‘More successful abroad than at home’: Disraeli’s Second Ministry

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‘More successful abroad than at home.’ Discuss this view of Disraeli’s premiership in the years 1874-80

While Disraeli could be seen as being more successful at home because of his social reforms and lasting impact on the Conservative Party due to his skill as a politician, many of these reforms were unsuccessful, permissive or not of his own doing, and as for the ‘founder of the Conservative Party’, Disraeli is only remembered thus by process of elimination. Therefore, Disraeli was more successful abroad, establishing British prestige in foreign policy, especially during the Congress of Berlin, despite occasional misjudgements elsewhere. Also Disraeli’s approach to Imperial policy was comparatively more successful than that of domesticity, yet maintenance of the colonies often required very little action. This, then, raises the question of success, with intent over effect in regards to domestic policy, and action for the sake of action in foreign.

Despite this, however, Disraeli’s domestic policy could provide strong argument for his success at home. Maurois argues that Disraeli was ideologically committed to social reform, referencing ‘the ideas of Coningsby and Sybil’1, which is a sentiment that Magnus supports, describing how ‘all his life he maintained that the object of politics was social justice, involving social reform. He held that the welfare of the people was the sole end of government’2. This is seen most prevalently in the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act, 1875, and the Employers and Workmen Act, 1876, allowing peaceful picketing and treating classes equally in the workplace, respectively. This would reflect such ideological commitment to social reform as Maurois and Magnus like to argue, but even Blake points out how ‘Disraeli emphasised that social rather than political reform would be the Conservative policy’3. While social reform perhaps made most sense to the new, expanded electorate, (which Disraeli himself had created in 1867) Disraeli does not claim to be a ‘moral crusader’ and so his intentions, deeply ideological or merely political strategy are somewhat irrelevant. It is his achievements, which Maurois summarises, that make Disraeli’s domestic reform a success: ‘Law after law was passed: equality of obligations between employers and employed; enlargement of the rights of Trade Unions; reduction of the hours of work to fifty-six in the week; half-holidays on Saturday; and numerous sanitary laws’4. The impact of ‘half-holidays on Saturday’, for example, as a result of Cross’ Factory Acts, can be seen as monumental, even inspiring songs; allowing football to prosper, the collaborative mindset that comes of team games could flourish, creating the class consciousness that had been bubbling away since the Chartist Movement, thirty years earlier. While this is not necessarily a direct consequence of Disraeli’s domestic policy, a changing, co-operative and collaborative society that can find its roots in Disraeli’s Victorian legislation is an argument for his success at home. However, Vincent contradicts this, arguing instead that ‘the legislation of the 1870s was not a move towards a collectivist state, though it was to some extent a move in the direction of

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1 Maurois, André Disraeli: A Picture of the Victorian Age, Bodley Head, London, Translated by Hamish Miles, 1962, page 259
2 Magnus, Philip, British Prime Ministers: Benjamin Disraeli, History Today, Volume 1, Issue 9, September 1951
4 Maurois, Disraeli, page 259
collectivist local government’. Therefore, according to Vincent, the political collectivism, achieved via Disraeli’s social reform, was a more direct success of domestic policy, while the social collectivism (seen as a consequence of the Factory Acts of 1874/5, which, of course, had other effects, such as increased productivity and so on) was an indirect success, standing in ironic contrast to what Blake, Maurois and Magnus would describe as Disraeli’s intentions. Either way, Disraeli facilitated a changing and more unified state, socially and politically, through his domestic policy and social reforms. Finally, as Blake argues, ‘social-reform legislation was the most important feature of the last reasonably smooth session in Disraeli’s Premiership’, which is seen in the length of time that Disraeli’s social-reform legislation lasted; the Sale of Food and Drugs Act of 1875, for example, remained until 1928, while the Public Health Act of the same year, remained the basis of Public Health Law for almost the same length of time. Therefore, the broader social and political effects of Disraeli’s domestic policy and their lasting legislative impact argue his success at home.

However, Disraeli’s domestic policy was mostly superficial, permissive and rarely was he personally involved in the creation of such legislation. While it could be argued that it was not his fault that he couldn’t reform entirely, for ‘his desire had been to give a whole nation an intellectual and romantic ideal; he had failed. And he had failed precisely because he was an aristocrat of the spirit, whereas the character of England is essentially that of its middle classes’, as Maurois characteristically blames the nation for the nation’s inability to reform, this is a somewhat ‘cheap’ way out. Most of the social reform of Disraeli’s Second Ministry occurred in 1875, but Disraeli had been ill in the winter of 1874, and could not have been involved with that year of reform. As Vincent argues damningly, ‘he is personally associated with no great measure of legislation, except for the Second Reform Bill, whose contents were not of his framing’. Rathbone also points out that ‘Disraeli, having pledged to improve the condition of the people, left the implementation of the policy up to others: Richard Cross, George Sclater-Booth, W.H. Smith and Viscount Sandon’. Blake supports this saying that ‘Social reform was not the principal or even a leading secondary preoccupation of Disraeli. He took little interest in the details’. However, Disraeli’s Second Ministry is one associated with a great number of reforms, so how can these points of view stand up to the likes of Ghosh, Magnus and Maurois, and the modern conception of ‘One-Nation Toryism’? Vincent makes a convincing argument that ‘on social questions Disraeli is sometimes made to appear advanced simply because comparisons are not made with what other leading Conservatives were doing in the same period. In fact Disraeli was less actively concerned with social policy than were most of his colleagues. He was content, indeed, that others should exert themselves, but his own attitudes were passive and literary rather than philanthropic or

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5 Vincent, John Was Disraeli a Failure? History Today, Volume 31, Issue 10, October 1981
6 Blake, Disraeli, page 556
7 Maurois, Disraeli, page 309
8 Vincent, Was Disraeli a Failure?
9 Rathbone, Mark Benjamin Disraeli: Conservative Leader and Prime Minister, History Today Review, Issue 56, December 2006
10 Blake, Disraeli, 556
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political’11. Aside from Disraeli’s personal involvement, the actual success of these reforms is disputable too. Adelman summarises succinctly that ‘in practice all that Disraeli provided for his party were the verbal trappings of reform’12, for, as Rathbone outlines, ‘there were limitations to the effectiveness of these reforms. Most were permissive, not compulsory, a fact which blunted their impact’13, referencing the 1875 Artisans Dwelling Act giving local authorities power but not obligation to purchase, demolish and rebuild whole areas of slums. Aside from Chamberlain’s Birmingham acting on this, he was virtually alone. The 1875 Merchant Shipping Act was equally permissive, lacking obligation to enforce such legislation. Finally, all reforms occurred before 1876. In a beautiful moment of historical irony and hindsight, Rathbone quips that ‘Disraeli’s own waspish comment about exhausted volcanoes could apply equally to his own government’s last few years as to those of Gladstone’s first ministry’14. This ultimately portrays Disraeli’s social reforms, despite the work of Cross and Sclater-Booth, as superficial; merely ‘verbal trappings’. Therefore, while Disraeli’s success at home initially appears bountiful, due to elaborate yet implicit social and political consequences, it ultimately was unsuccessful, permissive and he was rarely involved with anything other than rhetoric.

Even so, Disraeli’s success at home could be seen as being part of his parliamentary skill and lasting impact on the Conservative Party. Adelman argues that ‘Disraeli helped to make social reform part of the tradition of the Conservative Party after 1880’15. Despite the fact that Disraeli’s reform can be viewed as superficial, this change from the Conservative party of ‘Protestantism, Protectionism and no Popery’16 into one that at least attempted social reform cannot be ignored. While the cynic may argue that it was necessary due to the expanded electorate, one must consider that it is Disraeli’s expanded electorate. Maurois confirms this, stating that ‘it was not with laws of repressions that he wished his name to be linked. On the contrary, he was anxious that the Conservative party’s advent to power should be marked by a policy of generosity’17. The existence of the Primrose League and the 2015 Election with both parties trying to claim Disraeli as their predecessor speak for his importance as a political figure. Furthermore, Disraeli broke the pattern of Conservative minority governments between spells of Liberal confusion, as Rathbone points out, for ‘although it can be argued that the 1874 election was lost by Gladstone, rather than won by Disraeli, the result was a Conservative majority for the first time in 28 years, and it would be churlish to deny Disraeli some credit for this remarkable achievement’18, which he reinforces constantly throughout his essay, saying also that ‘Disraeli is rightly remembered for his success in bringing the Conservatives back to power after so long in opposition, and this achievement should not be

11 Vincent, Was Disraeli a Failure?
13 Rathbone, Benjamin Disraeli
14 Rathbone, Benjamin Disraeli
15 Adelman, Gladstone, Disraeli and Later Victorian Politics, page 24
16 Gash, Norman Position Paper: The Tamworth Manifesto, Online Document
17 Maurois, Disraeli, page 259
19 Rathbone, Benjamin Disraeli
underestimated”. Blake describes how Disraeli ‘never failed to play upon the part which the turn of electoral fortune had cast him’ and that he ‘controlled both Houses and dominated his ministerial colleagues […] and the Crown’ – no easy task, by all means. Vincent and Rathbone also discuss Disraeli’s success at ‘exploiting Gladstone’s mistakes and misfortunes’ and how ‘splitting the Liberal ranks in the Commons was his greatest achievement’. While the latter may be seen as adopting a more cynical stance, Disraeli’s success as a politician is seen both in his lasting impact on the running of the Conservative Party and in his command of Parliament during his ministry. It is this success in politics that presents a case for Disraeli’s success at home in his Premiership 1874-1880.

But other than splitting the Liberals, getting the Conservatives in power and [wrongly] being the convenient figurehead for two parties in recent elections, how else exactly was Disraeli successful in politics; should not his actions once in power, not before or after, be judged instead? Blake bitterly compares Disraeli to other politicians of the 18th and 19th centuries, saying how ‘although old age and illness were part of the explanation, it is true to say that Disraeli never possessed the drive, energy or application which were the qualities of Pitt, Peel, Palmerston, or Gladstone’. Moreover, the arguments for Disraeli’s lack of impact on the Party are in abundance, led largely by Vincent, for ‘he left the Tory Party very much as he found it’, which is supported by Murphy, who argues that Disraeli ‘was prepared to adopt the policies necessary in order to win power so that he could preserve the privileged position of the monarchy, the aristocracy and the Church of England’. This contrasts directly with Maurois’ perception of Disraeli. However, Vincent continues to go even further, saying how ‘Disraeli happened to die at a time when Conservatives badly needed a hero’ and that ‘it was only posthumously that he became the inspiration of his party’. So while Disraeli may have had a few, fortunate short-term successes as a result of his political skill, such as not taking office after the Universities Bill of 1873 (and perhaps, following Vincent’s line of thought, dying at the right time), he achieved very little else – and certainly nothing of principled change within the Party. If success is measured as achievement, it is severely lacking in Dizzy’s Second Ministry – for his ultimate political manoeuvre, not taking a minority government in 1873, occurred beforehand (and, of course, his death afterwards). Therefore, Disraeli must have been more successful abroad, as there is so little to be compared to at home, in both his reforms and his politics.

With this in mind, Disraeli’s success abroad can be argued due to his establishing British prestige in foreign policy. Particularly at the Congress of Berlin, Britain’s
inclusion as one of the major European powers and Disraeli’s personal hand in negotiation speak volumes. In fact, Maurois and Blake make exactly the same point, the former saying that ‘if Lord Beaconsfield had held a General Election on the morrow of the Congress of Berlin, he could have assured himself six more years of power’\(^{30}\) and the latter asking ‘ought he to have taken his opportunity and held a general election?’\(^{31}\). Magnus puts similar emphasis on the Congress, for ‘the Congress of Berlin, in 1878, at which he was the outstanding figure, marked the zenith of his career’\(^{32}\), which is reflected in Blake’s writings, as ‘the Treaty of Berlin was regarded throughout the country as a major victory for British diplomacy. The old Jew was indeed the man’\(^{33}\). Even Vincent struggles to criticise Beaconsfield’s foreign policy; ‘Foreign policy was a field where Disraeli both did well, and little. He did well, because he avoided disasters, restored British prestige, and achieved a domestic triumph. He did little, because there was little he could do’\(^{34}\). Blake actually becomes Disraeli’s biggest defender over his foreign policy, saying although ‘Disraeli’s policy was not always consistent[,] foreign policy seldom is. He took opportunities as they came’\(^{35}\) and ‘as for the Berlin settlement, of course it was not perfect. No treaty ever is’\(^{36}\), concluding finally that ‘Disraeli’s foreign policy was an undoubted success’\(^{37}\). Therefore, if Disraeli’s policy was indeed to restore British prestige, he not only continued but facilitated the traditional pattern of Conservative success abroad through his foreign policy.

But just as can be seen in Disraeli’s ‘great political manoeuvres’, the Congress of Berlin is a glorified unrepresentative example of transient achievement. While it received great acclaim in Britain, ‘achievements of this sort cannot be judged by popular applause. What sort of balance sheet can be drawn eighty years later?’\(^{38}\) The embarrassing defeat at Isandlwana and the Afghan Wars of 1878-79 give an impression of the Prime Minister’s lack of knowledge and clarity of aims in regards to his foreign policy. Blake supports this, for he argues that ‘when Disraeli took office in 1874 it is doubtful whether he had any clear ideas on foreign policy other than doing something – it did not much matter what – to reassert Britain’s power in Europe’\(^{39}\). Blake then makes the argument increasingly personal, asserting how ‘although Disraeli’s alien origins gave him a certain air of cosmopolitanism, and he was not averse to encouraging this impression, he had, in fact, little knowledge of foreign countries’\(^{40}\). Vincent presents Disraeli in an almost naïve way, Beaconsfield being ‘trapped within the pretence that one could have a foreign policy without having a defence policy, that one could be a great power on the cheap, and achieve large results with only the shadow of an army’\(^{41}\). Finally, after the Congress of Berlin,

\(^{30}\) Maurois, Disraeli, page 251  
\(^{31}\) Blake, Disraeli, page 655  
\(^{32}\) Magnus, Benjamin Disraeli  
\(^{33}\) Blake, Disraeli, page 650  
\(^{34}\) Vincent, Was Disraeli a Failure?  
\(^{35}\) Blake, Disraeli, page 652  
\(^{36}\) Blake, Disraeli, pages 653-4  
\(^{37}\) Blake, Disraeli, page 653  
\(^{38}\) Blake, Disraeli, page 650  
\(^{39}\) Blake, Disraeli, page 571  
\(^{40}\) Blake, Disraeli, page 570  
\(^{41}\) Vincent, Was Disraeli a Failure?
Disraeli’s ‘fortunes began to fail and nothing went well for the Government’\textsuperscript{42}. Therefore, ignoring the Crown Jewels of Disraeli’s foreign policy, it is easily outnumbered by the embarrassing blunders that were the Zulu and Afghan Wars, communicated an unclear and unintelligent foreign policy. Furthermore, to merit Disraeli’s policy abroad a success, his policy at home must be truly diabolical, which is arguably not the case. Following this line of argument, Disraeli’s policy at home was successful, compared to his embarrassing foreign policy.

However, Disraeli’s Imperial policy, that great pillar of Victorian Conservatism, is far stronger. Defended to no end by Magnus and Maurois, becoming the biggest single shareholder in the Suez Canal and taking Cyprus in the Treaty of Berlin were two of Disraeli’s colossal achievements. Discarding the Congress of Berlin as ‘flash in a pan’, therefore, is an oversimplification, as British involvement in Cyprus continued well into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, as did interest in the Suez Canal. Of his wider colonial policy, Magnus argues, ‘In imperial and colonial affairs he sought to gather the far-flung colonies and empire around the Queen as the central sun. Forgotten were the days when he had described the colonies as “millstones” round our necks. It was as an imperial country that he thought of Britain now’\textsuperscript{43}. Maurois rather emotively presents Disraeli as ideologically committed to imperialism, describing how ‘another idea cherished by the Prime Minister from his youth upwards and now installed in power with him, was the idea of Empire […] Disraeli had risen to insist that England is nothing if not the metropolis of a vast colonial Empire, and that the anti-colonists, in looking only at financial balance-sheets, were neglecting the political considerations which alone make a nation’s greatness’\textsuperscript{44}. Maurois continues to describe his ‘programme: colonial autonomy, accompanied by an Imperial customs tariff, a Crown right over unoccupied territory, a military entente, and, lastly, the creation of an Imperial Parliament in London’\textsuperscript{45}. Rather conveniently, however, ‘so new and so bold did this policy seem, that he could not yet apply it, but he seized every opportunity of a striking display of his sentiments’\textsuperscript{46}, which is the explanation for Vincent’s comment that ‘Disraeli both did well, and little’\textsuperscript{47}. However, if what Disraeli was doing was following a policy of minimal involvement, which was ultimately successful, criticism of such minimalism seems counter-productive. Therefore, what Disraeli did apply himself to – getting the money to purchase the Suez Canal shares in 1875, for example – it was mostly successful, and what he did not entirely, it was usually because forceful application was unnecessary. Finally, while the Titles Act of 1876 can be seen as Disraeli’s self-indulgent pursuit of leaving behind his D’Israeli family, it reflects his skill at political seduction of the Head of State and a pushing for British prestige in its Empire, making the Queen an Empress. It is for these reasons that Disraeli’s domestic policy pales in comparison to his foreign and imperial policy.

However, this argument is a somewhat kind simplification, which Rathbone points out, for ‘as far as upholding the Empire is concerned, Disraeli’s record is more varied. His purchase of shares in the Suez Canal gave Britain a strategic asset vital to the

\textsuperscript{42} Blake, Disraeli, page 656
\textsuperscript{43} Magnus, Benjamin Disraeli
\textsuperscript{44} Maurois, Disraeli, page 260
\textsuperscript{45} Maurois, Disraeli, page 260
\textsuperscript{46} Maurois, Disraeli, page 260
\textsuperscript{47} Vincent, Was Disraeli a Failure?
route to India. However, in some other respects, his policy towards the Eastern Question was less praiseworthy." Blake also discusses Disraeli’s difficulties in India, especially given his choice of Viceroy, of which ‘he must bear the responsibility of choosing, admittedly after trying many others first’. Blake also picks up, as a general theme of Disraeli’s policy abroad that ‘he was curiously unbalanced in judgement’.

An argument could be made that, a little like the Congress of Berlin being the crowning achievement of Disraeli’s foreign policy, Suez was Disraeli’s great success of imperial policy, and everything else is only second rate. However, what was lacking in Disraeli’s domestic and political policy was even one mediocre success, let alone international lasting triumphs. It is for this reason that the balance truly tips towards Disraeli being more successful abroad than at home in his premiership 1874-1880.

Yet one question that must be considered is that of success. In the case of Disraeli’s domestic policy, is reform the measure of success and must it be Disraeli’s personal work or is it the premiership as a whole, with all Cabinet members and Ministers’ work included? As for Disraeli’s impact on the Conservative Party, such methods to assess his premiership reflect the politics of the time rather than any particular personal parliamentary success. Similar issues can be raised in regards to assessing his policy abroad – should the longevity and eventual success of policies be considered and prioritised over the skill of a more laissez-faire approach to the colonies? Finally, the fact that Disraeli lost the 1880 Election has not been raised, yet is this is an insufficient argument, considering the nature of elections and the issue of when elections are held. In other words, in comparing two policies – that of domestic and foreign affairs – a consistent idea of success must be established, yet the abstract nature of this makes it difficult to do so.

Ultimately, however, despite Disraeli’s attempted reform, it was mostly superficial and he was rarely directly involved with such legislation, despite his apparent literary sympathies. As for Disraeli’s political impact and success as a politician, a lot is left to be desired, although most of the argument surrounding the perception of Disraeli as the founder of the Conservative Party reflects present politics over that of Dizzy’s Victorian age. This therefore leaves Disraeli’s policy abroad, something far flashier, with successes in diplomatic affairs and in the colonies – yet ‘something far flashier’ is perhaps more reflective of the ‘Right Honourable’ Earl. Therefore, although Disraeli’s foreign and imperial policy could be considered generally a success despite a few weaknesses, it appears a very clear success in comparison with his domestic policy.

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48 Rathbone, Benjamin Disraeli
49 Blake, Disraeli, page 657
50 Blake, Disraeli, page 657
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