

## **"A Question of Principle or Degree": British Parliamentary approaches to factory legislation in the 1830s and 1840s**

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The Factory Act of 1847, also known as the Ten Hours Act, was an important step forward for the British labour movement. It restricted the hours of women and some children working in textile factories to around ten hours. By 1847, the fight for a ten-hour workday had been raging for decades, with an earlier ten hours bill having been proposed in 1831, and it continued for years afterwards, as shown by an 1850 act intended to close its loopholes. From the vantage point of the present day, where working hours throughout Europe have been reduced even further, a ten-hour workday seems almost like a footnote in the inevitable progression towards the current situation. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, this was a significant change and a major source of controversy and represented an early step towards regulating the new economic forces of the Industrial Revolution. Focusing on parliamentary debates, this essay will explore trends in political opinion regarding the ten-hour workday from the earliest efforts in 1831 to the revision of the Ten Hours Act in 1850.

In the debates over the act, some of the dominant political narratives surrounding worker protections can be seen; rather than just being the domain of radicals, factory reform was also championed by aristocrats who saw it as an extension of their paternalistic responsibilities or even intertwined with their own rights. The opposition to the Factory Acts, meanwhile, took a range of approaches, with some condemnation on the grounds of classical economic theory and others simply quibbling about the exact number of hours to be allowed.

That Parliament passed legislation to regulate factory-working hours repeatedly across multiple decades suggests that its members understood the necessity of addressing factory conditions, but few Members of Parliament<sup>1</sup> were willing to entirely condemn factory owners, especially given that many of them owed their parliamentary seats to these capitalists. Even after the Ten Hours Act was passed, both Parliamentary and popular opinion was divided, and the implementation of the Act itself proved problematic. The wording contained loopholes and many limitations, and the inspectorate was small and underfunded. The difficulty of passing the Factory Acts into law and the issues faced once the 1847 Act was passed indicate how MPs were divided on how to define the scope of the ten-hour work day debate.

In the early stages of factory reform, one of its most prominent advocates was Anthony Ashley Cooper, styled Lord Ashley, an aristocratic Tory in the House of Commons. He argued from a paternalistic perspective, which was more prominent among the Tories than the Whigs. His view was that the Whig governments of the time had "[epitomized] in their private lives the immorality of the Georgian generation." Whig aristocrats were often criticized for having "little or no interest in social legislation," instead "abandoning the poor and oppressed to the depredations of the free market and the doctrines of political economy." For his part, Ashley was most vicious towards George Howard, known as Viscount Morpeth, who "typified all that was most unprincipled and amoral in the whig tradition," a man who was "irreligious, power-hungry, vain and lazy." These two figures were rivals on the subject of factory reform, and in some ways can be seen as representatives of their parties' aristocratic wings. Ashley was "a vigorous crusader for moral and social regeneration," whereas Morpeth was more in line with his party in

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<sup>1</sup> For the rest of this paper, Members of Parliament will be abbreviated as "MPs."

advocating for free trade. But neither man can be taken as wholly representative of his party. Ashley's unique moral convictions set him apart as a champion for reform, while Morpeth was far more interested in passing factory legislation than the Whig stereotype would suggest, as will be seen below.<sup>2</sup>

Both the Whig and Tory parties included factions, but Sadler, Oastler, and Ashley belonged to a radical faction of Tories who were known for stronger promotion of social reform. For these Tories, protection of the "Labouring classes" was tied up with that of "the Landed interests," and in 1832 Oastler called the Whigs "the enemies of my country" for their support of the factory system which threatened both. In the House of Commons of the 1830s, it was often noblemen arguing for factory reform, and indeed Tory reformers regarded their campaign as an expression of aristocratic interests and traditions. Morpeth, as an aristocrat on the Whig side, was the one who initially tabled factory legislation in 1831, though a "united tory-radical extra-parliamentary campaign" accused his proposals of having been "mutilated by the manufacturers' lobby" and criticized them for still being "restricted in coverage to the cotton mills."<sup>3</sup>

Morpeth had established a reputation as a radical Whig who would "[restore] faith in the aristocracy as leaders of popular causes,"<sup>4</sup> but he was nonetheless more willing to compromise with factory owners. His bill represents the latter's desire to ensure the inevitable regulations were relatively lenient. The Tory response to this compromise is embodied by Michael Sadler, who – encouraged by colleague Richard Oastler – argued that Morpeth's eleven hours bill failed "due, not to its impracticality, but to the betrayals of its Whig sponsors."<sup>5</sup> Sadler sought to push the issue further than the Whig efforts, and introduced a ten hours bill later in 1831. These Tory reformers recognized that MPs would be returned by the same manufacturers who opposed factory reform, who they believed would seek to eliminate any bill for limited hours and thus render compromise moot. As such, this faction refused to make a deal with the Whigs, and at this time refused to accept anything short of a ten hours bill.

Although Oaster perceived this cause as unique to the Tories, Morpeth continued to undermine that claim by launching "a new campaign for factory legislation in the first session of the reformed parliament" in 1832. Ashley, succeeding Oastler after that year, would clash with Morpeth primarily over the number of hours to be restricted by factory legislation. Ashley favoured ten; Morpeth favoured eleven. At this time, the Parliamentary argument over regulating factory hours devolved into a matter of numbers; a Factory Act was so popular in Parliament that factory owners only saw representation in Morpeth's Whigs, whose less radical proposal could mitigate the damage done to their interests. Reformers on both sides were motivated by a sense of *noblesse oblige*, which can be seen in both Ashley's defensive attitude towards the landed interests and labouring classes and Morpeth's view of Yorkshire and Manchester mill-owners as "socially uncongenial and politically harsh."<sup>6</sup>

The first Factory Act emerged in 1833 as a last-second compromise after the defeat of Morpeth's bill. It was an "Act which no one desired and which Whig ministers spent eight years

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Mandler, "Cain and Abel: Two Aristocrats and the Early Victorian Factory Acts," *Historical Journal* 27, no. 1 (1984): 84-85.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 91-92.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Mandler, "Cain and Abel: Two Aristocrats and the Early Victorian Factory Acts," *Historical Journal* 27, no. 1 (1984): 83-95

unenthusiastically enforcing, defending and improving.”<sup>7</sup> Passing social legislation did not necessarily guarantee compliance among those it was designed to affect. The failure to implement an 1834 act banning children from working as chimney sweeps eventually led to the Children’s Employment Commission reporting more than twenty years later that “this act was largely ignored.” Although inspectorates were established to ensure compliance with various forms of industrial legislation, they were “subject to a range of constraints” including limited resources. From the outside, the deficient state of enforcement made the 1833 act appear as “a shrewd maneuver by the ruling class to placate the working class while changing working conditions not at all.” Its “provision for the appointment of paid central government inspectors” represented an improvement over the unregulated industry that existed previously, but “only four inspectors and two poorly paid superintendents were initially appointed to enforce” the law in the entire country.<sup>8</sup> Further, inspectors faced opposition on various sides and struggled with a lack of proper infrastructure to facilitate their work. Fourteen superintendents held office by 1837, but from there the inspectorate stagnated, consistently employing only four inspectors until the 1860s. Meanwhile, its budget changed little after the mid-1840s, when it had risen to £10,000 per year.<sup>9</sup>

Popular opinion on the factory acts can be seen in petitions both for and against them, which Parliament was frequently inundated with. In 1847, the House of Commons read many petitions, sent from disparate parts of the country, “praying” for the passage of a Ten Hours Bill. The *Journal of the House of Commons* occasionally cites who sent a given petition: one on March 16 was sent from “Clergy and Inhabitants of Chorley,” and another on April 26<sup>th</sup> originated from “Factory Workers in the employ of Messrs. Banton and Wright” from Tyldesley township. Conversely, petitions from figures such as “the Chairman of the Dundee Chamber of Commerce” and unidentified “Proprietors of Mills” prayed that “the Factories Bill may not pass into law.”<sup>10</sup> Some of these petitions were controversial: John Bright accused one which opposed a Ten Hours Bill, which was “signed by 400 firms” and covered 150,000 “hands employed” by those firms, of being signed primarily by individuals who did not have “any connexion [sic] with the employment of steam power or water power in the cotton manufacture” and “the capital employed by whom ... probably did not exceed one million.”<sup>11</sup>

1847 is significant as the year that the petitions in favour of such an act finally prevailed, and by May 3<sup>rd</sup> of that year, a new Factory Act limiting the hours of women and “young persons” (that is, children over the age of 13) to ten hours a day was on its third reading. At this point, the passage of the bill was so certain that opponents merely argued for limiting its period of operation, regarding the act as an “experiment.” John Trelawny, for instance, sought to “[limit] the operation of the Act to three years,” so people could “get acquainted with the tax.” Henry Labouchere regarded it as “perilous” because it “was not calculated to produce the results which those who supported it anticipated.” William Stansfield suggested that the act would have

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>8</sup> Peter W.J. Bartrip, “State Intervention in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain: Fact or Fiction?” *Journal of British Studies* 23, no. 1 (1983): 66-69.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 69-71.

<sup>10</sup> United Kingdoms House of Commons, *Journals of the House of Commons, January-July 1847* (n.p.: The House of Commons, n.d.): 118-454.

<sup>11</sup> United Kingdom, House of Commons, *Hansard* (Mar 17, 1847): 122-126.  
<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/>.

a “dangerous” effect on the “small manufacturer,” who could only “make up for the loss of manual labour ... by introducing improvements in machinery,” which smaller businesses could not afford. Trelawny, no longer able to prevent the bill from passing, attempted to add a clause “providing that the Act should only be in force for three years,” to little success. Labouchere further argued that British manufacturers would be unable to compete with “foreign manufacturers who had no ... restrictions as to hours of labour.”<sup>12</sup>

However, economic arguments were also used in defence of the bill: Prime Minister John Russell, discussing “disadvantages that,” according to the bill’s critics, “ought to have absolutely overwhelmed the manufacturers of this country,” questioned why these disadvantages had not been a problem up to that point. He attributed this to the “general freedom” of the United Kingdom and the “great manufacturing skill” of its workers, which would allow the country to prevail even with a ten hours act.<sup>13</sup> Economic assumptions, then as now, appear to have been among the most common grounds for discussing regulations, and the debate over the Factory Act eventually became highly technical, as represented by MPs repeatedly attempting to answer whether the act was “a question of principle or degree.” Opponents of the bill were split between those who objected based on principles of economics, and those who merely objected based on the exact numbers stipulated.<sup>14</sup> Classical economists of the time had similarly reacted to regulatory legislation in ways that were “pragmatic and ... conditioned by the degree of state intervention which had been achieved,” contrasting with the approach of manufacturers, who typically were “unwilling to accept the view that government intervention might lead to economic welfare.”<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, manufacturers had significant influence over the composition of Parliament. In the constituency of Tiverton, John Heathcoat “was returned to Parliament from 1832 to 1859 primarily because he was the principal employer within the district,” a practice which would remain highly prominent after the rebranding of the Whigs as the Liberal Party. Lancashire politics were said to be “determined solely by the relative number of spindles and looms driven by Tory and Liberal employers.” Factory owners even held some degree of political influence over their employees, who in many cases could be guaranteed to align with their employers’ politics through their “deferential instincts, their respect for wealth and authority, their economic dependence, and in many cases their similar political beliefs,” though it should be noted that there was a “major division between worker and employer ideologies” surrounding the employers’ “unitary vision of society” that was already undermining this relationship.<sup>16</sup>

The official Parliamentary Hansard does not include any contributions from Heathcoat, as it appears he rarely spoke in the House of Commons, though he did vote in favour of the Factory

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<sup>12</sup> United Kingdom, House of Commons, *Hansard* (May 03, 1847): 307-311.

<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/>.

<sup>13</sup> House of Commons, *Hansard* (Mar 17, 1847): 139-141. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*: 123.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew H. Yarmie, “British employers’ resistance to ‘grandmotherly’ government, 1850-80,” *Social History* 9, no. 2 (1984): 143-144

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 146.

Act in 1847 on March 3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>17</sup> Although manufacturers generally viewed the Factory Acts with "gloomy anticipation," they were not universally opposed to legislation; soon after the implementation of the 1847 act, the *Halifax Guardian* reported that "The noble and benevolent-minded Fieldens, of Waterside, have again come forward with an example worthy of imitation," and "working their mills 11 hours a day, and paying the day hands with 12 hours' wages" – an hour apparently having been taken off even for young men working the mills.<sup>18</sup>

But passing an act did not cease petitions from being sent to Parliament. Based on the petitions read by the House of Commons in 1850, when Parliament was arguing over a new act to close loopholes in the 1847 Act, these petitions continued to demonstrate the controversy over factory legislation. Many still called for Parliament to "[extend] the limit of Ten hours ... to eleven hours *per diem*, or sixty-three hours *per week*," or to "permit mills wrought by water power to workup lost time from drought." Meanwhile, "working people in the employ of Messrs. Edmonds and Company" were already petitioning for even fewer hours. One such proposal was shortening Saturdays to "seven hours and a half" and requiring shifts to end at two o'clock, thus limiting the work week to 60 hours.<sup>19</sup> Some went further still: many organizations, based on the principle of limiting the work day to 10 hours, called for a work week of as little as 58 hours.<sup>20</sup> As the controversy over work hours continued, the ideal length of a working week remained in a state of flux. Even after the legal day had been limited to ten hours, its ideal was still a matter of open debate, as shown by these petitions to re-extend the work day. The ten hours movement's work was hardly finished.

Other objections to the Ten Hours Bill also seem to have remained, even after its passing. For instance, a column in *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle* continued to discuss the possibility that the "strict and literal adoption" of the 1847 act "would greatly reduce profits and render the English manufacturer unable to compete with his foreign rival," an argument to which the author declared he "[had] not yet seen a satisfactory answer to." Conversely, however, the paper offered arguments in favour of the act – that workers would be made inefficient by fatigue after ten hours, and that additional rest would make workers healthier. In other words, the same questions discussed before the act was passed were still subject to debate.<sup>21</sup>

The Ten Hours Act was also plagued by loopholes and logistical challenges. In 1850, approaching the time that a three-year trial would have ended, the House of Commons again met to discuss the bill, with Henry Edwards noting that although women and young people may be "not absolutely worked more than ten hours, their time would necessarily be at the disposal of their masters during the entire fifteen hours between half-past five, A.M., and half-past eight, P.M."<sup>22</sup> This came as a consequence of the bill failing to stipulate which hours their shifts must

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<sup>17</sup> United Kingdom, House of Commons, *Hansard* (Mar 03, 1847): 819.

<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/>.

<sup>18</sup> "The Factory Act," *John Bull*, August 2, 1847. *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals*.

<sup>19</sup> United Kingdom House of Commons, *Journals of the House of Commons, January 1850-December 1850* (n.p.: The House of Commons, n.d.): 332-365.

<sup>20</sup> "The Factory Bill," *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, May 19, 1850. *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals*.

<sup>21</sup> "The Factory Bill," *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, Mar 24, 1850. *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals*.

<sup>22</sup> United Kingdom, House of Commons, *Hansard* (Mar 14, 1850): 898.

<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/>.

fall within, leading to them being split throughout the day, thus preventing female and young workers from enjoying leisure during their off-time. Edwards further objected that the process of inspection was made nearly impossible by this shift system, as "the difficulty for any inspector to ascertain whether any one individual had not worked for more than ten consecutive hours, or for a longer period, would be almost insurmountable."<sup>23</sup> But Edwards' speech on this matter also explains the restriction of these acts to women and young people: limiting the hours of adult men would "deprive the frugal and industrious artisan of an opportunity of increasing the amounts of his wages, and thereby adding to the comforts, perhaps, of a large family."<sup>24</sup>

Edwards also claimed to have a preference for protectionism over free trade, merely admitting that "as soon as free trade became the law of the land, I felt bound to give it a fair trial."<sup>25</sup> With MPs like Edwards continuing to litigate free trade as a concept, Ashley needed to be defensive. He stated that he merely desired to "settle the disputed question as to the continuity of labour," seeking to protect his own interpretation of the act by ensuring "that the period of labour for young persons, being limited to ten hours a day, should be continuous hours, dating from the time when any child or young person began to work."<sup>26</sup> Even in advocating for a guarantee of this continuity, though, Ashley was deferential to mill owners: he argued that "the shift system had only been practiced by a small minority of manufacturers," and even "[expressed] admiration at the manner in which a large body of the master millowners had received the Act of Parliament, had carried it into effect, had promoted its good working, and had declared their opinion of the results." He was concerned with the "most unfortunate heartburnings and hostility between employers and their workman," and declared his intention to be "the restoration of harmony and good feeling between the employers and the unemployed." Class warfare was hardly intrinsic to reformist MPs' interests.<sup>27</sup>

His beliefs were not entirely unfounded: a year earlier, *The Satirist; or the Censor of the Times* reported a "numerous meeting of factory operatives" in Manchester "for the purpose of 'taking into consideration the best means of maintaining the Ten Hours Act, and also of putting an end to violations of its provisions by masters who are working by relays or shifts.'"<sup>28</sup> Later, in March of 1850, *John Bull* reported on a "memorial, signed by 30 of the Bradford parochial Clergy" which argued that "in consequence of a want of legal precision in the wording of the Act, the intention of the legislature [had] been defeated," as factory owners' wages had "undergone proportionate diminution" and was used as grounds to "complain of infringements made by their competitors." The memorial further complained that "Inspectors speak of the difficulty of inducing, and even of compelling, mill-owners to guard against accidents to the workers from machinery."<sup>29</sup> This accusation suggests that the Factory Act of 1847 had not been entirely successful in reigning in factory owners, and in fact was a useful tool through which they could attempt to hurt their competition. It is abundantly clear that there was still much to achieve in the arena of worker protections.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 899.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 901.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 931-932.

<sup>28</sup> "Provincial," *The Satirist; or The Censor of the Times*, June 30, 1849. *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals*.

<sup>29</sup> "The Ten hours' Act," *John Bull*, Mar 9, 1850. *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals*.

The amendment not only limited work for young people and women to a precise ten hours between 6 A.M. and 6 P.M., but also limited Sunday work to eight hours, to end at 2 P.M.<sup>30</sup> Although it did little to improve the task of inspecting mills, it would advance the paternalist agenda of protecting women and young people, and would serve to act upon the idea that fewer hours meant better work. But compared to the goals of the ten hours’ movement, this amendment still had significant issues. For one, “children from eight to thirteen years of age” were still “under the operation of the Factory Act of 1844,” which “permitted the employment of children as auxiliary hands to adult male labourers before and after the working hours of young persons and women.”<sup>31</sup>

Lord Ashley had proposed extending the Ten Hours Act to young children, and as a consequence was accused of having “a desire to restrict the labour of adult men, who could not carry on the work of the factory without the assistance of children.” He acquiesced once his bill was thrown out multiple times. Furthermore, the new Factory Act fell far short of the movement to enact “a ten hours day for all persons between thirteen and twenty-one,” something which had been called for as early as 1841. Advocates for the Ten Hours Bill also had more radical reasons for dissatisfaction, as shown in in 1850, when “large and enthusiastic meetings” of Ten-Hours supporters “boldly demanded that the limitation of hours should be directly extended to themselves.”<sup>32</sup> Worst of all, the new bill had increased the weekly hours of women and young people from 58 to 60, appending a further half-hour to each work day. Although Ashley had attempted to argue that the shorter hours on Saturday compensated for the extra hour each day, many individuals and newspapers clearly objected, including *Bell’s Sporting Life*, which noted the discrepancy between the new sixty hours and the fifty-eight hours of the original Ten Hours Act.<sup>33</sup> Ashley latched on to the ten hours movement out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*, but this was ultimately not sufficient to fully enact the demands of the ten hours movement.

Some working people – especially from the Chartist movement – viewed this as a failure of even sympathetic MPs to look after their interests. Before the bill was even passed, in a meeting of the Society for Improving the Condition of the Working Classes on June 8, two chartists “named Reynolds and Beacon ... attempted to oppose the proceedings,” and declared that Lord Ashley had “betrayed them on the ten hours’ bill.”<sup>34</sup> Their grievances were given greater expression in *John Bull*, which printed a polemic on July 20<sup>th</sup>, criticizing the proceedings around the new Factory Act and sympathizing with workmen who might be “sorely disappointed to find out that after all you are to be cheated out of a portion of the hours of rest and recreation, which the Ten Hours’ Act was meant to guarantee to your wives, to your sons and daughters.” Bright and Cobden, who had championed the Ten Hours’ Act, were stated to “not care two-pence about you [the working class], your interests, your comfort, or your welfare,” and even Ashley is accused of “humbugging himself,” deluding himself that “he is only reserving himself

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<sup>30</sup> *Journals of the House of Commons, January-December 1850*, 405-613.

<sup>31</sup> Ernst Plener, *The English Factory Legislation, from 1802 Till the Present Time* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1873): 43.

<sup>32</sup> B.L. Hutchins and A. Harrison, *A History of Factory Legislation* (London: P.S. King & Son, 1911): 65; 108-109.

<sup>33</sup> “The Factory bill,” *Bell’s Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, May 19, 1850. *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals*.

<sup>34</sup> “Society for Improving the Condition of the Working Classes,” *John Bull*, June 8, 1850. *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals*.

and his influence for you in the hope of better times" when, despite even his own knowledge, he only really meant "to serve himself, by making himself great and popular, and influential, and all that sort of thing."<sup>35</sup>

Similar words were offered to the House of Lords in the pages of *John Bull*: The Bishop of London turned out to be "the millowners' bishop," whereas the Bishop of Ripon and the Bishop of Oxford, who had both claimed that "Ten Hours' labour, and no more, was the bargain with you, out of which no one had a right to cheat you," were claimed to truly "have served an apprenticeship to their masters, Messrs. Russell and Co.," where they "learned to speak and vote, not according to what is right and true in itself, but according to their masters' bidding." The paper urged readers not to place faith in anyone who claimed to represent their interests, but despite referencing the French monarchy in comparison to the factory owners, it called not for revolution but simply for voting the Whigs out in the next election, with "those whose principle is 'Protection to native industry'" to be their replacement.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, a statement from the Halifax Short Time Committee condemning Ashley's abandonment of the Ten-Hour Bill made no reference to revolution.<sup>37</sup> But while the outrage of British workers did not present an existential threat to millowners or to Westminster, it serves as a reminder of workers' alienation from Parliament in the nineteenth century.

Half-steps allowed progress to occur; a ten-and-a-half hour day was still a hard limit, and one which was now free from the possibility of being divided into shifts over a fifteen-hour period. Manufacturers, despite claims to have "been able to compensate for the reduction to ten hours by increasing the speed of machinery," continued to object to further proposals for shortening the work day, such as the Nine Hours' Bill of 1869. Furthermore, they continued to bring up "the fear of foreign competition;" the numbers had changed, but the arguments did not.<sup>38</sup> In Parliament, the movement for a ten-hour work day was fraught with setbacks and compromises; politics prevented Lord Ashley from enacting the "true" ten hours bill hoped for by the short time movements, or even from applying the bill that was passed to the factories. The passage of the Factory Acts shows that Parliament was well aware of the need to take action against the conditions in factories, but the power of mill owners and differences of political opinion within Parliament were ultimately more powerful forces than *noblesse oblige*. There was no revolution on the horizon. Contrary to the stereotype of mid-nineteenth century Britain as a land of *laissez-faire*, protections were put in place for working people, but the political landscape of the time restricted their scope. Progress still had a long way to go.

The Ten Hours Act of 1847 saw its origins in the earlier Factory Act of 1831, which first pitted radical Tory reformers against comparatively moderate Whig counterparts. Both parties had reform-minded factions, which were led by aristocrats motivated by *noblesse oblige*. Lord Ashley became the most prominent of these, though as an aristocrat he was not necessarily in step with the popular working-class movement which supported him. Within Parliament, the argument took on many forms: some agreed or disagreed with the Bill based on principles of economics, whereas others merely argued over the specific calculations involved. These debates were common in 1831 and were still prevalent two decades later, in 1850, a period during which

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<sup>35</sup> "Common Sense for the Million," *John Bull*, July 20 1850. *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> "The Factory Bill," *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicles*, May 19, 1850. *19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals*.

<sup>38</sup> Yarmie, "British employers' resistance to 'grandmotherly' government," 152.



acts limiting work hours in factories faced continuous challenges that brought such debates back to the spotlight. The issues that were less widely debated – lacklustre funding for the inspectorate, more radical voices outside Parliament – served to further muddle the debate over the Act; they reflected the unwillingness of even radical MPs to fully oppose the mill owners’ lobby, but they also represented new issues of both principle and degree beyond the scope Parliament favoured. For Lord Ashley, the matter of degree and principle took on new meaning outside Parliament as his base attacked his compromises. The argument over the Ten Hours’ Act had taken on new dimensions, but MPs’ confusion about its nature remained the same.

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