

From the Corn Laws to Free Trade: Interests, Ideas, and Institutions in Historical Perspective | Book Reviews

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Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey, *From the Corn Laws to Free Trade: Interests, Ideas, and Institutions in Historical Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. xiii + 426 pp. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN: 0-262-19543-7.

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Britain's repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 was a significant event in the rise of a global economy in the second half of the nineteenth century. Historians have written extensively about the debates over the pros and cons of agricultural protection that took place both in and out of Parliament from 1815 to 1846. However, Parliament's repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 remains a puzzling event, because it was initiated by Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel, the leader of the Conservative Party which as late as the election of 1841 had been committed to maintaining protection. Shortly after the vote to repeal the Corn Laws, the Conservative party fragmented and Peel's government collapsed. Why did Peel propose repeal, and why did enough Conservative MPs vote with him to achieve repeal? Why did the House of Lords, which was dominated by the landed aristocracy, vote for repeal and against their own economic interests?

In this important study, political scientist Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey offers a fresh explanation for the puzzle. She argues that previous explanations that focus on changing economic interests (as a result of the spread of industrialization) cannot explain the sudden shift in preferences that led a number of Conservative MPs (the Peelites) to vote for repeal in 1846. While industrialization increased the pressure for free trade, repeal occurred in 1846 only because Peel convinced his followers that a vote for repeal was in line with general Conservative ideology, and that it was necessary to preserve the political power of the landed aristocracy.

After two introductory chapters that lay out the argument and set the stage for what follows, Part I (Chapters 3-6) examines the growing demand for free trade in the 1830s and 1840s. Schonhardt-Bailey contends in Chapter 3 that the emergence of the Anti-Corn Law League as a powerful lobbying group for free trade in the 1830s was a result of the "geographic concentration of the core export industry (cotton textiles)" in Lancashire and the geographic and industrial deconcentration of the overall export sector. She then (Chapter 4) shows how the League was able to "nationalize their interest" (that is, appeal to the general public) by arguing that the repeal of the Corn Laws would lead to national prosperity, that the Corn Laws were immoral and anti-Christian, and that the aristocratic monopoly of economic and political resources was unjust. Chapter 5 presents evidence that in the decades leading up to repeal landowners diversified their portfolios by investing in railways, mining, and industry. Schonhardt-Bailey argues that, as a result of diversification, landowners in many agricultural districts shifted from being staunch protectionists to being neutral or even moderately pro free trade. This led to a cleavage in the Conservative Party between those MPs who continued to represent mostly agricultural and protectionist districts (the Non-Peelites) and those who represented districts with greater diversification (the Peelites). In Chapter 6, Schonhardt-Bailey examines roll call votes in Parliament in the 1840s and shows that well

before 1846 "the Peelites thought about issues differently than Non-Peelite Conservatives did" (p. 137). However, up to 1846 the Peelites continued to vote for protection, and therefore against, to some degree, the interests of their constituents. In her terminology, the Peelites voted as "trustees" rather than as "delegates."

Part II of the book (Chapters 7-10) examines the reasons for the abrupt shift in 1846 of Peel and his supporters (the Peelite Conservatives) from protection to free trade, which paved the way for repeal. Schonhardt-Bailey analyzes parliamentary speeches on repeal using computer-assisted content analysis, in order to determine why MPs voted as they did. Chapter 7 analyzes 587 speeches on trade policy in the House of Commons between the beginning of debate on January 22, 1846 and the final vote on May 15, while Chapter 8 places the 1846 debate in context by analyzing speeches on trade policy during the parliamentary debates of 1814-15, 1826-28, and 1842-44. She finds that, largely because of the propaganda of the Anti-Corn Law League, "protectionist MPs were increasingly alarmed about the prospect of a middle-class and working-class alliance in pursuit of far more radical reforms than repeal" (p. 226). By the mid-1840s Peelites were looking for a way to remain faithful to Conservatism without going against the interests of their constituents. Peel offered them a way to do this in 1846, when he characterized repeal "as a means to preserve the landed basis of Parliament" (p. 187). By reinterpreting repeal, Peel enabled his followers to vote as delegates, while claiming to remain trustees of Conservative ideology. In Chapter 9 Schonhardt-Bailey examines the debate on repeal in the House of Lords. She concludes that peers decided that it was necessary to accept repeal in order to delay challenges from the middle and working classes to their political power. In sum, both Conservative MPs and peers realized by 1846 "that their powers as independent political actors (namely, trustees) were becoming limited by democratic activism — made conspicuous by the lobbying of the Anti-Corn Law League" (p. 259).

While the book is in general very well researched, a few of Schonhardt-Bailey's conclusions are based on little evidence. For example, she writes that "had the Peelites (and therefore the Commons) rejected repeal, Peel's fear of a revolution similar to that seen in France in 1848 may well have erupted in Britain" (p. 290). She offers no evidence in support of this assertion (other than a statement by Peel in 1848 cited on page 16), and I believe it is unfounded. The Chartists demanded parliamentary reform and "a fair day's pay," not repeal of the Corn Laws, and they were never allied with the Anti-Corn Law League. Some Conservative MPs might have feared an alliance of the middle and working classes for parliamentary reform, as Schonhardt-Bailey suggests, but there never was much chance of such an alliance occurring.

The book helps to fill a hole in the literature by offering a detailed examination of the parliamentary debates on the Corn Laws in 1846. Schonhardt-Bailey offers many fresh insights into the debate over repeal, although I suspect that not all will be convinced by her story that Peel and his followers, and the House of Lords, chose to abandon protection in order to maintain their privileged status.

This book considers only the political debate over the repeal of the Corn Laws; those looking for information on how the Corn Laws actually worked, and their effect on grain prices, wages, rents, and economic growth, will have to look elsewhere. Finally, the book is not written in a user-friendly style; readers who are not trained in quantitative political science will find large parts of it difficult to follow. That is a shame, because there is a lot to be learned here. *From the Corn Laws to Free Trade* should be

read by anyone interested in understanding one of the most important political debates that took place in nineteenth century Britain.

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- Geographic area: Europe (4)
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