Question, student answer, examiner's comments

Sir Robert Peel

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THE QUESTION FOLLOWS THE OCR SPECFIC AS-LEVEL examination papers on period studies of British History.

Question: How successful was Sir Robert Peel as leader of the Conservative party?

Janet's answer:

This essay will examine how successful Peel was as leader of the Conservative party. It will describe his policies and then assess their effects. Peel was a very successful party leader because he modernised the Conservative party and became Prime Minister in 1841 with a large majority. For the first time since Lord Liverpool's death, in 1827, the Conservatives were able to form an effective government. They had remained in power until 1830 and returned briefly in 1834-5 but these governments had been weak. Peel was mostly responsible for the reorganisation of the party and the restoration of its fortunes.

Peel was the son of a Lancashire cotton manufacturer and his background was not typical of the other leaders of the Conservatives in the early nineteenth century who were usually large landowners. He became a minister very soon after he entered Parliament, as Under-Secretary of War and the Colonies, then Chief Secretary for Ireland. When he was appointed Home Secretary, he introduced a number of reforms in the penal system, abolishing capital punishment for a number of offences and creating the Metropolitan Police Force. When Wellington became Prime Minister, he supported Catholic Emancipation as the only means of avoiding further violence in Ireland although it was opposed by most of the Conservatives. This helped to divide the party and bring the Whigs to power.

Peel was Prime Minister briefly in 1834-5 but his government did not last long because he did not have a majority in the House of Commons. The most important development at that time was the Tamworth Manifesto in 1834. Peel accepted the changes in the Whigs' 1832 Reform Bill and tried to modernise the Conservatives so that they would have more appeal to the electorate.

The most successful period of his career began in 1841 when the Conservatives won a large majority and Peel could carry through the policies that he wanted. He was the cleverest man in the government and was able to push through important reforms. He was very hard working and made sure that he was aware of everything that went on in government whereas other prime ministers were often interested in a few areas of policy and left many issues to their colleagues. He appointed effective ministers. For example, Gladstone became President of the Board of Trade and soon showed his ability in handling economic affairs. He also

Sir Robert Peel in the 1840s

thought that Peel was a great Prime Minister. However, Peel did not get on very well with other colleagues. He was cold in his manner and some Conservatives despised him because his family were not large landowners. Peel recognised the importance of the new industrial and working classes, unlike previous Tory governments. Steps were taken to improve the Poor Law. A Coal Mines Act (1842) and a Factory Act (1846) were introduced that protected the working conditions of women and children. The Bank Charter Act (1844) gave a monopoly to the Bank of England to issue paper money and helped to stabilise the currency. The Companies Act (1844) regulated business although Peel was not completely successful. However, the railways were not included because of the opposition of the powerful railway bosses and investors.

There was a large deficit when he became Prime Minister and he solved the problem by reintroducing income tax and reducing duties on many goods. Although income tax was unpopular at first, it was soon seen as fair. Peel believed that free trade would make the country more prosperous. The reduction of duties made prices cheaper and increased sales but those who still defended the duties on the import of corn opposed it. Most of the supporters of duties on corn were Conservatives so Peel was dividing his party.

Ireland had long been a problem to British governments and it became the most serious difficulty that Peel had to face as Prime Minister. He believed that it was necessary to solve the problems in Ireland that had continued since Catholic Emancipation. Most of the Irish were Catholics and he

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proposed an increase in the grant to Maynooth College, a college in Ireland to train Catholic priests. Many Whigs supported him but the proposal was very unpopular with many Conservatives who were strongly Protestant. His critics accused Peel of betraying the Church of England and 'turning and twisting like an eel'.

Although Catholic Emancipation had solved some political problems in the short term, the economic conditions in Ireland were harsh. The majority of the Irish were very poor. Millions depended on potatoes for food and the bad potato harvest of 1845 meant that they had nothing to eat. The harvest was also poor in England but not to such a great extent. The Irish famine became worse in 1846 and many died. The government could not get enough food to Ireland and the officials were disorganised. Peel wished to end the duties on corn but the English landed interests opposed him because they wanted to protect the farmers. There was a very long debate and Peel even resigned briefly but Russell and the Whigs could not form a government so Peel had to return as Prime Minister. In the end, the Corn Laws were abolished but Peel had to depend on votes from the Whigs because many of the Conservatives opposed him. Over 200 Conservatives voted against Peel, led by Disraeli. Soon after, his government was defeated in a vote over an Irish coercion bill and Peel's ministry was ended.

Examiner's Comments

The answer is given 60 marks out of 90 (Band C). Janet's answer has good qualities that deserve credit but there are also weaknesses. Most of the answer is very relevant. The best part of the answer deals with the ministry of 1841-6. These paragraphs begin by assessing his qualities and then discuss important issues about his economic policies. The paragraphs on Ireland are very relevant and explain why his policies were controversial.

There is a good quotation, 'turning and twisting like an eel' but Janet could have expanded on this claim about his policies and personality. The historical knowledge is accurate and the answer is written clearly.

Other parts of the answer could be improved. The question asks you to assess how successful was Peel 'as leader of the Conservatives' but the first sentence only repeats the question. Janet should not have done this and her second sentence does not say anything useful. The second paragraph is unnecessary because it deals with his career before he became leader of the party. It is very narrative and is not linked to an argument. Be careful to focus on the question that you are asked. Avoid unnecessary background. The mention of the Tamworth Manifesto is relevant but the answer could have said more about its importance.

The end of the answer is disappointing. Janet has forgotten to write a conclusion to summarise Peel's successes and failures. Is this because she spent too much time on unimportant points before 1841? The answer should have spent more time examining the split in the Conservatives in 1846 because this is an important part of an assessment of Peel.

How could Janet have improved her answer? She should have noted the key phrases in the question ('How successful' and 'leader of the Conservative party') and concentrated her answer on these. In questions that ask 'How successful?' or 'Assess the success', you should consider both achievements and failures and decide which were more important. A better essay would have summarised the background more quickly. A short plan would have helped Janet to note important factors in the essay. There are gaps in the answer, for example Peel and the Anti-Corn Law League and the situation in 1846. Her conclusion should have included an overall judgement about Peel. Which were more important: the successes of the 1841 ministry or the split in 1846?

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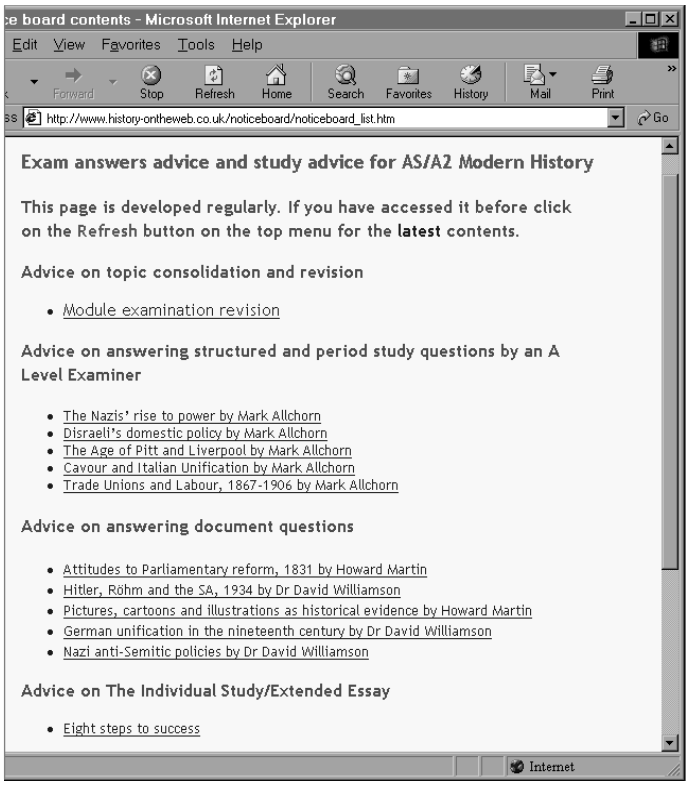

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