahhabism. He wrote that this form of Islam bore comparison to 'the most militant form of Calvinism' and that Wahhabis held, as 'an article of faith', the need to kill those who disagreed with their ideas.

The Wahhabis were 'austere, intolerant, well-armed, and blood-thirsty' and believed they had to 'kill all those who [did] not share

their opinions' as well as 'make slaves of their wives and children'. He listed those who were affected: 'Women have been put to death in Wahabi villages for simply appearing in the streets. It is a penal offence to wear a silk garment. Men have been killed for smoking a cigarette.'¹² This was a perceptive comment on how much radical Islam was motivated by a rejection of Western values, practices and freedoms.¹³

Churchill then would have had much to say about the West's current 'long war' against extremism. But today's neo-conservatives have become somewhat misty-eyed when comparing George Bush and Winston Churchill. Despite his love of grand oratory and occasional Manichean terminology, Churchill rarely spoke of democracy and freedom in messianic tones. While he mentioned God on occasions, he was not an essentially religious man and his reverence for liberty and the Constitution was couched most often in pragmatic and secular terms.

Moreover, Churchill had a thoroughgoing knowledge of international affairs and wrote numerous articles on nearly every major conflict of his times. Before taking up his seat in the House of Commons, he had already acquired intimate knowledge of wars in Cuba, South Africa, Afghanistan and Sudan. This gave him an air of authority when he spoke up on colonial issues in Parliament. By contrast, Bush, like Neville Chamberlain, took office with little knowledge or experience of foreign issues.¹⁴

Churchill, more than Bush, sought to bridge the political divide on many occasions, refusing to be the plaything of any one political party. He was a coalitionist during the grave struggles of the Second World War, bringing together politicians from across the political divide so as to forge a more effective and representative government. After 9/11, Bush won cross-party support for his war on terror. But this support evaporated towards the end of his first term amid recriminations over domestic and foreign policy.

Above all, Churchill was an intellectual as well as a man of action. He was a biographer, novelist, historian and journalist, a master of words and an oratorical genius who famously became his own speechwriter. Though no intellectual slouch, Bush became famous for his lack of verbal dexterity and inarticulate manner. And, despite the similarities between Nazism and radical Islam, the challenge posed to Western civilisation between 1939 and 1945 was on a monumentally different scale to that posed by militant Islam today.

At their height, the Axis powers might have overrun Europe and the Far East, while seizing control of the Middle East's oil supplies, posing the ultimate threat to the Allies. That is not comparable to the current jihadist terror assault, which will need to be defeated, or contained, by a combination of military, economic and ideological pressures. Globalised terror cannot be defeated on the battlefield alone.

In some respects, radical Islam more closely resembles Soviet Communism. Both share a utopian belief in the redemption of humanity, with communism raising man from the 'despond' of capitalism and radical Islam reclaiming humanity from the perceived shackles of secular life. The advocates of both doctrines espouse the use of violence to achieve political change, regarding the killing of fellow travellers as a necessary stage to redemption. Just as Stalin inflicted terror on members of the communist party, so too jihadists have murdered moderate Muslims for rejecting puritanical Islam.¹⁵ And both communists and Islamists have sought to make inroads within Western societies by the subtle use of propaganda and subversion.

As a life-long opponent of communism, Churchill would have understood this form of cultural intimidation. He wrote that the Bolshevik aim of global revolution could be pursued in peacetime or war. As he put it, a Bolshevik peace was only 'another form of war'.¹⁶ If the Bolsheviks could not work by military means they would 'employ every device of propaganda in their neighbours' territories' to ensure those countries were 'poisoned internally'.¹⁷

Despite not being a conventional neo-con, Churchill was a bitter opponent of tyranny in any form. As such, he would have certainly approved of the principled stand taken by the Western alliance against Al Qaeda. But would he have approved of the 2003 war in Iraq? Certainly politicians on both sides of the Atlantic invoked Churchill's vigorous stand against appeasement to justify regime change against Saddam Hussein. On the eve of war in March 2003, President Bush declared: 'In this century, when evil men plot chemical, biological and nuclear terror, a policy of appeasement could bring destruction of a kind never before seen on this earth.'¹⁸

At the same time, Tony Blair offered the flipside of Neville Chamberlain's Munich speech by condemning 'appeasement in our time'. Chamberlain was, according to Blair, a 'good man who made the wrong decision'. He spelt out the crucial lessons of appeasement:

‘The lesson we learnt then was that if, confronted by a threat, we back away because we assume that our ... peaceful intentions are matched by those threatening us, the threat only grows, and at a later time has to be confronted again, but in a far more deadly and dangerous form.’¹⁹ On the other side of the Atlantic, Richard Perle warned of Saddam Hussein: ‘The danger that springs from his capabilities will only grow as he expands his arsenal. A pre-emptive strike against Hitler at the time of Munich would have meant an immediate war, as opposed to the one that came later. Later was much worse.’²⁰

What all these politicians overlooked was that Churchill had already experienced a dispiriting military entanglement in Iraq. After the First World War Britain was awarded the mandate for Mesopotamia (Iraq) and maintained an imperial presence there for a number of years. But in 1920 a coalition of Iraqi insurgents declared a jihad against the British and parts of Iraq rebelled against colonial rule. The uprising was swiftly put down, albeit at considerable cost to British troops.

As Colonial Secretary, Churchill took over responsibility for reaching a political settlement in Iraq but often expressed grave doubts about the mandate. At one point he declared: ‘We have not got a single friend in the press upon the subject, and there is no point of which they make more effective use to injure the government. Week after week and month after month for a long time to come we shall have a continuance of this miserable, wasteful, sporadic warfare...’²¹ These sound like the sentiments of many a politician and General after the 2003 invasion.

We should sometimes be wary of those who wrap themselves in a Churchillian mantle in order to promote controversial policies. But in general, Churchill remains profoundly relevant to political debate in the twenty first century. During a public career spanning sixty years, he confronted many of the issues that concern us today: the Northern Ireland peace process, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the future of Iraq, the response to terrorism, European unity, the special relationship with America, welfare reform and taxation to name but a few. This volume will show how he grappled with these, and other, problems and how some of his thinking remains apposite for a modern generation. Above all, it is the aim of this book to dispel the many myths that surround the Churchill legend and, in so doing, offer a more rounded portrait of this multifaceted genius.

NOTES

- 1 This was how President Bush described the attacks in a live address to the nation on September 11th 2001.
- 2 A. Roberts, *Secrets of Leadership*, p.xvii.
- 3 Speeches VI, pp.6231-8.
- 4 J. Ramsden, *Man of the Century*, p.586.
- 5 A. Thompson, 'I looked out of the window and saw this nuclear cloud', in *Daily Telegraph*, February 12th 2002.
- 6 M. Desai, *Rethinking Islamism*, p.12.
- 7 See the short documentary *Obsession* by Wayne Kopping and Raphael Shore (2006).
- 8 In 1923, Turkey's leader, Kemal Ataturk, formally dissolved the Ottoman Sultanate, creating a secular republic with himself as President. A year later he dissolved the Muslim Caliphate, the political leadership of the global Muslim community since the time of Muhammad, as part of his modernisation.
- 9 W. Churchill, *The River War II*, pp.248-50.
- 10 W. Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, p.40.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.39.
- 12 Speeches III, p.3102.
- 13 By comparison, contemporary *bien pensant* opinion blames Western foreign policy for this Islamist aggression.
- 14 L. Olson, 'Why Winston Wouldn't Stand For W', *Washington Post*, July 1st 2007.
- 15 Islamists are attempting to dominate the cultural sphere, setting up schools to propagate Saudi Wahhabism, forcing through Sharia law in civil matters and using 'human rights' to ring fence Islam from criticism.
- 16 *Evening News*, July 28th 1920.
- 17 Companion IV (ii), p.1099.
- 18 J. Weisberg, *The Bush Tragedy*, p.233.
- 19 Tony Blair, Speech, March 1st 2003.
- 20 *Daily Telegraph*, August 9th 2002.
- 21 Companion IV (ii), p.1199.

Did Churchill want to abolish the House of Lords?

AT THE START of his political career, Churchill was an ardent champion of the British Constitution and, in particular, the hereditary House of Lords. In 1899 he had denounced the Liberals for their hostility to the Lords, and he later described the peers as a 'bulwark of the English Constitution'.³⁶ In 1906, while lauding Tory democracy, he made it clear that the British Constitution, far from needing radical alteration, was a means by which to guide social progress. In his first few years as an MP, he made no attempt to advocate lasting constitutional change, which fitted well with his strong aristocratic connections and Conservative viewpoint.

However, the Conservative inclinations of the Lords grated with Churchill as a Liberal MP. In 1905 he mocked that 'the check established by the House of Lords ... if it operated at all, operated only when one political party was in power'.³⁷ His words would prove prescient. The great shock for the Lords was the landslide Liberal victory in 1906 that swept away twenty years of Conservative predominance in English politics. Balfour, the Conservative leader in the Lords, had declared that 'the great Unionist party should still control, whether in power or in opposition, the destinies of this great Empire'. Between 1906 and 1909, the Lords proceeded to wreck or veto many pieces of reforming legislation, leading the Chancellor David Lloyd George to remark that the Lords had become 'not the watchdog of the Constitution, but Mr. Balfour's poodle'. Lloyd George was already established as a fiery critic of privilege and class, but from 1907, Churchill would join him in his radical harangues.

Denouncing the House of Lords in 1907 as a 'fortress of negation and reaction', Churchill condemned the way that a man could acquire legislative functions 'simply through his virtue in being born'. He wrote that, instead of acting as an 'impartial chamber of review', the Lords had become an 'irresponsible body' and a 'spoke in the wheel'; above all, they were the 'champions of one interest', namely the 'landed interest'. There were some who favoured sending bills to the Lords in the hope that they would be rejected, leading to a growing sense of public outrage which could be exploited in a general election. But Churchill believed this approach to be somewhat des-

perate, amounting to 'the policy of bowling lobbs for the House of Lords to sky in the hope that the spectators will take pity on the bowlers'.³⁸

In a debate on constitutional reform later in 1908, he set himself up as a champion of parliamentary liberty against the encroachment of the peers and their landed interest. He was unsparing in his contempt for the Lords, describing them as a 'one-sided hereditary, unpurged, unrepresentative, irresponsible absentee' and 'obedient henchmen' of the Tories'.³⁹ The House of Lords was filled with 'old doddering peers, cute financial magnates, clever wirepullers, big brewers with bulbous noses ... weaklings, sleek, smug, comfortable self-important individuals'.⁴⁰ His desire was to 'wrest from the hands of privilege and wealth the evil and ugly and sinister weapon of the Peers' veto'.⁴¹

This violent outburst would have been unsurprising from Lloyd George, with his fiery brand of Welsh non-conformism; but, coming from the grandson of a Duke, raised in a privileged, aristocratic setting, it was truly shocking. Not surprisingly, Churchill was denounced by many as a traitor to his class.

The opportunity for a grave constitutional showdown came in 1909. The Liberals presented their budget for the year which included increases in naval expenditure, an old age pensions bill and a programme of social reform. To fund these measures, the government raised taxes on higher incomes, increased death duties and added a new 'super tax' on very high incomes.

However the most contentious idea in the budget, the one that really exercised the Lords, was the novel suggestion of a tax on land values. It was the brainchild of the American political economist, Henry George. George had argued, in his influential book *Progress and Poverty*, that poverty was caused by an unjust distribution of wealth which, far from being part of the natural condition, was the product of human laws.

For George, the maldistribution of wealth was inextricably linked to the unjust ownership and monopolisation of land. He argued that, as a town's population increased in size, so too did the value of land in and around that community. As the population expanded, new infrastructure (i.e. roads, railways, streets) was required, the cost of which was borne by the community, not the landlord. When the landlord came to sell the land, he could do so at enormous 'unearned' profit. George believed that the concentration of unearned wealth in

the hands of land monopolists, which resulted in higher rents and thus reduced purchasing power for the working man, was the root cause of poverty.

To remedy this injustice, George sought a 'rental' tax on the annual value of privately owned land. This tax would be on the site value of the land, rather than on any man-made improvements or buildings. In this way, landowners would pay rent to the government, in effect returning some value to the community which was responsible for increasing the land value in the first place. In George's words, 'We would simply take for the community what belongs to the community.'⁴² He argued that, with this new system of taxation in place, a government could abolish taxes on incomes and goods, both of which were harmful to the functioning of any dynamic economy. Land taxes would directly tackle the cause of poverty rather than mitigate its worst symptoms.⁴³

Churchill came to be one of the most outspoken advocates for George's land taxes. Indeed, it was his support for Georgist thinking that most clearly marked him out as a liberal 'firebrand'. In 1906 he told Liberal MP Josiah Wedgwood that he had been reading George's *Progress and Poverty* and could 'see no answer to him'.⁴⁴ In April 1907 he told a crowd at the Drury Lane Theatre that land taxes would 'prevent any class from steadily absorbing under the shelter of the law the wealth in the creation of which they had borne no share – wealth which belonged not to them but to the community'.⁴⁵ 'Every form of enterprise,' he wrote later, 'is only undertaken after the land monopolist has skimmed the cream off for himself.'⁴⁶

He also shared George's conviction that taxation was socially harmful, describing it in 1908 as 'a gross and unredeemable evil' which could not 'fail to diminish' the 'consuming and productive energies of the people'.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, by 1909 Lloyd George, under Cabinet pressure, had watered down Henry George's original proposal for a land tax. First there was to be a 20 per cent tax on 'unearned increment' from land, but only when the land was sold or passed on after death. There was also a small duty on undeveloped land in the budget.

But, despite this dilution of George's original proposals, the Lords still vehemently rejected land taxes. For months they examined the Finance Bill in meticulous detail, their central objections confined to the land taxes. While some of his Cabinet colleagues hoped that the Lords would pass the budget, Churchill clearly relished the prospect

of a showdown. 'We shall send them up such a budget in June as shall terrify them'.⁴⁸

He was aware that, if the Lords vetoed this bill, it would be tantamount to a non-elected chamber deciding which government was in power, in turn making the Lords 'the main source and origin of all political power under the Crown'. Control over finance was, after all, the 'keystone' of the Constitution. In his most caustic speech on the issue, Churchill denounced 'the small fry of the Tory party splashing actively about in their proper puddles'. He had little sympathy for the nation's Dukes, who were no more than 'ornamental creatures' blundering 'on every hook they seek'.⁴⁹ The forthcoming struggle over the budget was between 'a representative assembly elected by six or seven millions ... and a miserable minority of titled persons who represent nobody, who are responsible to nobody and who only scurry up to London to vote in their party interests, their class interests and in their own interests'.⁵⁰

As Churchill expected, the Lords duly rejected the budget on November 30th 1909. Following the announcement of a general election for January 1910, Churchill condemned the Lords as 'a lingering relic of the feudal order'. When Curzon declared that 'all civilisation has been the work of aristocracies', Churchill responded, 'it would be much more true to say the upkeep of the aristocracy has been the hard work of all civilisations'.⁵¹

Churchill was rare among politicians in that his tone could be more vituperative in public than in private. In a memorandum in 1909, he presented a reasoned case for reform that accepted the need for a 'revising' second chamber. He seemed to agree with the Ripon Plan which advocated a hundred peers sitting and voting with all MPs when differences between the two houses arose. On November 9th he accepted the need for a second chamber to impose a check on the executive and thought joint sessions would 'be productive of debates of the highest value' while also providing 'an entirely fresh opportunity of conciliatory settlements'.⁵²

He argued that peers should be chosen from different political parties, though other figures in public office, such as military officers and civil service figures, could be included. There would be a power of delay effective for one year with a joint session called when a disagreement arose between the two houses. Interestingly, Churchill did not call for the overthrow of the hereditary principle or the

voting rights of peers. In short, there would be 'no break in the historical continuity of our constitutional development'.⁵³ He also accepted the principle that peers could renounce their peerages to take a seat in the Commons.

In January 1910 a general election was held. The Liberals won but with a massively reduced majority of two, leaving them in the difficult position of relying on the support of the Labour Party and the Irish Nationalists. Churchill believed that the government now had a mandate for Lords reform, but thus far his proposals had been limited to the modification of the powers of the second chamber. However, in 1910 he sent Asquith a memorandum in which he proposed something far more radical. 'The time has come', he declared, 'for the total abolition of the House of Lords.'⁵⁴

He came to believe that, as long as the Lords remained, the Tory Party would find ways of controlling it. However, if the Lords were to be abolished, he would need to find something to replace it. He advocated a second chamber which would be wholly subordinate to the elected Commons, smaller than the Commons and elected from very large constituencies. This new second chamber would be unable to reject budgets, and thus would lack 'power to make or unmake governments'.⁵⁵

Its ability to revise legislation and to 'interpose the potent safeguard of delay' was also paramount.⁵⁶ He envisaged a second chamber with 150 members, two thirds of whom would be elected from fifty major constituencies, sitting for eight-year terms, and the members chosen from 'a panel of public service'. The second chamber would be unable to reject a money bill but would possess a suspensory veto for three years, after which an issue would be decided by a majority vote in a joint session of the two houses. Instead of Law Lords, he advocated a 'Supreme Court of Appeal for the British Empire'. However, few other Cabinet members shared Churchill's enthusiasm for such a radical constitutional transformation, preferring a sustained attack on the Lords' powers of veto. Nonetheless, his notion of a Supreme Court of Appeal sounds uncannily similar to the body that has replaced the Law Lords in 2009.⁵⁷

The Asquith government now introduced resolutions to limit the power of the Lords, which later formed the basis of the 1911 Parliament Act. The provisions of this act marked a milestone in relations between the two houses. Firstly, the Lords were denied the power to veto a money bill, the issue that had created the crisis in the first

place. Secondly, it stipulated that any bill that had been passed by the Commons in three successive sessions, but rejected by the Lords in those sessions, would become law. It also included an amendment to the Septennial Act whereby the life of a parliament was reduced from seven down to five years.

Asquith knew that, without the assent of the intransigent Lords, this act would never become law. He therefore asked Edward VII whether he would be prepared to create 250 new Liberal peers in the event that the Lords rejected it. The King agreed, on condition that the Prime Minister call another election to seek a public mandate for his policy. Edward VII died in May 1910, but when George V came to the throne he also agreed to the constitutional changes only after an election. Following the January 1911 general election, the Liberals returned with a virtually unchanged majority but a clear mandate for the Parliament Act. With full knowledge of the royal threat looming over them, the Lords duly passed the Parliament Act by 131 votes to 114.

Churchill's role in 1911 should be noted. Far from wanting party bickering, he called for a cross-party approach to the future composition of the Lords. As he said: 'We should state at the proper time that after the veto has been restricted we shall be quite ready to discuss the future composition of the Lords with the Conservative leaders.' The government should pursue '*une politique d'apaisement*' (a policy of appeasement) which would partly consist in 'a liberal grant of Honours' to leading Conservatives as well as 'Tory peers and baronets'.⁵⁸

In the Commons he spoke of his hope that the passage of the bill would 'mark a new era' in politics, an 'era not of strife but of settlement'.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, he remained unhappy with this bill as it gave considerable revising powers to the Lords which, he argued, could wreck the last two years of a government. In later life he came to accept much of the 1911 act, even to the point of rejecting the modification made in 1949 whereby the suspensory veto of the Lords would last only one year. He also supported a motion for members of the Lords to be able to renounce their titles and stand for election to the Commons.

Churchill was born into aristocratic surroundings but he never let that fact dictate his perspective. Accused of class disloyalty, he showed vigour and imagination in trying to reach an agreeable and workable constitutional settlement. Much as he admired features of

the British Constitution, he could not accept the muzzling of the Commons by a hereditary chamber. In this sense, his reverence for parliamentary democracy remained paramount.

How did Churchill help to found Britain's welfare state?

'THE MINISTER who will apply to this country the successful experiences of Germany in social organisation may or may not be supported at the polls, but he will at least have left a memorial which time will not deface of his administration.'⁶⁰

Between 1908 and 1911, a small step was taken towards creating the fully fledged welfare state we recognise today. The Liberal government under Asquith introduced a pensions system, social and health insurance for workers, a minimum wage in some of the sweated trades and labour exchanges. It was a limited form of social security but it represented an important advance in state intervention. As President of the Board of Trade from 1908 to 1910, Churchill was deeply involved in these measures. Between these years he gave numerous speeches highlighting the need to alleviate poverty and unemployment and campaigned for the People's Budget of 1909. He pioneered National Health Insurance and labour exchanges as well as important measures to improve working conditions in shops and factories.

But Churchill's role in these developments remains contentious among historians. For his official biographer, Sir Martin Gilbert, Churchill was 'a believer in the need for the State to take an active part, both by legislation and finance, in ensuring minimum standards of life, labour and social well-being for its citizens'.⁶¹ However for Frances Lloyd George, Churchill 'had no interest in social reform',⁶² while Beatrice Webb, commenting in her diary in 1904 after a conversation with Churchill, wrote simply: 'He has no sympathy with suffering.'⁶³

Nevertheless, Violet Bonham-Carter believed that Churchill fully endorsed the Liberal government's desire to eradicate poverty and redress the wrongs of industrial life: 'It is to Winston Churchill's signal credit that he embraced these aims and worked and fought with all his heart and might to realise them.'⁶⁴ What becomes clear is that the Liberal Party introduced reforms for a mixture of