In late 1832 Great Britain was preparing for a special General Election. A Reform Bill passed in June had extended voting rights to the middle class, and parliamentary constituencies were re-distributed to enfranchise some of the larger industrial towns. Many Tory landed gentry had — unsuccessfully — opposed the change. So, early on in *Felix Holt, the Radical*, it comes as a surprise to the reader as well as his family when Harold Transome, heir to the Transome estates, declares his political allegiance. Just returned from abroad where he had made his fortune in business, he does not intend to stand as a Tory in the forthcoming post-reform election in December 1832. Landed gentry in North Warwickshire, thinly disguised as ‘North Loamshire’, were usually from this party and, fictionally, the Transome family tradition also reflected a strong attachment to the Tory principles of upholding Church and King. Harold, however, goes further than abandoning this party. Jumping over the Whigs, who had successfully pushed through the reform of parliament, he stands as a Radical, implying he would support further changes to the constitutional system.

A memorable conversation in chapter one records Harold’s political revelation to his mother:

‘But I shall not be a Tory candidate’
Mrs Transome felt something like an electric shock
‘What then?’ she said almost sharply. ‘You will not call yourself a Whig?’
‘God forbid. I’m a Radical’
Mrs Transome’s limbs tottered; she sank into a chair.

In her secluded state, Mrs Transome is aghast at Harold’s disclosure: her awareness of Radicalism is limited to the old-fashioned Radical MP Francis Burdett who had stood for Chartist-like political change but had been regarded by the likes of Mrs Transome with contempt. ‘There were rich Radicals, she was aware, as there were rich Jews and Dissenters, but she had never thought of them as county people. Sir Francis Burdett had been generally regarded as a madman’ (92-3). Burdett had been known to speak well of Napoleon and had attacked the English aristocracy. When she has recovered from the shock, Mrs Transome articulates part of her objection to Harold’s Radical candidature:

It seems to me that a man owes something to his birth and station and has no right to take up this notion or the other, just as it suits his family; still less to work at the overthrow of his class. That was what everyone said of Lord Grey, and my family is at least as good as Lord Grey’s. (116)

Grey was the Whig Prime Minister who had just successfully passed the 1832 Reform Act. Earl Grey’s grandfather had been the first baronet. His son-in law and fellow-Whig cabinet member, Lord Durham was — like Harold Transome in fiction — an upper-class Radical.

But Harold is not to be deflected by his mother’s objections: as a contemporary review remarks, he shows ‘radical impatience with immemorial Tory prejudices’. Two local Treby newspapers — of contrasting political persuasions — react to Harold’s candidature, one of them using predictably similar thought-processes to his mother: the Tory *North Loamshire Herald*
asserts it is ‘an example of defection in the inheritor of a family name’ whereas the Liberal Duffield Watchman views it as ‘self-liberation from the trammels of prejudice’ (195).

Others also react unfavourably to Harold’s candidature. Sir Maximus Debarry, father of North Loamshire Tory candidate, Philip, is outraged, failing to understand the changing political situation:

‘A Radical!’ said Sir Maximus, in a tone of incredulous disgust as he took a folded bill.
What fool is he? – he’ll have no chance’. [...] 
‘Harold Transome!’ shouted Sir Maximus, as he read the name in three-inch letters. ‘I don’t believe it’. (181)

Sir Maximus is dismayed that Harold will not stand as a second Tory since ‘he and Philip [Debarry] can run in harness together and keep out both the Whigs’ (176). But Sir Maximus is wrong to say Harold would have no chance as a Radical. There are plausible political reasons why he might wish to stand under that label. The explanation has its origin in the Catholic Emancipation Act passed in 1829, allowing Roman Catholics to become members of parliament. The Tories had always been split on this question. A former Prime Minister William Pitt – nostalgically invoked by his Tory supporters in Felix Holt – had actually favoured Emancipation which is why he lost office in 1801, since the King would not accept it. Lord Liverpool, Prime Minister 1812-27, had made Emancipation an ‘Open Question’, avoiding discussion and averting dissension. But with Emancipation passing, about half of the sixty or so staunch (or Ultra as they were known) Tory MPs now changed tack and made a momentous leap in thinking. If Emancipation could be passed, the political system was indeed unrepresentative and needed reforming. In Nuneaton and many other places, anti-catholic protests were strong, particularly among non-voters; they argued that an unrepresentative group of MPs had made unacceptable concessions. Ultra-Tories concluded that, if these decent complainants desired to maintain the old protestant constitution, they could be entrusted with the vote after all.

Tories of this persuasion, such as Sir Edward Knatchbull, the Marquis of Blandford and the Duke of Richmond, announced their conversion to reform and prepared to support a Whig Bill to this effect. Some continued their support of the Whigs. Richmond was to serve in Earl Grey’s cabinet. No wonder Harold ‘had brought himself to see that anything really worthy to be called British Toryism had been entirely extinct since the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel had passed the Catholic Emancipation Act’ (110). This was very much the view in strongly protestant north Warwickshire. In February 1829 there had been a public meeting at Chilvers Coton Church to organize a petition to parliament against Catholic Emancipation. By 1832 it was too late to turn the tide on Emancipation but a pro-parliamentary reform candidate would be favourably received. A petition favouring reform had been drawn up in the town in 1831. So, some of those of previously Tory views were – for the moment at least – reformers. Even after the Bill was passed, a candidate of Harold Transome’s stamp would find some ex-Tories in his political camp.

And so while Harold standing as a Radical would have been inconceivable five years previously, by December 1832 it was not so ridiculous, as Eliot realizes. Yet Harold’s radical candidature has left some commentators puzzled or dismissive. David Carroll talks of Harold as a ‘bogus radical’. He suggests that ‘The aristocratic Harold surprisingly presents himself as a Radical’ in the first chapter, while Felix, the working-class Radical, turns out to be ‘a
conservative gradualist mistrustful of political change'. Carroll suggests they are both anomalies. But Harold is not the only Radical/Liberal candidate with this background. So his stance is not a 'shocking rejection of his landed position' or as 'difficult to interpret' as he suggests.\(^6\) Fred C. Thomson points out that contemporary reviewers called Harold a 'cynical and nefarious politician'.\(^7\) Morris Edmund Speare suggests it is 'to show he is not tied to class conservatisms' and Christine Richards argues Harold displays merely 'an insipid version of Whiggery'.\(^8\) However, his Radical candidature is not a superficial decision: Arnold Kettle's comment that 'Radicalism is seen here by George Eliot not simply as a set of opinions: it is a social force arising out of basic economic changes' rings true.\(^9\) Harold is a Radical because as Eliot puts it in the novel:

Nothing was left to men of sense and good family but to retard the national ruin by declaring themselves radicals and take the inevitable process of changing everything out of the hands of beggarly demagogues and proud-purse tradesmen. (110)

Behind the emotive language is Eliot's deep understanding of the politically dramatic time around 1832.

Eliot's celebrated comment in *Felix Holt* that 'There is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life' (129) is also relevant here. Harold's Radical candidature is another part of Mrs. Transome's world that comes crashing down. Eliot also shows how lawyer Matthew Jermyn understands Harold's motives better than either Harold's mother or Sir Maximus. Harold tells Jermyn: 'If I put up it will be as a Radical; and I fancy, in any county that would return Whigs there would be plenty of voters to be combed off by a Radical who offered himself with good pretensions' (115). This suggests Harold's decision is in part based on his chances of success. Jermyn's reaction is very different from Mrs Transome's and Sir Maximus's.

Harold not only understands: he expresses it eloquently when talking about the trees on the Transome estate and trying to explain his candidature to his mother: 'The Radical sticks are growing, mother, and the Tory oaks are rotting' (96). Eliot later remarks in Chapter 8 that Harold realizes the enormity of the economic and social change taking place in the country and his pragmatic reaction is,

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to stand up for every change that the economical condition of the country required and he had an angry contempt for men with coronets on their coaches but too small a share of brains to see where they had better make a virtue of necessity. (197)
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Harold and Jermyn, and therefore Eliot, know what historian Carlos Flick asserts in his history of the pro-reform Birmingham Political Union: 'Radicalism seemed everywhere on the increase'.\(^{10}\) But the Radical candidature is not merely opportunism to take advantage of temporary circumstances. Harold judges the long-established Tories to be as weak as the long-established Transome family, and in as much danger.
The description of the term Radical evolved rapidly. In 1832 it had neither quite the meaning of a few years before nor of a few years later. The bold Radicalism of the period of the Napoleonic Wars was evident when political reform was deeply unfashionable, and its advocacy — in a strongly Tory period — seen as unpatriotic. In Mrs. Transome’s youth Tories had frequently referred to Radicals as Jacobins. But in the four years immediately before 1832, Radical advocacy of substantial parliamentary reform suddenly became very popular. Lord John Russell turned the unpatriotic argument on its head, arguing that when the House of Lords initially rejected the Reform Bill, he felt it intolerable that ‘the whisper of a faction should prevail against the voice of a nation’, so unpopular were the Lords, so out of touch with public feeling.

Harold, well acquainted with current political developments, realizes that a Radical candidature makes sense. At a national level The Times newspaper, immediately after the Reform Bill was passed argued that ‘men be sought for [...] who will vote through fire and water for a redress of all practical grievances’. When the real political circumstances are examined fact and fiction prove to be closely allied. At the North Warwickshire election of May 1831, virtually a plebiscite for reform, Stratford Dugdale, Tory MP for the County since 1802, decided not to stand again. After years of trenchant opposition to Catholic Emancipation or Parliamentary reform, his last-minute conversion to vote for the Reform Bill was mistrusted and reflected his own confusion of mind. To have voted against the Bill would have condemned him to political oblivion; only six of the thirty-four county members throughout the country who resisted the change in 1831 were elected in December 1832. So, even in Tory Warwickshire, two moderate reformers, Sir Francis Lawley and new candidate Sir Gray Skipwith were elected unopposed in 1831. In four years the Tories appeared to have undergone a rapid collapse.

Were the days of landlord influence numbered? In reality they were still present at least up to the time when Felix Holt was written, but in the excitement of the moment in 1831-2 things looked very different. When two Reformers defeated Sir Charles Greville, brother of the Earl, in the Borough of Warwick election in 1831, a shiver went down the spines of the landowning classes of Warwickshire. So, come December 1832, Warwickshire’s northern seat, less exclusively rural, would seem promising territory for a Radical in the immediate post-reform euphoria. Of the previous candidates, Skipwith was to stand for the south and Lawley had retired, hence the candidature of the real-life Dempster Heming. Harold is his fictional equivalent, trying his hand at an opportunistic Radical candidature.

There is also a parallel here with future Conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli who strongly disliked the Whigs but, at the time of his first considered entry into parliament in 1832, realized that the tide had turned against the Tories, for the moment at least. His leading biographer Robert Blake asserts that ‘Disraeli’s object was to get in [to parliament] and the tide was obviously flowing fast against the Tories. No one who was ambitious would commit himself to the losers’. So he stood, unsuccessfully, as a Radical in High Wycombe in 1832. ‘“Toryism is worn out and I cannot condescend to be a Whig,” he explained’. But Disraeli, an opportunist, soon spotted the turning of the political tide and by 1837 was a successful Tory candidate.

By 1845 both Heming’s and Disraeli’s Radicalism lay well in the past and they were now leading the opposition, locally and nationally respectively, to Peel’s proposed Repeal of the Corn Laws. A Tory Prime Minister had become too radical for them. Shortly after Eliot
finished *Felix Holt*, Disraeli passed the Second Reform Bill in 1867, having opposed a more moderate Bill the year before: in 1868 he became Conservative Prime Minister. Clearly Disraeli was looking to his own interests and in the novel Esther concludes towards the end of the book that Harold is too:

His very good nature was unsympathetic: it never came from any thorough understanding or deep respect for what was in the mind of the person he obliged or indulged [...]. And an inevitable comparison which haunted her, showed her the same quality in his political views: the utmost enjoyment of his own advantage was the solvent that blended pride in his family and position, with the adhesion to changes that were to obliterate tradition and melt down encased gold heirlooms into plating for the egg-spoons of ‘the people’. (528-29)

Back in 1832 Harold hopes to win a seat as a Radical but the result remains uncertain until the end. In the book the politically knowledgeable Jermyn asserts ‘a presumption [...] in favour of the two liberal candidates’. Whigs, Liberals and Radicals, he believes, would garner the bulk of support from the new voters, particularly in more urban areas where many regard the Tories as yesterday’s men. By clinging on to their opposition to any kind of political reform they had lost many of their former supporters and potential new ones. However, the shrewd Jermyn also notes that a canvass around Treby ‘would not be unfavourable to the return of a Conservative’ (113). This local area is much more traditional. So who is to be victorious in the election is not obvious. But in the county of North Loamshire overall, Jermyn remains optimistic about Harold’s chances as a Radical: later he predicts, ‘I think we shall get him returned’ (204). Radical Agent Johnson is similarly optimistic, ‘As a Radical and a moneyed radical, you are in a fine position’ he tells Harold (282).

Harold’s chances are discussed at length: two people are to be elected and the other fictional candidates are the Whig supporter Peter Garstin, who owns coal mines nearby, and the Tory Philip Debarry, son of Sir Maximus. ‘They think it will be a hard run between Transome and Garstin,’ said Christian’. Mr Sircome comments knowingly: ‘Folks say he hasn’t got many votes hereabout but towards Duffield and all there, where the Radicals are, everybody’s for him’ (305). In the end Harold Transome, like the real-life Dempster Heming, is defeated. Heming’s real loss of the election in North Warwickshire was a narrow one, but of course Eliot does not reveal any figures relating to Harold’s failure. The defeat is the significant event, not the margin. As David Carroll points out, the loss of the election was one of a series of happenings that undermine Harold’s aristocratic self-confidence, such as his disinheritance, the discovery of his real father, and his rejection by Esther.¹⁸

The word Radical encompassed a great variety of views and it was banded around a good deal in the 1830s, 40s and 50s. But Eliot was writing in the 1860s. By this latter date a Liberal Party, especially after a significant meeting in 1859, was starting to coalesce from Whigs, Liberals and Radicals. What is the precise nature of Harold’s Radicalism? A later generation of Radicals supported female suffrage but this was much less apparent in the 1830s. Harold is harsh to his mother when he tries to write off her objections to his candidature with the notion that, ‘Women, very properly, don’t change their views, but keep to the notions in which they have been brought up. It doesn’t signify what they think – they are not called upon to judge or act’ (116–7). Elections, with their violence and money trading were seen as very male affairs and yet his agent Johnson later remarks that for a lower social class, ‘One fourth
of the men would never have voted if their wives hadn't driven them to it for the sake of their families' (282).

However, Harold's conversation with his clerical uncle Rev. John Lygon of Treby Magna is more revealing about his candidature. The foxhunting man, if initially surprised at Harold's Radical declaration, soon comes round to it. 'A rather nasty business you calling yourself a radical' (120) is his initial response, but he soon accepts the situation. There is an element here of blood being thicker than water, as Lygon asserts a clergyman must keep peace in a family. 'Confound it! I'm not bound to love Toryism better than my own flesh and blood, and the manor I shoot over'. He wants to avoid 'quarrelling with my own sister's son!' (121). Perhaps Harold's (at least temporary) political desertion is less painful in view of the chaotic state of the Tories in 1832. But there was another more obviously political factor: Harold's definition of his own Radicalism is limited compared to Felix Holt, as the conversation between Lygon and Harold reveals:

>'But you'll not be attacking the Church and the institutions of the country – you'll not be going those lengths; you'll keep up the bulwarks, and so on, eh?'
>'No, I shan't attack the Church, only the incomes of the bishops, perhaps, to make them eke out the incomes of the poor clergy.'
>'Well, well, I have no objection to that. [...] you'll respect the constitution handed down, etc. – and you'll rally round the throne – and the King, God bless him, and the usual toasts, eh?'
>'Of course, of course. I am a Radical only in rooting out abuses.'
>'That's the word I wanted, my lad! [...] Abuses is the very word; and if anybody shows himself offended, he'll put the cap on for himself'.
>'I remove the rotten timbers,' said Harold, inwardly amused, 'and substitute fresh oak, that's all.' (121)

The desire to cut down placemen, pensioners and sinecure holders was attacked with verve by men such William Cobbett who, at the start of the nineteenth century, had been a Tory when he admired the young Pitt as the least corrupt of politicians. But Cobbett's concern with war-time government corruption had turned him in a more Radical direction. The idea that the 1832 Reform Act would eliminate all the worst features of the old system was, as Eliot saw, far too optimistic, but the legislation did lead to further change. As well as church reform, the number of sinecures in government saw a decline that began well before 1832 but was hastened by the Reform Act. Other aspects of corruption outside parliament were, however, harder to deal with. Riotous elections with drinking, treating and bribery remained popular with electors.

Harold's radical stance could be seen as exemplifying the need for the old-fashioned Transome family to change their approach. But it is based more on the concept of necessity than the principles which drive Felix's Radicalism. The contrast between the two men in their interpretation of Radicalism emphasizes the wide meaning of the term. It also ensures, for the purposes of the plot, that Harold has a good reason for visiting Rufus Lyon and thus meeting his daughter. He sees Lyon, with his Radical views and position of influence among similarly inclined Dissenters, as someone who needs cultivating. Dissenting chapels were more directly centres of local organization for the Whigs, Radicals and Liberals, than Anglican Churches were for the Tories. Harold knows the reaction of the Dissenting Minister will be different from the reactions to his candidature of his mother, Sir Maximus and Uncle Lygon. He is prepared for different subjects of conversation: as Eliot memorably puts it, 'canvassing makes a gentleman acquainted with many strange animals; together with the ways of catching and
taming them’ (267). In conversation with Harold, Rufus Lyon makes it clear that, in order to get the Reform Act through, it has been necessary for those of Radical opinions to make an alliance with mildly pro-reform Whigs with whom otherwise Lyon has little sympathy.

But now Lyon feels the danger of further accommodation with moderate Whigs when he remarks that ‘where compromise broadens, intellect and conscience are thrust into the narrower room’ (268). Now the Great Reform Act has passed, other policies can be considered. Harold, as Eliot remarks, ‘was quick at new languages, and still quicker at translating other men’s generalities into his own special and immediate purposes’, and, bearing in mind who he is speaking to, is keen to point out that ‘On questions connected with religious liberty I would stop short at no measure that was not thorough’ (269). He emphasizes to Lyon the tactical importance of plumping for him as the genuine Radical. Ironically, the most Radical policy Harold espouses – the Secret Ballot – is one that Lyon opposes: the Minister sees voting as a trust that should be exercised openly in order to be accountable. Harold is surprised. His tactic – looking for the needs of the voters rather than professing his own philosophy – is a relatively new development that expands with the electorate and reminds one of today’s market research and focus groups. It illustrates the continuing relevance of Eliot’s writings to our own times.

So, Harold’s Radical candidature is, from an historical perspective, quite plausible and not at all mysterious. Eliot’s shrewd understanding of the political atmosphere around 1832 gives us many insights into that period. In 1852 George Henry Lewes in his Westminster Review article The Lady Novelists had ‘outlined the theory that became hers – that fiction should be based on real experiences and that it should enable readers to share a profounder realization of their feelings and the plight of common humanity’. Felix Holt is of considerable historical value before we even begin to consider its many literary qualities.

Notes


3 See for instance, Felix Holt, Chapter 2, p. 111; Chapter 3, p. 124; Chapter 20, p. 304.

4 Warwickshire County Record Office Z0761 (SM), Election ephemera, 1820s-1830s.

5 John Astley, Memorandum of Occurrences at Nuneaton, 1810-1845 (Nuneaton Library), 6 October 1831.


15 For Heming’s Radical candidacy in North Warwickshire in 1832 see Nuneaton Diary, 26 May 1832 – 6 August 1833, and also Birmingham Gazette, 31 December 1832.


17 For Disraeli, see Blake, Chapter 10: for Heming, see Leicester Journal 16 January 1846.

18 Carroll, p. 209.

