GRESHAM COLLEGE

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GEORGE IV: RADICAL OR REACTIONARY?

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Good evening. I am going to talk tonight about George IV. 2020 marks the 200th anniversary of his accession to the British throne, and this anniversary - opportunely in the light of recent events in the institution of the monarchy - gives us the opportunity to think about the role of an individual, as a private and as a public person, in this most gilded of cages.

I am going to ask a few questions about George IV, of the sort of questions that historians do still ask if only of selected historical figures - male figures for the most part - monarchs, politicians, generals and so on - that is to say, was George IV a success, as a public figure - was he a good Prince of Wales, Regent, King? Did he do what the institution of the monarchy demanded of him? I am also going to talk about his influence: did he leave anything that was distinguished, useful or beautiful? And then I am going to talk about him as a person, because George was, after a fashion, a private man, trying, within the constraints of the institution he was born to inherit and head, to lead some sort of private life. Finally, I'll ask if on the 200th anniversary of George IV's accession we should reassess the reputation that he has and modify it in any way.

George IV's reputation was poor when he acceded to the throne in 1820, and poor when he died in 1830. The day after his funeral the Times newspaper ran a leader declaring with undeferential relish, 'there never was an individual less regretted by his fellow creatures than this deceased King'. 'What eye has wept for him?, it went on, 'What heart has heaved one throb of unmercenary sorrow? If George IV ever had a friend - a devoted friend - in any rank of life, we protest that the name of him or her has not yet reached us.'

George was held in low esteem both by his chief executor, the Duke of Wellington, and by his niece, Queen Victoria. The duke destroyed many of George IV's personal possessions and, presumably, as much of his private correspondence, both incoming and outgoing, that he could get hold of. Queen Victoria hung onto the best of his paintings, porcelain, silver and furniture, but sold off or junked what she didn't like. In the absence of George's private correspondence, his vast and expensive wardrobe and his collections other than his best art and furniture, his intimate world and emotions are difficult to reconstruct except from the outside.

But this negative assessment did not wait for George IV's death. It was arrived at early on, as the image that I have put up here shows. It was made by James Gillray in 1792, when George, then Prince of Wales, was just 30 years old, and titled 'A voluptuary under the horrors of digestion'.

Gillroy's engraving shows the Prince of Wales at the height of his most debauched period, splayed out over a chair, picking his teeth with a fork. George stares unapologetically at us, surrounded by empty wine bottles, a

cascade of unpaid bills, an overflowing chamber pot. Gillroy's engraving does not even show the Prince as convivially drunk or fornicating, as many other prints did, but alone, without companions. Perhaps one reason why it has endured so long is that it contains something we don't see when we first look: the essential loneliness of the man and the role he had to fulfil.

Gillroy's image was famous in its own day and was republished many times in the years and decades after 1792. It came to encapsulate the popular vision of George IV as a wastrel, a spendthrift and a drunkard. It also highlights several important things that it is useful to bear in mind when we consider the life of George IV. The first -

topically - is that it was about the private and, seemingly, not the public life of the Prince of Wales, and this highlights the fact that by the mid-eighteenth century the distinction between the private life and the public life of a member of the royal family had been eroded by the ubiquity and licence of the press. The 18th century press was active, scurrilous and recording everything in both words and images. There were dozens of daily newspapers published in Britain by the 1760s, and they all needed copy. The laws of libel were weak; all kinds of things could be printed that would be forbidden today: private letters, satires, rumours, accounts of debaucheries and love affairs. Until the 1790s when draconian new laws against what was called seditious libel were passed, Britain's press was really very free. Prints were also issued in their thousands, satirical as well as comic:
That's the Prince on the left hand side - the content of the image is less important (it has to do with the so-called Regency crisis in 1788-9) than the fact that even more than today, perhaps, imagery and written accounts strongly influenced the way in which public figures were seen. As we will see, George IV put a tremendous amount of energy into his own public image - in portraits, interiors, pageants and buildings, but it is Gillray's image, which hints that a careless Prince will be an equally careless king, that has endured.

What led to the point at which George could plausibly be described as a voluptuary in thrall to sensation? After all it started very well. George was born on 12 August 1762, just 11 months after the marriage of his parents George III and Princess Charlotte of Mecklenberg Strelitz.

Here is the King, young and splendid in his coronation robes:

The production of an heir was the basic familial duty of a monarch, and George III fulfilled that duty as quickly as humanly possible, and any anxiety about the perpetuation of the dynasty was completely eased by the stream

of children who came after George: 15 in all. And in addition to that, George III was young and healthy, likely to live long. He was extremely moderate in his habits - a way of life that gradually turned into a high-minded austerity that made his court exceptionally dull and his heir infuriated - and inclined to let his children live simply and out of the public eye.

So, it all got off to a good start. George was a bonny and intelligent child, with fine blue-grey eyes and a mass of light brown hair. George III was an indulgent father to his babies and loved to play with them on the carpet at Windsor or at Kew. But far too soon Prince George was removed from the family and, with his younger brother Frederick, was set up in Kew Palace under the eye of a harsh governor, Lord Holdernesse, and several tutors. From the age of 7 he was being prepared for his future role as King, so that he was aware that he was different from his brothers and sisters. He was the heir to the throne, and subject way beyond his childhood not just to the conditions of the 1701 Act of Settlement that laid down the relationship between the crown and the executive, but also to his father's whims and strictures. The Act of Settlement precluded him from marrying a Catholic, while the Royal Marriages Act of 1772 forbad him from marrying anyone without his father's permission before the age of 25. Everywhere he turned three was his father, stopping something.

Hanoverian kings and their heirs already had a bad history. George I hated his son and banished him from St James's Palace. George 2nd in turn ridiculed and hates HIS son, Prince Frederick, and similarly threw him out. Frederick died young, so that the chain might have been broken here, but his son George III seemed to have learned nothing from the family history. He cut his son off from family affection, made his love for him dependent on good behaviour and was constantly on the lookout for lapses from his own high standards.

Not surprisingly it all went very wrong. By the time George was a teenager, the combination of an unremittingly severe regime, the subservience of courtiers and visitors, and the emotional neglect to which he was subject had produced a rebellious young man who was well-educated, charming and talented, but also self-regarding and disinclined to the efforts required of his position as the future king. At 16 George dashed off a peon of self-praise for one of his sisters' attendants, describing himself in the third person. 'His sentiments and thoughts are open and generous,' he wrote, adding that though he is 'rather too fond of both women and wine', his quick temper was forgivable because he was 'above doing anything that is mean'.

This version of himself, as a dashing and charming young man, is evident in the equestrian portrait painted by George Stubbs in 1791, a painting that the prince was particularly fond of - and we can see why:

Others agreed that the Prince was convivial and warm and could be charming when he wanted to be. Had he not been who he was, his acquaintance Lady Holland wrote, 'he would, I am persuaded, have been a most amiable man.' He was often kind, loved children and hated any kind of cruelty to animals. He was happy to sit round the piano and sing, liked bawdy songs and popular opera arias, counting it an honour that Gioachino Rossini came to play the piano for him while he sang songs from his operas. Joseph Haydn wrote that George had 'an extraordinary love of music, and a lot of feeling' for it. George returned the compliment by commissioning Haydn's portrait from John Hoppner when the composer came to London in 1791 but, also typically, never took delivery of it, so that it did not enter his collection until Hoppner died in 1810.

The positive view that the prince had of himself, and many visitors echoed, was not shared by the King. George quickly came to the opposite view, voicing a disapproval and distain that the prince fully returned by the time he was in his late teens. The king, 'hates me,' George told his friend James Harris, adding, 'he always did, from seven years old'.

The duties of the Prince of Wales were undefined, but, in practice, determined by the King. From the age of 21 George received a handsome allowance of £62,000 a year, and a household and establishment of his own in Carlton House on the southern side of Pall Mall. He was forbidden from leaving the country without permission or taking a military role, both of which he longed to do, and he was now in a very public way his father's heir. George III expected him to act with the decorum and ceremony his position demanded, especially in the matter of politics, where he was expected, if not to support his father, then certainly to stay out of the limelight. Matters were supposed to continue in this way until the King died; but in 1783, when the Prince moved into Carlton House, his father was only 45 years old. Decades might pass before he inherited the throne. So the burning question of the Prince's life was what to do in the meantime - the same question that has haunted members of the royal family who are not the monarch since the turn of the 18th century, when a constitutional monarchy was established in Britain.

As if to spite his father, as soon as he turned 18, and even more so once he moved into Carlton House, the prince began to pursue with great energy and pleasure the life of women, song and wine that his father most feared. The press, of course, loved this, and images of the prince began to fill the print shops of London.

Here is George with his companions and a couple of courtesans, drawn by Thomas Rowlandson sometime in the early 1780s - the Whig politician Charles James Fox is on the left dressed as an abbess of Covent Garden, that is to say the procuress, or the person who has led the prince to these debaucheries. Much as George III hated the way these prints drew attention to his son and his gallivanting, George himself rather liked this sort of image, which was, at this stage, not without affection.

Out on the town, at prize-fights, at Newmarket, with a string of mistresses who had to be bought off when he got bored: George chose activities that enraged his father not just because they were a deliberate affront to his way of life, but because they involved spending huge amounts of money. George 3rd was always careful to live within his civil list allowance and his private income and bought the art, books, clothes and other objects that he thought befitting to a monarch but nothing more. Prince began therefore to overspend extravagantly, and not just on

entertainment, hordes and women. He embarked on full-scale renovations to Carlton House, on furniture and art and on a spectacular wardrobe.

Carlton House was a rambling and neglected pile when the Prince moved in and was still an architectural and stylistic hodgepodge when it was demolished in 1826. Nothing remains except some of the furniture and objects - a vast collection of stuff that occupied many rooms on the top floor - and the paintings that George bought while he lived there, so the vast sums that were spent on it were wasted. Carlton House's melange of Chinois-Gothic-Louis Quinze-Swag anticipated some of the schemes that were later carried out in the Brighton Pavilion, but the effect, if surviving prints are anything to go by, was less eccentric and more deadening.

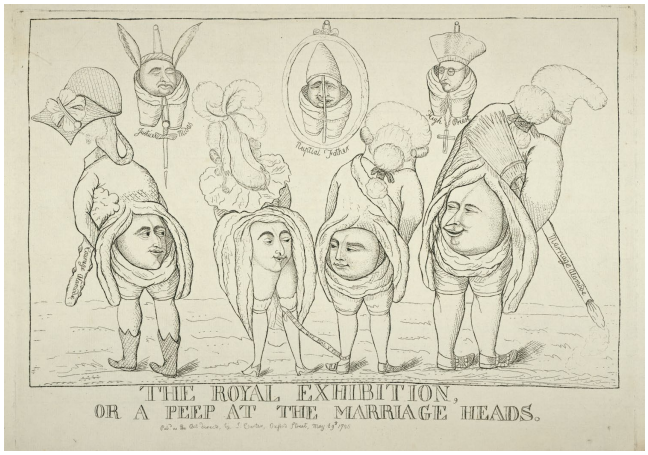
Here is the velvet room and the lobby and staircase:

From the surviving evidence, Carlton House interiors seem to have been all gilt and chintz, with heavy curtains, vast chandeliers: to our present taste, it's grandeur without elegance, luxury without beauty. It certainly was, however, much grander than anywhere King George 3rd inhabited; much more of a palace than Kew, much grander than Kensington Palace and far more regal than the medieval shambles of St James's. Carlton House was an alternative court, but one where George shrugged off the atmosphere of the real court, with its disciplined use of the day and tepid evening entertainments. When he was to be found at home it was often in his bedchamber, where he transacted both friendship and such business as he could bring himself to do. The memoirist Nathaniel Wraxall reported with glee that visitors often found the Prince in bed, 'rolling about from side to side in a state approaching to nudity', no matter what the hour.

Early in 1784, when he was still 21, the Prince met a mild-mannered and attractive Roman Catholic widow, 27-year-old Maria Fitzherbert. Here she is, painted by Reynolds, a picture commissioned by the Prince and subsequently given away when the relationship faltered.

As Lord Holland observed, George had a successful technique with women. 'He generally... assailed the hearts he wished to carry by exciting their commiserations for his sufferings and their apprehensions for his health'. With Maria Fitzherbert, who was extremely devout, this didn't work for a long time, despite George's visiting, letter-writing and present-giving. She declared her intention to leave for France to get away from him. George fell ill and then stabbed himself in the chest, which finally brought Mrs Fitzherbert round to his bedroom in Carlton House and promise to marry him, whereupon he was miraculously able to sit up in bed and slip a ring on her finger. Still, she left, telling him that her consent had been obtained under duress. Gigantic letters followed her

and, in the end, she returned and the wedding went ahead, legal in the eyes of the Catholic Church, doubly illegal under the terms of the Royal Marriages Act. George repeatedly denied, even to close friends, that the marriage had taken place, but the press had a field day with it nonetheless, especially once Mrs Fitzherbert was installed in a mansion around the corner from Carlton House and maintained in glittering style.



Here is a typically bawdy take on the marriage, uncovering the identities of the protagonists; the Prince and Mrs Fitzherbert in the middle; the Prince's friend Lord Brougham to the right, the politicians Charles James Fox and Edmund Burke at the top - I'm not sure who the guy on the left is, and neither Fox nor Burke were actually present at the wedding, but the point here was to involve as many of the Prince's Whig associates as possible in the affair.

By the early 1790s, the Prince's affairs had reached a point of crisis. George III had his first prolonged bout of insanity in 1788 and the Prince and his Whig associates had been all too eager to take the reins of power and to declare a Regency. The King's unexpectedly recovered in early 1789 plunged the Prince's relationship with both his father and the hungry press onto the rocks. The progress of the French Revolution and the execution of Louis XV1, which seemed to threaten monarchies all over Europe, ended the Prince's association with Whig politicians. As war spread throughout Europe, he distanced himself from his erstwhile friends amongst the Foxites and became suspicious of anything even associated with radical politics, including Catholic emancipation. He also came to see himself as the custodian of the monarchical principle and tradition in Europe, buying up royal memorabilia, especially that of the French absolutist monarchy, like this bronze copy of a statue of Louis XIV that stood in the place de Vendome and was torn down and destroyed in 1792.

Unfortunately, this political change of heart did nothing to endear the Prince to the press, the public or his father. In fact, George III took advantage of his own new popularity after his recovery to demand ever more firmly that his son reform his whole way of life. The Prince's debts had by this time become unsustainable: the only way to pay to get them paid off was to do as his father wished, at least in the short term: get married properly and produce an heir. The Prince decided to comply. In 1794, having already taken a new mistress, he dismissed Mrs Fitzherbert, and the following year, after a cursory search and despite the well-telegraphed warnings of his friend James Harris, who had been to Germany to check her out, he married his cousin Princess

Caroline of Brunswick. Here she is looking uncharacteristically scholarly:

The marriage was an absolute disaster, undertaken with scant regard for any of the people involved, including himself. From the first the Prince hated Caroline and claimed only to have slept with her three times. She hated him, too, and hated the life he demanded she led, kept away from him and made to shut up. Although an heir, Princess Charlotte, was born nine months after the wedding, George's marriage only made everything worse for him. The public sided with the Princess, the Prince's debts mounted again, and the King continued to be implacable. This state of affairs continued both up to, and beyond the Regency, which began in 1811, when George III was finally declared irremediably mad and unable to rule. Even Princess Charlotte's death in childbirth in 1817 earned the Regent scant sympathy.

So when George finally came to the throne in 1820, it was too late to do much about his reputation, despite royal visits to Ireland, Hanover and Scotland, and the usual state pomp - here is his coronation portrait, a late and suspiciously youthful repose to the portrait of his father painted by Ramsey 50 years earlier.

The fact was that by the time of his accession George was an ailing man without a direct heir or family. Estranged from his wife, who died soon after a massively lavish coronation to which she was very publicly denied entrance, he was obese and dependent on alcohol and laudanum, and, as the years went on, more a hindrance to the governance of the nation than a symbol of its greatness. Although George IV was undoubtedly the architect of his own reputation, his life was also shaped by circumstances, by an unyielding father and by the fact that for three decades as Prince of Wales he had no real role to play.

Through all this, though, as Prince and then King, George remained a man capable of kindness, generosity and artistic discernment. In his youth he was a leader of fashion and style, and always insisted on the highest standards of tailoring and finish in every project he undertook. He was a generous patron to various institutions and gave his father's extensive library in its entirety to the British Museum in 1823, a gift that resulted in the demolition of the existing museum and the building of grand new neoclassical structure.

After music, art and architecture best engaged the Prince's talents. George IV was the last monarch who bought any decent painting for the crown - although it has to be said he bought a lot of not very good stuff as well. In particular he added many outstanding works to the Crown's already fine collection of 17th century Dutch work. In 1811, 4 months after he became Regent, George bought *The Shipbuilder and his Wife*, painted by Rembrandt in 1833. At £5000, an astronomical sum at the time, this was the most expensive purchase he made in his life, a flourish of his newly replenished cheque book.

It really is an outstanding painting - you will have to go and see it to appreciate it because I haven't been able to do it justice with this photograph. In 1819 he added this Rembrandt portrait of Agathe Bas, one half of a double marriage portrait painted in 1641, which is notable for the way Rembrandt the sitter holds the frame with her left hand and seems to lean towards us.

This painting joined the 86 Dutch and Flemish paintings that the Prince bought from Sir Thomas Baring in 1814, many of which were of the highest quality, including a Rembrandt self portrait of 62, many small genre pieces, such as this one by Jan Steen from 1663 the Prince was very fond of these small genre paintings and added to his Dutch collection with several British contemporary versions, of very dubious quality - paintings by Wilkie and Moreland, of villagers in taverns and so on - though he did also buy, early, in 1797, one extraordinary work, an unfinished Gainsborough painting, a Titian-influenced, Cezanne-anticipating scene of Diana and Actaeon

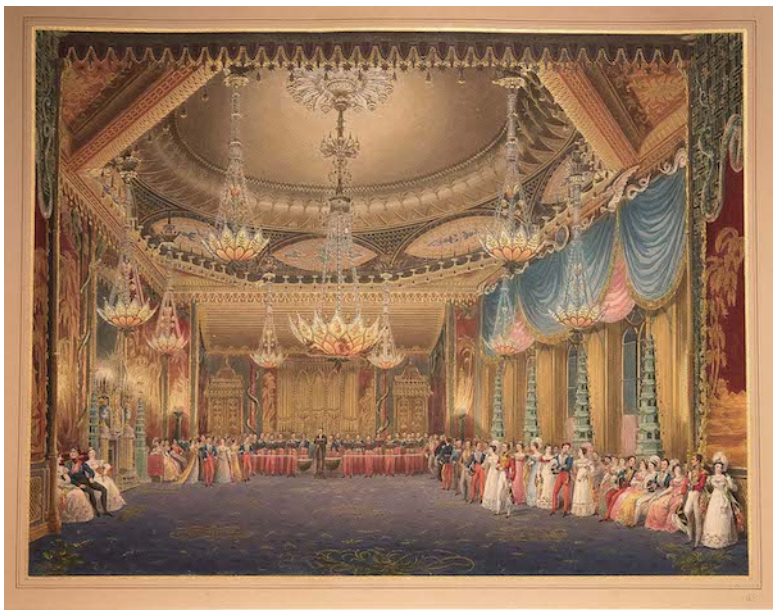
The Prince also acquired several outstanding landscapes with the Baring collection - including these 2 by Cuyp that are beautiful and poignant for the fact that they a brought into Carlton House places that George himself, forbidden from travelling abroad by his father, had never been to, and in the end, would never see, though had he been able to go to the Continent he would have found in its drawing rooms and spa culture just the sort of conviviality he most enjoyed.

At Carlton House, where his collections were displayed until he became King, George tried to mix his private inclination for glamorously eccentric interiors with his opposing desire for the royal and the pompous, which produced a mash-up of interiors with no controlling taste or aesthetic coherence. He also had a taste for glitter and all kinds of stuff from military uniforms and equipment to clothing from around the world, some of which he designed, much of which is lost, although his successors did of course keep the jewels, dress swords, crowns and gongs like these:

Gradually, however, he split his two needs, with Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle absorbing the desire for grandeur and monarchical heft, and the Royal Pavilion in Brighton showcasing the brilliant and eccentric. As a result - precisely because George was not trying to make the Pavilion a palace - it is his only building that shows a genuinely personal stamp and flair.

George first took the lease of the house that turned into the Pavilion in 1786, but it was only in 1815 that the plain house began its transformation under the architect John Nash. This is the exterior, when it was finished in 1822.

The Pavilion stupefied and horrified visitors in equal measure. While one described the exterior as 'taken from the Kremlin at Moscow', the interior seemed to others an enchanted place of light, with colours shifting through stained glass, and light glancing and twinkling from lanterns, mirrors, chandeliers and lacquered walls. Glittering objects filled the rooms: gilt conch-shells, silvered dragons and snakes and gilded furniture. Everything was saturated with colour; deep reds, yellows, blues. This was the Prince's own style; the real Regency style, in marked contrast to the rather dull elegance of the Beau Brummel style that took on that title and has come to be associated with him.



This is the ballroom at the Pavilion - with its marvellous chandeliers, heavy swag curtains and ranks of pagodas. Other rooms were even more extravagant - in fact if there is one thing I'd like you to take away from this evening it's a re-imagining of Regency style - it's not Mr Darcy or the cute muslin dresses the ladies are wearing here, it's the mad over-the-top-ness of the Regent's taste itself.

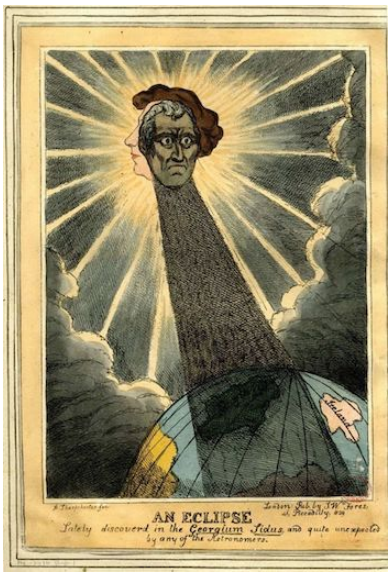
George IV died on 26 June 1830, having drifted towards death at Windsor Castle for several months. Although the immediate cause was the rupture of a blood vessel in his stomach, the long-term cause was the decades of abuse of his immensely strong body. George had left instructions in his will of 1796 that he be buried his miniature of Mrs Fitzherbert round his neck, and he repeated these to the Duke of Wellington in his last illness. His wish

was complied with, so this little picture - one of the few really personal items that remains from his vast collections of stuff - is presumably where it was put to rest, in the vault of St George's Chapel, Windsor.

The fact was, and still is, that a constitutional monarchy renders the monarch impotent: that is the point of it. After the Glorious Revolution of 1689, the executive took control of the British state, and gradually increased that control during the 18th century. As constitutional monarchy became entrenched - and after the French Revolution monarchs had a fearful example of what could go wrong - the monarch and his family had less and less to do.

For better or worse the most that can be said about George IV's public, monarchical achievements is that until the end of his reign he was too averse to bureaucratic work to interfere much in the business of government, and so contributed to the solidity of the constitutional monarchy. As a rebellious youth George had sided with a Whig Opposition that demanded reforms to government and the franchise, but the French Revolution ended his dalliance with political change, and the long Napoleonic Wars and unrest in Ireland turned it to a firm hostility. So, both as Regent and King, George stuck with successive Tory administrations. His ten-year reign began just after the quelling of the social unrest that culminated in the Peterloo Massacre, and drew to a close with the Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, forcing him to accept and sign the Catholic Relief Act of 1829, which finally allowed Catholics to hold public office and sit in Parliament. George had resisted the subject of Catholic Emancipation for years, and when he did finally sign the Bill he complained testily that the Duke of Wellington - who he admired and was scared of in equal measure - was King now; 'King Arthur', he said, while he the real King, was just a lowly official, a Canon of Windsor.

The press understood the significance of this capitulation, as this brilliant cartoon showed:



Riffing on the discovery of the planet Uranus by George Herschel in - which was originally called Georgium Sidum, the George Star, George IV is here shown eclipsed by the Duke of Wellington, his realm thrown into shadow, while Ireland, off to the right, has a bright future.

So, this was how the reign of George IV ended, with the infirm and ailing King side-lined and his lean and relentless Prime Minister triumphant. But that, in a constitutional monarchy, was how it should be.

George was indeed a terrible Prince of Wales in the eyes of the institution of the monarchy represented by his father, and also in the eyes of the public - not so much because of his womanising and political opposition, but above all because he ran up huge debts, many of which they knew, rightly, eventually fall on the public purse. But as King? In terms of the institution of the monarchy, he didn't do so badly because one of the jobs of the monarch at a time when monarchies all over Europe were tottering and in some cases falling, was to keep the institution

alive and strong - even if largely through neglect and incapacity. He continued his father's Tory administration when he became Regent, and did, in the end fulfil his constitutional role and sign the Catholic Relief Act into law.

The Duke of Wellington was a thorough Tory who understood that for things to stay the same - for the monarchical and imperial power structure that held Britain in place and in its place in the world to remain - things had to change. This policy worked - the Catholic Relief Act ushered in the Great Reform Bill of 1832 and the gradual - very gradual - reform of the franchise which was finally equalised almost a century later when in 1928 women were finally given the franchise on the same terms as men. In that time aristocratic, Tory power was cemented. Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose - When George IV died in 1830 Britain had a Tory government, government by House of Commons and House of Lords and a Prime Minister who was educated at Eton College. In 2020, on the 200th anniversary of George's accession, Britain has a Tory government, government by House of Commons and House of Lords and a Prime Minister who was educated at Eton College. We have gone from here:

To here, where I leave you to judge whether it has all been for the best:

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