






Lord Althorp



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John Charles Spencer, the eldest son of the 2nd Earl of Althorp, was born on 30th May, 1782. At the age of eight he was sent to school at [Harrow](#). One of his friends at school was [Lord Byron](#). Spencer was an undistinguished student but after private tuition he was able to go to Trinity College, [Cambridge](#) in 1800.

The Earl of Althorp purchased the constituency of [Okehampton](#) for £60,000 and arranged for his son to become MP for the borough in 1804. Known under his courtesy title, Lord Althorp, he supported [William Pitt](#) but for the first five years in the [House of Commons](#) he did not take part in any debates. In 1806, Althorp switched to [Northampton](#), another constituency under the control of his father.

In the [House of Commons](#) Althorp came under the influence of [Charles Fox](#) and as a result switched his support from the Tories to the Whigs. Althorp became very concerned about the hardships being encountered by shoemakers in [Northampton](#) and argued strongly against the proposed leather tax in 1812.

After the end of the war with France in 1815 Lord Althorp began to argue in favour of parliamentary reform. In 1817 he opposed the suspension of [Habeas Corpus](#) and the decision by [Lord Liverpool](#) and his government to increase the powers of local magistrates. Lord Althorp was also very critical of the [Corn Laws](#). Althorp also supported [Joseph Hume](#) in his campaign for [Catholic Emancipation](#).

In March, 1830, Althorp was chosen as leader of the [Whigs](#) in Parliament and when the [Duke of Wellington](#) resigned in November of that year, Althorp was expected to become prime minister. He was reluctant to accept the responsibility of this post and persuaded [Earl Grey](#), the leader of the Whigs in the House of Lords, to become prime minister.

In Grey's government Althorp became Chancellor of the Exchequer and leader of the [House of Commons](#). Lord Althorp and [Earl Grey](#) had been supporters of parliamentary reform for many years and the two men were determined to use their power to increase the size of the electorate. As leader of the House of Commons, Althorp played an important role in persuading Parliament to pass the [Reform Bill](#) in 1832.

Although John Charles Spencer supported some aspects of factory legislation, he was totally against the idea of the 'ten hour day' for children. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lord Althorp led the opposition to [Michael Sadler](#) and his supporters in the debates that took place on this issue in 1832. Two years later, Althorp spoke out against the proposed reforms of [Lord Ashley](#).

On the death of his father in 1834, Spencer became the 3rd Earl of Althorp. He now moved to the [House of Lords](#) but remained as Lord Melbourne's Chancellor of the Exchequer until December, 1835. Althorp now retired from politics and spent the rest of his life looking after the family estates. John Charles Spencer, 3rd Earl of Althorp, died in 1845.

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(1) John Charles Spencer, speech, House of Commons (16th March, 1832)

I am of the opinion that the effect of the measure proposed by the honourable member (Michael Sadler), must necessarily be a fall in the rate of wages, or, what is more probable, that children would cease to be employed at all in manufactories. Now I appeal to the honourable member whether a measure which would prevent children from obtaining any employment in factories would not be more injurious than beneficial to the labouring classes?

As long as we have a manufacturing population in the kingdom it will be impossible to render their occupation as wholesome as that of agricultural labourers, or persons engaged in out-door labour. This is an evil that cannot be remedied. It is too late now to argue about the unwholesome nature of manufacturing employment. We have got a manufacturing population, and it must be employed. Any measure which shall have the effect of diminishing the means of employment to labourers engaged in manufactures will produce extensive misery.

(2) Thomas Macaulay, letter to his sister Hannah (29th August, 1831)

My opinion of Lord Althorp is extremely high. In fact his character is the only stay of the ministry. I doubt whether any person has ever lived in England who, with no eloquence, no brilliant talents, no profound information, with nothing in short but plain good sense and an excellent heart, possessed so much influence both in and out of Parliament.

(3) E. J. Littleton described a meeting of the Whigs in his diary on 8th March, 1832.

There stood Althorp with his stout, honest face, and farmer-like figure, habited in ill-made black clothes, his trousers rucked up in a heap round his legs, one coat flap turned round, and exposing his posterior, and the pocket of the other crammed full of papers - his hat held awkwardly in one hand and his large snuff box in the other, while he briefly and bluntly told his plain, unsophisticated tale with his usual correct feeling and stout sense, and was warmly responded to by the whole party.

(4) William Howitt, *Eminent Living Political Reformers* (1840)

In 1830 Lord Althorp was appointed to the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer and leader of the House of Commons. During this reign of four years as leader of the Lower House, his Lordship's authority and influence was unbounded. No minister perhaps ever possessed more individual power in that assembly than he had. His Lordship was never an orator, yet who spoke so irresistibly as he did.



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