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## **Britain: Toward Democracy**

In contrast to most states on the Continent, Britain's political development during the second half of the 19th century went fairly smoothly, as economic prosperity increased and Parliament continued to initiate gradual reform that built on legislation from the earlier part of the century.

### ***The Evolution of the Monarchy***

By the 1850s, the monarchy symbolized the stability of the age, with Queen Victoria ruling from 1837 to 1901. In contrast to many of her predecessors, she and her husband Albert were models of morality and propriety who lived frugally by royal standards. Their lifestyle appealed to the growing middle class of the second half of the 19th century, and the queen cultivated the image of being above politics as a symbol of national unity. Although Victoria had less power than most monarchs on the Continent, many others were toppled, while the constitutional monarchy endured in Britain. So great was Victoria's influence that the entire era was known as the Victorian Age, because the middle classes in Britain saw in her a reflection of their own values. Victorian morality frowned on public drunkenness, anti-alcohol movements flourished, and public festivals were regulated to make them less rowdy.

### ***Parliamentary Reforms***

Voting rights continued to expand during the late 19th century, building on the Reform Bill of 1832, as the political party system was flexible enough to allow for a relatively smooth policymaking process. The Tory Party evolved into the Conservative Party, which generally favored the status quo while still supporting liberal reform that aided economic development and strengthened representative government. The Whig Party changed its name to the Liberal Party, which as its name implies – promoted economic and political liberalism. In 1867, the Conservatives, led by Benjamin Disraeli, passed the Second Reform Bill, which made a million more men – mostly from the middle class and highly-paid working class – eligible to vote. Parliament passed this reform, as well as many others, partly because interest groups had gradually increased in power and in numbers, and they actively promoted their particular causes. Liberal reform was supported very strongly by William Gladstone, the Liberal Party prime minister that served four times between the 1860s and 1890s. Gladstone's ministry passed education reforms that

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provided state support for elementary education, and his government instituted competitive examinations for the civil service. Later in the century, Parliament became convinced that all working-class men were worthy of the vote, and so the Third Reform Bill of 1884 provided suffrage for almost every adult male in Britain. Under Liberal leadership, several social welfare measures were passed between 1906 and 1914, including national health insurance, unemployment benefits, and old-age pensions.

## Irish Home Rule

### **Perspectives: William Gladstone on Irish Home Rule**

By the 1880s, agitation for Irish home rule reached a peak, and Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone, announced his support for it in a speech to Parliament in 1886. The issue split Gladstone's Liberal Party, and those that opposed home rule sided with the Conservatives to defeat Gladstone's bill. The following excerpt from the speech reflects Gladstone's respect for Irish nationalism and shame for Britain's past treatment of Ireland.

“ ... Can anything stop a nation's demand, except its being proved to be immoderate and unsafe? But here are multitudes ... who feel this demand to be neither immoderate nor unsafe ... Ireland stands at your bar expectant, hopeful, almost suppliant. Her words are the words of truth and soberness ... Go into the length and breadth of the world, ransack the literature of all countries, find, if you can, a single voice, a single book, find, I would almost say, as much as a single newspaper article, unless the product of the [present] day, in which the conduct of England towards Ireland is anywhere treated except with profound and bitter condemnation. Are these the traditions by which we are exhorted to stand? No; they are a sad exception to the glory of our country. They are a broad and black spot upon the pages of its history ... “

The most serious challenge to British nation-building during this time period was the “Irish question.” As political rights extended for most British citizens, Irish nationalists sought to achieve home rule, or local rule by an Irish Parliament, for their homeland. During his first ministry, Gladstone had sponsored two pieces of legislation: one that freed Irish Roman Catholics from paying taxes to support the Anglican Church, and one that provided compensation to Irish land tenants who were evicted by their absentee English landlords. However, the Irish question festered, as the resentment of Irish

tenants toward their profits-oriented landlords grew. The Irish members of Parliament – led by Charles Stewart Parnell – demanded British support for home rule in exchange for Irish votes for programs supported by the major political parties. Gladstone accommodated Parnell with bills on home rule, but Conservatives refused to go along, and when the Conservative Party was in power, it refused to recognize Irish demands. The government used forgeries and other questionable means to destroy Parnell, who was eventually brought down by scandal in his personal life. His affair with a married woman offended Victorian morality, and he died in disgrace in 1891, without accomplishing his goal of Irish home rule.