

**Understanding the London Corresponding Society:  
A Balancing Act between Adversaries Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke**

by

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### **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the intellectual foundation of the London Corresponding Society's (LCS) efforts to reform Britain's Parliamentary democracy in the 1790s. The LCS was a working population group fighting for universal male suffrage and annual parliaments in a decade that was wrought with internal social and governmental tension. Many Britons, especially the aristocracy and those in the government, feared the spread of ideas of republicanism and equality from revolutionary France and responded accordingly by oppressing the freedom of speech and association. At first glance, the LCS appears contradictory: it supported the hierarchical status quo but fought for the voice and representation of the people; and it believed that the foundation for rights was natural but also argued its demands for equal rights were drawn from Britain's ancient unwritten constitution. This thesis contextualizes these ideas using a contemporary debate, the Burke-Paine controversy, as Edmund Burke was the epitome of eighteenth century conservative constitutionalism in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* while Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* represented a Lockean interpretation of natural rights and equality. Thus using *Reflections* and *Rights of Man* as a framework, this thesis demonstrates that the LCS thoroughly understood its demands for parliamentary reform and uniformly applied its interpretation of natural rights and equality to British constitutionalism and the social and governmental hierarchies.

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## Introduction

In 1799, the London Corresponding Society (LCS) was officially disbanded by the government after a mere seven years. After attempting an underground meeting in November, 1800 without success,<sup>1</sup> the largest and most active British parliamentary reform association in the 1790s was permanently dissolved. Its demise was a result of Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger's fears of a revolution in Britain. With *An Act for the more effectual suppression of societies established for seditious and treasonable Purposes; and for better preventing treasonable and seditious practices*, the Pitt Government ended the assembly of all extra-parliamentary reformist associations, specifically naming the LCS, United Englishmen, United Scottsmen, and United Irishmen.<sup>2</sup> What did the LCS do to deserve a legislative act specifically aimed at ending its existence? Violent riots? Attempted revolution? Anti-government rhetoric? No, it was simply convinced that "a thorough Parliamentary Reform would remove every grievance under which [they laboured]" and it could use constitutional methods to restore the right of universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, and a more representative government system.<sup>3</sup>

Seven years earlier, the shoemaker Thomas Hardy formed the LCS 25 January 1792. After considering American Revolutionary ideas and reading political tracts from the Society for

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Thale, *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, Edited and notes by Mary Thale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 451.

<sup>2</sup> 39 Geo III, c. 79 sect. 27 in Joseph Davis, *A Digest of Legislative Enactments Relating to the Society of Friends, Commonly Called Quakers, in England, with Occasional Observations and Notes*, (London: Edward Marsh, 1849), 16, at the Columbia University Libraries from Internet Archives Online.

<sup>3</sup> LCS, *Address to the nation, from the London Corresponding Society, on the subject of a thorough Parliamentary Reform; Together with the Resolutions which were passed at a General meeting of the Society; Held on Monday, the 8th of July, 1793. At the Crown and Anchor Tavern Strand* (London: LCS, 1793), from the British Library at Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 7.

Constitutional Information (SCI) as well as from other “realy [sic] great men,” Hardy realized “it was very evident that a *radical reform in parliament* was quite necessary”. To achieve reform, it was necessary to form a society including “all classes and descriptions of men...”<sup>4</sup> Hardy’s revelation was shared by many across Great Britain and Ireland where numerous urban and provincial reform societies formed in the early years of the 1790s.

In Britain, the 1790s was a decade ripe for internal turmoil. Britons heard about the equality achieved in the American Revolution and the rights being demanded by French Revolutionaries. Many of the grievances felt by the American colonists and French people were also felt in Britain. The previously quiet and unrepresented masses were becoming more aware and active as they realized that without political representation their social or economic grievances may not be addressed. While there were a few revolutionary and somewhat violent groups in Britain, largely the Britons associating for some level of change were reformists.<sup>5</sup>

The French Revolution inspired the responses of Britons from all walks of life. Pamphleteers and politicians debated the potential impact of the Revolution on Britain as well as

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<sup>4</sup> *Thomas Hardys account of the origin of the London Corresponding Society (1799)*, British Library Add MSS 27814, 5. (Author’s italics)

<sup>5</sup> For example, the United Irishmen (UI), a Dublin-based group originally formed to gain parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation, diligently attempted to work with British groups, but their quick turn towards a “secret revolutionary organisation determined to establish a non-sectarian republic in Ireland” alienated the non-violent British reformers. Nancy J. Curtin, “The Transformation of the Society of the United Irishmen into a Mass-Based Revolutionary Organisation, 1794-96,” *Irish Historical Studies* 24:96 (Nov., 1985), 463 (463-492). Also, in a LCS letter to the Birmingham Corresponding Society, the LCS showed their distaste that a fellow corresponding society was propagating revolutionary aims and riots. “LCS to Birmingham Corresponding Society 17 July 1795,” from LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected, with explanatory notes and a prefatory letter, by the Committee of Arrangement, Deputed For That Purpose: published for the use of members, Pursuant To The 17th Article Of The Society's Regulations*, at the Harvard University Houghton Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 32. All future correspondence from this folio will be noted with: “in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected.*”

the scale and nature of the British reaction. While there were hundreds of published works, the best known early response was Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The notoriety of *Reflections* was a combination of the perspective and the writer, and is considered one of the founding tracts of modern conservatism.<sup>6</sup> Burke feared the spread of revolutionary ideas that would decimate values he believed Britons held dear. He argued that the French *ancien regime* must be reinstated, explaining that the degradation of France was a consequence of lacking a strong constitution like Britain's, where hereditary succession, historical precedents, and the constitutional monarchy ensured Britain maintained its balance and strength.<sup>7</sup> Further, as a formerly prominent Whig Party member and regular conservative writer, Burke already had a potential audience ready to read *Reflections*. Numerous other writers published their perspective of the French Revolution as well as many who responded directly to Burke. Thomas Paine, influential in the American Revolution because of *Common Sense* and the series *The American Crisis*, had begun writing a pamphlet hoping to expose Britons to the great French revolutionary ideas, but altered his course to reply directly to Burke. In *Rights of Man*, Paine attacked Burke's idolization of the unwritten British Constitution, and Paine applauded the French Revolutionaries as they were fighting for the natural rights of all men and pursued a republic which Paine saw as the only truly democratic system.<sup>8</sup> While Burke and Paine were but two of many important writers during the Great Revolutionary Debates in the 1790s, they were two of the most

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<sup>6</sup> Russell Kirk, "Burke and Natural Rights," *The Review of Politics* 13:4 (Oct., 1951), 456.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France, And on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event (1790)*, edited and introduction by Conor Cruise O'Brien (USA: Penguin Books, 2004), 325, 375, 111, 117, 372.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of man: being an answer to Mr. Burke's attack on the French Revolution. By Thomas Paine, secretary for foreign affairs to Congress in the American war, and author of the work entitled Common sense (1791)* at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 28, 69, 55, 76.

prominent writers for they represented two divisive perspectives: constitutionalism<sup>9</sup> and natural rights.

These works impacted Britain in the 1790s because they opened a public discourse on the nature of the British government and its constitution. Works such as *Rights of Man* were accessible to the average uneducated Briton because the language was simpler than Burke's eloquent writing, and writers like Paine also called on Britons to rally against their government and demand equal rights. While historians debate whether Britons formed reformist associations because of Paine's rallying cry, the spread of natural rights ideas from France, or to redress their grievances, new parliamentary reform societies soon formed across England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland.<sup>10</sup>

This surge of working population reform associations are often described as either the last decade of eighteenth century reformists or the first decade of nineteenth century radical associations. The eighteenth century reformists were largely dominated by aristocratic or upper

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<sup>9</sup> The use of 'constitutionalism' in this thesis is defined by Glenn Burgess: constitutionalism is "a political theory that required all political action, including that of kings, to be in conformity with the law, and which provided legal remedies for dealing with actinos that were note." This is the basis of a 'constitutionalist,' but it will be demonstrated that the LCS was constitutionalists beyond this basic definition, for they understood the basic principles of the constitution and fought to restore them. See: Chapter Two and Three. Glenn Burgess, *The Politics of the Ancient Constitution: An Introduction to English Political Thought, 1603-1642*, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 89.

<sup>10</sup> For Paine see: John Belchem, "Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform in Early Nineteenth Century England," *Social History* 6:1 (Jan., 1981): 1-3 and Gwyn A. Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes, Popular Movements in France and Britain during the French Revolution*, (London: Cox & Wyman Ltd., 1968), 67. For France see: Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 20; J. Ann Hone, *For the Cause of Truth: Radicalism in London 1796-1821*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 11; and *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, edited by Mark Philp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For socio-economic factors see: James A. Epstein, "The Constitutional Idiom: Radical Reasoning, Rhetoric and Action in Early Nineteenth-Century England," *Journal of Social History* 23:3 (Spring, 1990), 556; Walter Phelps Hall, *British Radicalism, 1791-1797*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) (First edition: 1912), 13; and Eugene Charlton Black, *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organization, 1766-1793*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), 3.

ranked<sup>11</sup> men calling for moderate parliamentary reforms like household male suffrage.<sup>12</sup> Their demands were typically focused on the same political changes seen in the 1790s, but they denied membership to working population men through high membership fees and also strictly controlled who could voice their opinions at meetings.<sup>13</sup> The nineteenth century radicals were working population men calling for similar political reforms, but diverged in two important aspects. First, the eighteenth century era of reform and the radical societies in the 1790s distinguish themselves from nineteenth century radicals because of the earlier emphasis on petitions as the primary means of achieving a redress of grievances.<sup>14</sup> Second, later reformists had additional demands, such as the Chartists who sought to repeal the Poor Laws and ‘torch-light’ meetings in 1838 challenging factory masters.<sup>15</sup> The reformers in the 1790s, and the LCS specifically, was a party to both reform movements. The LCS focussed on parliamentary reform and petitions like their predecessors, but their internal organization was more democratic, for their structure was a reflection of their demands for equality. Furthermore, while they happily accepted assistance from aristocrats who desired more equality as well, the LCS worked hard to

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<sup>11</sup> The decision to use ‘rank’ instead of ‘class’ when discussing social distinctions is twofold: First, while I heed historian James Thompson’s observation that “much writing on the language of class lays great stress on this transition from rank to class. It is undeniably the case that talk of rank comes to seem obsolete and archaic.” It is, at the same time, anachronistic to discuss the social ranks as individuals classes in Britain during the 1790s. Second, this thesis concludes that the LCS, as an organization, did not identify with a working class consciousness, thus it would be anachronistic to use a term or concept that the LCS itself did not use nor identify with. James Thompson, “After the Fall: Class and Political Language in Britain, 1780-1900,” *The Historical Journal* 39:3 (Sep., 1996), 799.

<sup>12</sup> H.T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution, 1789-1815*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1985), 5.

<sup>13</sup> SCI, *An Address to the Public, from the Society for Constitutional Information*, (London: SCI, c. 1780), at the Cambridge University Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 3-5; and Richard. W. Davis, *Political Change and Continuity, 1760-1885: A Buckinghamshire Study*, (Hamden, Connecticut United States: Archon Books, 1972).

<sup>14</sup> In John Belchem’s discussion of nineteenth century radical platforms, he emphasizes that radical rhetoric moved away from the language of petitioning with mass platforms becoming a “mad collective of violence.” Belchem, “Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform,” 1-32.

<sup>15</sup> Epstein, “The Constitutional Idiom,” 561.

ensure their organization was a representation of the people for whom they were fighting.<sup>16</sup> In comparison to their nineteenth century successors, the LCS membership and internal organization was very similar, yet the LCS did not demand social or economic changes and regularly petitioned all levels of government. It was unnecessary to seek non-political changes, as the LCS believed “in consequence of a *partial, unequal, and therefore inadequate Representation*, together with the *corrupt* method in which Representatives are elected; *Oppressive Taxes, unjust Laws, restrictions of Liberty, and wasting of the Public Money*, have ensued.”<sup>17</sup>

The LCS broadly hoped for more equality in Britain with their focused parliamentary reforms being universal male suffrage and annual parliaments, and often the additional demand for a more representative borough system.<sup>18</sup> In one of the earliest LCS meetings, Hardy explained to LCS members that his vision for the organization was one that was “agreeable to the plan of the Duke of Richmond, &c.”<sup>19</sup> Hardy’s specific reference to the Duke of Richmond, a former president of the SCI, set the stage for the LCS’s reliance on a specific work in the years to

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<sup>16</sup> An example of this is the LCS’s adamant refusal to allow members of the Executive Committee to be unpaid for that would allow only men of leisure to lead their association. While paying those with an active role did not prevent wealthy men from running the organization, it did ensure that a man’s financial or professional background would not limit him. LCS, *Citizens, we lay before you an abstract of the pecuniary transactions of the London Corresponding Society, from the 7th of July to the 31st of December last (1797)*, (London: LCS, 1797), in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, edited by Michael T. Davis, (London: Pickering & Chatts, 2002), 2:285.

<sup>17</sup> LCS, *The London Corresponding Society's addresses and resolutions, (reprinted, and distributed gratis) July, 1794*, (London: LCS, 1794), 2, at the Harvard University Houghton Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online. (Author’s italics)

<sup>18</sup> LCS, *Address from the London Corresponding Society to the inhabitants of Great Britain, on the Subject of a parliamentary reform*, (London: LCS, 1792), 2, at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Online. In the LCS’s *Address to the Nation*, the LCS explained that to procure full representation it was necessary to reform the borough system in addition to universal suffrage, by demonstrating the significantly unequal distribution of electors and seats in many boroughs. In the attached chart, there were 42 members of parliament listed, representing merely 453 electors. While this was not the case for all boroughs, it is clear the LCS was correct that the borough system needed reform. See: LCS, *Address to the Nation*, in *Selections*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Thomas Hardy’s account of the origin of the London Corresponding Society (1799)*, British Library Add MSS 27814, fol. 1-38 in *Selections*, 5.

come. Not only did Hardy and successive LCS leaders focus on the same demands as the SCI and the Duke of Richmond,<sup>20</sup> universal suffrage and annual parliaments, but also, the Duke's letter to Lieutenant Colonel Sharman was a fundamental text for the LCS. The LCS sent copies to other reform societies as a text to consider for their own pursuits, as the Duke's letter exemplified the LCS's own understanding of its demands.<sup>21</sup> However, the LCS did not limit itself to tracts from the previous decade. While its ideas were originally drawn from the SCI, the LCS continued to employ arguments based on natural and constitutional rights to justify their claims that all British men deserved equal civil rights. To achieve this aim, the LCS regularly sent petitions and remonstrances to all branches of the government, encouraged the few men with suffrage to support parliamentary candidates who shared their goals, and corresponded with members in both Houses to maintain a voice in government, even if it was minimal.

While Hardy's original aims were strictly parliamentary reform, he soon realized that "gross ignorance and prejudice of the bulk of the nation was the greatest obstacle to the obtaining [of a] redress."<sup>22</sup> So the LCS, from its earliest days, had two interwoven aims: parliamentary reform and educating Britons. The LCS's desire to educate the public was its secondary aim, yet it worked as hard to fulfill this aim as it did for parliamentary reform. Through affordable and regularly produced publications and open meetings, the LCS reached out to Britons regardless of whether or not they were directly affiliated with the LCS.<sup>23</sup> The LCS published pamphlets

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<sup>20</sup> In an unfortunate twist of fate, the Duke of Richmond testified against Hardy in the 1794 Treason Trials. *The Trial of Hardy: 25 October – 5 November 1794*, in *Selections*, 233.

<sup>21</sup> "LCS to Bradford, 31 July 1795," in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 38; "LCS to Dundee Friends of Liberty 23 September 1795," in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 62; "LCS to Norwich Patriotic Society 23 September 1795," in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> *Thomas Hardy's account of the origin of the London Corresponding Society*, 7

<sup>23</sup> Their individual pamphlets were affordable as most were free, while the LCS's *Moral and Political Magazine*, a monthly publication produced from July 1796 to June 1797, cost 4.5d for members and related societies, 6d for the

written by its own members while also reproducing external publications congruent with their beliefs, beginning as individual pamphlets and eventually together in the *Moral and Political Magazine of the London Corresponding Society*, running from June 1796 to May 1797.

Maintaining the consistency of its ideas was important to the LCS, for the LCS Executive Committee was instructed to insert a preface or footnote contextualizing reprints that were not entirely concurrent with LCS perspectives.<sup>24</sup> On Sunday evenings, the LCS hosted members where political tracts were read and ideas were openly discussed with the goal of considering concepts, without a specific focus on their demands for parliamentary reform.<sup>25</sup>

The LCS's dual aims also extended to other reformist associations, as it declared "we can achieve universal suffrage and annual parliaments through united efforts only."<sup>26</sup> Because of the LCS's willingness to assist other reformist associations, many referred to the LCS as a 'father' association.<sup>27</sup> For like-minded groups, the LCS offered complimentary copies of its *Regulations and Principles* and educational pamphlets while providing advice beginning with their initial

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public. LCS, *Activities of the LCS from July to October 1796; support of Binns and Jones; publications of the 'Moral and Political Magazine,'* in *Selections*, 363.

<sup>24</sup> For example, in the July, 1796 *Moral and Political Magazine*, the LCS prefaced Thomas Paine's letter to 'a Friend in Philadelphia' by explaining its pleasure in publishing a previously unpublished letter, however "[a] word may be added respecting its merit. In the sentiment relative to M. de la Fayette and General Washington, we cannot agree with the writer," with the LCS continuing on to explain the merits of both men Paine attacked in his letter. LCS, "Preface to 'Letter from Thomas Paine to a Friend in Philadelphia. Paris, March 16, 1790,'" *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, July, 1796), from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 75. The LCS also used footnotes to contextualize ideas, such as the case in *The Englishman's Right* written by Sir John Hawles in 1680, republished by the LCS in 1793 at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Thale, *Selections*, xxvi.

<sup>26</sup> "LCS to Wycombe Corresponding Society, 30 September 1795," in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 56.

<sup>27</sup> "Whitchurch Reforming Society (in Salop) to LCS 16 September 1795," in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 72 and "Portsmouth Constitutional and Corresponding Society to LCS, 29 September 1795," in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 74.

start-up to how they could continue to function within the Pitt Government's severe limitations.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the LCS and provincial societies' had a reciprocal relationship that extended beyond simply passing on knowledge. At their celebratory dinner for the Hardy's acquittal, the Norwich Patriotic Society informed the LCS that "we shall be glad to see," any friend who can join the celebrations.<sup>29</sup>

As one of at least twenty parliamentary reform societies established in the 1790s, the LCS was not unique in its aims or methods; however, it was vital to the parliamentary reform movement in the 1790s. Boasting 650 members within its first year and at least 3,000 members at its peak in late 1795, reaching 79 divisions throughout London and surrounding area, and attendance in the tens of thousands at General Meetings in October, 1795, the LCS was by far the largest parliamentary reform association in Britain.<sup>30</sup> While numbers alone do not demonstrate the influence of an association, they can be a testament to its reception. Britons wanted to be a part of the movement to achieve more equality for British men.

The LCS saw and projected itself as a truly democratic and constitutional organization.<sup>31</sup> Not only were its aims within this framework, but its methods reflected its ideology as well. The LCS distinguished itself from earlier reformists such as the SCI as the LCS organized itself

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<sup>28</sup> Numerous examples in: LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*.

<sup>29</sup> *Norwich Patriotic Society to LCS, October 1794*, Norfolk Records Office WKC 7/107, 404 x 5, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Thale, *Selections*, xxiv; 298. *Report from spy Powell: LCS General Committee, 3 September 1795*, in *Selections*, 301; *Proceedings of a General Meeting of the London Corresponding Society, Held on Monday October the 26<sup>th</sup>, 1795...*, in *Selections*, 314. The LCS claimed that more than 150,000 people attended the meeting, while Mary Thale (editor of *Selections*) notes that contemporary estimates ranged from 40,000 to 100,000.

<sup>31</sup> A very thorough examination of the LCS's democratic internal organization is: David Featherstone, "Contested Relationalities of Political Activism: the Democratic Spatial Practices of the London Corresponding Society," *Cultural Dynamics* 22:2 (2010): 87-104.

according to its democratic principles of inclusion and equality. While the nineteenth century was dominated by working and middle class reformist groups, that was not the case in the eighteenth century. Through affordable fees and a democratic framework for leadership, the LCS demonstrated its true adherence to its belief in equality.<sup>32</sup> As the LCS Executive Committee reminded its divisions, “we think it scarce necessary to observe, that the regulations of our own Society ought to be confident with those principles.”<sup>33</sup>

The process of writing an LCS Address is quite telling about the LCS as an organization. It demonstrates their commitment to ensuring all members had an equal voice while also supporting the claim that these types of sources are a representation of the LCS as a whole. The process they followed throughout their seven year duration was described in one of the LCS’s first addresses, *Address to the Nation* in May 1792. Together, the elected division delegates wrote a rough draft outlining the essential ideas that the LCS wanted to present to the nation, ideas that both represented who they were as an organization as well as their desired reforms. At the next divisional meeting, each delegate presented the rough address to LCS members where assent from all divisions was necessary. The LCS Committee then took into consideration the comments from each division and produced the final copy to be distributed to each division and the public.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The SCI, an aristocratic reform group that began and ended in the 1780s but re-emerged in the 1790s, charged two guineas and a half annually while the LCS charged a shilling a week but overlooked many instances where members could not pay regularly. Society of the Friends of the People, *Proceedings of the Society of Friends of the People; associated for the purpose of obtaining a Parliamentary reform, in the year 1792*, (London: Society of the Friends of the People, 1792), at the National Archives ESTC No. T044524 from Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

<sup>33</sup> “LCS Executive Committee to LCS Divisions, 28 April 1799,” in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> LCS, *LCS General Committee, 3-22 May 1792*. MSS 27812, fol. 1-4 in *Selections*, 11. The LCS used a similar process when responding to significant question from other reform associations; such was the case when the

From a purely pragmatic perspective, the various divisions were necessary for spatial reasons and in 1795 for legal reasons.<sup>35</sup> However, the process of writing an address is an example of why their internal organization, that is, multiple divisions, was an integral feature of the LCS – it ensured everyone had the *opportunity* to voice their thoughts. Ultimately the Committee would make any decisions regarding the final draft, but there are multiple examples throughout their meeting notes that demonstrate the Committee respected their members’ opinions; opinions that were possible to be heard because the divisions were small enough to give every man his chance to speak. For example, the LCS Secretary John Ashley remarked in his notes that the discussions surrounding the 1795 *Address to the King* “caused a considerable degree of debate.” Those opposing the address argued that the likelihood of the address reaching the king untarnished by the Privy Council, or at all, were quite slim. While those in support reminded fellow members that regardless of the actions of their government, as an association that fervently used constitutional methods, an address to their monarch should be included with the addresses to the House of Commons and House of Lords. Ultimately, the final Committee decision was based on a members’ vote where the majority agreed to present the king with an address.<sup>36</sup>

The LCS was adamantly against violence, pursuing solely constitutional methods to achieve its aims. The LCS expressed its “abhorrence of all tumult and violence,” for only through “every legal and constitutional method,” would it be possible to return “to the people of

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Constitutional Society in Sheffield proposed a British national convention. *LCS to Constitutional Society in Sheffield, 12 February 1793*, National Archives TS 11/965.

<sup>35</sup> The Gagging Acts limited legal meetings to a maximum of fifty attendees.

<sup>36</sup> LCS, *Narrative of the proceedings at a general meeting of the London Corresponding Society. Second edition, revised and corrected. ... on Monday the 29th of June, 1795...*, from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 8-9.

Great Britain [their] natural and undoubted rights.”<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, many aristocrats, upper class Britons, and the government feared associations like the LCS. Often they were labelled as levellers, anti-monarchists, republicans, Jacobins, and violent revolutionaries. Although the LCS sometimes displayed anger towards Pitt and his small cadre of ministers, it consistently followed non-violent constitutional methods, warned fellow reformers “against entertaining Republican ideas,”<sup>38</sup> and maintained that they could never ““have conceived so wild and detestable a sentiment....as the equalization of property.”<sup>39</sup> However, the LCS’s attempts to demonstrate that they were simply parliamentary reformers working within the parliamentary system would be insufficient regardless of their truth as the Pitt Government also feared the LCS members themselves.

British reaction to the French Revolution was both theoretical and physical. There was the potential for the transmittance of revolutionary ideas as well as a French invasion of the British Isles. The 1790s was an important decade to British military history, for it established for the first and largest solely volunteer army in British history. In the process of the government attempting to fill its ranks, the Pitt Government clearly feared the British masses rising against the government, for it consistently voiced its hesitation to arm Britons even against the threat of an invasion.<sup>40</sup> The British Volunteer Movement in the 1790s, while typically a separate group of Britons than the parliamentary reformers, contextualizes the government’s response to

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<sup>37</sup> LCS, *To the parliament and people of Great Britain. An explicit declaration of the principles and views of the London Corresponding Society*, (London: LCS, 1795), in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 2:406; LCS, *Narrative of the proceedings at a general meeting of the London Corresponding Society...on Monday the 29th of June, 1795...*, 6

<sup>38</sup> *LCS to unknown, 6 August 1796*, British Library MS 27815, fol. 116

<sup>39</sup> LCS, *To the parliament and people of Great Britain*, 2:405.

<sup>40</sup> Austin Gee, *The British Volunteer Movement 1794-1814*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 4.

organizations like the LCS for the Pitt Government feared its own citizens, both armed and with potentially revolutionary ideas.

Unfortunately for the LCS and similar reformist associations in the 1790s, the Pitt Government was adamantly against their campaign for equality, for as historian Eugene Black describes it, Pitt, the government, and many upper ranked Britons "...saw in rapidly developing working-class organizations and in the mass acceptance of Paine, an overt threat to every value to which they clung."<sup>41</sup> So the government took numerous legislative actions against reformers. The Pitt Government began by suspending Habeas Corpus during the Treason Trials in 1794 followed by the Gagging Acts, as the *Treasonable Practices Act* and the *Seditious Meeting Act* were known, and finally the 1799 act banning all reformist organizations. While in 1794 the Pitt Government claimed its legislation was to protect the constitution, by 1795 it was clear the legislation was intentionally designed to prevent any parliamentary reform suggested by groups like the LCS.<sup>42</sup> While the LCS used constitutional methods to achieve constitutional reform, not radical acts to incite a revolution, it was largely misunderstood.

## **Historiography**

This thesis addresses some of the major historiographical questions surrounding parliamentary reformers in the 1790s. While the larger radical movement existed into the nineteenth century, this thesis pertains specifically to the 1790s, and thus a literature review will

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<sup>41</sup> Black, *The Association*, 234.

<sup>42</sup> "Thelwall's Political Lectures, Delivered during the Discussion of the two Bills brought into Parliament, by Mr. Pitt and Lord Grenville," *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, February 1797), in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:52.

focus primarily on this decade.<sup>43</sup> First, questions surrounding class often dominate studies of British working population groups, a consequence of E.P. Thompson's seminal text *The Making of the Working Class*. Thompson's perspectives triggered a wave of Marxist and neo-Marxist historians who sought to understand the development of a class consciousness, later historians who examined the influence of class on parliamentary reform groups, and eventually historians questioning the general acceptance of class as a parameter to understand these groups.<sup>44</sup> Second, historians examine why there were considerably more parliamentary reform groups forming in the 1790s than any period before in Britain, specifically by working population people. The two predominant conclusions consider the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the lives of Britons and the spread of French Revolutionary ideas. A few other historians focus on Thomas Paine's call to arms or the growing political awareness of the commons. Lastly, historians offer larger narratives of parliamentary reform groups in the 1790s which often doubt the depth and legitimacy of reform associations. Many scholars doubt the groups' understanding of their own ideas or are suspicious about the truthfulness of reformers' adherence to constitutionalist methods, hinting at impure intentions. These historiographical questions form the basis of historians' understanding of the 1790s reform movement and each deserve a critical review to place an intellectual history of the LCS properly within the literature.

Within the larger discussions of class, a significant focus is on the development of class consciousness. Historians examine when the working class emerged and the relationship between

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<sup>43</sup> For survey studies on nineteenth century parliamentary reformers see: Rohan McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth Century England*, (London: Routledge, 1998); D.G. Wright, *Popular Radicalism: The Working Class Experience 1780-1880*, (London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1991); John Belchem, *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); James A. Epstein, *Radical Expression, Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Thompson, "After the Fall," 785-806.

<sup>44</sup> Two studies that thoroughly discuss the historiography of class, and were used in this review, are: Thompson, "After the Fall," and McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth Century England*.

a class consciousness developing and the contemporary atmosphere. E.P Thompson's *The Making of the Working Class* is the seminal text about the development of a British working class consciousness. *The Making* focuses primarily on the early nineteenth century for Thompson sees working class men as being conscious of their class, but he argues that the 1790's were of "profound importance in shaping the post-[Napoleonic] war working class." Moreover, Thompson connects this later consciousness with the nineteenth century radical movement.<sup>45</sup> David Nicholls agrees with Thompson's periodization that 1790-1832 was 'the making of the English working class,' in his article "The English Middle Class and the Ideological Significance of Radicalism, 1760-1886."<sup>46</sup> Like Thompson, Albert Goodwin sees a connection between the reformers and the development of a working class consciousness, however Goodwin argues that the radicals in the 1790s accelerated, rather than began, the development of class consciousness.<sup>47</sup> Goodwin connects this acceleration to the emergence of radicalism in the 1790s, when working population men dominated parliamentary reform groups, rather than the eighteenth century reformers who were typically aristocrats.<sup>48</sup> In a similar sentiment but with slightly different language, Mary Thale argues that in the 1790s artisans were becoming more self-conscious of their class commonalities, and links this to "the increasing interest of the common people in political issues."<sup>49</sup> George Woodcock continues this understanding of a level of working class consciousness in the 1790s alongside the commons becoming more political

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<sup>45</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1968), 194.

<sup>46</sup> David Nicholls, "The English Middle Class and the Ideological Significance of Radicalism, 1760-1886," *Journal of British Studies* 24:4 (Oct., 1985), 425.

<sup>47</sup> Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Mary Thale, "London Debating Societies in the 1790s," *The Historical Journal* 32:1 (March, 1989), 58.

aware, however, he attributes this to the French Revolution.<sup>50</sup> These studies stand apart from others as they examine the development of a working class consciousness rather than beginning with the anachronistic assumption that the working class existed. Furthermore, while this thesis does not deny any of these historians' assertions in general terms for the 1790s, the LCS specifically did not display a consciousness of their working population identity. Rather, the LCS as an organization understood themselves and those they represented as 'the people,' a social and political group that deserved its place in the British social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy.<sup>51</sup>

With similar perspectives of class, but different methodologies to question a working class consciousness, a group of historians engages with the relationship between class and parliamentary reform groups in the 1790s. Historian John Belchem focuses most of his work on nineteenth century popular radicalism, but sees a working class emerging in the eighteenth century.<sup>52</sup> Belchem argues that there was a direct relationship between reform groups and class, arguing that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "class...served to inform, if not define, the promotion and reception of the various radical programmes and campaigns."<sup>53</sup> Two other historians examine the relationship between class and reform groups by focusing on political ideologies and language. Nicholls, discussed earlier as believing in the emergence of a working class consciousness in the 1790s, argues that "radicalism as a powerful ideology...has profoundly influenced class development and class relations."<sup>54</sup> James Thompson believes that

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<sup>50</sup> George Woodcock, "The Meaning of Revolution in Britain, 1770-1800," in *The French Revolution and British Culture*, edited by Ceri Crossley and Ian Small, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 10.

<sup>51</sup> See: Chapter Three: "The People"

<sup>52</sup> Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*.

<sup>53</sup> Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Nicholls, "The English Middle Class," 416.

the political language of reforms groups is important, and highlights the importance that historians James Vernon, Patrick Joyce, Stedman Jones and Dror Wahrman place on “the political construction of narratives of class,” in studies of eighteenth and nineteenth century radicals.<sup>55</sup> However, Thompson explains that in studies such as these, “too tight a focus on [political language] can obscure the origins of a widespread sense of class.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, Thompson’s work focuses on both the political language employed by working population groups as well as their social circumstances to explore class consciousness.<sup>57</sup> These historians provide important examinations of the relationship between language, ideology, and identity by providing specific examples rather than broader ideas as evidence, as is the case with the historians in the previous section. While some of these studies cover both eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and their evidence is thorough, but like the previous section, they are not a true representation of individual groups like the LCS whose language and ideology placed them contentedly as a pre-designated rank in the British social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy.<sup>58</sup> Thus, while the original ‘class’ historians should be applauded for turning from Whiggish history by giving ‘the people’ a voice, they began decades of historical studies that often based on the unequivocal understanding that class existed and allowed that perception to dictate their examinations of eighteenth and nineteenth century reformers.

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<sup>55</sup> Thompson, “After the Fall,” 796. Thompson cites: James Vernon, *Politics and the People: a Study in English Political Culture 1815-1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); G. Stedman Jones, “Working Class Culture and Working Class Politics in London, 1870-1900 : notes on the remaking of a working class,” in *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the Middle Class: the Political Representation of Class c. 1780-1840*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>56</sup> Thompson, “After the Fall,” 805.

<sup>57</sup> Thompson, “After the Fall,” 785.

<sup>58</sup> See: Chapter Two: “Society and Government” and Chapter Three: “The People”.

Historians explain the large-scale formation of working population parliamentary reform groups in the 1790s with four predominant reasons: socio-economic grievances, the French Revolution, Paine's call to arms, and a more politically aware commons. However, many historians emphasize one reason while recognizing other factors as well – these historians will be placed in their respective sections with the acknowledgement that they do not limit their perspective to one reason.

The impact of socio-economic grievances on parliamentary reform groups in the 1790s is explained in a few different ways by historians. Both James Epstein and Walter Phelps Hall consider these grievances as a trigger for the formation of reform groups, with Epstein broadly discussing the impact of the Industrial Revolution and Hall focussing on the rising prices of commodities.<sup>59</sup> While similar, Eugene Charlton Black and Goodwin diverge slightly away from the trigger perspective. Rather, they argue that reformers in the 1790s saw parliamentary reform as the means groups to achieve a redress of their socio-economic, and in a few cases, political grievances.<sup>60</sup> In a broader perspective, Nicholls sees the impact of emerging capitalism amongst agrarian, commercial, industrial, and financial sectors as impacting reform groups during their entire development, including their decline.<sup>61</sup> While these historians provide evidence for these assertions, by the end of the twentieth century, economic historians proved that the industrial revolution did alter the social and economic atmosphere of Britain as significantly as earlier historians had believed.<sup>62</sup> Considering this, the studies focusing on socio-economic grievances

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<sup>59</sup> Epstein, "The Constitutional Idiom," 556; Hall, *British Radicalism, 1791-1797*, 13.

<sup>60</sup> Black, *The Association*, 3; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 23-24.

<sup>61</sup> Nicholls, "The English Middle Class," 433.

<sup>62</sup> See N.F.R. Crafts, *British Economic Growth during the Industrial Revolution*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) for a post-revisionist perspective of the economic changes in Britain during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; see Pat Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution*, (London: Arnold, 1992) for a discussion of the literature concerning questions of the impact of the Industrial Revolution.

provide an understanding of Britons lives and potential triggers, but their use of the theory of the Industrial Revolution, largely disproven as a mass phenomenon, severely limits the usefulness of this perspective. Furthermore, while this thesis acknowledges that individuals have varied reasons for joining parliamentary reform groups, by focusing on socio-economic grievances, historians blatantly disregard the potential that some people did in fact have political intentions, regardless of their background or educational background.

Questioning the impact of the French Revolution on reform groups in the 1790s seems natural, as in the early years, the Revolutionaries were fighting for the same natural rights as Britons would later. Two historians see the French Revolution as affecting the reformers in 1790s in relation to their predecessors or successors. Goodwin, who also explores socio-economic factors, saw French Revolutionary ideas as guiding eighteenth century moderate reformers to nineteenth century radicalism, while emphasizing it was a development that began later in the decade.<sup>63</sup> In a similar perspective, but different periodical focus, J. Ann Hone argues that the Revolution stimulated earlier reformers to become the radicals of the 1790s.<sup>64</sup> A few historians focus on the 1790s as its own period rather than connecting it to the previous era of reform or nineteenth century radicalism. Instead, they argue that to understand the parliamentary reform groups of the 1790s it is imperative to consider the spread of ideas from the French Revolution. Epstein explains the radicalism in the 1790s as a combination of the impact of the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, focussing on the rationalist arguments for rights seen in France. To properly understand reform groups, historians David Eastwood and

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<sup>63</sup> Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, 19-20.

<sup>64</sup> Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, 11.

George Veitch argue that the spread of revolutionary ideas from France must be considered.<sup>65</sup> Most of these observations are very interesting, especially to consider the influence of external ideas on domestic political programmes. The limitations of these perspectives, for the LCS specifically, are that the founder Thomas Hardy formed the LCS on ideas published by the SCI in the 1780s. Although this thesis does not dismiss the potential impact of Revolutionary ideas or atmosphere, the ideological foundation of the LCS began before the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Historians examining the impact of Paine's *Rights of Man* on parliamentary reform groups in the 1790s focus on Paine's ideological impact. In his thorough study of the relationship between British reformers and the French *sans-culottes*, Gwyn Williams argues that Paine's call to arms was fundamental in the split between 1790s radicals and earlier moderate reformers.<sup>66</sup> In one of his earliest works, Belchem discusses Paine's influence in the 1790s as an important figure who was a mentor for many reform groups, regardless of their rejection of Paine's republican ideas.<sup>67</sup> Epstein, who sees both the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution as triggers for the formation of late eighteenth century reform associations, attributes the rationalist arguments, first seen with reformers in the 1790s, as a result of Paine spreading revolutionary ideas in Britain.<sup>68</sup> A conservative estimation of the sale of *Rights of Man* in the 1790s is about one hundred thousand.<sup>69</sup> Given the literary environment of eighteenth century Britain, where most books were read to groups because of the communal atmosphere as well low

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<sup>65</sup> David Eastwood, "Patriotism and the English State in the 1790s," in Philp, *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, 148; George Veitch, *The Genesis of Parliamentary Reform*, (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1965) (First Edition 1913), 15.

<sup>66</sup> Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes*, 67.

<sup>67</sup> Belchem, "Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform," 1.

<sup>68</sup> Epstein, "The Constitutional Idiom," 565.

<sup>69</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Burke Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 106.

literacy rates, many more Britons ‘read’ *Rights of Man*. Considering this, these historians have a strong basis for their connections, for they also use theoretical continuities to support their arguments. The major limitation that must be considered is that Paine’s ideas were not new, but simply represented the Lockean perspective of natural rights that already existed in Britain’s political philosophy discourse. However, these historians are correct in highlighting the fact that *Rights of Man* was a book written for the common person, so these ideas were more easily spread to a new and more aware group in British society.

There is broad agreement that at the end of the eighteenth century, when working population reform groups began to emerge, the commons became more politically aware. But this is often a “chicken and egg” discourse; that is, did the increasing political awareness push Britons to form and join reform societies, or, did the education and publishing efforts of a few Britons make the commons more politically aware? Historians Goodwin and Woodcock argue that a political awareness spurred groups to form, but their reasons are quite different. Goodwin sees public apathy, and as a consequence more political awareness, beginning to dissipate by the centenary in 1788 following Pitt the Younger’s failed reform proposals. From earlier sections, it is clear that Goodwin truly understands that there are often multiple connecting forces for a movement, and he succinctly explains the difference between each as stages of impact.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, Woodcock considers the growing political awareness to be from external factors, specifically the French Revolution.<sup>71</sup> In a complete reversal, Black, who argues that the primary trigger was socio-economic factors, explains that reform associations helped make the commons

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<sup>70</sup> Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 19-20, 23-24.

<sup>71</sup> Woodcock, “The Meaning of Revolution in Britain,” 10.

more aware.<sup>72</sup> Boyd Hilton views the late eighteenth century as the politicization of British society, and moreover, makes an astute observation when he explains “it was one thing to tell the populace to think [ie. SCI of earlier period] but by addressing them so frequently (pamphleteers), so urgently, and so directly, these writers unwittingly acknowledged the masses as agents.”<sup>73</sup> Thale, who connects the political awareness of the commons with a class conscious, takes a more neutral stance by arguing that the developments of political awareness, class consciousness, and reform groups worked in congruency with each other.<sup>74</sup> Each of these arguments is useful to understand the emergence of working population groups in the 1790s, for ultimately it is a chicken-egg question. Although this is not a question explicitly addressed in this thesis, it can be concluded that the LCS would not have blossomed in numbers if the populace was not already politically engaged, nevertheless, the LCS undoubtedly made its own impact through its affordable membership fees, publications, and public meetings.

A group of historians discuss the nature of reformer demands, doubting the groups’ understanding of their own ideas; these historians make unfair claims about the use of language or rhetoric, the intentions of some reformers, and question the theoretical connections between ideas. In Belchem’s broad study on the nineteenth century, he connects the nineteenth century radicals’ use of constitutionalism with the precedent set in the 1790s. Belchem accepts that “radicalism retained a common core: the constitutional language of historical restoration and national regeneration.” However, he contends that “. . .rhetorical strategy and propaganda device took precedence over ideology and intellectual argument.”<sup>75</sup> Epstein provides a representation of

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<sup>72</sup> Black, *The Association*, 279.

<sup>73</sup> Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 31, 60.

<sup>74</sup> Thale, “London Debating Societies in the 1790s,” 58.

<sup>75</sup> Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*, 36, 17.

several historians who diminish the constitutionalism of 1790s reform groups. Epstein argues that reformers used a ‘constitutionalism idiom,’ or the borrowed language of the past, as a shelter to legitimize their demands for natural rights.<sup>76</sup> In *Radical Expression*, Epstein also claims that many artisans simply wanted to achieve property security.<sup>77</sup> In a broad generalization, Goodwin claims that groups were undecided about their reform objectives, and explains that the reform groups also printed their work in newspapers and maintained a level of openness to prevent others from misconstruing their ideas, rather than because of a belief in transparency or the desire to educate the public.<sup>78</sup> Lastly, in a more theoretical deconstruction of reform groups’ ideas, Craig Calhoun claims that “natural rights were claimed on a totally separate and contradictory philosophical basis from that used for the traditionalist claims of the historic constitution.”<sup>79</sup> When examining the ideas of an organization, it is vital to question the legitimacy or understanding of ideas, especially when there may be other influences such as socio-economic grievances. However, these historians explicitly disregard the significant depth of ideas by groups like the LCS and provide an unfair assessment that can potentially alter readers and other historians’ perspective of associations such as the LCS who truly understood their fight for parliamentary reform.

An explanation for the limitations of these studies is their nature as survey studies.

Although many focus on a specific short period or an element of reform groups, by considering all of the British groups as one it leads to conclusions that unfairly lambast others. There are

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<sup>76</sup> Epstein, “The Constitutional Idiom,” 567, 569; Epstein, *Radical Expression*, 4, 11; James Epstein and David Karr, “Playing at Revolution: British ‘Jacobin’ Performance,” *The Journal of Modern History* 79:3 (September 2007), 513; Hone, *For the Cause of Truth*, 21.

<sup>77</sup> Epstein, *Radical Expression*, 22.

<sup>78</sup> Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 275, 220, 221, 238.

<sup>79</sup> Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 38.

undoubtedly examples from London and provincial societies that prove some groups had a limited understanding of their demands, others with revolutionary aims, and those whose intentions were potentially impure.<sup>80</sup> But these examples do not diminish the work of reform groups in the 1790s; rather they demonstrate the importance of more focused historical studies that together can provide a more accurate narrative of this period and the reform associations.

## **Aims**

The LCS sought equality, regardless of whether their specific demands fulfill our twenty-first century conception of human equality. The majority of LCS members were individuals who would gain something from their demands (ie. unlike the SCI) and were largely uneducated. So naturally their campaign appears as a personal fight to improve their lives and that they may not have understood their demands beyond the simplicity of a broad concept like equal rights. While this thesis does not dismiss the personal motivations or the lack of education of many Britons, out of fairness to the organization, it is vital to consider the LCS beyond these two simplistic assertions.

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<sup>80</sup> It is fair to question the depth of understanding for some small, provincial reform groups because they relied on the LCS to provide publications for distribution and their limited self-publishing makes it difficult for historians to examine them to the extent it is possible with the LCS. See: *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised*. For example, the Society of Newington supported the aims of French Revolutionaries, but was avowedly against “any efforts to disturb the peace.” See: *A collection of addresses transmitted by certain English clubs and societies to the National Convention of France... To which are added, Extracts from the seditious resolutions of the English Societies; A List of those Societies*. (London, 1793) from Eighteenth Century Collections Online. William Williams, a regular writer for the *Moral and Political Magazine* explains the ‘peculiar’ demands for household suffrage by some reform groups. Williams, and the LCS in a letter to a reform association, show their disdain for groups such as these for their intentions are solely to achieve suffrage for themselves, rather than the grander objective of universal male suffrage based on natural rights. See: William Williams, “On the Association necessary to obtain a Reform in Parliament,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, October 1796) from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 214-217 and “LCS to Leceister, 12 November 1796,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, December, 1796) from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 321-324.

The secondary aim is to contextualize the LCS alongside their contemporaries and within the historical literature. Contemporaries described the LCS as levellers, republicans, Jacobins, revolutionaries, and anti-monarchists. Historians consider the LCS within the larger framework of nineteenth century radicalism, in the context of class struggles, and as an inferior successor to the SCI.<sup>81</sup> Contemporaries feared the effects of the French Revolution in Britain, and saw demands for equal rights as synonymous with destroying the status quo and levelling society. Historians see similarities between the LCS's demands and those of both their eighteenth century predecessors as well as with their nineteenth century successors. As a result, questions about class during the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of a distinct middle class during the Victorian Era place the 1790s at the beginning of a narrative concerning Britain's emerging working and middle class.<sup>82</sup> The similarities between earlier and later reformists also make it easy to categorize the LCS with either period without exploring the specific context and ideas that drove its demands for reform.

This project thus analyzes the LCS as an organization of the 1790s, rather than as a beginning or end of another period. The focus is on the LCS's ideas, rather than their social affiliations, which has been the basis of contemporary and historical perspectives.<sup>83</sup> The LCS

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<sup>81</sup> For the 1790s within nineteenth century radicalism see: Malcolm I. Thomis and Peter Holt, *Threats of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848*, (Hamden, Connecticut: Archan Books, 1970); Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution, 1789-1815*; Epstein, *Radical Expression, Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850*; and Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846*. For nineteenth century radicalism see: Wright, *Popular Radicalism*; Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*; Nicholls, "The English Middle Class and the Ideological Significance of Radicalism," and Thompson, "After the Fall." For the 1790s being a continuation of the eighteenth century era of reform see: Frank O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History, 1688-1832*, (London: Arnold, 1997).

<sup>82</sup> See: Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*; Nicholls, "The English Middle Class and the Ideological Significance of Radicalism, 415-433; O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteen Century*.

<sup>83</sup> In 1793, a writer explained that "[t]he propertied classes had no intention of letting the lower orders be drawn into the political nation as actors." Anon, *Objections to the War Examined and Refuted by a Friend of Peace* (London, 1793), 3 in Clive Emsley, "Revolution, war and the nation state: the British and French experiences 1789-1801," in

was comprised primarily of working population<sup>84</sup> men in a period when they were largely insignificant politically. They did not have basic civil rights, they did not own property, they did not have titles, and they did not often run companies. While their social and economic grievances certainly drove their political demands, this thesis concentrates on the nature and origins of their ideas. Instead, it asserts that their ideas must be considered first, and then put within the context of its supporters.

### **Methodology and Argument**

A study of the LCS's democratic leadership records and private correspondence reveals that the 'face' of the LCS was congruent with its internal discourse. The sources used in this thesis are drawn primarily from the LCS's printed sources, as well as some private letters. Considering most of the major research questions surrounded the LCS's conception of an idea, a major decision concerning the sources was the extent to which they reflected the core LCS values. In many cases, the LCS includes a preface, conclusion, LCS advertisement or footnote to contextualize pamphlets not written by or for the LCS, thus it is possible to discern the ideas that the LCS supports. Furthermore, some sources are given more weight, such as the Duke of Richmond's letter to Colonel Sharman, a pamphlet given to all new LCS members and sent regularly to new corresponding societies. Or William Williams' publications in the *Moral and Political Magazine*, for he was a regular writer with personal experience within the LCS, rather than an outsider using the opportunity to be published.

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Philp, *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, 103. For historians who understand the period intrinsically related to class, see: Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*; and Belchem, *Popular Radicalism*.

<sup>84</sup> This thesis uses 'working population men' instead of 'working class men' for one of the conclusion in this thesis is that the LCS as an organization was not actively a part of the emerging 'working class' as argued by Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*.

The LCS believed in the natural equality of men yet supported an unequal social hierarchy; it believed in natural rights yet justified its demands as constitutional rights; it applauded William and Mary for the Glorious Revolution yet attacked numerous monarchs for their legislative actions; and it employed constitutional methods yet fought to renovate the constitution. These seemingly contradictory ideas must be considered together to understand the LCS as an intellectual organization.

This thesis argues that the LCS campaign for parliamentary reform applied a Painite interpretation of mankind and natural rights to a Burkean understanding of the basic framework of the British social hierarchy, government system, and the constitution. That is not to say that LCS drew directly from either Burke or Paine, for many of their original ideas came from the SCI, rather it is a framework to understand the LCS as an organization. The Burke-Paine framework represents two of the predominant streams of thought in Britain in the late eighteenth century. Burke's ideas were encompassed in *Reflections*, which reflected similar beliefs as the eighteenth century British Commonwealthmen who favoured historical precedents, revered the unwritten British Constitution, and believed in gradual reform.<sup>85</sup> In *Rights of Man*, Paine

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<sup>85</sup> 'Commonwealthman' was an eighteenth century contemporary term for intellectuals who believed in the original purity of the constitution wherein there was a perfect balance of power between branches. Burke's understanding of and adherence to the ancient British Constitution, as well as his inclination towards the 'Old Whigs' perspective placed him amongst other commonwealthmen. For further explanations of the term 'commonwealthman' and its connections with Burke or 1790s reform groups see: Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*; Nicholls, "The English Middle Class and the Ideological Significance of Radicalism," 415-433; J.G.A Pocock, "The Varieties of Whiggism from Exclusion to Reform: A History of Ideology and Discourse," in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985); Colin Bonwick, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); and a definitive text on the subject, historian Robbins connects Burke's ideas to the commonwealthmen. Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development, and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961). Moreover, it is important to highlight two articles that argue the LCS was solely using a 'constitutional idiom' or a Commonwealth ideology. While both studies make important conclusions, they are limited each for different reasons. Epstein in "The Constitutional Idiom," questions

provided a Lockean conception of natural rights that was important in the American and French Revolutions.<sup>86</sup> The British discourse surrounding rights and reform in the 1790s was indelibly shaped by the Burke-Paine controversy. Each writer's work spawned multiple responses, positive and negative, and their "pamphlet war" was the major battleground between the people and the oppressive government, or Paine and Burke respectively. The LCS found a balance between these adversaries. While it supported revolutionary ideas such as Paine's interpretation of natural equality and rights, it also insisted on employing a Burkean framework of a social hierarchy, government system, and constitutionalism so as to never actually support revolution.

## Chapter Outline

The thesis's chapters are organized thematically rather than chronologically. First, as this project is an exploration of the LCS ideas, the best course to comprehend specific elements of the LCS campaign is by focusing on each as a concept. Second, the LCS's ideas on the predominant themes of society - government, society, constitution, and rights – remained

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the legitimacy of the LCS's use of constitutionalism, claiming it was merely a means for reformers to legitimize their demands for natural rights. In a quite different perspective, Benjamin Weinstein in "Popular Constitutionalism and the London Corresponding Society," entirely dismisses the LCS's commitment to natural rights and equality, arguing that the LCS was merely continuing the SCI's Commonwealthman or Country constitutionalism. See: Benjamin Weinstein, "Popular Constitutionalism and the London Corresponding Society," *A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 34:1 (Spring, 2002): 37-57.

<sup>86</sup> In Locke's *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690), his theory of government is based on the sovereignty of the people and he uses natural rights arguments to argue for the equality of all people in civil society. Thus, while the concept of the 'rights of man' was known in the eighteenth century, most historians agree that Paine encapsulated a Lockean perspective of natural rights and applied it to contemporary issues or events. Paine's use of a natural rights argument is first seen in *Common Sense*, but it is also the foundation for *Rights of Man*. For 'rights of man' in the eighteenth century and for parliamentary reformers see: Black, *The Association*, 197. For sources connecting Paine and Locke's interpretation of natural rights see: Christopher Hitchens, "The Actuarial Radical: Common Sense about Thomas," *Grand Street* 7: 1 (Autumn, 1987): 67-77; Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, "The Republic of the Moderns: Paine's and Madison's Novel Liberalism," *Polity* 38: 4 (Oct., 2006), 447-477; Craig Nelson, "Thomas Paine and the Making of 'Common Sense,'" *New England Review* 27:3 (2006), 228-250; Jason Edwards, *The Radical Attitude and Modern Political Theory*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Jack Fruchtman Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994).

relatively constant through the 1790s. While in some years there were more publications concerning certain topics, generally the ideas did not change. The most significant difference in LCS publications is their reactionary work during the Treason Trials in 1794 and in 1795 when the public LCS General Meetings were a rallying point to get more ordinary Britons involved. However, while their tone is reactionary, their words and conception of ideas remained consistent during their eight year lifetime, the difference being how they presented their ideas rather than the ideas themselves. Furthermore, for some topics, certain years saw more publications discussing an idea.

This thesis is broken into five chapters. The chapter, “The Men Behind the Ideas,” is an exploration of Burke and Paine’s lives. This chapter aims to provide the reader with a brief background of how Burke and Paine came to realize the ideas presented in *Reflections* and *Rights of Man*. Through an examination of Burke’s early and political life, it will be clear that while he was more progressive than his modern reputation suggests, ultimately he was a pragmatic conservative as his perspective developed throughout his life and he revered, but thoroughly understood, the British Constitution. Paine, on the other hand, established the foundation of his ideas early in his life, and lived as a radical revolutionary continuously hoping to improve the world with his interpretation of natural equality and rights.

The four chapters each explore a specific theme, first through the Burkean framework and second through the LCS’s Paineite interpretation of that framework. The second and third chapter examine the LCS perspective of their society and government system. To truly understand the LCS as an organization, it is necessary to explore this perspective, first against contemporary charges but also because it demonstrates their true intentions of parliamentary reform, and not

revolutionary changes to the status quo and government system. In Chapter Two, “Social Hierarchy and the Constitutional Monarchy,” it will be demonstrated that the LCS’s conception of the social hierarchy and the constitutional monarchy mirror the framework of each in *Reflections*. The similarities between the LCS and Burkean perspective is clear through an examination of the roles, characteristics, and necessary balance that creates both a social hierarchy and government system to support and eagerly work within. In the third chapter, “The People,” the clear similarities between the LCS’s understanding of ‘the people’ as a concept and Paine’s interpretation of mankind will be proven. Further, this conception will then be applied to Burke’s social and governmental framework, to demonstrate that while the LCS’s perception of the ‘the people’ was Painite, they continued to work within Burke’s framework to produce a conception of society and government that is both Painite and Burkean.

The last two chapters will focus on the political side of the LCS, exploring how it could advocate both constitutionalism and natural rights. Chapter four, “The LCS as Constitutionalists,” will demonstrate that its constitutional demands and methods were only the surface of their constitutionalism. Similar to Burke’s constitutionalism in *Reflections*, the LCS understood the British Constitution as fundamentally based on ancient principles and gauged good and bad historical precedents based on whether or not they reflected the original constitution’s principles. The LCS campaign for parliamentary reform was a fight to restore the ancient constitution, rather than to create a new document. The final chapter, “Natural Rights and Constitutionalism,” will show that the LCS’s understanding of rights as fundamentally natural and equal for all men reflected Paine’s interpretation of natural rights. The LCS’s Painite interpretation of natural rights will be applied to its Burkean constitutional framework, where it

will be clear that the LCS understood its fight as both one for natural rights and constitutional rights, because, for the LCS, they were intrinsically connected.

## Chapter One: The Men Behind the Ideas

The lives of revolutionary Thomas Paine and conservative Edmund Burke were reflections of each other, equally great and disappointing. They were both faithfully devoted to God, yet disagreed about how to fulfill their spiritual obligations. As public figures, they were popular throughout most of their careers and discussed ideas with the major political figures of their time. Both championed multiple causes to affect change in society. At one point the radical Paine and conservative Burke were philosophical colleagues and on friendly terms. In a letter to French Laurence, Burke welcomed the idea of meeting “the great American Paine,”<sup>87</sup> while Paine happily continued his friendship with Burke, until the pamphlet war, regardless of their often difference opinions.<sup>88</sup> However, Paine mocked Burke’s unfortunate ending, stating, “[as] he rose like a rocket, he fell like the stick,”<sup>89</sup> ironic because the same fate soon followed Paine: both passed shortly after the revolutionary debates in the 1790s with as few friends as pence in their pockets. Their pamphlet war was short-lived as there was but one interchange; however, it is crucial to comprehending how *Reflections* and *Rights of Man* are the key to understanding the LCS reform movement.

The pamphlet war originated with Burke publishing *Reflections*, which began as a request by a friend in Paris, French aristocrat Charles-Jean-François Depont, for Burke’s thoughts on the French Revolution. The letter became a book of nearly 300 pages, clearly intended for a British

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<sup>87</sup> “Burke to French Laurence, 18 August 1788,” quote in J. Prior, *Memoir of the Life and Character of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Baldwin, Cradock & Joy, 1825), in R. R. Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man: A Difference of Political Opinion*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), 45.

<sup>88</sup> Fruchtman Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 186, 188, 191.

<sup>89</sup> *The Thomas Paine Reader*, edited by Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick, (New York: Penguin, 1987), 366 in Bruce Woodcock and John Coates, “Introduction,” in *Combative Styles, Romantic Writing and Ideology: Two Contrasting Interpretations* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1988), 1.

audience.<sup>90</sup> Its Whiggish perspectives and conservative worldviews incited a network of pamphleteers to respond. The debate between British intellectuals that ensued was an “ideological war over the significance of the past, for the Revolution was, in many ways, a referendum on history.”<sup>91</sup> Burke’s conservative worldview meant he clung to existing institutions and customs because they were a part of a model that had endured for centuries; most of the anti-Burke camp supported Enlightenment ideas of natural rights and a more representative society. Mary Wollstonecraft produced the first response, followed by other well-established pamphleteers, such as Richard Price, Joseph Priestly, James Mackintosh, and James Parkinson.<sup>92</sup> In some cases, they cooperated by focussing on different topics to ensure the strongest front against what they saw as Burke’s abhorrent ideas.<sup>93</sup> While many of the replies by more prominent writers were quite “innovative and utopian proposals,” such as with Paine, William Godwin and Wollstonecraft, the majority were “often more humdrum or more practical.”<sup>94</sup> This balance kept the 1790s pamphlet war from reaching extremes, but it also meant the louder and more radical voices were better known than as they are today.

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<sup>90</sup> Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 106.

<sup>91</sup> Steven Blakemore, *Intertextual War: Edmund Burke and the French Revolution in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, and James Mackintosh*, (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997), 15.

<sup>92</sup> Richard Price, *A discourse on the Lover of our Country* (1790); Joseph Priestly, *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (1790); James Mackintosh *Vindiciae Gallicae* (1791); and James Parkinson *An Address to the Hon. Edmund Burke from the Swinish Multitude* (1793).

<sup>93</sup> Steven Blakemore, *Intertextual War*, 16-17. Thomas Christie intended to discuss the origin and causes of the French Revolution in *Letters on the Revolution in France*, but after a discussion with Paine about their upcoming work, Christie instead concentrated on the French Constitution. And Mackintosh, writing after Wollstonecraft and Paine, focussed on Burke’s understanding of history because of the minimal accounts written on that topic.

<sup>94</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 5.

Paine's *Rights of Man* was by no means the best response,<sup>95</sup> yet it received the most attention from all ranks in society, albeit with very different reactions. For decades, it was the bible for parliamentary reformers looking for a more representative government.<sup>96</sup> Unfortunately Paine's book also led to him being tried and executed in absentia for seditious libel by the Pitt government in 1792. Burke avoided the gallows, but he felt the backlash from his party with few members publicly supporting him after 1790, which for Burke was likely comparable to a death sentence. This negative reaction and persecution of both Paine and Burke is one of the reasons why the Burke-Paine controversy is so complex, for many of the London intellectuals engaged in the pamphlet war of the 1790s were as extreme. They were, however, largely overlooked by the government because they were not viewed as a threat to the established order.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, it was not only the ideas in *Rights of Man* and *Reflections* that incited reactions across England, but also the men behind those ideas.

To understand *Reflections* and *Rights of Man* it is necessary to understand how each writer reached his ideas. Biographies of Burke treat him as a classic conservative, while works on Paine focus on the impassioned radical revolutionary.<sup>98</sup> Neither of these perspectives was new, however ideas cannot be entirely understood without a consideration of the person behind them. Therefore, it becomes important to heed Herbert Butterfield's warning "...against the

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<sup>95</sup> Historians such as Clive Emsley explain that while they acknowledge the importance of *Rights of Man*, it was "by no means the most intellectually coherent and cogent." James Mackintosh's *Vindiciae Gallicae* is often considered the strongest written response to *Reflections*. Emsley, "Revolution, war and the nation state," 102. Fennessy makes similar conclusions about *Vindiciae Gallicae* in Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 106.

<sup>96</sup> Epstein, "The Constitutional Idiom," 555.

<sup>97</sup> Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*, 8.

<sup>98</sup> For Burke see: Edwards, *The Radical Attitude and Modern Political Theory*, 98; Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 61; and John Whale, "Introduction," in John Whale (ed.), *Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 1. For Paine see: Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 167, 190; Edwards, *The Radical Attitude*, 111-112; Fruchtman Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 183.

insidious habit of evaluating past figures and events for what they are supposed to have contributed or failed to contribute to contemporary developments of which one approves.”<sup>99</sup>

### **The Life of Edmund Burke**

The notoriety of *Reflections* followed Burke’s long career as a professional politician and writer. Burke the politician and Burke the writer were interwoven: he used both Parliament and the written word to champion his causes. Most of Burke’s work was in letter or pamphlet form, often originating from parliamentary speeches, and always toward a political end.<sup>100</sup> While Burke’s conservatism is clear throughout his work, he championed many causes that were quite progressive in an eighteenth century context: he fought for Catholic emancipation, free trade, and Irish independence from Britain, while challenging the slave trade, the lifelong enlistment of soldiers, and India’s mistreatment by East Indian officials.<sup>101</sup> His commitment to advocating regularly for political and social causes and expressing his opinions through the written word left his indelible mark on Britain’s intellectual history. Burke had an impressive list of colleagues and followers with whom he debated his work. He was well-acquainted with the Scottish Enlightenment thinker David Hume, hailed as a genius for producing *Reflections* by the Emperor of Germany, Catherine of Russia, Stanislaus of Poland, and George III while being labelled a sycophant by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*, and applauded by Margaret Thatcher for being a part of the first anti-Maastricht brigade.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, the sales of *Reflections*, thirty thousand in the first

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<sup>99</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) (First Edition: 1931), 16-31, eloquently summarized by John Coates, “In Defence of Civilisation – Techniques of Burke’s Late Prose,” in Woodcock and Coates (eds), *Combative Styles, Romantic Writing and Ideology*, 48.

<sup>100</sup> Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*, 33.

<sup>101</sup> Woodcock and Coate, “Introduction,” in Woodcock and Coates (eds), *Combative Styles, Romantic Writing and Ideology*; Russell Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered*, (Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1997).

<sup>102</sup> Woodcock and Coate, “Introduction,” 8; Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 181; Edwards, *The Radical Attitude and Modern Political Theory*, 98; Robert Rhodes James, “The Relevance of Edmund Burke,” in

two years, were quite impressive considering the masses bought *Rights of Man* while the small population of aristocrats purchased *Reflections*.<sup>103</sup> However, Burke's importance to understanding the LCS is not because of his impressive list of followers or the multiple causes he supported, but for the substance of *Reflections* itself. Thus this will be a brief biography of Burke's life and works to explain how the ideas in *Reflections* came to be, for as a true conservative, Burke took a lifetime to construct his worldview, complete with years of reflecting on his many experiences.

Edmund Burke's ideas took root early in life and would slowly grow into the conservatism embodied in *Reflections*. Like his constitutionalist framework, his perspective on different causes was garnered through slow processes, often including a level of pragmatism to balance his ideological beliefs. This is not to say, though, that he lacked a firm set of principles. Rather, Burke was a true conservative who preferred gradual development and was guided by his experiences. . Burke's life experiences as an Anglican, a politician, and a writer were avenues to develop the ideas eventually presented in *Reflections*. The LCS drew from the conservative constitutionalism seen in *Reflections*, agreeing whether knowingly or otherwise, that historical precedents were examples to follow; thus, constitutional reform, not revolution, was the means to affect change.

As the son of a middle ranking lawyer, Burke received an education befitting his family's station. At a boarding school run by the Quaker Abraham Shackleton at Ballitore, Burke received a full eighteenth century education in the classics, literature, history, ethics, logic, and

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*Edmund Burke: His Life and Legacy*, ed. Ian Crowe (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 145 in Whale, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>103</sup> Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*, 35.

metaphysics, as well as the rudiments of the natural sciences;<sup>104</sup> however, it was the study of Greek and Latin classics that made the most impact. From Burke's education we can see the conservative foundations of his thoughts and where his rhetorical and at times theatrical writing style began. Through his reading of the classics, Burke found his ideal form of government in Aristotle's mixed constitution and a "taste for noble and elevated language and complex stylistic effects."<sup>105</sup> Both the ideological adherence to a balance of power and Burke's powerful writing style developed throughout his life,<sup>106</sup> and reach their apotheosis in *Reflections*, where Burke uses the English Constitution as the model for a properly formed balance of power.

Burke's education provided his ticket into the political realm. Entering politics in 1761 as secretary to William Gerard Hamilton, chief secretary of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Burke soon rose in the Whig Party ranks. Burke's quick, intellectual mind allowed him to move into a place of power under Charles Wentworth, Lord Rockingham. As his private secretary, Burke was known as the Prime Minister's advisor. Lord Rockingham valued Burke's advice to compensate for his own intellectual limits.<sup>107</sup> This position, a result of a good mind and thorough education, established Burke's stronghold in the Whig Party. Beginning with Lord Rockingham's successful election in 1765, Burke retained a position in the House of Commons for almost three decades, although he only held office twice and for brief periods.<sup>108</sup> During this time, other politicians had more patience for Burke's long-winded speeches and outbursts than they did after the death of Lord Rockingham in 1782, when Burke lost most of his party rank.<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless,

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<sup>104</sup> Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 48.

<sup>105</sup> Woodcock and Coate, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>106</sup> Woodcock and Coate, "Introduction," 9-10.

<sup>107</sup> Woodcock and Coate, "Introduction," 9.

<sup>108</sup> Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 49-50.

<sup>109</sup> Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 86.

he joined the Whigs because he was a thinker *and* a politician, not for peerage, prestige or position.

Burke's firm adherence to a specific perception of the English Constitution and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 were the embodiment of the 'Old Whigs' under Rockingham. They were staunchly anti-Jacobite, looking back proudly at the Glorious Revolution as confirming the existing principles in the English Constitution. Moreover, the Old Whigs believed the constitutional settlement of 1688 ended any further demands for a more democratic system or social levelling.<sup>110</sup> This was a significant area of contention for politicians and parliamentary reformers, for many saw the constitutional settlement as guaranteeing rights such as petitioning the government for further change.<sup>111</sup> However, the Whig Party argued that the Glorious Revolution established the forms which Britons should continue to follow. Burke's agreement with this perspective of the 1688 Revolution did not waver during his life, for this 'Old Whig' perspective is clearly maintained throughout *Reflections*.

Following in his father's footsteps, Burke was educated in law at Middle Temple from 1750-54, although he was never called to the bar. This legal training provided the necessary background for Burke to try to impeach Warren Hastings, Governor General of Bengal in 1785.<sup>112</sup> For Burke, the trial of Hastings was a moral issue, not merely legal proceedings. He believed Hastings was corrupt and "condemned the exploitation of India by officials of the East

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<sup>110</sup> Edwards, *The Radical Attitude and Modern Political Theory*, 97-98.

<sup>111</sup> For example, at a LCS public meeting in 1795, the speaker Matthew Campbell Brown drew attention to the Pitt Government's disregard for Britons' right to petition any level of government. Brown explained that the Pitt Government was ignoring constitutional dictates as established by the Bill of Rights (1689). LCS, *London Corresponding Society, Meeting in Mary-Le-Bone Fields. 7 December 1795*, in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 2:53-54.

<sup>112</sup> Woodcock and Coate, "Introduction," 6.

India Company.”<sup>113</sup> Although this episode began as an opportunity for Burke to return to the position of strength in the Whig Party that he had begun to lose by 1782,<sup>114</sup> the eight-year trial did not produce the results Burke anticipated. Through a combination of Charles James Fox and Richard Sheridan becoming bored with the trial<sup>115</sup> and the publication of *Reflections*, Burke lost any credibility he might have gained in 1785 and further hurt his position in the Party through his actions during the Regency Crisis of 1788-89.

The Regency Crisis had both positive and negative effects on Burke. What could have been a great opportunity to confirm his essential position in the Party turned into a defeat. Fox’s absence at the opening of the Regency Crisis forced Burke to organize the Whig opposition. Unfortunately, he was considered so inept that Fox and other Whigs unofficially dismissed him from the Party.<sup>116</sup> However, the Crisis also forced Burke to reconsider his constitutionalism, for “it impressed upon his mind the importance of the hereditary principle in the English constitution, and at the same time led him to think that that principle was in danger, and needed to be defended.”<sup>117</sup> This idea is vital to understanding *Reflections*, making the timing of the Crisis ideal, for Burke had begun writing *Reflections* in 1789 when he confronted Richard Price’s sermon on the same basis. Nonetheless, the slow decline of Burke’s reputation within the Whig Party culminated with the Regency Crisis and *Reflections*. By the 1790s, Burke was no longer welcome in the political realm which had been his home.

No longer respected by his fellow Whigs, Burke was condemned for *Reflections* by politicians and the public, and his private life crumbled when his son died in 1795. Although he

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<sup>113</sup> Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 51.

<sup>114</sup> Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 86.

<sup>115</sup> Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 93.

<sup>116</sup> Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 88.

<sup>117</sup> Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 89.

managed to publish his last work, *An Appeal from the new to the Old Whigs*, Burke's career was trapped in a downward spiral. He died in 1797 a broken man, riddled with debt, and alone. This is not the Burke who is remembered today. He is applauded as the father of modern conservatism and the champion of many honourable causes throughout his political career.<sup>118</sup> Although he fought against the rights of men which are an intrinsic part of our society today, Burke came to these ideas as a true conservative, believing in experiential knowledge and adherence to a constitution with a strict definition of who did and did not have civil rights. In spite of his failures, it was his successful embodiment of the spirit of conservatism that would be remembered by future British politicians, philosophers, and historians alike.

### **The Life of Thomas Paine**

Thomas Paine was a dedicated radical revolutionary, believing that through the propagation of his principles he could improve the lives of people on both sides of the Atlantic. Largely successful in this endeavour in America with *Common Sense*, and the series *The American Crisis*, Paine later tried to make an impact in Great Britain and France. As he so aptly states, "my country is the world."<sup>119</sup> Minimally active in the political realm, Paine reached people through engaging and communicable written works. The radicalism he transmitted through his pamphlets earned him many friends and enemies, and in many cases, some individuals were both at different times in their lives. During his lifetime, Paine was colleagues and dear friends with major revolutionary figures such as Benjamin Franklin, George

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<sup>118</sup> For 'father of conservatism' see: Jan-Werner Müller, "Comprehending conservatism: A new framework for analysis," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11:3 (October, 2006), 360; for Burke's causes see: Woodcock and Coate, "Introduction," in Woodcock and Coates (ed.s), *Combative Styles, Romantic Writing and Ideology*; Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered*.

<sup>119</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man Part the Second, Combining Principles and Practice* (1792), at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 106.

Washington, and the Marquis de la Fayette. Later supporters of Paine's ideas include intellectuals such as Bertrand Russell, who helped found the Thomas Paine Society UK, and Christopher Hitchens, who wrote on *Rights of Man* in the series *Books that Shook the World*, and politicians like American President Barack Obama, who quoted from *Crisis* in his 2008 inauguration speech. The radicalism in *Rights of Man* that wrought havoc in Britain in the 1790s was a reflection of Thomas Paine's character and ideas: radical and revolutionary to the very end.

Unlike Burke, where a comparison of his earlier and later work shows significant ideological development, Paine reframed his principles to fit the situation or cause. Although his aims for *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* were different, both are comprised of arguments supported almost entirely by Lockean ideals of natural law and rights. In 1806 Paine described his work perfectly: "My motive and object in all my political works...[has] been to rescue man from tyranny and false systems and false principles of government, and enable him to be free and establish government for himself."<sup>120</sup> Here we can see his true character. As a lifelong revolutionary, Paine supported revolutionary methods regardless of the internal situation of a nation, while his radicalism drew from his fear of tyranny and unfaltering support for the equality of men, thus challenging the status quo in every country. However, this was not entirely the Thomas Paine that attracted the attention of LCS members. The LCS belief in the right of universal male suffrage draws from a Painite and Lockean belief in natural rights.

Regardless of the fact that Paine's father was a Quaker and that he requested his burial to be in a Quaker cemetery, Paine maintained he was not a Quaker. Theologically, this should be

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<sup>120</sup> *Thomas Paine to John Inskoop, February 1806*, in *CW 2:1480*, in Fruchtman Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 1.

accepted, considering that *Age of Reason*, Paine's last major work, presented a pantheist perspective of spirituality.<sup>121</sup> Yet Paine's worldviews are not as separate from Quakerism as his spiritualism. Intrinsic to the principles in all of his work are important aspects of the Quaker belief system. Paine certainly followed the Quaker belief in the natural equality of men before God, whether it was a Christian or a creationist God.<sup>122</sup> Paine was not an iconoclast for his view. Whether or not Paine had ever read Locke<sup>123</sup>, the Lockean principles of natural rights and laws were becoming more accepted through the eighteenth century, especially after the American Revolution. Yet Paine's belief in natural equality of men was more inclusive than most 'progressive' thinkers of his time. Paine argued for the rights of slaves, he sided with Indians against the "horrid cruelties" inflicted by British colonizers, and hoped that American Indians would one day "be freed from the 'treachery and murder' of the white man."<sup>124</sup> Although his ideas of equality were largely limited to men, his wide-spanning belief in the equality of rights for all men demonstrates his unwavering commitment to his principles. Fighting for equal rights in America, France, and Britain were not merely causes to change the government or redress the grievances of his fellow countrymen, but a necessity of principle. These principles were further developed to intertwine the fundamentals of natural equality and the necessity of reason as seen in *Rights of Man*.

Upon arriving in London in the 1760s to work as a teacher, Paine involved himself in debating clubs and scientific lectures. These fulfilled Paine's life-long willingness to argue any topic imaginable, while supplementing his educational deficiencies. In a lecture series including

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<sup>121</sup> Fruchtmann Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 5. A pantheist is "...someone who believed that the spirit of God, a power beyond human capacity to comprehend fully, was present in every aspect of life on earth."

<sup>122</sup> Blakemore, *Intertextual War*, 11; and Fruchtmann Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 20.

<sup>123</sup> Edwards, *The Radical Attitude and Modern Political Theory*, 111.

<sup>124</sup> Coates, "In Defence of Civilisation," 51.

Benjamin Franklin, Paine was introduced to the “Newtonian view of an ordered universe operating according to rationally comprehensible laws of nature.”<sup>125</sup> These ideas converged with his previously established Quaker understanding of the equality of men to produce the same basic principles articulated in *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man*. Further, Paine’s attendance at these lectures is an early example of two features seen throughout his life: self-education and the drive to discuss ideas with anyone and everyone. Through these meetings Paine met Benjamin Franklin, whose letter of recommendation allowed Paine to begin his radical work in America. It was there, in Paine’s adopted country, that his true revolutionary character emerged, but it began much earlier in his life.

Paine’s Quaker upbringing introduced the ideas that were intrinsic to his revolutionary character. His distrust towards established religions and government power drew from the Quaker tradition of suspicion of authority.<sup>126</sup> For Paine, the struggle to ensure the rights of all men was within this framework of challenging the status quo. In his major works, Paine advocated for natural rights and laws while exploring how the current government was oppressive and prevented every man from garnering their inalienable rights.<sup>127</sup> In *Common Sense*, Paine argued that the American colonies were not given their due representation by the British government and thus hoped the colonies would secede from the British Empire and create their own state.<sup>128</sup> However, Paine’s revolutionary character was not limited to his role in the

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<sup>125</sup> Edwards, *The Radical Attitude and Modern Political Theory*, 111.

<sup>126</sup> “For Paine, The goal of all organized religion, Judaism or Christianity or Islam, was to control as many people as possible, to keep them enslaved to the theology of a particular group for its own enrichment.” Fruchtman Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 20, 49.

<sup>127</sup> Although Part II of *Rights of Man* was largely a tract espousing social welfare, Paine’s arguments drew from the principles of equality and challenged the legitimacy and usefulness of the British government because of its lack of consideration for the quality of life of most of its inhabitants.

<sup>128</sup> Thomas Paine, “A Serious Thought,” *Pennsylvania Journal*, October 18, 1775 from The Online Library of Liberty.

American Revolution. As early as 1780, Paine intended to return to England to produce the British equivalent of *Common Sense*, hoping that it would “open the eyes of the country with respect to the madness and stupidity of its Government.”<sup>129</sup>

In March 1791, Paine published *Rights of Man*, which was truly the British equivalent of *Common Sense*. The first part of *Rights of Man* was written as a reply to Burke’s *Reflections*, to attack the conservative’s antiquated views and to garner British support for the French Revolution. Before *Reflections* was published, Paine made it known he would respond, and it is clear that he wanted to establish to the British public that he was a revolutionary author.<sup>130</sup> *Rights of Man* propagated the same principles of the natural equality of men: a distrust of government power not reined in by a strong, written constitution, and used “the familiar vocabulary and word patterns of everyday street discourse.”<sup>131</sup> The accessibility of his writing style and the nominal cost of three shillings (six pence for both parts in 1792) allowed ordinary Britons to read *Rights of Man* in vast numbers. In 1809, Paine claimed that the sales of Part I and II reached half a million, and while historians disagree on the exact number, a conservative estimate is at least one hundred thousand copies in combined sales.<sup>132</sup> These were read aloud at parliamentary reform meetings and taverns across Great Britain and Ireland, thus Paine’s audience far exceeded copies sold.

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<sup>129</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, edited by P.S. Foner 2<sup>nd</sup> volume (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), 464 in Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 39.

<sup>130</sup> Fennessy, *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, 161, 190.

<sup>131</sup> Fruchtmann Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 63.

<sup>132</sup> Butler explains that E.P. Thompson has a very high estimate at two hundred thousand, but Butler agrees with R. D. Altick with a figure of about one hundred thousand. See: Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 108 and R. D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 70 in Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*, 108.

Unfortunately for Paine, the accessibility of *Rights of Man* led directly to his downfall in England. Paine left for France shortly after Part I was published to be the representative to the French National Convention and wrote the second part in France; however, his birth country ensured he could never return. Charged and found guilty of seditious libel in 1794, Paine was ceremoniously executed in absentia. The Prosecution used the cheap price and accessible language to argue that Paine had revolutionary intentions beyond what was deemed an acceptable challenge of the status quo in a pamphlet. Although Paine had no intentions of returning to England, this was the beginning of his demise.

Paine's popularity in France was short-lived. He spent almost a year in prison, where he wrote *Age of Reason*, because he was seen as an ally to the Girondins who were falling out of favour with Robespierre. He returned to his adopted country of the United States to live amongst those who loved the same principles of liberty. His homecoming was not quite as warm as he had hoped. Few of his former friends maintained a presence in his life, and he died alone and heavily in debt in 1809. Paine's bones were defiled in the process of returning his body to rest in his home country by a former enemy-turned-supporter who wanted to build a mausoleum in his honour.<sup>133</sup> Like Burke, he would be remembered for his ideas and successes rather than his failures.

The memory of Paine is mixed. Americans remember him differently than Britons, while within Britain, there are vastly different impressions. His ongoing inspiration as a radical revolutionary is readily found on a plaque erected in August, 1943: "In tribute to his memory & to the everlasting love for freedom embodied in his works..." The monument was planned and

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<sup>133</sup> Paul Collins, *The Trouble with Tom: The Strange Afterlife and Times of Thomas Paine*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2006).

paid for by an American Air Force Squadron stationed in Paine's hometown, Thetford in Norfolk County. Paine's lasting influence is clear in the words on the plaque: "Buried in New York<sup>134</sup> this simple son of England lives on through the Ideals & Principles of the democratic world for which we fight today."

## Conclusion

Neither *Reflections* nor *Rights of Man* presented a framework that was ideal for all Britons. Burke overlooked the rights of hundreds of thousands of individuals and the emerging acceptance of a more equal society, while Paine refused to accept the English system and the British reverence for its unwritten constitution. However both truly believed their perspectives would best serve Great Britain. Burke's constitutionalist and hierarchical framework preserved essential components of British society, namely the British constitution and their Britons' preferred system of a constitutional monarchy. The adoration for constitutionalism was not limited to those who gained something from it, but also by ordinary Britons, members of the LCS, who used Burke's framework in the battle to secure the rights propagated by Paine. The fundamental concept of natural rights balanced with reason propagated by Paine throughout his life appealed to the same Britons who supported Burke's constitutionalism. This is an unlikely combination, considering they have been pitted against each other since 1791, yet it is through the Burke-Paine controversy that we can understand the LCS as an organization.

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<sup>134</sup> This is incorrect. His body was removed from New York in 1819. However, a headstone remains in the corner of the former plot of land he owned. See: Paul Collins, *The Trouble with Tom*, 56.

## Chapter Two: Society and Government

The LCS's firm demands for equal rights have created misinterpretations of the organization by contemporaries and historians. One of the many charges the LCS faced was that it was a group of republicans and levellers. Often it defended itself against "evil designing men," who tried to persuade "the uniformed that the Friends of Parliamentary Reform are only a few Republicans and Levellers, who wish to overturn all government and to introduce anarchy and confusion."<sup>135</sup> Accusations against the LCS such as these, most often made by the government, were both ungrounded and false. There were some associations, such as the Revolution Society, that sought a republican system, but they were the anomaly amongst reformist associations in the 1790s. The concept of natural equality was the basis of the LCS campaign for parliamentary reform, however this did not mean that it aimed to overturn the social status quo and constitutional monarchy; quite the opposite, in fact.

In one of its earliest public addresses, the LCS denied claims that "opinions supporting rights of man, liberty, and equality mean 'No King! No Parliament!'"<sup>136</sup> From the beginning, the LCS was forced to defend itself against such accusations. In LCS publications, it responded to aristocratic and government fears that it aimed to revolutionize British society and government. Studying the LCS necessarily involves exploring this side of its fight, for such accusations inhibited them often. Not only did the LCS defend itself in court against the government during the Treason Trials in 1794, but also to Britons, for the LCS needed their support to achieve its goals. So a historical study about the LCS must include its perspectives of society and

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<sup>135</sup> Duke of Richmond, *A letter from His Grace the Duke of Richmond, to Lieutenant Colonel Sharman, chairman to the Committee of Correspondence appointed by the delegates of forty-five Corps of Volunteers, assembled at Lisburn in Ireland. With notes by a member of the Society for Constitutional Information*, (London: LCS, 1795) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-99*, 2:14.

<sup>136</sup> LCS, *Address of the London Corresponding Society to the other societies of Great Britain, United for obtaining a reform in Parliament*, (London: LCS, 1792), at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 7.

government as it was a key element of their struggle. As the LCS was first and foremost a political group, an examination of it automatically includes its fight for parliamentary reform. But to thoroughly comprehend how the LCS fought its battle for reform, it is necessary to explore the LCS's views of Britain's social and political systems as more than a struggle to work within each. The LCS desired to work within the social and government systems, for it understood and supported both the social hierarchy and the constitutional monarchy.

The LCS campaign for parliamentary reform necessitated that they work within the government system, so their comprehension of this system and willingness to work within it are an important element to understand the LCS as organization. The constitutional monarchy system largely mirrored the social rank structure of eighteenth century Britain, with a commons, a group of nobles, and the monarch. The social ranks in eighteenth century Britain were largely decided by land, with wealth being a secondary but also important factor. The hereditary monarchy was the highest station, followed by aristocrats, the landed elite with titles who could sit in the House of Lords, then the lower upper ranked gentry who often had small land parcels, and wealth, and were the majority of non-peers with suffrage and were of the Members of Parliament in the House of Commons. Lastly, the remaining Britons, who had some chances to change their station if they were rising merchants or artisans, but regardless of their social rank, they remained disenfranchised.<sup>137</sup> By supporting one system, social or governmental, it is

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<sup>137</sup> For further studies on the eighteenth century British social hierarchy see: Hilton, "Pittism and Plutocracy: The Social and Psychological Foundations," in *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People?*; O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century*; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society : order, hierarchy and subordination in Britain and Ireland*, edited by Michael J. Braddick and John Walter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Steven Wallech, "'Class Versus Rank': The Transformation of Eighteenth-Century English Social Terms and Theories of Production," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47:3 (July-Sep., 1987): 409-431; P.J. Corfield, "Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *The Journal of the Historical Association* 72:234 (February, 1987):38-61; and Ian R.

difficult to avoid supporting the other. Exploring the LCS's perspective of the social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy is more than contextualizing their demands within the governmental framework it was forced to accept. The LCS's perception of each is a part of its worldview and thus must be explored to provide a thorough understanding of the LCS as an organization.

The LCS's acceptance of Britain's social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy was more than a blind adherence to systems it could not change. Throughout its publications, it is clear that the LCS grasped the elements of each that amalgamated to create something it supported. In both British society and government, each rank or branch had a specific role and different characteristics which, when properly balanced, could produce a system that was beneficial for all members, regardless of their place. Ultimately, this is a study of the LCS perception of the world, rather than the reality. Further, while it is unlikely that most LCS members read *Reflections* or realized the significant similarities between their perspective and Burke's, such influence was indirectly present. Burke understood his society and government as functioning properly when all sections remained within their prescribed roles, believed that each had differing characteristics, and adamantly believed in the importance of balance. Thus, the LCS, comprised primarily of working population men, supported the social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy not despite their rank in society, but because its members understood and believed in the utility of each.

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Christie, "Conservatism and stability in British society," in Philp, *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, 169–187.

## Social Hierarchy

At first glance, it seems odd that a working population parliamentary reform association fighting for equal rights for all men supported such a stringent social hierarchy. It was not due to ignorance of alternatives, for they were aware of the American and French republican systems that professed a more levelled society.<sup>138</sup> Quite possibly there were some individuals who had selfish intentions, hoping to one day achieve a higher station or more fiscal independence, however, that was not the case for the LCS as an organization. Rather, its support was based on a clear understanding of the merits of a strict social order, where people were aware of their station, their role, and their relationship with other ranks – similar to the separate branches of government. Thus the LCS, comprised largely of individuals firmly at the bottom of the English social hierarchy,<sup>139</sup> professed full support for the eighteenth century status quo providing a respect to that balance was maintained.

The very essence of a social hierarchy is inequality. Some individuals or groups will have a higher income and have more power, and in eighteenth century Britain, upwards mobility was rarely an achievable goal.<sup>140</sup> For most LCS members, they remained at the bottom or low-

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<sup>138</sup> Republican ideas were quickly spread after the American Revolution and the LCS would have read Paine's republicanism in *Rights of Man*

<sup>139</sup> David Nicholls discusses the 'labour aristocracy,' Britons who took advantage of merging markets to earn sufficient wealth to gain a higher station than the uneducated and unskilled working population. Socially the 'labor aristocracy' had a higher station, but they continued to be considered significantly below the gentry and established merchants, and politically, most remained disenfranchised. Thus, while some LCS members were a part of the 'labor aristocracy,' they were perceived socially as similar to the working population men and politically they had the same limitations on their rights. See: Nicholls, "The English Middle Class."

<sup>140</sup> Linda Colley successfully disputes historians such as Ian R. Christie in "Conservatism and stability in British society," who argues that upward mobility was a possibility in eighteenth century Britain. In *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, Colley demonstrates that the aristocracy largely maintained its control over British society because the emerging 'elite' often owed allegiance to an aristocratic family, whether through marriage or political favours. Furthermore, consider Colley's central argument, that the aristocracy successfully asserted their 'rightful' place in society by guiding the development of 'Britishness.' Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation*.

middle of the hierarchy as their trades did not help them gain a higher social station nor could they earn sufficient wages to become a part of the propertied ranks. They supported the status quo because they perceived the system as natural for it produced a form of equality from its inherent inequality.

While there were many components to the late eighteenth century British social hierarchy, its most significant element was its inequality. In some cases, a professional position earned more respect than another, while in other cases, the income ensured a better rank; either way, the LCS understood that ranks in society were more than birth, often they related to profession. While the social hierarchy was more than professional, an individual's profession and income were an important component in determining their place in the British social hierarchy. The resulting power or higher income produced a level of inequality in society that the LCS saw as natural, if not essential.

Property holding afforded many Britons a higher station in society, for in most boroughs it was the prerequisite to vote, and the British peers often had vast estates. In one of its first public Addresses written to other corresponding societies, the LCS reminded its cohorts that “we know and are sensible...that *Difference of Strength, of Talents, and of Industry, do and ought to afford proportional Distinctions of Property.*”<sup>141</sup> As property was a major factor in deciding social ranks, the LCS's perception of ‘proportional distinctions of property’ demonstrated two beliefs essential to their reform goals. First, the LCS comprehended that its society used property to distinguish between ranks, and second, that it ‘ought’ to be that way. Essentially, the LCS accepted and supported the inequality of their society. The relationship between this type of inequality, and its place in society, is thoroughly explained in a pamphlet, *An Explanation of the*

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<sup>141</sup> LCS, *Address of the London Corresponding Society to the other societies of Great Britain*, 8.

*Word Equality*, reprinted by the LCS in 1793. In it, the author examined social perspectives of the concept of equality, in both a theoretical and practical sense, justifying the “inequality derived from labour and successful enterprise,” for it is “*essential to the very existence of society*.”<sup>142</sup> Thus for the LCS, the inequality of property and ranks deriving from an individual’s profession was a natural component of their society. This understanding of Britain was also propagated by Burke who was fortunate to sit higher socially and fiscally than most LCS members. However, his thorough explanation of the necessities of inequality demonstrated it was an intellectual, rather than self-fulfilling, agreement with Britain’s hierarchy.

Throughout *Reflections* Burke addressed inequality in British society, explaining its merit in response to what he perceived as the French National Assembly’s attempts to level society. In one of his detailed discussions about the merits of the British House of Lords, Burke argued that the “characteristic essence of property, formed out of the combined principles of its acquisition and conservation, is to be unequal.”<sup>143</sup> As with the LCS, Burke understood property as a significant factor to distinguish between ranks while the benefits afforded to some individuals because of their property were a natural component of society. Moreover, property was one of the important forms of inequality that underpinned Britain’s social hierarchy. When the LCS explained society as naturally being an unequal distribution of wages and property, they were echoing Burke’s belief that monetary and property inequality, “without confounding ranks, had produced a noble equality, and handed it down through all the gradations of social life.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Unknown, *An Explanation of the Word Equality*, (London: LCS, 1793) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-99*, 1:119.

<sup>143</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 140.

<sup>144</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 170.

The LCS's belief that property and fiscal inequality was the basis of their society points to their underlying adherence to Britain's social hierarchy. It was one thing to understand and propagate the pre-existing inequality in Britain, but it was quite another to openly respect and remind others of the necessity of deference towards higher stations. In the same address discussed earlier, the LCS maintained that it and other reformist associations respected the "landed and commercial interests in our society," while any attacks it made were a consequence of the negative impact of monopolies and corrupt boroughs.<sup>145</sup> This respect was not the result of coercion because society expected it, but was based on the LCS's understanding of the social hierarchy that existed in Great Britain: there are individuals in higher stations with a distinct purpose. The clearest exposé of this outlook was in the Duke of Richmond's letter, written in 1780 and reprinted regularly by the LCS, espousing universal male suffrage and annual parliaments. In the Duke's justification that equal representation would not challenge the hierarchical nature of Britain, he eloquently explained the relationship between property and station:

It is also true, that men of superior fortunes will have a superior degree of weight and influence; and I think that as education and knowledge generally attend property, those who possess them ought to have weight and influence with the more ignorant.<sup>146</sup>

This explanation is the epitome of the LCS's support of the status quo, for it combined its naturalist conception of unequal property and wages with a respect for the social utility of higher ranked individuals.

As *Reflections* was a compilation of Burke's thoughts on the events in revolutionary France, Burke typically explained his views as a reaction to some abhorrent idea or situation in

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<sup>145</sup> LCS, *Address of the London Corresponding Society... United for obtaining a reform in Parliament*, 13.

<sup>146</sup> Duke of Richmond, *A letter from His Grace the Duke of Richmond*, 2:21.

France. In multiple sections, he vehemently argued against fiscal and social levelling, maintaining that “those who attempt to level, never equalize.” Yet Burke was not against levelling because would be unsuccessful, but because it would “only change and pervert the natural order of things,” for in “all societies, consisting of various descriptions of citizens, some description must be uppermost.”<sup>147</sup> His intellectual understanding of the social hierarchy followed the perspective that each station deserved respect because they have a specific, earned place in society. In a later and more frenzied response to French Revolutionaries’ intentions to level society, Burke’s fears are predominantly for those in “the highest situation in the commonwealth.” It is founded on his clear respect for this rank, for they are “men of exalted rank,” and their necessary place in the hierarchy as they had a “sacred function.”<sup>148</sup> Thus for Burke, the inequality of society was first and foremost natural, but also a necessary component since each rank had a different function. In a general and mostly theoretical sense, the LCS and Burke proclaimed their understanding and acceptance that inequality was the essence of British society. The social hierarchy created a distinct role for each rank based on what they could provide for society. The LCS agreed with the Duke of Richmond that those with education were better prepared to serve the state, and these differences produced a necessary equality of inequality in society, for each person had a place.

The LCS believed there was a social utility to the hierarchy for each rank had a role, but it also saw characteristics for each rank which provided society with atmosphere. Character was a reflection of the position or role that each rank had and together they produced a balanced society. In a poem published in the LCS’s *Moral and Political Magazine*, the poet attacked “That

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<sup>147</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 138.

<sup>148</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 205.

misbegotten rogue Tom Paine/ He that hath taught the swinish herd strange things/ Taught them to hoot and hiss the best of kings/ a king too good by far to be forsaken...”<sup>149</sup> Granted the LCS supported some of Paine’s ideas, but it diverged from his perspective of George III. While the LCS acknowledged their monarch had some faults, they applauded him at a LCS General Meeting in October, 1795 for being an example of royal virtue.<sup>150</sup> This belief that the British Monarch exemplified the morality of his kingdom, and should perhaps be shielded from Paine-like attacks on the royal family and its hereditary succession, drew from their perception that he was “the landed father of his people.”<sup>151</sup> The LCS’s perspective of the monarch within the social hierarchy was more than the historic head of government, he was also a figure expected to live up to virtuous standards as a moral guide for his subjects.

Similar to the LCS’s understanding of its monarch, it perceived a duality in the character and role of the nobility. Although the aristocracy did not hold a father-like designation for the LCS, they were also considered to be a guiding force for Britons. In a 1796 address to citizens of Britain, the LCS reminded Britons that the “ancient Aristocracy of the country, [were] designed to be its strength and ornament...”<sup>152</sup> Further, the LCS Executive Committee stated their principles coincided with the Portsmouth Constitutional and Corresponding Society where, in a letter to the LCS, Portsmouth outlined its aims and perspective of the “pure form of three

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<sup>149</sup> Tommy Pindar, “The Boots, an Heroic Poem,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, August 1796) from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 143.

<sup>150</sup> LCS, *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the London Corresponding Society...Monday, Oct. 26, 1795; Including the Substance of the Speeches of Citizens Binns, Thelwall, Jones, Hodgson, &c. With the address to the nation, and the remonstrance to the King...*, (London: LCS, 1795) at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 12.

<sup>151</sup> Michael Hudson, “Opening Speech,” in *LCS General Meeting 2 September 1793* at the British Library ADD MS 27814, fol., 133

<sup>152</sup> LCS, *Citizens, we are eager to address you on the extraordinary occurrences that have recently agitated the nation*, (London: LCS, 1796), in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 2:237.

estates,” in which British nobles were “men distinguished for their wisdom and virtues.”<sup>153</sup> The LCS’s perception of the monarch and nobility, while somewhat unrealistic, revealed that each possessed specific characteristics that made them an important component of society.

Burke understood the social position and reverence for the peers and monarch within the government system. With the same tone and words as the LCS, he also glorified their character: “We fear God; we look up with awe to kings...and with respect to nobility. Why? Because when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is natural to be affected.”<sup>154</sup> Burke’s awe of his King stemmed from the significant and irreplaceable position of the British monarch. Only royalty could be king; thus only royalty could lead the state. Burke held the aristocracy in similar adulation. Its place in society was as “a graceful ornament to the civil order,” and it was necessary for British society and government because of the aristocracy’s virtue and wisdom.<sup>155</sup> This perspective of the nobility and monarch, like the LCS, was much more than a blind acceptance of their pre-existing social order.

For Burke and the LCS, there was a fundamental comprehension about the nature of the hierarchy, the roles of higher stations, and the character of each rank. Moreover, the LCS perceived each of these components as an integral part of Burke’s historic framework that he examined in *Reflections*. They were not only a crucial aspect to Britain’s past success as a country, but to its continued success as well.

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<sup>153</sup> “LCS to Portsmouth Constitutional and Corresponding Society, 8 October 1795,” and “Portsmouth Constitutional and Corresponding Society to LCS, 29 September 1795,” in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 76.

<sup>154</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 182.

<sup>155</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 245, 139.

## Governmental Hierarchy

In October, 1795, a LCS speaker told his audience, numbering in the tens of thousands, that the LCS saw in King George III “a solitary argument for the superiority of our form of government.”<sup>156</sup> This was after Habeas Corpus was suspended and shortly before the Gagging Acts were passed, severely limiting the right to assemble and restricting any discourse concerning the King, Parliament, or the government in general. The LCS supported their government even as it passed legislation intended to severely restrict their few remaining rights because they fundamentally believed in the perfection of the constitutional monarchy system. . . . As the Duke of Richmond aptly explained, “I am not for a democratic, any more than for an aristocratic, or monarchic government, solely; I am for that admirable mixture of the three...”<sup>157</sup> The three predominant social ranks were suitably reflected in Britain’s constitutional monarchy system, if not in reality. Accordingly, the commons had the lower house in parliament, the aristocrats had the upper house, and the monarch was a distinct executive branch. Similar to the social hierarchy, the LCS understood the constitutional monarchy as a system with separate ranks or branches, each with their own role, harmoniously functioning as each balanced each other.

The LCS treatment of each government branch reflected both its thorough understanding of the government system as well as its perception of each. The king was seen as an “integral part of [the] parliament,” and although most petitions were sent directly to LCS’s own house, the House of Commons, it sent many petitions directly to their king, for he was “the landed father of

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<sup>156</sup> LCS, *Account of the proceedings...Oct. 26, 1795*, 12.

<sup>157</sup> Duke of Richmond, *A letter from His Grace the Duke of Richmond*, 2:23.

his people.”<sup>158</sup> The LCS applauded the Peers for demonstrating their utility, and in their official toasts the LCS often thanked aristocrats like Earl Stanhope for their commitment to the cause of liberty.<sup>159</sup> The LCS recognized that as an organization representing the commons, it did not have a direct relationship with the King or the House of Lords, yet it actively acknowledged the importance of these two branches for together with the House of Commons, they produced the ideal system.

In the LCS’s petitions and remonstrances to the King and the House of Lords, a level of reverence is apparent. Often it was subtle in the regularity of style and words, and a tone befitting a monarch’s or aristocrat’s station.<sup>160</sup> This reverence and respect to aristocratic stations is clear in a comparison of two LCS addresses intended to be printed in the same publication and both written by LCS Chairman Duane and Secretary J. Ashley. While Duane and Ashley maintained the expected formalities of language for an address to the government, there is a subtle difference in their explanation of each branches’ role. To the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in Parliament, the writers used a more eloquent and formal language than in addresses to the nation or other reform groups. The LCS desired “to testify our deep sense of the threatened invasion of our liberties, and to remind our legislators of the sacred ties [sic] of reciprocal obligation that must ever exist between the government and the people.”<sup>161</sup> Yet to the House of

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<sup>158</sup> Hudson, “Opening Speech,” 133.

<sup>159</sup> LCS, *At a general meeting of the London Corresponding Society, ... on Monday the 14th of April, 1794, ... the following letters were read*, (London: LCS, 1794 ) at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 5.

<sup>160</sup> “Thelwall’s Political Lectures, Delivered during the Discussion of the two Bills brought into Parliament by Mr. Pitt and Lord Grenville,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, November 1796) from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 246.

<sup>161</sup> LCS, *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the people...Thursday, Nov. 12, 1795; including the substance of the speeches of citizens Duane, Thelwall, Jones, &c. With the petitions to the King, Lords, and Commons...on the subject of the threatened invasion of their Rights by a Convention Bill*, (London: LCS, 1795) at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 9.

Commons, a level of sarcasm is apparent, for the LCS addressed “that branch of the legislature...[that] was *evidently* intended to be the constitutional guardian of the people’s liberties.”<sup>162</sup> While the basis of the LCS’s fight for parliamentary reform was natural and constitutional rights, and it thoroughly understood and supported the constitutional monarchy as a government system, this respect could have been an element of their desire for reform instead of revolution. The LCS would not aim to overthrow the monarch and aristocrats it revered while there were constitutional methods to achieve reform.

The parliamentary struggle in the 1790s was to gain more representation in the House of Commons, rather than a fight to gain more power for their House. The LCS acknowledged that the lower house had a specific role to represent the last group, the commons. Thus John Jebb, whose letters were reprinted as a series in the *Moral and Political Magazine*, reminded the government that “a certain portion of their legislative power is reserved to the Commons.”<sup>163</sup> The Commons deserved to be represented in government within acceptable constitutional limits. Each branch existed in a relationship with the others, rather than simply being a part of the same system. Further, the variety of methods the LCS used to project these ideas, such as a reprinted speech from a former member, a speech at a general meeting, and a reprinted letter from an earlier reformer, demonstrate its consistency. It is not out of necessity that the LCS agreed with the system. If that had been the case, the LCS would have had no impetus to propagate its support for the constitutional monarchy outside of its petitions or general addresses that the government would have read.

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<sup>162</sup> LCS, *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the people... Nov. 12, 1795*, 12. (Author’s italics)

<sup>163</sup> John Jebb, “Letter I. To Lieut. Col. Sharman, &c.,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, February 1797) in, *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:60.

Burke discussed the British government and the three branches as if they were synonymous. It was a rare passage that touched on the government without including all three levels. Frequently his perspectives did not directly refer to Britain, but rather an abstract system that was superior to anything French; however, they were always in-line with aspects of British tradition. Burke's opinions on the ideal system, the British constitutional monarchy, were especially poignant when expressing his disdain for the newly-established French National Assembly. In establishing their national assembly, Burke saw "little genius and talent" for they began "with the utter abolition of parliaments."<sup>164</sup> He feared for France, because it would be governed by an "ignoble oligarchy founded on the destruction of the crown, the church, the nobility, and the people."<sup>165</sup> His concern was for all stations in society, not simply those who governed, for together they created the unity necessary to uphold the ideal system. Further, Burke could not comprehend the lack of a senate in the new French system, because it held "a sort of middle place between the supreme power exercised by the people, or immediately delegated from them, and the mere executive."<sup>166</sup> This executive ceased to exist in Burke's understanding of the National Assembly. He explained the new system as a dominating governing body, where the legislative and executive branches were unnaturally combined. After the National Assembly assumed the majority of executive power, for the king technically retained his position, Burke explained the French king was degraded, so the "first executive officer is to be a machine."<sup>167</sup> Throughout these passages, Burke's astonishment is clear, for the National Assembly was a conglomeration of power rather than a "real" government system

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<sup>164</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 325.

<sup>165</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 313.

<sup>166</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 316.

<sup>167</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 317

comprised of three separate branches that relied on each other to represent their different interests.

A fundamental aspect of the LCS's belief that its three branch system was the ideal form of government was that intrinsic to the system was a balance of power. The LCS cherished each level as it represented a different portion of society, and thus the system was perfect when a balance of power was maintained. This was equally true for the House of Commons, the LCS's House, as it was for the House of Lords and the King, for it was the entire system they supported, not its branch's role or power within the system. The extent to which the LCS cherished the constitutionally imbued balance of power was seen in its constant fear that the government was no longer balanced.

The LCS's discussions of a balance of power were a reaction to a perceived lack of balance between all three branches of government. The LCS pointedly expressed its concern that a specific branch was being encroached upon or losing its grip on its constitutionally established power. At a LCS general meeting in 1795, the orator begged his king "to exert that power with which the constitution has instructed," for he believed the ministers in the Pitt government were exerting too much influence in government.<sup>168</sup> In a reflective piece, a regular writer for the *Moral and Political Magazine* known simply as Sidney, looked back to the Stuart monarchy to show his readers the dangerous direction of their current government. The ministers under the Stuarts were "so far degenerate from their constitutional origin," that the system was warped and thus "annihilates the check or controul [sic] upon the views of the court or minister in the other

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<sup>168</sup> LCS, *Narrative of the proceedings... on Monday the 29th of June 1795*, (London: LCS, 1795) at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 8.

constitutional branch of the legislature.”<sup>169</sup> In 1794, possibly reacting to the Treason Trials, two different LCS publications were printed that attacked the Pitt government for dismissing the constitutionally dictated balance of power. Expressing their concerns to other reform societies, the LCS reminded fellow reformers that their fight was slow because the House of Commons was exceeding the constitutional limits on their authority.<sup>170</sup> In the second case, the LCS published a petition to the crown, where it called on King George III to rein in undue governmental extensions of power, for they were “breaches on the constitution, a constitution that was intended to prevent such encroachments.”<sup>171</sup> These fears surrounding an unbalanced government system resulted from the LCS’s understanding of the British constitutional monarchy. Given that each level was equally important it was imperative that each branch remained within its constitutionally established limits. The LCS supported the tripartite system for its equality through balance, not equality of status or power. Each different branch of government represented a part of society, and through the ideal constitutional monarchy, Britain’s government fulfilled the different needs of its citizen groups.

In *Reflections*, Burke articulated what he saw as the intrinsic beauty of the British system, its constitutionally founded balance of power. Without it, the government could potentially favour some sections of society over others. Furthermore, like the LCS, Burke’s dedication to a fair balance was not to ensure his preferred branch would maintain its strength, but because, as

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<sup>169</sup> Sidney, “Reflections on the Measures pursued at various periods, by some of the Ministers during the reigns of the Stuarts,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, January 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:15-16.

<sup>170</sup> LCS, *Address of the London Corresponding Society, united for the purpose of obtaining universal suffrage and annual parliaments, to the various patriotic societies of Great Britain*, (London: LCS, 1794) at the Bodleian Library (Oxford) from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 2.

<sup>171</sup> SCI, *Report of the sub-committee of Westminster; appointed April 12, 1780...And the speech of Mr. Pitt, on this subject; with the reply of Lord North*, (London: LCS, 1794) at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 4.

the perfect system, it was a necessary function. As Burke attacked the National Assembly for creating a system where one governing body held most of the power, he explained that by doing so, there were not external controls.<sup>172</sup> For Burke, it was more than a fear that a lack of checks and balance would result in poor governing, for he believed in the importance of separate roles.

He asked:

Have they [the French National Assembly] never heard of a monarchy directed by laws, controlled and balanced by the great hereditary wealth and hereditary dignity of a nation; and both again controlled by a judicious check from the reason and feeling of the people at large acting by a suitable and permanent organ?<sup>173</sup>

A balance of power ensured each branch would consistently have the opportunity to fulfill its separate role, producing a balanced system. Such a system, through constitutional checks, “preserves an [sic] unity in so great a diversity of its parts.”<sup>174</sup> Burke believed that only when each faction of society acted together, socially and governmentally, could they govern according to the best interests of the country at large. For without the government’s “antient [sic] opinions and rules... we have no compass to govern us.”<sup>175</sup>

The LCS believed so deeply in the importance of a balance of governmental power that it reacted in a radical fashion when constitutional limits were ignored. As an organization that knew its audience, the LCS often used bold language to attract people to their cause. In the first two years as an association, the LCS rarely attacked the government. There were a few cases where the LCS opposed an individual government motion or the government’s failure to recognize the parliamentary rights of Britons; that is, government action rather than the

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<sup>172</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 315.

<sup>173</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 227.

<sup>174</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 119.

<sup>175</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 172.

government itself. This would slowly change. It was during the political upheavals of 1794-97, when legislation was passed to prevent peaceful reformists like the LCS from organizing and spreading their ideas, that a reactionary attack against the government emerged. The majority of attacks were on the ‘Minister’s Cabal,’ Pitt and his followers, since the LCS perceived them as disrespecting the constitutional limits of power on different branches. Most importantly, these attacks were not a reflection of the LCS’s perspectives of Britain’s constitutional monarchy, for the LCS’s adherence to the different roles of each branch, how they related to the social hierarchy, and the importance of the balance of power were still present as it attacked the Pitt Government. However, these condemnations should not be perceived as a condemnation of the government system.

The LCS did not hide its contempt for the ‘Minister’s cabal.’ At public meetings, in petitions published for the public, and in addresses across Great Britain, the LCS attacked the government. In 1795, the height of the LCS’s massive public meetings, one orator, speaking abstractly to the king, told him to look to his ministers for a guilty party, claiming it is “the ministers who poison your ear and pervert your understanding.”<sup>176</sup> At a later public meeting, the LCS charged the same ministers with high treason against the people, and in the published minutes of a private meeting, the LCS labelled them “a bold and corrupt faction.”<sup>177</sup> The LCS’s criticism was not limited to the ministers. In two separate private letters, one LCS correspondent wrote about the need to rescue Britons’ rights from “an insulting and vindictive Aristocracy” and “an insulting Aristocracy [that] is endeavouring to shackle them.”<sup>178</sup> While Thelwall, also in

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<sup>176</sup> LCS, *Narrative of the proceedings ...on Monday the 29th of June, 1795*, 7.

<sup>177</sup> LCS, *Account of the proceedings...Oct. 26, 1795*, 4; *LCS General Committee to Citizen June 1796* at the British Library ADD MS 27815 Fol., 62.

<sup>178</sup> “LCS to Citizens Felix Vaughan and John Gurney, 17 July 1795,” 46 and “LCS to Melbourne near Derby, 23 August 1795,” 54 in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*.

private correspondence, hoped to save “posterity from impending slavery,” for the “aristocracy ever vigilant crunches the spirit of independence.”<sup>179</sup> This was a group unhappy with its governing bodies. The government thus had clear reasons to fear the LCS; however, it unfairly focussed on these expressions of anger rather than considering the entirety of the LCS and their message.

The LCS that attacked the ‘Minister’s Cabal’ was the same association that clearly agreed that a social hierarchy is natural to society, one that believed in the fundamental components of the constitutional monarchy, and one that simply wanted its voice heard. The seemingly radicalization of the LCS view of its government was a consequence of its perception that the Pitt Government was not fulfilling its duty while also negatively affecting the necessary balance of government branches. The quotations used are clear in their meaning, but they are not the entire quotation – they are merely the part that the government, and perhaps some historians, choose to focus on. When the LCS called on the king to charge his ministers with high treason, it was because the ministers had refused to forward the reformers’ petitions to the king, actively dismissing the LCS’s right to petition their king. Further, the LCS believed its grievances with the government were a result of Pitt’s cabal. In one address the LCS reminded its members that the “Commons had changed their original character ... There was no power, therefore, but in the Court cabal.” Because of Pitt,

the Nobility, as such, disappeared from the State. The Crown was held in subjection. The Commons usurped the whole functions of the Government, not as the Representative of the People, for they were not the choice of the People, but

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<sup>179</sup> *LCS to Perthe United Constitutional and Friends of Liberty, 6 September 1797*, at the British Library ADD MS 27815 Fol., 177-178.

as the agents and in virtue of the nomination of contractors, stockjobbers, and successful projectors.<sup>180</sup>

This was not a political association unhappy with its government system. It was one unhappy with a faction in the government perceived to be destroying the balance of power cherished by its supporters. The LCS openly voiced its negative opinions because it saw Pitt's government as a roadblock in its fight for parliamentary reform; reform that was possible when the constitutional monarchy functioned as it should, for it was the ideal system.

### **Conclusion**

The LCS was not fighting its government system; it was fighting to be a part of it. It perceived the inequality of the social hierarchy as a fundamental element that was natural to the existence of society. While the LCS was comprised largely of working population men who did not have the perks of a high station, the LCS supported the eighteenth century status quo because of its perceived utility. The acceptable inequality of property and wages produced the different stations in society that ensured a balanced system. Everyone understood their role, each rank had a distinct characteristic, and these differences produced a social framework that worked for Britons. While proof of that LCS's agreement with the social hierarchy is important against the false charges that they were levellers, this element of the LCS is more important to explore than simply as a means to redeem them. Not only is it a perception that, once realized, contributes to understanding the LCS as an organization, it is also intrinsically linked to their perception of the government system.

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<sup>180</sup> LCS, *Citizens, we are eager to address you on the extraordinary occurrences that have recently agitated the nation*, 2:237-238.

The social ranks and framework largely mirrored Britain's constitutional monarchical system with a commons, an aristocracy, and the monarchy. Each contributed to society independently of the other and produced a balanced system for all elements of society and government. Moreover, unless the LCS desired to entirely revolutionize Britain, it had to work within the government system. It attacked the Minister's Cabal for not respecting their constitutional limits on power, but did not attack the system itself. The LCS believed in a system where the commons and the majority of citizens were one of three branches; a system that could still prevent their legislation from passing even if there was universal suffrage. There were numerous reasons that the LCS, derived from the working population, should not have supported the existing social hierarchy or constitutional monarchy, yet it did. It saw the utility of each, and moreover, respected them.

One of the LCS's official principles was that "every nation has an unalienable right to choose the mode in which it will be governed."<sup>181</sup> The LCS, through a comprehensive understanding of the constitutional dictates of government, chose the constitutional monarchy, and consequently, the mirrored social hierarchy.

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<sup>181</sup> LCS, *Address to the nation*, 7.

### Chapter Three: The People

The LCS campaign for equal rights was more than a political fight. The LCS understood its fight as one to ensure the people had a voice and would one day hold their deserved rights. The LCS stood for ‘the people.’<sup>182</sup> In eighteenth century Britain, the commons, or the people, were generally understood as the small portion of non-nobility, usually the gentry, which had suffrage. This was not so for the LCS. For them, the artisan, the ploughman, the unskilled factory worker, and the wealthy merchant were all part of the people. The LCS was not a poor man’s or a ‘working class’ organization, nor did they limit themselves to householders.<sup>183</sup> The LCS gave a voice to the poor labourer who worked too many hours to feed his family to be able to find the time to be politically active,<sup>184</sup> represented the middle classes who had wealth but no vote, and all those in-between.<sup>185</sup>

This chapter will explore the LCS’s understanding of ‘the people’ and how it applied this term to a Burkean framework of society and the government system. ‘The people,’ for the LCS, was a concept understood through a Painite interpretation of mankind, focussing on the natural equality of men alongside their innate equal capabilities as individuals. As the LCS’s perception of ‘the people’ differed significantly from many contemporaries, the LCS’s application of its interpretation to the social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy demonstrate both its firm

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<sup>182</sup> The LCS’s understanding of ‘the people’ is vital to understanding the LCS as separate organization within the larger nineteenth century parliamentary reform movement, for, as Epstein explains, this term had a “range of meanings within radical discourse.” James Epstein, “Understanding the Cap of Liberty: Symbolic Practice and Social Conflict in Early Nineteenth-Century England,” *Past & Present* 122 (Feb., 1989):76.

<sup>183</sup> “LCS Division 27 to LCS General Committee, 2 September 1795,” in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 55.

<sup>184</sup> In England in the 1790s, a common labourer earned 6-9 shillings per week, insufficient to support a family, in comparison to the wealthiest aristocracy earning £30,000 – 40,000 per year. Ian R. Christie, “Conservatism and stability in British society,” in Philp, *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, 169.

<sup>185</sup> LCS, *Address to Scotland* (London: LCS, April 1796) at the British Library ADD MS 27815 Fol., 43-44; William Williams, “On the Association necessary to obtain a Reform in Parliament,” 216.

adherence to the unequal systems as well its fight to represent the quiet and unrepresented masses.

### **Painite Interpretation**

To the LCS, all men were born equal. As equal individuals, they each become a member of the people, regardless of birthplace, profession, property holdings, or wealth. Their equality could not be nullified. Paine was a champion for rights, and he argued for these rights because at the most fundamental level, he believed all men were naturally equal. While Paine claimed that he had “never read Locke, nor ever had the work in [his] hand,” there are ties between Paine’s and Locke’s conceptions of rights.<sup>186</sup> Thus, while Paine’s interpretation was not new, it was distinct from many eighteenth century conceptions of mankind, specifically Burke’s.<sup>187</sup>

The LCS was a parliamentary reform association, not a philosophical group, and thus its discussions of equality were often through the lens of civil society. A 1794 LCS Executive Committee report opened with the explanation that “an explicit declaration of our principles are necessary,” with the first principle being that “all men are by nature free, equal, and independent of each other.”<sup>188</sup> Not only was this a strict belief for the LCS, it was also “reasonable to the

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<sup>186</sup> Paine, “Essay on Cheetham,” 22 August 1807, in the *New York Public Advertiser*, reprinted in Gilbert Vale, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 165 in Fruchtmann Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 6.

<sup>187</sup> In 1789, Anna Leticia Barbauld, the wife of a dissenting clergyman, responded to the French Revolution in a way that perfectly encapsulates the status of men in eighteenth century Britain. Barbauld explained that in France, “Man, the creature of God, exists there. Millions of men exist there who, only now, truly begin to exist.” This was both existence in the political sense, because of universal male suffrage, but also in the sense that they were acknowledged as a part of their country. Anna Leticia Barbauld, *An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Tests Acts (1790)*, quoted in Alfred Cobban, ed., *The Debate on the French Revolution 1789-1800* (London, 1950), 50 in Emsley, “Revolution, war and the nation state,” 33.

<sup>188</sup> LCS, *Report of the committee, appointed to revise and abridge a former report of the constitution, of the London Corresponding Society*, (London: LCS, 1794) at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 2.

natural feelings of mankind.”<sup>189</sup> Most importantly, this was more than equality within a specific set of men in society, for in an address to Scotland, the LCS reminded its reformer colleagues that we “are all brethren, the prince who sits upon the throne the ploughman who cultivates the land, are by nature equal.”<sup>190</sup> It is important to emphasize that in the same address, there was not one word that could be interpreted as a desire for levelling society or removing the hereditary monarchy. Rather, this line demonstrates that the LCS’s understanding of the natural equality of men was at the most basic level; ranks were a product of society, necessary for the social hierarchy, rather than a natural distinction.

In *Rights of Man*, Paine argued for a republican system, applauded the French Revolution, and attacked British parliamentary democracy. These varied stances are consistent because they were derived from a concept that was essential to *Rights of Man*: the natural equality of men. Paine’s interpretation of mankind was not new in 1791, but it was clearly articulated and diverged from the British status quo. A significant reason for Paine’s support for the French Revolution was the National Assembly’s *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens*, which was repeated twice in *Rights of Man*. Paine explained that understanding the greatness of the National Assembly was possible through looking at the *Declaration*, and he emphasized the importance of the first three points. The first began with a statement fundamental to Paine’s interpretation: “Men are born and always continue free, and equal...”<sup>191</sup> Paine supported the French revolutionaries because they believed in the same interpretation of mankind as he did. Paine discussed this natural equality with more fervour than the LCS, writing that “every history of the creation... agree in establishing one point, *the unity of man*; by which I

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<sup>189</sup> SCI, *Report of the sub-committee of Westminster*, 6.

<sup>190</sup> LCS, *Address to Scotland*, 43-44.

<sup>191</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 55.

mean that man is all of *one degree*, and consequently that all men are born equal...,”<sup>192</sup> but both held the natural equality of men as a plain fact.

A contemporary argument against universal male suffrage was that not all men were equally capable. That is, capable of the same faculties of the mind, and specifically, comprehending components of the political realm necessary to make a decision regarding voting. There was a common belief that men in the ‘lower orders’ could not, rather than would not or should not, be a part of the political system.<sup>193</sup> The Duke of Richmond, an advocate for equal rights and a peer, highlighted the fears of many in his station: “Others again dread, that when paupers and the lowest orders of the people shall have an equal vote with the first commoner in the kingdom, we shall fall into all the confusion of a democratic republic.”<sup>194</sup> He mirrored the beliefs of the LCS and Paine that men were born equal and had equal faculties to be a part of Britain’s political system. Unfortunately, his view was rare for men of his rank. Considering the contemporary perception that many Britons were not mindfully capable, often the LCS discussed how men were equally capable of a variety of faculties, whether of the mind or otherwise. The LCS’s defense was often reactionary but also directly linked to its belief that all men were born equal. Thus the second element to understanding the LCS’s perspective of ‘the people’ is its view that all men were equally capable, which explained why all men were automatically members of the people. This view was distinct from the norm in eighteenth century Britain, and followed directly from the LCS’s Painite interpretation of the natural equality of mankind, as natural equality must come before being equally capable.

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<sup>192</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 24.

<sup>193</sup> Of course, many believed they would not and should not, but a fundamental aspect of this was the fact that it was believed that ‘lower orders’ were not capable, thus they should not have the vote, rather than the other way around.

<sup>194</sup> Duke of Richmond, *A letter from His Grace the Duke of Richmond*, 2:21.

LCS publications that discussed the equal capabilities of men were typically reactionary. Each writer was reacting to claims that some portions of society were not capable of learning beyond an elementary level or capable of understanding politics. However, their views consistently followed from the LCS's belief that men were born equal and thus were equally capable in all capacities, beginning in childhood. A writer for the LCS's *Moral and Political Magazine* explained how children should be educated according to the profession they intended to pursue. He began by explaining that a "child is born without ideas, consequently without any natural genius...the whole field of knowledge is open to him."<sup>195</sup> This implicit 'blank slate' perspective was one of the few theoretical explanations of equal capability printed by the LCS. Yet in a 1792 Address, the LCS maintained that all men are capable, because "providence has kindly furnished men, in every station, with faculties necessary for judging of what concerns themselves."<sup>196</sup> Thus all men, from birth to adulthood, had the same basic capabilities, regardless of their station. This was how the LCS perceived mankind, and thus all men were members of 'the people' because they were naturally equal and were also equally capable to act as members of society.

William Williams, a regular writer for the *Moral and Political Magazine*, made important contributions to the LCS's perspective of capability, for he directly assessed it within a political framework. While the LCS understood the place of the people within a social and governmental framework, ultimately the LCS represented them as a political group, and it was thus vital that people be perceived as politically capable as well. In one publication, Williams considered a list

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<sup>195</sup> William Williams, "Letter III – On Education," *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, September 1796) from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 170.

<sup>196</sup> LCS, *The London Corresponding Society's addresses and resolutions*, (London: LCS, 1792) at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 8.

of contemporary questions surrounding universal suffrage. Williams asked “Is he as capable of estimating the merits of the respective candidates as the rich man?” His answer:

“Undoubtedly.”<sup>197</sup> In a later article, Williams told his readers that a man was “indisputably able to acquire sufficient wisdom to exercise properly all his rights.”<sup>198</sup> Thus, from the LCS’s perspective, beginning at birth all males were equally capable of learning, as adults they had equivalent faculties to their brethren, and all men were capable of making political decisions.

### **The People in Burke’s Framework**

The LCS’s emphasis on ‘the people’ throughout its lifetime and in different forms, social and governmental, shows the depths of its fight for equality. This campaign was more than restoring their constitutionally dictated equal rights. It was making the social and governmental systems as they should be – with *all* of Britons granted their place. The LCS understood ‘the people’ through a Painite interpretation of the natural equality of all men. It used this conception to stand for a massive group of Britons who were silent, often unrepresented, and did not have their deserved place in Britain. However, it disagreed with Paine’s idea of the ideal system - the LCS supported the British social order and constitutional monarchy. So the LCS used Paine’s interpretation of man’s equality and applied it to repair the lost place of many Britons within a system they supposedly existed within but realistically had no role. However, the people wanted that role; they deserved that role; and they had a duty to fulfill that role. The LCS had a different conception of the people than Burke and many contemporaries; however the LCS applied its Painite interpretation to the Burkean framework of society and government that it wholeheartedly support.

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<sup>197</sup> William Williams, “On the Association necessary to obtain a Reform in Parliament,” 215.

<sup>198</sup> William Williams, “On Cruelty to Animals,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, March 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:118.

Although the LCS had a different understanding of the people than Burke, the LCS maintained its adherence to his systems by applying its Painite interpretation of the people to his framework. The LCS believed that the people were naturally equal to fellow Britons while accepting that the people had a different place in society than the nobility or monarch. In the previous chapter, it was shown that the LCS understood the social hierarchy in the same way that Burke did, in the sense that there was equality in inequality and the social hierarchy was an essential and almost natural part of society. Furthermore, there were two specific elements in the social hierarchy that applied to stations: each had a specific role in society and each had characteristics important for the nation. In the case of aristocrats and the monarch, the LCS agreed with Burke about their roles and characteristics. But because the LCS had a different understanding of the people than Burke, it diverged on the role and character of the British commons. However, this was consistent with the argument made above in Chapter Two that the LCS agreed with the Burkean social framework, because the LCS continued to imagine the people as the commons who had a specific role and character that was vital in Britain. The LCS believed that once the people had their place in British society, it would “enable the whole body to act with union, and concert for the procuration of the general good, and the resistance of common enemies.”<sup>199</sup> The LCS wanted the social hierarchy to function as it should, with the people in their deserved place, for it made a greater Britain for everyone.

Who were the people? The LCS often answered this question in its addresses for it wanted the people to know that the LCS stood for them. First, the people were over-burdened

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<sup>199</sup> LCS, *Report of the Committee, appointed to revise and abridge a former report of the constitution, of the London Corresponding Society [revised April 1794]*, (London: LCS, 1794) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 1:301.

Britons and the poor men on “the verge of desperation.”<sup>200</sup> The people were the tradesmen, mechanics, and shopkeepers, they were the labouring population, they were the “starving manufacturers and neglected peasantry of Great Britain and Ireland.”<sup>201</sup> They came from a variety of backgrounds, but each had a place in the LCS’s people because they were innately equal. “The people” was an inclusive group excepting only the aristocracy as they had their own separate place in society. Further, although the LCS focused on the unrepresented people in their fight for parliamentary reform, it clearly understood that group as one portion of the people, for they stated, “the unrepresented we have of the people.”<sup>202</sup> So the LCS did not exclude those who were fortunate enough to have suffrage, because it represented the commons, the non-nobility, and aimed to ensure all of the people had their deserved place in society.<sup>203</sup> The composition of the people also explained what their role was - they were the “industrious and useful inhabitants” of Great Britain.<sup>204</sup>

For the LCS, the character of a station was what they contributed to the nation over and above their role. In a sense, character was a rank’s abstract contribution while their role was concrete.<sup>205</sup> Both were equally important. Society was comprised of more than the combined

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<sup>200</sup> LCS, *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the people...*, Nov. 12, 1795, 6; SCI, *Report of the sub-committee of Westminster*, 8.

<sup>201</sup> *LCS to Sheffield Constitutional Society*, 7 March 1792 at the British Library ADD MSS 27814, fol., 1; *LCS to Citizens*, n.d. at the British Library ADD MSS 27815 fol., 22; LCS, *At a general meeting of the London Corresponding Society...on Monday the 20th day of January, 1794 ... The following address to the people of Great Britain and Ireland...* (London: LCS, 1794) at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 8.

<sup>202</sup> *LCS to Sheffield Constitutional Society*, 7 March 1792 fol., 2.

<sup>203</sup> This distinction, that there is the nobility and the commons as clearly separate entities, was understood by many in eighteenth century Britain, see: Burke, *Reflections*, 115.

<sup>204</sup> LCS, *The London Corresponding Society's addresses and resolutions* (1792), 1.

<sup>205</sup> While *The English National Character* focuses on a broader national identity, Peter Mandler’s conception of English understanding of character, and its place in society, is applicable to character of different ranks as well. Mandler explains that “‘national character’ is meant to refer to deep-seated structures in the minds of the people.” Moreover, Mandler emphasizes that the Enlightenment perspective that character traits were embedded in human

professions of its citizens, society also needed the character of the different stations to give it life. Together, the personae of all of the ranks blended together to produce a balanced society. To the LCS, the monarchy represented the morality of the nation, while the peers were the strength and ornament.<sup>206</sup> While the LCS wholeheartedly desired a balanced society, it believed that “it is from the mass of the people that national character is derived.”<sup>207</sup>

The people’s energy specifically contributed to British society. With that energy, the LCS explained, Britain would attain or restore its greatness. In a reprinted publication, the writer feared that “the sun of England’s glory perhaps soon may set to rise no more,” however, “hope remains in the collective energy of the people.”<sup>208</sup> The idea that the people brought together an important level of energy for Britain is repeated with similar connotations. Lord Oxford explained that for Britain to re-establish its credit or strength as a nation, “it requires the united energy and public spirit” of the people.<sup>209</sup> For each writer, a collective source of energy was necessary for the future greatness of Britain. Energy as a concept was not applied by the LCS to the nobility or the monarchy; it was a quality solely provided to society through the people. Further, the LCS explanation of the importance of this quality demonstrated that it saw the people’s character as one which was a necessary component for the British nation. Energy and spirit were equally important to Lord Oxford. For others, the spirit of the people was an important continuation of the past.

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nature continued into the late eighteenth century. Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 2, 27.

<sup>206</sup> LCS, *Citizens, we are eager to address you on the extraordinary occurrences that have recently agitated the nation*, 2:237; LCS, *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the London Corresponding Society...Monday, Oct. 26, 1795* ..., 12.

<sup>207</sup> Unknown, “Reading Societies,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, February 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:66.

<sup>208</sup> SCI, *Report of the sub-committee of Westminster*, 5.

<sup>209</sup> Lord Oxford and Lord Mortimer, “Protest of Lord Oxford,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, April 1797), in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:154.

For the LCS, the people's spirit was a quality linked to their happiness and the establishment or continuation of their rights. As a parliamentary reform group, the LCS often linked its perspectives of society with their fight for equality because without those rights the people did not have their deserved place in society. So, for the LCS, without a public spirit to drive its cause of liberty, the people would lose their place in society. At the 1794 anniversary dinner, the LCS speaker toasted the 'spirited citizens' who could not attend because they were jailed as a result of voicing their beliefs that the people deserved equal rights.<sup>210</sup> The LCS weighed the importance of the people's spirit in one of its more desperate remonstrances to the House of Commons in 1795. After frustratingly repeating earlier demands for liberty and a voice for the people, the LCS stated "we conjure you to assure his Majesty's Ministers, that the people of Britain have not degenerated from the spirit and bravery of their ancestors." The ancestors the LCS referred to were those who contributed to the 1688 Glorious Revolution which, in the LCS's opinion, guaranteed many rights for the people.<sup>211</sup> This historical connection to the usefulness of the people's spirit was not limited to examples of parliamentary reform. Citing Edward III as an example, the writer justified this important characteristic, for "in the history of our country, the reigns that followed the spirit of the people were no less distinguished in advancements in commerce."<sup>212</sup> The people were the most important group in society for the LCS, and as representatives of the people, it understand the vital role the people's spirit played in the cause for liberty.

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<sup>210</sup> LCS, *At a general meeting ... Monday the 20th day of January, 1794*, 8.

<sup>211</sup> LCS, *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the people... Nov. 12, 1795*, 13.

<sup>212</sup> Charles Lord Hawkesbury, *Constitutional maxims, extracted from A discourse on the establishment of a national and constitutional force*, (London: LCS, 1794) at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 6.

The LCS fought for the people's place in the constitutional monarchy because it understood the fundamental elements of their government system and thus believed there were consequences resulting from the people not actively participating in government. That is, for the LCS, it was more than simply supporting the system and demanding the rights held by others. The LCS did not desire a republican or entirely democratic system to ensure the people had a place in Britain. Rather, it sought to demonstrate that the people had multiple reasons to demand their place in the established system. The LCS foundation for these claims epitomizes them as an organization: the importance of a balance of power, the constitutionalist nature of their demands, and their vital claims to liberty.

The LCS's reimagining of the people's place in the British government system was more than a consequence of their deserved right to universal male suffrage. It was a part of the LCS's understanding of how the constitutional monarchy functioned. So long as the people did not have a place in government, the system would not have its necessary balance. So, the LCS was asserting the place of the people both because the people deserved their place and because the LCS believed the constitutional monarchy system would function better as a result. To the LCS, the government was not actually fulfilling its duty. Considering the people were denied their deserved place in the House of Commons, the lower house was fallacious and consequently, the whole government system lacked its necessary balance. It was both a travesty to the people and to the government, for without true representation of the people, the great British system would not function properly. Thus they exclaimed: "the voice of the people ought to be heard in the councils of the nation!"<sup>213</sup> The LCS justified their fight to grant the people their warranted place

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<sup>213</sup> Unknown, *Reformers not rioters*, (London: LCS, 1794) at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 5.

in government in three ways. First, because the LCS believed the people had an inalienable right to suffrage; second because the LCS believed there were ramifications from a consequence of the lack of representation; and third because the LCS believed that once the people could fulfill their role in government, they would make significant contributions to Britain.

In a 1795 remonstrance to the House of Commons, the LCS explained its perception of the role of the lower house. As if speaking directly to the house, they opened with: "...to that branch of the legislature, which from its legal style and firm, was *evidently* intended to be the constitutional guardian of the people's liberties, and the champion of its rights and privileges!"<sup>214</sup> In the subtly sarcasm, it is clear that the the LCS did not believe that the House was fulfilling its expected role. In a simpler and less passionate diction, Dr. Jebb summarized the LCS frustrations with the current state of their government, for "it is the very essence of a Commons House of Parliament, that it faithfully express the voice of the Commons."<sup>215</sup>

While the LCS was fighting for parliamentary reform and thus many of their concerns related to the injustice of the people not having a place in the government system, it also had other issues of concern. The LCS perceived more consequences from the people not being duly represented in the House of Commons. In one of many cases where William Williams posed questions to answer himself, he provided a clear summary of the effects of a non-representative House of Commons. "First. Is the happiness of the people of England sufficiently provided for? No. Secondly. Why is it not sufficiently provided for? Because all the people are not represented. The house of Commons, which ought to be elected by all the people, is elected by a part of the

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<sup>214</sup> LCS, *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the people... Nov. 12, 1795*, 12. (Author's italics)

<sup>215</sup> "Dr. Jebb's Letters continued 25 October 1783," *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, March 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:103.

people.”<sup>216</sup> So the LCS understood that the House of Commons performed a specific role as a protectorate for the people as its very essence was the commons. The lack of representation of the people was more than unjust, it was a problem that affected the government system. The LCS went further, exploring multiple reasons why the people should have their place in the government.

In a self-written history of the LCS, the writer explained the constitutional place of the people in government through a discussion of the legal foundations of the LCS demands for parliamentary reform. “The Constitution of England presumes that the laws are both made and administered by the country – that is to say, by the people.”<sup>217</sup> In a different publication, Lord Oxford’s interpretation of the constitutionally dictated place of the people in government is an important example for it focused on the spirit of the constitution, a concept as important as legal foundations for the LCS. In his protest, Lord Oxford reminded readers that “according to ‘the true spirit of the Constitution,’ which is founded in wisdom, liberty, and justice, the People of Great Britain have a right, and ought to be fairly and equally represented in that which, by its very name, is their House of Parliament.”<sup>218</sup> This first explanation for why the people should be a part of government balanced both concrete and abstract interpretations of the English constitution, both of which were important elements of constitutionalism in England.

In very dramatic language often seen in LCS publications and reprints, a writer used emotional rhetoric to make his case for the people’s place in government. “That the restoration of the Commons’ House of Parliament to freedom and independency, by interposition of the great

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<sup>216</sup> Williams, “On the Association necessary to obtain a Reform in Parliament,” 215.

<sup>217</sup> LCS, “History of the Society,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, October 1796) from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 231.

<sup>218</sup> Oxford and Mortimer, “Protest of Lord Oxford,” 4:155.

collective body of the nation, is essentially necessary to our existence as a free people.”<sup>219</sup> Each of these reasons for the people having a place in the government has one important common theme: without the people truly being a part of the British government system, it was not fulfilling its function.

The LCS’s perception of the role of the House of Commons is clear, the consequences of the lack of a presence of the people is clear, and the foundations for why the people have a place in government is evident. The LCS had a clear understanding of the place of the people, their interpretation of the people, in the British constitutional monarchy system. But what would the people do once they had their proper place in government?: “The People’s Parliament would venerate their rights, and respect their friends.”<sup>220</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The LCS knew that the people had many grievances, but this was not the foundation of their fight for parliamentary reform. While a redress of grievances was perceived as a favourable consequence to their reform demands, the LCS had other reasons to assert the people’s place in society and government. The LCS thoroughly understood and supported the social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy, and through its understanding, the LCS believed neither system was functioning properly. Without the people playing their pre-established social and governmental roles, each system was imbalanced. So the LCS fight to ensure the people were granted their place was because they deserved it as equal men, and equally, because the LCS wanted the social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy to perform. Thus the LCS’s demands were to improve the

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<sup>219</sup> SCI, *Report of the sub-committee of Westminster*, 5.

<sup>220</sup> LCS, “Executive Committee, Sitting of Friday March 31, 1797,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, April 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:156.

lives of the people they represented and to improve the systems they supported, for as it exclaimed in a letter to a fellow reformist society: “Oh happy, happy day, when the time will come, that one interest shall bind the whole nation, nay the whole world, as citizens and brethren!”<sup>221</sup> If that happy day was to arrive, it would not be an entirely democratic government system or a socialist society where ranks no longer exist; no, it would be a day when the people have their deserved place in society and government so each system could function properly.

The LCS’s interpretation of ‘the people’ was vastly different from any contemporaries, especially Burke. Individuals were members of the people simply because they were born outside the aristocracy. Their natural equality automatically granted them a specific position in society and government, a position that the LCS perceived as unfulfilled, for the people were not recognized as the ‘industrious inhabitants’ who provided the energy and spirit for society. Furthermore, they were denied their place in government regardless of the fact that the lower house was called the House of *Commons*. Without the people functioning in their predetermined roles, the systems were not balanced. While the LCS had a different perception of the people, it did not have a different perception of how they fit into the social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy.

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<sup>221</sup> “LCS to Dundee Friends of Liberty, 23 September 1795,” 62.

#### Chapter Four: The LCS as Constitutionalists

Constitutionalism was the legal and material foundation of the LCS campaign for equal rights. As the British Constitution was a compilation of numerous legislative acts and accepted practices, it was considered unwritten, as opposed to countries that had codified their laws into an official constitution. While some people, like Paine, doubted the strength or importance of the British Constitution because it was unwritten, Britons did not often question their constitutional rights and laws on this basis. Rather, they saw their constitution as beginning with the Magna Charta (1215), and the successive legislative acts were additions or alterations as with any formal, written constitution.

To achieve parliamentary reform, the LCS adamantly followed constitutional methods. Through petitions and remonstrances to each government branch as well as government officials, the LCS strictly followed a peaceful course of action to achieve their aims. Their demands were for constitutional rights, so it was to be expected that they used constitutional methods. This was also an organization that understood, respected, and supported its constitutional monarchy, so naturally the LCS functioned within its government system. The LCS's coalesced constitutional knowledge was thorough, in both the areas that directly pertained to their campaign as well as the remaining sections regardless of how they affected the LCS's course of action. However, exploring the LCS's understanding of the constitution requires more than examining its perspective of constitutional rights and use of constitutional methods, for the LCS were truly constitutionalists.

In a legal sense, the LCS was a constitutionalist organization, as it employed constitutional methods and pursues constitutional rights. It also comprehended that the Magna

Charta was the foundation of the British Constitution and that successive legislative acts came together to produce the British Constitution. While the LCS doubted the legitimacy of some acts, ultimately they supported their constitution for they had a consistent model to deliberate whether an act deserved to be a historical precedent or not. That is, the LCS saw the conceptual foundation of the constitution in the principles of the Magna Charta. The constitution they supported was both the constitution that dictated the laws of the land, and more importantly, the ancient principles that made it great. The LCS believed that principles of liberty and equality were the foundation of the Magna Charta, and thus judged successive historical precedents based on these principles. It was through these principles that the LCS justified its campaign for parliamentary reform, for it was demanding a return to the ancient constitutional principles.

Burke is predominantly known as a conservative and a constitutionalist. For him, the British Constitution was an example of why Britain was great. As both a former politician and an intellectual, Burke's understanding of the constitution considered both its physical laws and its founding principles. While his perception of which rights were constitutional and which were unrealistic was vastly different from the LCS, his constitutionalist framework mirrored the LCS's. This framework was an understanding of the legal dictates of the constitution, agreeing with the founding elements of the constitutions, that is, the principles, and using these to judge historical precedents.

### **Constitutionalism**

To be a 'constitutionalist' meant more than using the constitution as a means to achieve one's ends. It entailed believing that the constitution was the strength of one's country; an understanding that the constitution dictates the laws and norms of your country; and a studied

eneration of the constitution. The LCS referred to the British Constitution when demanding its rights as often as it did when discussing topics unrelated to their fight for parliamentary reform. By understanding that constitutionalism was a fundamental aspect of the LCSW campaign, it is possible to categorize the LCS as an aware and knowledgeable group. This was not an association that used the British Constitution because it was conveniently in agreement with their desired parliamentary reforms, but one that believed in the rightness of their demands because at one point they were also constitutional rights. When opponents of parliamentary reform called the LCS ‘the Great Revolutionary Engine’ of England, the LCS refused to accept the title, for it was not aiming to revolutionize Britain. The LCS responded by denouncing the title and labelling itself the ‘Constitutional Engine’ instead.<sup>222</sup>

The LCS wanted to ensure that its supporters and adversaries knew that the LCS followed the constitution in its campaign for parliamentary reform. In the 1793 *Address to the Nation*, it reminded Britons that the LCS had always “pursued the course prescribed by the Constitution.”<sup>223</sup> This could be reactionary, for many of its opponents claimed the LCS was not following legal means, but that was not the root of the LCS course of action. After questioning the methods of the Society for the Friends of the People in a letter, the LCS correspondent subtly apologized for the perhaps tactless question by declaring the LCS assembled “for the purpose of *obtaining in a legal and constitution method*, a full and effectual representation.”<sup>224</sup> From the very beginning, the LCS followed purely constitutional methods and would not affiliate themselves with parliamentary reform groups who did not respect the constitution, regardless of

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<sup>222</sup> LCS, *Citizens, we lay before you an abstract of the pecuniary transactions of the London Corresponding Society, from the 7th of July to the 31st of December last (1797)*, 2:287.

<sup>223</sup> LCS, *Address to the nation*, 6.

<sup>224</sup> LCS, *At a general meeting of the London Corresponding Society, ... on Monday the 14th of April, 1794*, 1. (Author’s italics)

whether or not they had the same goals as organizations. Their commitment to the British Constitution was so strong that it was more important than the possibility of strength in numbers across the nation.

The LCS commitment to the British Constitution was not a blind acceptance of an unwritten collection of laws. At a 1793 dinner celebrating its first anniversary as an association, members unanimously resolved to toast “all that is good in every constitution; and may we never be superstitious enough to reverence in any that which is good for nothing.”<sup>225</sup> ‘Reverence’ was a term often associated with the British Constitution, and here the LCS reminded its members and outsiders that it acknowledged that not all constitutions were perfect, least of all theirs. This hesitation to blindly revere the British Constitution was the result of the LCS recognizing that its parliamentary reform demands were ultimately demands to alter the constitution. One of the LCS’s Declarations of Principles was that the LCS had “laboured therefore, with incessant application, not to *overthrow*, but to *restore* and *realize* that Constitution to give practical effect to those excellencies [sic] which have been theoretically acknowledged.”<sup>226</sup> Thus the LCS understood the depth of its fight for reform, as its demands would not end with the Parliament. Rather, the LCS demands began within the parliament, where their demands must be first acknowledged, and ultimately become substantial alterations to the constitution in areas that did not reflect its theoretical substance.

Yet the LCS was protective of the British Constitution, and while it recognized the British constitution was not perfect, the LCS attacked those who did not respect the strengths of the constitution. William Williams twists the parliamentary ministers’ attack on parliamentary

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<sup>225</sup> LCS, *At a general meeting ... Monday the 20th day of January, 1794*, 8.

<sup>226</sup> LCS, *To the parliament and people of Great Britain*, 2:405.

reformists against themselves when he pointed out that the “ministers are revolutionary because they assert that the Constitution is unable to protect itself” against reformists demands, for this perspective was “founded upon the acknowledged impotency of the constitution.”<sup>227</sup> Here Williams emphasized the contradiction of the government appealing to the constitution to prevent reforms while lacking confidence in that very constitution.<sup>228</sup> A confidence that the LCS did have in its constitution, alongside the acknowledgement that the constitution was not perfect, so the LCS aimed to use constitutional and legal methods to guide the constitution towards a better form of its already great state, for in the end, the LCS were true constitutionalists.

Justifiably, the LCS’s most thorough understanding of the constitution was in the areas related to the laws surrounding political representation and accepted parliamentary reform methods. The House of Commons was “the constitutional guardian of the people’s liberties,” and “the constitution ensures the liberties of speech and press.”<sup>229</sup> These elements were an important component to the LCS’s demands for reform because its methods were directed towards achieving change beginning in the House of Commons. Further, the LCS begged the government not to “exceed the constitutional limits of their authority,” for the constitution dictated the roles of government branches and the balance that made their government system great.<sup>230</sup> These roles as well as the constitutional limits on the distribution of power were directly relevant to the LCS

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<sup>227</sup> William Williams, “On the Revolutionary Conduct of Administration,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, March 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:98.

<sup>228</sup> Williams is discussing the suspension of Habeas Corpus and the Gagging Acts, all of which were a government response to the growing demands for a more representative country. The Pitt Government truly believed that an extension of suffrage would ultimately hurt the British Constitution and the laws that made it great. However, Williams correctly points out that if the Constitution was as great as the government claimed, the constitution should have checks that would act as a protection from the poor decisions that the Pitt Government assumed would follow from universal male suffrage.

<sup>229</sup> LCS, *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the people... Nov. 12, 1795*, 12.

<sup>230</sup> LCS, *Address of the London Corresponding Society, united for the purpose of obtaining universal suffrage and annual parliaments, to the various patriotic societies of Great Britain*, 2; Duke of Richmond, *A letter from His Grace the Duke of Richmond*, 2:23-24.

campaign because the government ‘cabal’ was perceived as detrimental to the reform process, and based on the LCS’s perception of the constitutionally dictated roles, the cabal should not have existed in the first place as their increase in power would come at the cost of a different branch. Finally, the LCS considered resisting oppression to be a constitutional duty for all Britons; a duty intrinsic to the LCS demands for parliamentary reform as it perceived oppression to be an increasing problem stemming from the Pitt government.<sup>231</sup> While the origins of its parliamentary reform demands were in natural and ancient constitutional rights, the LCS increasingly expressed the duty of Britons to resist the Pitt Government, for the government’s oppressive acts were directly aimed at preventing peaceful reformist associations from achieving their goals.

Nonetheless, that was not the limit of the LCS’s collective constitutional knowledge. The LCS recognized that the concept of impartial juries came from the Magna Charta and the framework for deciding judicial penalties was a section in the unwritten constitution.<sup>232</sup> No taxation without consent was an important right drawn from the constitution, while a writer for the *Moral and Political Magazine* reminded its readers that within the constitution, there were also laws that preserved public peace, protect property, and repressed monopoly.<sup>233</sup> Although many of these elements shared an indirect link with the LCS’s campaign for equal rights, this was not why the LCS illuminated them in its publications. One of the LCS’s aims was to educate the public, and through its discussions surrounding the constitution, we can see that the LCS

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<sup>231</sup> LCS, *To the parliament and people of Great Britain*, 2406.

<sup>232</sup> *Extracted from the Morning Chronicle. June, 1st, 1793. The speech of John Wharton, Esq; M. P. in the House of Commons, on his motion on the constitution* (London: LCS, 1793) at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 406; LCS, *Meeting in Mary-Le-Bone Fields, 7 December 1795*, 2:57.

<sup>233</sup> LCS, *Address to the nation*, 4; D. O’Byrne, “Review: Urum (Uerum?) Horum?- The Government; or the Country?,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, November 1796) from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 267.

understood and wanted Britons to understand the constitution beyond the elements pertaining to its demands for parliamentary reform. LCS members were constitutionalists, for they were knowledgeable about the multiple elements in the constitution outside of their campaign and they aimed to always follow constitutional methods.

Burke's use of a constitutionalist framework was present throughout *Reflections* in a variety of ways. Burke's pride in the constitution and his dealings with it was clear when he told his readers "I certainly have the honour to belong to more clubs than one, in which the constitution... [is] held in high reverence; and I reckon myself among the most forward in my zeal for maintaining that constitution and those principles in their utmost purity and vigour."<sup>234</sup> Moreover, Burke was a committed politician and a trained lawyer, so his reverence was not limited to the constitution's symbolic strength in Great Britain. He used the British Constitution to both prove the greatness of Britain as well as a means to demonstrate the faults of the French Revolution, specifically the formation of the National Assembly.

The 'practical constitution' as Burke labeled the legal and written elements of the constitution, was an important component of the constitution that Burke focused on to show the strength and all-encompassing greatness of the British Constitution.<sup>235</sup> It was in the constitution that all of the distinguishing qualities of the British government system were found and Burke explained why many of the constitutional dictates were great. In numerous sections, Burke cited the importance of hereditary succession as an imbedded element of the constitution, for it was "a

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<sup>234</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 85-86.

<sup>235</sup> "To detail the particulars in which it is found so well to promote its ends, would demand a treatise on our practical constitution." That is, the particulars as laws, rather than the principles which are abstract. Burke, *Reflections*, 146

pledge of the stability and perpetuity of all the other members of our constitution.”<sup>236</sup> Burke explained the different roles of government branches, their compacts with different sectors of society, and emphasized the important and delicate distribution of power which “requires a deep knowledge of human nature.”<sup>237</sup> Furthermore, Burke’s pragmatism emerged surrounding the question of representation, which he adamantly defended against the arithmetical equations of the French Revolutionaries, for “our representation has been found perfectly adequate to all the purposes for which a representation of the people can be desired or devised.”<sup>238</sup> These are but a few of the areas that Burke discussed, however they were the elements he focused on in multiple occasions and also demonstrated his understanding of British laws, for he explained how each of these law were strong, useful, and an important element of the constitution. Each of these areas came together when Burke dismissed the enemies of the British Constitution by emphasizing that it was the “*antient* [sic] constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty,” and reminded them of them of the many years “under which we have long prospered,” because of “that old-fashioned constitution.”<sup>239</sup>

### **Constitutional Principles**

For the LCS and Burke, their constitutionalism was partially because of the British Constitution’s historical basis, its long-standing strong qualities, and its mass of laws. But their reverence for the constitution came from something more significant than the material outcomes of the constitution. Both revered the British Constitution because of ancient constitutional principles. The Burkean framework dictated that good historical precedents and strong laws were

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<sup>236</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 109, 106 , 111.

<sup>237</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 105, 115, 119, 151.

<sup>238</sup> Burke, *Reflections* ,141, 146.

<sup>239</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 117, 146. (Author’s italics)

the result of legislators creating laws that were a reflection of the original constitutional principles.

The LCS often discussed the constitution beyond the legal dictated that they must function within. One of their aims was to “restore our no less boasted than impaired Constitution its *pristine vigour and purity*.”<sup>240</sup> This quotation explains two significant elements of the LCS’s perception of Britain’s constitution. First, members knew that their constitution was revered; however, clearly this was problematic for they believed that it was necessary to fix the impaired constitution. In the self-written *History of the Society*, the LCS explained the faults it saw in eighteenth century reverence for the British Constitution. Britons compared the British Constitution to other constitutions to declare that theirs was better. The LCS considered this comparison faulty because “instead of strictly examining its component parts,” that is, the principles, those very people who loved their constitution disregarded “the parts of the constitution that are excellent.”<sup>241</sup> By considering the individual parts, it leads to the second issue of the earlier quotation, as the LCS desired to return the constitution to its “*pristine vigour and purity*.”<sup>242</sup>

That is, returning the constitution to the original principles and laws that followed those principles, for “the forms of the Constitution, we conceive like those of Religion, were not established for the Form’s sake, but for the Substance.”<sup>243</sup> The first edict that began the British

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<sup>240</sup> LCS, *Address from the London Corresponding Society to the inhabitants of Great Britain, on the Subject of a parliamentary reform*, 2. (Author’s italics)

<sup>241</sup> LCS, “History of the Society,” (October, 1796), 230.

<sup>242</sup> LCS, *Address from the London Corresponding Society to the inhabitants of Great Britain (1792)*, 2. (Author’s italics)

<sup>243</sup> LCS, *The Following petition was presented to the House of Commons by Phillip Francis, Esq. May 6, 1793. From the London Corresponding Society*, (London: LCS, 1793) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 2:343.

Constitution, the Magna Charta (1215), was where the substance of the constitution is drawn from for the LCS. Thus, "...if the constitution is only through age impaired, it must be called back to its first principles."<sup>244</sup> These principles were the very foundation of everything the LCS revered in Britain's constitution, not the laws that form from them. Thus members believed in their constitution, as it was renovated over the centuries, for the principles were good and just, and therefore it was possible to restore the constitution as the principles precede laws. Their belief in the intrinsic relationship between constitutional principles and laws was evident in their internal correspondence concerning the LCS writing a new constitution. In a letter written by the Executive Committee to each division, the committee explained that they provided an "... explicit declaration of our political principles; and having done so, we think it scarce necessary to observe, that the regulations of our own Society ought to be confident with those principles."<sup>245</sup> As the LCS mirrored itself to the ideals it pursued, the LCS's focus on its principles being the foundation of its rules was a reflection of how the LCS believed the British Constitution ideally functioned.

The LCS believed there was a need to restore or reform the constitution because it saw numerous bad laws that were not true to the constitution. Often the LCS cited specific acts or, in many cases, a specific monarch or an entire monarchical family was to blame for bad historical precedents. Commencing with the "encroaching spirit of the Tudors" during the fifteenth century and reaching a peak with the "darkest, gloomiest, and most detestable areas of despotism" under Queen Elizabeth I until 1603, while James I ended his reign as "the Stuarts were treacherous, the

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<sup>244</sup> Hawkesbury, *Constitutional maxims*, 3.

<sup>245</sup> "LCS Executive Committee to LCS Divisions, 28 April 1794," in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 20.

people expelled that House.”<sup>246</sup> These were more than broad sweeping accusations, for the LCS also focused on specific acts and individual laws that it perceived to be making a negative impact on England. There was the Triennial Bill (1641), the Septennial Act (1715), the Riot Act (1714), the corrupt borough system, and the LCS claimed that there were at least seventy other bad acts passed since King Henry VI.<sup>247</sup> However, the LCS was most concerned about its current government under Pitt, for the LCS declared that for Britons it was not even as bad as under Elizabeth I and Charles I, the latter who was “brought to the block” for his misdeeds to the country.<sup>248</sup> The LCS compared the Pitt Government to previous bad monarchs and acts because the LCS saw “unprecedented stretches of prerogative” and an “invasion of public security, contempt of popular opinion, [and a] violation of Constitution.”<sup>249</sup> The last in the list was the element that each of the historical precedents discussed had in common: they violated constitutional principles.

There were significantly fewer good historical precedents than bad for the LCS. It applauded King John for passing the Magna Charta which established the fundamental constitutional principles; King Edward III, whose reign was commercially successful because he respected the constitution by following the spirit of the people; and fast forward several centuries

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<sup>246</sup> Hawkesbury, *Constitutional maxims*, 11; “Thelwall’s Political Lectures. Delivered during the Discussion of the two Bills brought into Parliament by Mr. Pitt and Lord Grenville,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, January 1797), in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:6; LCS, *Account of the proceedings...Oct. 26, 1795*, 4:9.

<sup>247</sup> Unknown, “On National Degeneracy, Letter II,” *The Politician Number IV* (London: LCS, 1794) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 3:28; LCS, *Meeting in Mary-Le-Bone Fields. 7 December 1795*, 2: 14; Oxford and Mortimer, “Protest of Lord Oxford,” 4:155.; SCI, *Report of the sub-committee of Westminster*, 10. The LCS fought for annual parliaments, so it disliked the Triennial Bill for it allowed parliament to convene every three years, while the Septennial Act extended this to seven years. The Riot Act gave authorities the power to declare any groups of twelve or more people as unlawfully assembled, problematic for groups like the LCS.

<sup>248</sup> “Thelwall’s Political Lectures,” (January, 1797), 4: 6; LCS, *At a general meeting of the London Corresponding Society, ... on Monday the 14th of April, 1794*, 4:5.

<sup>249</sup> LCS, *Address of the London Corresponding Society...to the various patriotic societies of Great Britain*, 1; LCS, *At a general meeting of the London Corresponding Society, ... on Monday the 14th of April, 1794*, 4.

and monarchies to applaud William and Mary for claiming the throne in 1688 and their subsequent Bill of Rights, which was “*the main instrument by which the Revolution is distinguished.*”<sup>250</sup> The LCS revered the Glorious Revolution because “the Constitution was settled in 1688,” for it confirmed the ancient principles seen originally in the Magna Charta.<sup>251</sup> The basis of the LCS judgement of good or bad historical precedents was whether they reflected the original constitutional principles.

In the second volume of the *Moral and Political Magazine*, January to May 1797, a predominant theme was political reforms and Britain’s reliance on historical precedents. In a published campaign speech, Thelwall reminded Britons that in their history, there was “a collection of precedents of persecution and usurpations: and therefore persecutors and usurpers can never want precedents for their justification.”<sup>252</sup> Since most people could find a historical example to support their case, it was necessary to have a framework to judge the legitimacy of historical precedents. An anonymous writer eloquently explored the negative components of historical precedents and explained the best course to evaluate such precedents:

The prompt and heedless respect usually paid to *precedent*, is not less absurd than the childish dread of innovation. A precedent is followed because it is thought an example of conformity to principle. But, as time changes circumstances, the precedent of a former century and its copy in this cannot be true to principles. The resort to precedent instead of principle, like referring to a copy when the original is accessible, militates (likely?) against the plainest axioms of evidence of what is right.<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Unknown, “Strictures on Imprisonment for Debt,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, May 1797), in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:206; Hawkesbury, *Constitutional maxims*, 6; LCS, *Meeting in Mary-Le-Bone Fields. 7 December 1795*, 2:57.

<sup>251</sup> *The speech of John Wharton, Esq; M. P. in the House of Commons, on his motion on the constitution*, 406.

<sup>252</sup> “Thelwall’s Political Lectures,” (January, 1797), 4:6.

<sup>253</sup> Unknown, “On Some Prevailing Errors,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, February 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:55.

The LCS used two seemingly different terms to describe its perceived alterations to the constitution: restore and preserve. Although each verb seems to designate a different path, for the LCS, they had the same connotation as each ultimately ensured the British Constitution reflected its original principles. In a letter to its members, the LCS executive committee explained its dismay regarding the Treasonable Practices Act and the Seditious Meeting Act.<sup>254</sup> The LCS had sufficient reason to oppose these ‘Gagging Acts,’ for any previously legal means it employed in its attempts to gain reform would result in legal repercussions. While the severe limitation imposed by the Gagging Acts automatically ensured reformers would dispute their basis, the LCS had stronger reasons to oppose them. The existence of such Bills was “not only a contempt of the public Voice, but a violation of the fundamental Principles of the Constitution.”<sup>255</sup> Considering one of the articles agreed upon by British National Convention delegates was “that it is the duty of the people to resist any act of parliament repugnant to the original principles of the constitution,” the LCS felt obliged to preserve the constitution by restoring it to its *pristine vigour and purity*, that is, to its original principles. Thus the LCS’s desired parliamentary reforms reinforce how fundamentally constitutionalist the association was, because although the alterations were to the current constitution, “No law can be abrogated but by an act of parliament; but no act of parliament can repeal MAGNA CHARTA, or alter the fundamental principles of the British Constitution.”<sup>256</sup> The LCS disregard for some precedents and support of others was warranted as its distinctions were based on whether legislative acts were a reflection

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<sup>254</sup> LCS, *To the members of the London Corresponding Society*, (London: LCS, 1795) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 2:401.

<sup>255</sup> LCS, *To the members of the London Corresponding Society*, 2:401.

<sup>256</sup> Unknown, “Strictures on Imprisonment for Debts,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, March 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:125.

of the original principles, if not, they were contrary to the great British Constitution that so many Britons revered.

The LCS believed that the British Constitution could be great. It lambasted bad historical precedents, applauded good ones, and had a clear framework to judge accordingly. The criteria were simple: if legislation reflected the original constitutional principles, the LCS deemed it a good precedent. This adherence to the original constitutional principles was important for the LCS, as principles were also the basis of the LCS's fight for parliamentary reform. When the LCS demanded constitutional alterations, it was to return the constitution to its original purity for the LCS believed that the greatness of the British Constitution lied in its original principles. Thus the LCS did not see its fight as revolutionary, for it was simply restoring the ancient constitution. This connection between ancient principles, both to judge historical precedents and as the basis for new legislation, is similar to Burke's exploration of the British Constitution where his adherence to age being the ultimate test became secondary to the importance of the original constitutional principles.

Burke's conservatism, that is the belief in age as a verification of greatness, emerged as he celebrated the British Constitution. His adherence to the importance of historical precedents or the testimony of time was clear in his fears about the Revolution Society in London challenging the British Constitution. To dispute their contesting the ancient precedents of the constitution, Burke stated, "When antient [sic] opinions and rules of life are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated."<sup>257</sup> Yet, for Burke, the idea that the ancient constitution should be fundamentally altered was absurd, because while discussing the individual components of the British Constitution, Burke reminded his readers that its "merits are confirmed by the solid test

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<sup>257</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 172.

of long experience.”<sup>258</sup> Not only did the laws ensure a strong and just Britain, but Burke explained that “Old establishments are tried by their effects. If the people are happy, united, wealthy, and powerful, we presume the rest.”<sup>259</sup> So Burke’s adherence to age being a testimony of strength was because the legal components were good for Britain. However, Burke, as a pragmatic conservative, was not against reforming the constitution.

As a pragmatic conservative, and a fervent enemy of sudden or revolutionary changes, Burke supported constitutional alterations, but “...it is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again...”<sup>260</sup> With this caution ever-present in *Reflections*, Burke succinctly explained the basis of constitutional reforms: “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation. Without such means it might even risque [sic] the loss of that part of the constitution which it wished the most religiously to preserve.”<sup>261</sup> Thus any alterations to the constitution should be a return to the past, instead of significant changes to the original. Rather than blindly accepting that all historical precedents were great, Burke understood that some were “aberrations from theory.” Although Burke saw these deviations from the original constitution as problematic, he explained that once “the errors and deviations of every kind in reckoning are found and computed, and the ship proceeds in her course.”<sup>262</sup> That is, precedents are overturned and the original greatness of a constitution is preserved. Therefore, Burke’s understanding of constitutional reforms was truly conservative, for changes are a means of preservation, rather than alteration.

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<sup>258</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 148.

<sup>259</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 285.

<sup>260</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 152.

<sup>261</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 106.

<sup>262</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 285

Burke seemed to speak directly to the French National Assembly when he discussed the specifics of necessary alterations. He acknowledged that it was possible for elements of the constitution to reach a pinnacle low, however, he was adamant that reforms could always return to their original greatness; that is, a reflection of the original constitution. Dismissing claims that a new constitution was necessary for France, Burke explained it was unfathomable to find that “the character of a government, that has been, on the whole, so oppressive, or so corrupt, or so negligent, as to be utterly unfit *for all reformation*.”<sup>263</sup> However, Burke did not dismiss the fact that France’s constitutionally dictated government was in need of change. Rather, Burke agreed that “like the rest of the old government, [the parliaments] stood in need of reform...”<sup>264</sup> France was not fortunate enough to have had their own Glorious Revolution, to return its constitution and thus government system to the original principles dictating the roles and consequently balance that resulted in the great British system of a constitutional monarchy.<sup>265</sup> However, Burke almost pleaded with the French Revolutionaries to consider reform instead of creating an entirely new constitution. Through an analogy, Burke provided his perspective of the ideal course for the French National Assembly: “Your constitution, it is true, whilst you were out of possession, suffered waste and dilapidation but you possessed in some parts of the walls, and in all the foundations of a noble and venerable castle. You might have repaired those walls; you might have built on those old foundations.”<sup>266</sup> Burke begged the French Revolutionaries to reform as a means of preserving the original, rather than creating a new constitution lacking the original fundamental quality that made it great: its principles.

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<sup>263</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 236.

<sup>264</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 325.

<sup>265</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 123.

<sup>266</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 121.

The most significant way that Burke attacked the French Revolution is through demeaning multiple aspects of the National Assembly's constitution, or lack of a proper constitution as Burke saw it. Burke explained to his friend, or the British reader as was likely his hope, that "it was my original purpose to take a view of the principles of the national assembly with regard to the great and fundamental establishments; and to compare the whole of what you have...with the several members of our British constitution."<sup>267</sup> His conclusion, after comparing the British and French constitutions on matters such as representation, taxation, hereditary succession, and the government systems,<sup>268</sup> was that "I wish my countrymen rather to recommend to our neighbours the example of the British constitution, than to take models from them for the improvement of our own."<sup>269</sup> Burke recommended this primarily for one reason, because the National Assembly's constitution lacked the fundamental principles that made the British Constitution great.

Constitutional laws and dictates were the practical side of the constitution, and made Britain the country that Burke cherished; however, Burke believed it was the constitutional principles that were the foundation of the great laws. Burke's understanding of the basis of the constitution emerged when he recalled the Glorious Revolution 1688. It was during this Revolution that the fundamental principles of the constitution were reaffirmed. Burke explained that the principles of the Glorious Revolution were found in the *Declaration of Rights*, which was "the cornerstone of our constitution, as reinforced, explained, improved, and in its fundamental principles for ever [sic] settled."<sup>270</sup> These principles were a reflection of the original

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<sup>267</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 275.

<sup>268</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, representation (141, 304), taxation (294), hereditary succession (109), lack of balance (315), abolishing Parliament (325).

<sup>269</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 375.

<sup>270</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 100.

principles, for the “Revolution was made to preserve our antient [sic] constitution...”<sup>271</sup> For Burke, it was not a coincidence that following the Revolution William and Mary preserved the ancient constitutional principles. In one discussion surrounding hereditary succession, Burke acceded that technically the new monarchs did not directly follow the line of succession; however, the Parliament maintained hereditary succession, a fundamental constitutional principle. “When the legislature altered the direction, but kept the principle, they shewed [sic] that they held it inviolable.”<sup>272</sup> Although this appears too convenient to be a wholehearted respect for the principles rather than the route best fitting the new monarchs’ station, Burke conceived it differently. As Burke explained later in *Reflections*, “I would not exclude alteration neither; but when I changed, it should be to preserve...In what I did, I should follow the example of our ancestors.”<sup>273</sup> Pragmatically, he accepted that some changes were necessary, however, in the case of a slight diversion from the line of succession, the principle was followed, which was more important than the one deviation. Burke thanked the actors in the Glorious Revolution and its resulting Acts, “who had kept alive the ancient principles and models of the old common law.”<sup>274</sup> Thus Burke’s constitutionalism was more than respect to the dictates of a strong government system with proper checks and balances, where individuals and government bodies knew their roles. His reverence for the British Constitution was for the ancient principles that were the foundation of the great laws, and the principles that must be followed for a historical precedent to be respected.

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<sup>271</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 117.

<sup>272</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 106.

<sup>273</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 375.

<sup>274</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 123.

## Conclusion

LCS members were constitutionalists because their demands were constitutional rights and they employed constitutional methods. While their strict adherence to this formal constitutionalism is an important element to understand the LCS as a parliamentary reform group, to understand them as an organization it is necessary to delve deeper. The ‘constitutional idiom,’ as termed by James Epstein, was a fundamental component for most British parliamentary reformers in the 1790s. While many new associations named themselves after the London Corresponding Society, such as the Sheffield Corresponding Society, many others titled themselves the Constitutional Society of ‘town’ because they believed in the British Constitution and maintained constitutional methods. Some historians have doubted the truly constitutional nature of parliamentary reform groups, however, in the case of LCS at least, these doubts are unfounded.<sup>275</sup> The LCS used constitutional methods because it supported the constitutional monarchy, and more importantly, because it comprehended and admired the essence of the constitution. The LCS was a knowledgeable group, for it was aware of both the constitutional dictates that directly pertained to its fight for parliamentary reform as well as those that were important to the LCS simply as citizens. Further, the LCS examined historical precedents and found many wanting. Not solely because many previous acts severely limited their rights as Britons, but because those limitations were contrary to the fundamental ancient constitutional principles. Such principles were the foundation of the prominence of the British Constitution. In a 1793 letter to the Friends of the People, the LCS succinctly summarized its view of the constitution: “Venerating with you our excellent Const. [sic] we are firmly persuaded the

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<sup>275</sup> See: “Historiography” in Introduction for a discussion of historians’ doubts concerning the level of constitutionalism in parliamentary reform groups.

restoring of it to its primitive purity will be found a sufficient remedy of ever Abuse we  
complain of.”<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> *LCS to Friends of the People, 1 February 1793*, at the National Archives TS 11/965.

## Chapter Five: Natural Rights and Constitutionalism

While the LCS believed that the British Constitution had strong principles and the constitutional monarchy was the ideal system, the LCS also believed that "...the people are the best keepers of their own liberties..."<sup>277</sup> That is, the LCS as the people's representatives had to assert the people's claims to their liberties as they were the most likely to succeed. Considering this, it was vital that the LCS had a conceptual understanding of rights and how they translate into civil rights, for it was the voice of the people. Yet, for rights to be translatable into civil rights, the question remains, what are rights if they are not strictly civil rights? This was the very basis of the LCS fight for parliamentary reform, for it believed that rights were first and foremost natural.

The LCS's interpretation of rights as fundamentally natural before all else was inspired by Paine. While others before Paine had a similar perception, to understand the LCS as an organization, it is necessary to delineate its interpretation of rights, as this interpretation was largely contrary to those who supported the constitutional monarchy and applauded the ancient British Constitution. For the LCS, rights were natural, all men were born equal and independent of one another, and natural rights became civil rights. It is necessary to understand the LCS's interpretation of rights, natural and civil, to comprehend how it firmly worked within constitutional limits, for the majority of LCS members and Britons had no claims to equal rights by that very constitution in the 1790s. The LCS had an interpretation of rights that was seemingly contrary to the eighteenth century status quo, yet it managed to apply this interpretation to a constitutional framework. The LCS thus drew on both Painite and Burkean ideas, for it is Paine's interpretation of natural rights applied to Burke's constitutional framework

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<sup>277</sup> LCS, "Abstract: The excellency of a Free State," *Moral and Political* (London: LCS, February 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:69.

that the LCS used to campaign for parliamentary reform. However, to understand the final result, their constitutional demands, it is necessary to first explore the LCS's conception of rights.

## Natural Rights

The LCS was a parliamentary reform group - the entirety of its demands fell within constitutionally prescribed methods, while all suggested reforms were directly relatable to the parliament. This was both how the LCS presented itself as well as how it truly functioned.<sup>278</sup> Nevertheless, the LCS clearly understood its campaign in specific terms: “*We hope that Parliamentary reform [will] take place upon the general ground of equal rights.*”<sup>279</sup> All of the LCS's demands for reform were intrinsically linked to the idea that all men had equal rights, or in broader terms, “that every person may be equally entitled to the protection and benefits of society; may equally have a voice in the election of those who may make the laws by which he is affected in his liberty, his life, or his property; and may have a fair opportunity of exerting to advantage any talents he may possess.”<sup>280</sup> To achieve this equality of citizens, the LCS's demands were straightforward, as the LCS had associated “in order to obtain a fair, free, and full representation of the people in a house of real national representatives.”<sup>281</sup> Specifically, the LCS hoped for universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, and more representative boroughs. The LCS specifically focussed on these demands because they would have contributed to the

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<sup>278</sup> This claim is supported in the Introduction, where I demonstrate that the LCS were as democratic as their demands and did not stretch beyond constitutional methods.

<sup>279</sup> LCS, *A letter of thanks addressed by the London Corresponding Society, To Phillip Francis. Esq. M. P. for his able speech in Parliament, On the 10th of April, 1793. Upon the Stockbridge election bill; together with his answer.* (London: LCS, 1793), at the British Library from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 7.

<sup>280</sup> Unknown, *An Explanation of the Word Equality*, (London: LCS, 1792-93) from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 1:1.

<sup>281</sup> LCS, *At a general meeting ... Monday the 20th day of January, 1794*, 6.

betterment of life for Britons, and moreover, they were rights that all men were born with, and thus all Britons should have them.

When the LCS explored the idea of rights independent of the constitution, there were two types of rights: natural and civil.<sup>282</sup> Considering the LCS “endeavour[ed] to procure to the people of Great Britain [their] natural and undoubted rights,”<sup>283</sup> it is important to focus on natural rights first. The LCS’s parliamentary reform demands were specifically for natural rights, but it also used terms such as unalienable, imprescriptible, inherent, undoubted, and essential.<sup>284</sup> This list of adjectives is important for it shows the depth of the LCS’s understanding that rights existed independent of civil society – they were fundamental to each man and could not be removed. That is not to say that the LCS dismissed civil rights or did not appreciate the necessity of civil rights, rather, it was that at their most basic level “rights are always natural...”<sup>285</sup> Ultimately, the LCS fight for parliamentary reform was a fight for rights that it believed each man was born with.

In the LCS’s 1794 *Declaration of Principles*, one containing some alterations from previous editions, the first principle remained the same: “That all men are by nature free, equal,

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<sup>282</sup> The LCS also discussed constitutional rights, however this chapter will demonstrate that the rights the LCS perceived as natural rights were also present in the constitution, and thus should not be understood separately.

<sup>283</sup> LCS, *Narrative of the proceedings at a general meeting of the London Corresponding Society ... on Monday the 29th of June, 1795*, 5.

<sup>284</sup> These terms are present throughout their publications, however these specific sources include the mentioned terms: LCS, *LCS General Meeting 2 September 1793*, British Library ADD MSS 27814, fol., 137 (unalienable); Unknown, “On the Duty of associating into Popular Societies,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, May 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 4:219 (imprescriptible); LCS, *At a general meeting of the London Corresponding Society ... on Monday the 20th day of January, 1794*, 6 (inherent); LCS, *Narrative of the proceedings at a general meeting of the London Corresponding Society. ... on Monday the 29th of June, 1795*, 5 (undoubted); LCS, *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the London Corresponding Society ... Monday, Oct. 26, 1795*, 3 (essential).

<sup>285</sup> Williams, “On Cruelty to Animals,” 4:119.

and independent of each other.”<sup>286</sup> This natural independence and liberty was the basis of the equality of natural rights, for if everyone was born equal, they equally deserved the same rights. This connection was clear in a Norwich reformist’s explanation of support for a potential Member of Parliament candidate, Bartlet Gurney, in a letter specifically written for the LCS’s *Moral and Political Magazine*. The writer explained that although Gurney had minimal political experience, he deserved the support of British reformists, because, as Gurney explained to the writer, he felt “that *every man was alike a man*, that all therefore *were equally entitled to the common rights of humanity*.”<sup>287</sup> So Gurney had the same vision for Britain as the LCS, thus he earned their support.

For the LCS, it was both a logical conclusion that because all men are born equal they deserved the same rights, as well as important to their campaign for parliamentary reform. In a commemorative song popular amongst LCS and other reformist associations, *The Birthday of our Liberty*, the connection between the equality between men, their rights, and their perceived resulting happiness was clear, for when “each man behold in his neighbour a brother/ Equal rights, equal laws, equal blessings shall nourish/ Peace, justice, and plenty, henceforward shall flourish.”<sup>288</sup> These lines eloquently summarized the LCS’s campaign for parliamentary reform, for it encompassed the idea that all men are equal and should be treated as such and that equal rights and laws are intrinsic to the general happiness of society. Nonetheless, although the LCS understood rights as intrinsically natural to all men, to understand how this perception fit into

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<sup>286</sup> LCS, *Report of the committee, appointed to revise and abridge a former report of the constitution, of the London Corresponding Society*, 2.

<sup>287</sup> “LCS to Norwich Patriotic Society 10 July 1796,” in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 64.

<sup>288</sup> Unknown, “Poetry Song: The Birth Day of our Liberty – sung at the Commemoration of the Trial by Jury Nov. 5th, 1796 at the Crown & Anchor, London,” *Moral and Political Magazine* (London: LCS, November, 1796), from Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 289.

their constitutional demands, it is necessary to explore the relationship between natural and civil rights.

It was rare for the LCS to specifically discuss civil rights. This was not because of a lack of understanding of British civil rights nor was it a disregard for the importance of civil rights in society. Rather, it was because the LCS saw them as intrinsically linked. In most of the LCS's *Declaration of Principles*, there was a section beginning with: "the civil rights of every individual are."<sup>289</sup> In each case, the five sets of civil rights were broad and conceptual. The specifics were not as important as the general tone. Each focused on equality, whether it was equality of life, liberty, and property, or equality to exercise one's enjoyments, or equality to employ one's talents; fundamentally they were based on the natural equality of men. Further, the LCS saw freedom of speech and religion as fundamental civil rights alongside the more general idea of "unrestrained exercise of [one's] own private judgement."<sup>290</sup> Each of these civil rights existed as a result of the natural equality and rights of men as discussed earlier. This connection between natural and civil rights was similar to the relationship between constitutional principles and constitutional laws: one was the conceptual foundation of the other.

When the LCS discussed specific rights, rather than broad conceptual rights such as equality, it referred to rights as natural. The specific rights the LCS saw as natural were commonly understood as civil rights: the right to resist oppression, a proper share in governing, universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, no taxation without representation, right to be in

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<sup>289</sup> LCS, *Report of the Committee, appointed to revise and abridge a former report of the constitution, of the London Corresponding Society [revised]*, 1:301.

<sup>290</sup> LCS, *Report of the committee, appointed to revise and abridge a former report of the constitution, of the London Corresponding Society*, 3.

legislature, equal representation, and fair representation.<sup>291</sup> Yet in each of these cases, the LCS discussed them as natural rights. These specific rights are important to consider because, beyond the basic earlier proof that the LCS understood civil rights as fundamentally about equality and liberty, it demonstrates how minimal the difference between a civil and a natural right was for the LCS. Each of these rights, typically perceived as civil rights, was natural rights for the LCS because natural rights became civil rights upon entering into society. Fundamentally, each civil right was predicated upon the concept of natural equality and liberty, and became civil rights once encoded into the constitution. Thus the LCS understood the natural rights as the conceptual foundation of civil rights, and civil rights the manifestation of natural rights.

The title of Paine's work, *The Rights of Man*, was fitting, for rights were the very basis of his support for the French National Assembly and disdain for Burke. Paine compared the French Revolution with the Glorious Revolution to ascertain which revolution was better for mankind. The French Revolution easily trumped the English Revolution, for "in the instance of France, we see a revolution generated in the rational contemplation of the rights of man."<sup>292</sup> These rights, as established in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* which was the foundation of the new French constitution, perfectly mirrored Paine's conception of rights. Fundamentally, rights were natural. If there was any cause to doubt Paine's adoration for the *Declaration*, he reproduced it twice in *Rights of Man*. While Paine had numerous reasons to attack the Glorious Revolution, largely they related to Burke's adoration for 1688. Burke applauded the English Revolution because it

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<sup>291</sup> LCS, *The London Corresponding Society's addresses and resolutions* (1792), 1 (oppression and governing); LCS, *At a general meeting of the London Corresponding Society...on Monday the 20th day of January, 1794*, 6 (fair representation and equal); "LCS to London Reform Society, 27 July 1795, in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 40 (Universal male suffrage and annual parliaments).

<sup>292</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 12.

established the ancient rights of Britons for posterity.<sup>293</sup> Paine condemned Burke's opinion for "the rights of man were but imperfectly understood at the Revolution."<sup>294</sup> Continuing his attack on Burke's perspective of revolutions, Paine considered Burke's condemnation for France's *Declaration*, and extrapolated his own understanding of Burke's conception of the rights of men. He asked his readers: "Does Mr. Burke mean to deny that *man* has any rights?" and concluded that Burke "must mean that there are no such things as right any where[sic]."<sup>295</sup> Paine's assertion that Burke did not believe in rights was a result of Paine's fundamental understanding of rights, for Burke's dismissal of the French Revolutionaries was based on his perspective that representative rights, amongst others, were limited to certain individuals in society. Paine, on the other hand, fundamentally believed that all men had equal rights. Thus his support for the French Revolution and disdain for the Glorious Revolution were the result of the same idea and succinctly demonstrate the foundations of *Rights of Man*, that is, natural rights.

When Paine discussed rights, he did not mince words; it is hardly necessary to interpret his words. Rights begin as natural and all men were afforded the same equality upon birth. "Natural rights are those which appertain to man in right of his existence."<sup>296</sup> 'Man,' for Paine, had no social distinction and was no different from his fellow man. In Paine's perception of rights, every man could justifiably expect the same equality throughout his life, for "men are born and always continue free, and equal in respect of their rights."<sup>297</sup> The very essence of Paine's interpretation of rights was that they were natural and proscribed a perfect levelling of men, for all men had the same natural rights upon birth. In a somewhat communal view, Paine

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<sup>293</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 104.

<sup>294</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 8.

<sup>295</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 23.

<sup>296</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 25.

<sup>297</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 55.

explained “whatever is my right as a man, is also the right of another.”<sup>298</sup> The way Paine discussed natural rights and the natural equality between men was as if it was an absolute truth. That is, the naturalness of rights was so fundamental to Paine’s perception of rights that it was clearly the foundation of *Rights of Man*.

While the basis of *Rights of Man* was natural rights, Paine described their intrinsic relationship to civil rights. Likely this was a consequence of Paine’s desire to influence the political situation in Britain as much as *Common Sense* did in the United States of America. Although Paine’s philosophizing throughout each of his major works was important to their foundations, much of the popularity of each was a result of the practical descriptions that reformists could draw on. However, Paine’s interpretation of the relationship between natural and civil rights was twofold. First, Paine asserted that “that every civil right grows out of a natural right.”<sup>299</sup> That is, the natural equality accorded to each man upon birth is the foundation of all rights, and thus can be expected to continue as civil rights. Second, Paine explained society’s function in relation to rights, for “man did not enter into society to become worse than he was before, nor to have less rights than he had before, but to have those rights better secured.”<sup>300</sup> Paine understood society as a compact between men to better their lives, so naturally he concluded that the natural rights he held so dear must be guaranteed by becoming civil rights.

The fundamentally reliant relationship between civil and natural rights was clear when Paine described the specific rights of men. In some cases, he was disputing a lack of rights in Britain, while in others he was applauding the positive rights in the new French Constitution, but regardless of their origin, Paine’s interpretation maintained the same course. Rights that were

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<sup>298</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 57.

<sup>299</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 26.

<sup>300</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 25.

recognized as legally established by the constitution were described as natural rights by Paine; there was little differentiation for him. Paine wrote broadly about the rights of the mind as well as “those rights of acting as an individual for his own comfort and happiness.”<sup>301</sup> Or more specifically, Paine advocated equal representation, the safety of property and personal security, as well as the right to resist oppression.<sup>302</sup> One right Paine naturally held dear was the “unrestrained communication of thoughts and opinions.”<sup>303</sup> Each of these civil rights, whether broad or specific, had one common quality for Paine: they were first and foremost natural rights. Regardless of a man’s social, financial, or professional situation, Paine argued that he retained each of these rights equally with the man next to him. Why? As “every individual is born in equal rights with his contemporary” and “his natural rights are the foundation of all his civil rights,”<sup>304</sup> all men can claim the same civil rights as his fellow man.

### **Natural Rights in Constitutionalism**

The LCS’s demands for parliamentary reform were layered. First, it fundamentally believed that its campaign for equal rights was rooted in natural rights and the equality of all men at birth. Second, the LCS looked back to the ancient constitution to prove that its claims for natural rights existed at one point, but had been removed by parliamentary acts since the original charter, Magna Charta. Third, the LCS’s desired natural and constitutional rights could not be denied for they were enshrined in constitutional principles. Thus the very foundation of the LCS’s campaign was that the natural rights it demanded, at one point, were rights for all Britons.

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<sup>301</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 25.

<sup>302</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 40, 55.

<sup>303</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 55.

<sup>304</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man*, 24, 25.

In the LCS's view, it was not demanding new rights; rather, it was demanding the restoration of former constitutional rights that it had a claim to as equal men.

In general terms, the LCS hoped for true freedom of speech, religion, assembly, and a multitude of other liberties that ensured all British men were equal in the eyes of society. However, the LCS's focus for parliamentary reform was on universal suffrage, annual parliaments, and more equal representation, for "we are fully convinced, a thorough Parliamentary Reform would remove every grievance under which we labour."<sup>305</sup> Or, more specifically, suffrage, "for *Universal Suffrage*, we regard as the *grand palladium*, the *very essence* of Liberty."<sup>306</sup> In one of their first *Addresses and Resolutions* in 1792, the LCS demonstrated the truth of its claims about the degradation of their rights and consequently the constitution through various legislations. Beginning in the fifteenth century with King Henry VI, suffrage was limited to forty shilling freeholders. Shortly after the exulted Glorious Revolution, Britons saw their rights further limited as parliamentary representatives had to hold significant property. Further, the importance of annual parliaments was disregarded as they were called every three years under William II and later every seven years under George I.<sup>307</sup> This list is important in understanding the LCS for it demonstrates the LCS's thorough knowledge of constitutional history, while also emphasizing that its demands for equal rights were not a new concept, but rather, rights held by their ancestors. Ultimately, the LCS's demands were for natural rights that it believed no government could remove,<sup>308</sup> while it applied its interpretation

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<sup>305</sup> LCS, *Address to the nation*, 7.

<sup>306</sup> LCS, *The London Corresponding Society's answer to a member of parliament's letter (1797)*, (London: LCS, 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 2:443.

<sup>307</sup> LCS, *The London Corresponding Society's addresses and resolutions (1792)*, 7-8.

<sup>308</sup> See: Chapter Four: "The LCS as Constitutionalists"

of rights to a constitutional framework. By doing so, the LCS maintained its adherence to constitutional methods, while also demonstrating that their claims were more than theoretical.

The LCS's constitutional demands were straightforward: it desired universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, and a more representative borough system. This appears to be a conflicting inconsistent, for these were the exact same demands the LCS justified based on a natural rights argument. However, that is the very essence of the LCS's understanding of the relationship between natural and constitution rights. For them, they were one in the same. The parallels between natural and constitutional rights are twofold: concrete and theoretical. The LCS demanded a restoration of the ancient constitution because the original charter guaranteed the same concrete, constitutional rights that the LCS saw as natural. In a theoretical sense, the LCS believed the original constitution reflected ancient principles of equality and liberty, which were the same theoretical principles that underpinned the LCS's natural rights for all men were born equal and with the same natural liberty. Thus when the LCS demanded universal suffrage, annual parliaments, and a representative borough system, it was actively fighting for both natural and constitutional rights because concretely they were the same, and theoretically they had the same foundation.

In a letter between earlier eighteenth century reformists reprinted by the LCS, John Jebb explained to his friend, "I have long considered every restriction of the right of suffrage as an infringement on the law of Nature, as well as subversive of the Constitution of my country."<sup>309</sup> The law of nature Jebb referred to was the natural equality between all men, and his connection to the constitution was based on the perception that the original constitution guaranteed suffrage to all freemen. In a similar sentiment, the LCS feared the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1794

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<sup>309</sup> Jebb, "Letter I. To Lieut. Col. Sharman, &c.," (February, 1797), 4:60.

because it was both an attack natural and constitutional rights formerly held by all British subjects.<sup>310</sup> Thus the LCS perceived tangible rights such as suffrage and habeas corpus as intrinsically both natural and constitutional rights. While these two examples were two of the few examples that natural rights and constitutional rights were explicitly linked, often the LCS discussed the exact same rights as natural or constitutional in different publications, meaning they saw no distinction. Moreover, there were multiple publications that discussed the same right as a natural in one section and constitutional in another, with the language bearing little difference. In a reactionary piece, the LCS responded to the Gagging Acts by telling readers that the LCS was “jealous of the *right* of Man, [and] they have never failed to propagate, nor to practice, the constitutional doctrines of opposing...the encroachment of power and corruption,” while reminding Britons that “to resist oppression,” is “a natural right.”<sup>311</sup> Also, in an oft-reprinted publication, the writer discussed the constitutional rights of universal male suffrage and annual parliaments’ one on page, while citing those same rights as unalienable and indefeasible, terms that were interchangeable with natural for the LCS, on the next page.<sup>312</sup> Thus the LCS explicitly and subtly linked natural and constitutional rights as the same concrete rights, both in their demands for universal suffrage and universal parliaments, as well as tangential rights important to all Britons like Habeas Corpus.

Theoretically, the LCS also linked natural and constitutional rights as both were founded on the most basic principles of equality and liberty. As explored in the previous chapter, constitutional principles were the foundation of the LCS’s perception that the British Constitution was great. Any alterations not in-line with the original constitutional principles were

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<sup>310</sup> LCS, *Address of the London Corresponding Society...to the various patriotic societies of Great Britain*, 1.

<sup>311</sup> LCS, *To the parliament and people of Great Britain*, 2:406.

<sup>312</sup> SCI, *Report of the sub-committee of Westminster*, 6-7.

deemed as illegitimate historical precedents. The basic principles of the constitution reflected the core ideals that the LCS interpreted in natural rights, that is, natural equality and liberty at birth; thus constitutional rights that were a reflection of the original constitutional principles replicated natural rights. In a response to the pending Gagging Acts that would severely limit many freedoms including speech, printing opinions, and assembly, the LCS expressed hope that “Juries will not uphold the Bills,” for their existence was “not only a contempt of the public Voice, but a violation of the fundamental Principles of the Constitution.”<sup>313</sup> The principles referred to were those set out in the original constitution established during King John’s reign, which “confirmed the rights and liberties of the subject, in a charter called Magna Charta.”<sup>314</sup> The LCS explained that the core of the “first charter said that all are equal in the sight of the law.”<sup>315</sup> That is, a legal representation of the LCS’s interpretation of natural rights, with equality as the basis of rights and liberties.

The LCS perceived Britons’ liberties as a fundamental constitutional principle, thus it was fundamentally true that their natural rights, as principles, should continue to be constitutional rights. In the LCS’s *Address to the Nation* following the implementation of the Gagging Acts, the LCS claimed that through these acts, Pitt “demanded the destruction of those Constitutional principles on which rest all the parts of your Liberty.”<sup>316</sup> The same principles of explicit natural equality as seen first in the Magna Charta and later reasserted during the Glorious Revolution.<sup>317</sup> Therefore, the LCS’s justification for its demands for equal rights was layered.

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<sup>313</sup> LCS, *To the members of the London Corresponding Society*, 2:401.

<sup>314</sup> Unknown, “Strictures on Imprisonment for Debt,” (May, 1797), 4:206.

<sup>315</sup> LCS, *Address of the London Corresponding Society to the other societies of Great Britain*, 9.

<sup>316</sup> LCS, *Citizens, we are eager to address you on the extraordinary occurrences that have recently agitated the nation*, 2:239.

<sup>317</sup> LCS, *Citizens, we lay before you an abstract of the pecuniary transactions of the London Corresponding Society, from the 7th of July to the 31st of December last (1797)*, 2:6.

First, they were natural rights that all men could claim; second, they were former constitutional rights diminished by previous monarchs; and third, they were the tangible or legal version of the ancient constitutional principles.

To preserve any remaining liberties, and out of respect for the constitution it adored, the LCS desired a restoration of the ancient constitution. The LCS used terms such as restore, recover, and long lost, when discussing the natural and constitutional rights that comprised its demands for parliamentary reform. At times, the LCS wrote in general terms, as was the case in a letter to a reformist society in Wycombe, where the LCS writer reminded its fellow reformists that “through united efforts only,” was “gaining the liberty once boasted by Englishmen,” possible.<sup>318</sup> One of the most common themes in LCS correspondence was its specific focus on the restoration of rights. The LCS reminded its fellow reform groups that “we fight to restore these undoubted rights to our countrymen,” and “we shall either recover our natural rights, or be buried under the smoking ruins of our country.”<sup>319</sup> Although a bit dramatic, the LCS continuously focused on a restoration or recovery of either long lost rights, or natural rights, for to the LCS, they were one in the same. Yet these demands were not always in broad terms, for in the Resolutions determined at a General Meeting in 1795, the LCS stated “that the permanent peace, welfare, and happiness of this country, can be established only by restoring to our fellow countrymen their natural undoubted rights, Universal suffrage and annual Parliaments.”<sup>320</sup> LCS members’ desire to recover rights was all-encompassing, from universal suffrage and annual

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<sup>318</sup> “LCS to Wycombe Corresponding Society, 30 September 1795,” 57.

<sup>319</sup> “LCS to Society of the Friends of Liberty, 30 July 1795,” in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 42; LCS, *Answer of the London Corresponding Society, respecting a general meeting to the friends of reform in Sheffield (1797,)* (London: LCS, 1797) in *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, 2:414.

<sup>320</sup> LCS, *Account of the proceedings of a meeting of the London Corresponding Society...Monday, Oct. 26, 1795*, 13.

parliaments, to natural and long-lost rights, to the very liberty they were recovering. In former LCS leader Maurice Margarot's letter to the court appealing his transportation sentence, he summed up the LCS perspective perfectly: "I...claim the restoration of my freedom – freedom the common birth right of Britons and to which I feel myself entitled."<sup>321</sup> The LCS was working within constitutional limits, for its demands were first and foremost natural rights, but also the very principles of the constitution the Britons revered, and those principles were, at one points, also constitutional laws, so they must be restored.

## **Conclusion**

Fundamentally, the LCS's parliamentary demands were for natural rights. It made these demands within a constitutional framework because it supported the British constitutional monarchy system and also because the LCS believed the natural rights it fought for were also, at one point, constitutional rights. The LCS demands for universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, and a more representative borough system were understood to be both natural and constitutional rights for concrete and theoretical reasons. Concretely, suffrage was a natural right all men could justifiably demand, while it was also a right guaranteed in the original constitution. Theoretically, the rights the LCS fought for were based on all men being born equal and with the same liberties, while the ancient constitutional principles were based on equality and liberty; thus natural and constitutional rights had the same basic principles. The LCS's fight for parliamentary reform was layered, as natural rights and constitutional rights were ultimately the same, and the

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<sup>321</sup> "Re: Sydney Cove - Maurice Margarot to the Court 29 October 1794," at the British Library ADD MS 27816, fol., 100. Margarot challenged his sentence because it was possible a result of the suspension of Habeas Corpus, a fundamental right. Moreover, he was charged with seditious libel for his work with the LCS, to which he argued his rights of freedom of speech should have been uppermost and without the suspension of Habeas Corpus he likely would not have been charged and thus found guilty.

LCS understood that their demands had concrete historical precedent while also being founded on basic principles all men deserved.

It understood these rights as based on the basic principle that all men were born equal and with the same liberties. Therefore, when the LCS called for parliamentary reform, it was demanding a restoration of ancient constitutional rights, namely, a preservation of the ancient constitutional principles that made the British Constitution great.

## Conclusion

The LCS formed in January, 1792 to campaign for parliamentary reform. While the foundation of their demands is in natural rights and constitutional principles, they also hoped to redress the grievances of Britons. They believed that universal male suffrage, annual parliaments were sufficient for a thorough reform and a redress. In reality, by their demise in 1799, Britons' liberties were significantly more restricted than they were in 1792. Annual parliaments have never been achieved, with most countries using terms of four to five years. It was not until 1918 that all property restrictions on male suffrage were lifted in the United Kingdom, alongside women over thirty gaining the vote with property requirements. So what did they achieve?

The LCS was an organization that truly understood the theoretical and legal underpinnings of their entire fight; this in a time when working population men were not educated or organized. They were so committed to their fight and to following constitutional methods that the Treason Trials, the suspension of Habeas Corpus, and the Gagging Acts did not stop them, they merely re-organized to continue as a legal and peaceful association. It took a legislative act forcibly shutting them down to stop their fight for equal rights.

Natural equality is the foundation of the LCS's fight for parliamentary reform, that is, a Paineite interpretation of natural equality at birth. This natural equality was the basis of the LCS demands for rights, most specifically, universal male suffrage. It is also the reason that the LCS's classification of 'the people' was so clear – all men are equal upon birth, so the people are all British men who are not aristocrats. Their natural equality supersedes situational classifications like birthplace, profession, income, and property holdings. However, this interpretation of a natural equality was not predominant in eighteenth century Britain. The social hierarchy did not

acknowledge a natural equality, and through a succession of parliamentary acts, the government did not recognize universal suffrage as a natural right all British men could claim. Yet somehow, the LCS aimed to assert its place in society and constitutional monarchy, two institutions that, even with the reforms, would remain largely hierarchical. This seemingly contradictory aim, natural equality within hierarchical institutions, was possible as the LCS applied its Painite interpretation of natural equality to a Burkean framework concerning British society, the constitutional monarchy, and the constitution.

The LCS perceived the British social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy as Burke did, institutions with specific rules and relationships that ensured the systems functioned properly. Systems where different ranks or branches knew their roles, understood the importance of balance, and through working together, were able to produce institutions that produced a general happiness for all Britons. The LCS understood and supported both the social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy for they saw the utility in each. Their desire for reforms was not to the systems themselves, but to assert their place in each. The people needed to be recognized as the industrial inhabitants of Britain who gave their country energy and spirit. Further, the LCS saw the oppressive government and Britons' grievances as a result of their lack of representation, for the system could not function properly unless each of its elements were correctly fulfilled. Without the commons in the House of Commons, the constitutional monarchy did not have the necessary voice of the people nor the necessary balance. While natural rights were the foundation of the LCS demands for reform, their conception of the social and governmental institutions demonstrates they also saw the necessary utility of their campaign.

The LCS adored the unwritten British Constitution like many fellow Britons, but it was because of an understanding of the constitution, not a blind acceptance of an existing establishment. Ultimately, the LCS supported the constitution because of its ancient principles. These were the foundation of good historical precedents, and part of the reason the LCS had a constitutional fight in the first place. Members saw the ancient principles as ones that ensured equality and liberty to all Britons, and because of these, ancient constitutional rights provided equality for British men.

The ease by which the LCS applied Painite interpretation of natural rights to a Burkean constitutionalist framework seems well thought out and thoroughly planned. While the LCS clearly read *Rights of Man* and Paine's other work because they published a few different pieces, it cannot be concluded that they were directly influenced by Paine's work. Furthermore it is doubtful that the LCS was directly influenced by Burke because they attacked his views on multiple occasions.<sup>322</sup> The use of the Burke-Paine controversy in this thesis was because it provided a framework within which to understand the LCS's apparently conflicting ideas. Each writer largely represents a major school of thought in late eighteenth century Britain. Burke is a reflection of the Old Whigs and Commonwealthmen, while Paine's interpretations are Lockean, whether or not he claims they are original, and echo many of the predominant ideas from the American and French Revolutions. By using *Reflections* and *Rights of Man* as the framework, it is possible to understand the LCS as an organization – one that merged two seemingly conflicting set of ideas into a conceptual and political fight for parliamentary reform.

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<sup>322</sup> LCS, "Conclusory Address," in LCS, *The correspondence of the London Corresponding Society revised and corrected*, 82; LCS, *LCS Advertisement*, preface to Duke of Richmond, *A letter from His Grace the Duke of Richmond*, 2:1.

The LCS fought for equal representation in government and a voice in society, so ultimately, equality for all British men. Their composition was primarily working population men with few hopes of attaining a better position or higher income. If they had achieved their aims, they would continue as the Lower House in Parliament and the bottom rung in the social ladder. It is easy, almost natural, to consider the LCS as the underdogs; Britons with no rights who were suppressed in their society, their economy, and their government. But that would be anachronistic.

There have been many good studies on British working class consciousness and identity, many which label the 1790s as the starting point.<sup>323</sup> However, the LCS was an organization actively that wanted to remain in the hierarchical society and government systems. This is not discrediting the larger arguments about emerging working and middle classes in the nineteenth century, nor does it purposefully overlook individuals in the 1790s that might have identified with either class. Rather, that the LCS not only thoroughly understood the hierarchies, but actively strived to work within them as the eighteenth century conception of the commons, not a nineteenth century working class.

Striving to gain a role in a hierarchy is not sufficient to disclaim a working class consciousness, but within their fight to gain both a social and governmental role, there are two areas that I believe highlight a lack of consciousness.<sup>324</sup> First, the LCS perceived their grievances

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<sup>323</sup> See: “Historiography” in the Introduction.

<sup>324</sup> There are numerous studies on British working classes as well as general studies considering what the requirements are for a class consciousness or identity. So, while some studies may have criteria that would place the LCS within a working class consciousness, I am focusing on the ‘us vs them’ paradigm, where it is the working class against the upper or middle classes, as well as a consideration of how they identify in their group, ‘the people.’ This paradigm is used by Mary Thale, parliamentary reformer expert and editor of *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799*, “[t]hese popular reform societies of 1791-9 were new phenomena and their members knew it. They saw themselves as ‘the people’ to be contrasted with ‘the aristocrats’ (i.e. men of

not as a result of their station, or the oppression of the upper classes, but as a consequence of their lack of representation in the House of Commons.<sup>325</sup> They simply wanted their deserved place in society and government. Second, the qualifications to be a member of ‘the people’ have absolutely nothing to do with concepts related to class. Simply, if you were a man and not a noble, you were a member, for all men were born equal. While the LCS openly acknowledged that many of the people they represented were working population individuals, they also opened their organization to the ‘represented of the people’ as well as the unfortunate individuals who had property holdings or wealth but not suffrage because of complicated borough systems. The people were simply all men who were not noble. There is not class identification present in the LCS’s perception of ‘the people.’ Therefore, taken together, the LCS’s class-less identification of the people and absolute lack of fitting within an ‘us vs. them’ paradigm to remedy their grievances demonstrates that, as an organization, the LCS as an organization was not the beginning of an emerging British working class consciousness.

The LCS, as an intellectual organization, brought together two significantly different worldviews. Members applied their belief in the natural equality of men to the social hierarchy, constitutional monarchy, and British Constitution to campaign for parliamentary reform. Their demands, while founded on natural rights, were also constitutional rights recognized in the ancient constitution, the Magna Charta. This coalescing of ideas was not arbitrary. It was the result of an organization who truly understood their motives, demands, and the institutions they

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property who held power in society.” While it has been demonstrated that the LCS understood ‘the people’ to be non-aristocratic Britons, they did not contrast themselves against those in the upper ranks for each had its own place in the social hierarchy and constitutional monarchy. See: Thale, *Selections*, xvi.

<sup>325</sup> Earlier, the LCS anger at the oppressive government was discussed, however, they saw this as a result of the Minister’s Cabal take more than their share of constitutional power, that is, not the upper classes or government oppressing ‘the people.’

worked within and fervently supported. The LCS clearly understood its fight for parliamentary reform, one that had its basis in natural rights, but was adeptly applied within hierarchical systems for they were truly just asserting their natural and ancient right to be members of society and government.

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