

Reform and Protest in Wales and England, circa (c) 1830 - 1848

Why was the extension of the franchise (vote) such an important issue in the British political system 1815 - 1918?

Britain in 1815 had only two political parties: the Tories and the Whigs. The Tories controlled Parliament throughout the Napoleonic War 1793 - 1815 and also during the 1920s. However, the Whigs won the election in 1830 and were determined to introduce political reform. They wanted to recognise the growing financial strength of the middle classes and grant them a say in politics.

This major political development was to change Britain from a country ruled by the monarchy and aristocracy into a parliamentary democracy. However, it would take almost 100 years before suffrage for all was permitted. Beginning with the first or Great Reform Act of 1832 and followed by further reform acts in 1867, 1884 and 1918.

So why was there a need for an extension of the right to vote?

One reason was the tremendous social and economic change that took place in Britain as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. Prior to its technological and industrial expansion, Britain's wealth had been in the ownership of land and agriculture (farming). The aristocracy were the largest landowners, so therefore, were the richest members of society.

With money and land came the power and influence required for the aristocracy to dominate the political landscape in Britain for centuries. They controlled the House of Lords through titles that had been passed down from generation to generation. Furthermore, they dominated the House of Commons, largely thanks to an ineffective electoral system that only permitted a fraction of the population the vote, namely the wealthiest members of British society. In 1815, the aristocratic populous amounted to some 53,000 out of an increasing population of 20 million.

Nevertheless, as a result of the Industrial Revolution a growing industrial/business class, factory owners, merchants etc gained more wealth and began to demand a greater say in the governance of the country. They not only wanted to influence the decisions politicians made in Westminster, they wanted to become directly involved in politics by becoming Members of Parliament (MPs) and having a much greater say in the way Britain was being run.

Concurrent with the increase in the Middle Class, the Working Classes saw an upsurge in number. Mass industrialisation brought a huge population increase and vast cities emerged from the plains of Great Britain to accommodate them. Factory workers, miners, tradesmen, all saw the extension of the vote as an opportunity to voice the many grievances they held

about their squalid conditions. Many lived in impoverished circumstances, with poor if any sanitation and were exposed to the threat of disease and death routinely. Furthermore, they saw the right to vote as a way of suppressing the strength of their employers and hoped to pressurise the government into passing laws to reduce working hours and improve salaries.

The electoral system at the time was based on the principles of the Feudal System, whereby social status dictated who could vote and who could not. Only a small hierarchy were afforded this opportunity. Increasing pressure from below saw greater demand placed upon the government to enact change. It came in the forms of political unions that debated and demanded change in an intellectual argument and it also came in the form of popular and violent protest as rioters took to the streets and called for reform of the corruptions and anomalies inherent in British politics.

However, this groundswell of public opinion and fear of a national uprising was not the only reason politicians were beginning to heed the calls of reform, the Whigs saw an opportunity to redress the political balance. The Tories had long been in power thanks to an electoral system that benefitted their party; the Whigs saw reform as an opportunity to exploit this. Change to the system and an extension of the franchise might just give the Whigs the edge in future elections, if the right people were accepted into the fold. Thus the Great Reform Act of 1832 has proved to be a contentious law for historians thanks to the multifaceted reasoning that must have been considered during the process of the bill becoming law.

Significance of the 1832 Act

Many people believed that once the 1832 reform act was passed then that would stop further calls for electoral reform. They were wrong, the reform bill opened the door for further demands for electoral changes and subsequent reform acts of 1867, 1884 and 1918 proved that the British public were insistent in obtaining their 'natural and inalienable rights'. Nevertheless, these rights did not come about easily or quickly and the staggered and stuttering process seemed to be measured and controlled by those responsible for governing the country.

Rioters take to the streets of Merthyr to demand for parliamentary reform (1831).



Parliament and the Great Reform Act of 1832

Introduction

The accession of political power in 1830 by the Whig party brought new agitation for reform of Parliament and the system of elections. Although the demand for reform dated back to the mid-eighteenth century, by 1830 the demand for change was more widespread than ever before. For more than 30 years prior to the Whig attainment of power the Tory party had seen no reason to entertain thoughts of reform, nevertheless, that all changed with the newly formed Whig government putting reform at the forefront of their political agenda.

What was wrong with the system before 1832?

The system was completely out of date and took no account of the recent alterations and shifts in population caused by the Industrial Revolution. Parliament was dominated by landowners, whilst Britain was fast becoming an industrialised nation.

A) Constituencies: were not organised to give fair and equal representation to all parts of the country. There were two types of constituency; counties and boroughs. There were many absurdities.

- i) English and Irish counties were represented by two MPs irrespective of size and population, e.g. Yorkshire had 17,000 electors, whilst Rutland had 609 - both returned two MPs to Parliament.
- ii) Scottish and Welsh counties only had one MP and both were under-represented in comparison to England. Scotland had 45 seats in the House of Commons and Wales had 24, England had a massive 489.
- iii) Most English boroughs had two MPs, whilst Scottish and Welsh had one.
- iv) Furthermore the electorate varied widely: Westminster, Bristol and Liverpool had over 5,000 voters and returned two MPs to parliament. Old Sarum had seven voters and returned two MPs; Gatton in Surrey had only six voters. East Dunwich had fallen into the sea. These tiny constituencies were known as Rotten Boroughs because they had fallen into decay and only stood to maintain seats for whichever held them. In total there were 56 boroughs with fewer than 40 voters and each was represented by two MPs in the House of Commons.
- v) In stark comparison, expanding industrial cities like Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield had no MPs because they had not been boroughs from the late 17th century when the last major redistribution of seats had taken place.

Therefore the industrial North and factory based midlands were greatly under-represented as compared with the agricultural south.

B) The Franchise: was restricted and haphazard. Women had no vote at all. In county constituencies the franchise was confined to the 40 shilling freeholders (of land property). In the boroughs the franchise qualification varied greatly but these categories stand out.

- i) Freeman boroughs - the vote to all who had received the freedom of the city by inheritance or marriage to the daughter or widow of a freeman; or by purchase.
- ii) Pocket boroughs - the landowner chose the MP with no election
- iii) Potwallopers - any man that had a fireplace in house big enough to boil a pot could vote.
- iv) Rotten boroughs - already mentioned, only a small number of inhabitants but still returned two MPs. These were usually areas that had been inhabited during the medieval period, such as Old Sarum, and had kept their political patronage.
- v) Burgage boroughs - only people that owned certain pieces of property or land could vote.
- vi) Corporation boroughs - the vote only went to members of corporations.

What they all had in common was that in each case the system of voting was unfair and not at all democratic. Throughout the whole of Great Britain where the population at the 1831 census was 24 million, fewer than 500,000 (1/2 million) had the vote.

C) Bribery and corruption: was rife during the election process thanks to the way voting was carried out.

- i) There was no secret ballot so electors had little freedom to vote for the candidate of their choice; there were many cases of tenants being evicted from the homes for not supporting the local squire's choice of candidate.
- ii) In larger constituencies, candidates resorted to outright bribery in the way of cash, jobs, government posts, contracts and sometimes even free beer (Dickens' account in *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) of the constituency of Eatanswill).
- iii) As already mentioned, in smaller boroughs the local landowner simply chose his nominated who he wished to become MP. These 'pocket boroughs' were so called because they were very much in the pocket of the landowner.

Why did the demand for parliamentary reform revive 1829 - 1830?

There had always been a small group of Whig MPs in favour of moderate parliamentary reform. Lord Grey had come out in support of reform in 1793 and other prominent Whigs like Lord John Russell had also advocated reform. However, by 1829 - 30 there were further pressures:

- a) The ever increasing class of prosperous business men and manufacturers, though some of them MPs, resented the domination of Parliament by the landed class. Generally referred to as the middle classes, they wanted the system changed, not to one of complete democracy, but to extend the franchise just enough to give themselves a fair representation in the House of Commons.
- b) In 1829 the Catholic Emancipation Act was passed by the Tories. The measure split the Tory party and some were so furious with the Tory leader the Duke of Wellington they were prepared to support some reforms to the system just to spite him. They hoped to reduce the number of pocket boroughs as Wellington had used the MPs from these areas to pass the Catholic Emancipation Act.
- c) There had been a sudden slump in the economy and both agriculture and industry had been hit. Riots broke out in the Midlands, protesting against irregular employment and poor wages. Furthermore, the introduction of thresher machines and tithes began a series of violent outbreaks which became better known as the 'Captain Swing' riots. The new Whig government acted swiftly to curb the disruption and nearly 2000 offenders were tried, 600 sent to jail, 500 transported to Australia and nineteen hanged to death. By the summer of 1831 order had been restored, but the disturbances had done enough to convince the Whigs into thinking that moderate reform was the best and perhaps only way to avoid a revolution similar to what had happened in France.
- d) Other strikes and riots were breaking out all over the country - the signs were ominous - reform or face revolution, perhaps?
- e) Jeremy Bentham and his supporters had been advocating parliamentary reform for years. In 1817, Bentham had published a pamphlet calling for annual general elections, secret ballots and the vote for all males at 21 years. Initially the demands seemed to extreme for most, by 1831 however, his views were being taken up by many different and some surprising sections of society.

- f) Thomas Attwood, a Birmingham banker from a Tory background, founded the Birmingham Political Union in January 1830. He saw the reform of parliament as the only way of remedying the general distress within the nation. The Union aimed to unite middle and working classes in the struggle for reform. It would inspire and later join with other Unions across the country and become a national movement for reform.
- g) Revolution in France was a particularly motivating factor in the cause for reform. The fear and panic that had occurred during the French revolution frightened some of the British ruling elite into conceding ground on the issue of reform.
- h) King George IV's death was a fortunate event for the pro-reform movement. He had been totally against reform, whilst his successor King William IV was prepared to accept some changes, though not many. It was custom that a general election take place upon the death of a monarch and it was in 1830, with the support of some progressive Tories and those sympathetic to reform, the Whigs were able to come to power for the first time in over 20 years.
- i) The popular press did a great deal to spread the message of reform and stir up the hype surrounding the reform bill process, thus keeping the public informed and the pressure on the government.



The Whigs (Reformers) want to bring down the rotten system that the Tories want to uphold.

Why was there so much opposition to reform?

It may appear that the case for reform was so overwhelmingly strong that no sane-minded person could possibly oppose it? Nevertheless, the system had an abundance of vigorous supporters who put forward many arguments for maintaining the status-quo (keeping things the same). They were as follows:

- a) 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' It had worked well in the past and therefore there was no need to change it now (Just who had it worked well for?).
- b) Rotten boroughs were a useful tool utilised by both parties, as they allowed them to introduce their promising up and coming young men into the House of Commons. They also provided seats for unpopular ministers.
- c) However, it was the Tories who really wanted to uphold the system because pocket and rotten boroughs provided the core of their MPs. Well over 200 in comparison to the Whigs 70.
- d) If small boroughs were abolished, the resulting loss of the franchise would be an interference with the property rights of those people concerned. Once such a practice was allowed no property would be safe.
- e) All people who benefitted from the system in some way were reluctant to have it changed; e.g. corporation members and freemen opposed extensions to the franchise because the more electors there were, the less they could expect to receive in bribes.
- f) Wealthy landowners were afraid that their interests would not be considered as much in the House of Commons, should the franchise be extended to the middle classes, whose own interests would be more inclined towards industry and trade. They feared that their influence would pass to the industrial areas of the nation.
- g) Even small changes in the system needed to be restricted because it would only encourage more demands for further reforms. Once the general population's appetite had been whetted, then there would be no satisfying them until full democracy had been introduced. Leading Tory politician, Robert Peel, stated '*I was unwilling to open a door which I saw no prospect of being able to close...*'

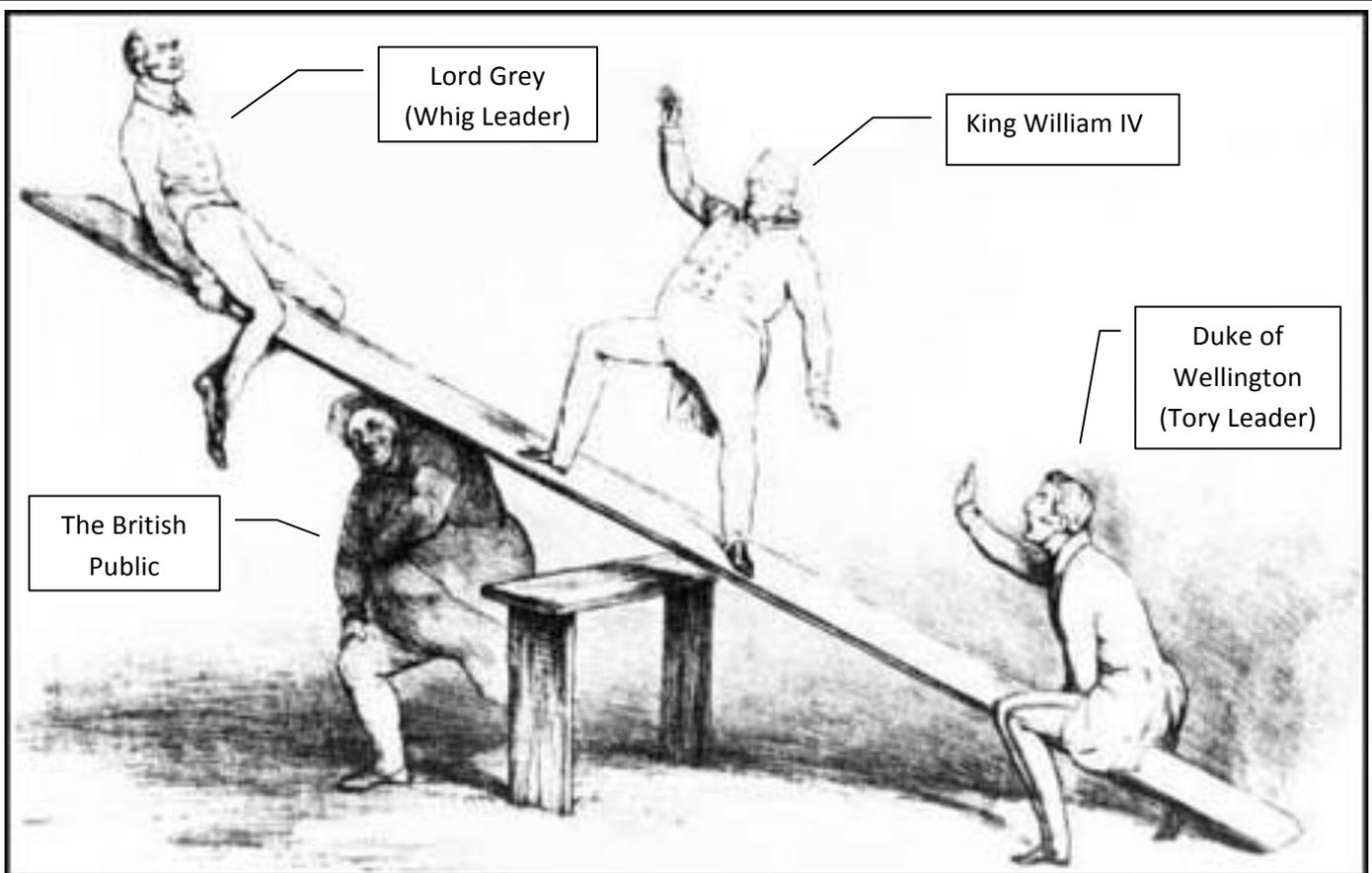
Why were the Whigs so much in favour of Parliamentary Reform?

The traditional view sees the Whigs as liberally-minded reformers who believed in sharing political power more widely and wished to enact a series of desperately needed social reforms for the benefit of society. This view is too simplistic to accept, moreover, it is far

too an optimistic portrayal of 19th century politicians (or politicians from any era, for that matter). It is far more likely that the Whigs were anxious over the fact that they had been in political exile for nearly 30 years and saw reform as a way of securing future power by gaining the support of those they extended the franchise to.

Furthermore, they recognised the danger of popular revolution in Britain unless political power was shared more widely. The fear that radical middle class elements would ally themselves with the lower orders of society and overthrow the king and aristocracy, as per French Revolution, played a genuine role when considering and enacting political reform. Unless the Whigs shared some political power, they believed that they may lose all power altogether.

This would explain why the Whigs proposed only moderate (limited) reform of the old parliamentary system and to only give the vote to a small section of the un-enfranchised (those without the vote), namely the upper end of the middle class. It also explains why there was popular disappointment with the terms of the *Great Reform Bill* - it was never intended to be democratic. It also explains the collapse of middle and working class cooperation, as the middle class leaders who had once championed the cause of reform for themselves and those below them now had the vote. Conversely, they now joined with the upper classes to stave the demands of the lower orders for democracy.



The British Public give their support for the Whigs in enacting Parliamentary Reform (1832)

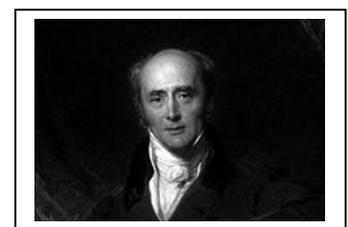
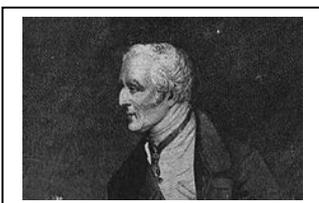
The passing of the Reform Bill.

The Whigs had to fight with tooth and nail to get their Bill through Parliament; it took 15 months instead of a few weeks, as well as a series of riots, (including one in Merthyr Tydfil), marches and a general election before it became law. It went through various stages:

- 1) Lord John Russell introduced the Bill to Parliament in March 1831, a Bill which proposed among other things to abolish over 100 rotten and pocket boroughs and to give MPs to the industrial North and Midlands of England. It was greeted with howls and jeers of derision from the Tories and though it passed the second reading in House of Commons by a majority of one, the Tories were able to defeat it in the Committee stage.
- 2) Lord Grey, the Whig Prime Minister, persuaded William IV to dissolve Parliament and a general election followed in April 1831. Naturally, the Whigs and Tories held on to their rotten and pocket boroughs, but in the counties where the electorate was larger the Whigs made sweeping gains and winning the election with a majority of 136.
- 3) Russell introduced a slightly different version of the Bill in September 1831 and it was passed in the House of Commons by a majority of 109. However, at this time it was defeated in the House of Lords by a majority of 41, 21 of whom were Bishops. There was an immediate outburst of public anger against the Lords and the radical newspaper, *The Morning Chronicle*, appeared with black borders in mourning for the bill. There were riots in Derby and Nottingham castle was destroyed, the property of the Duke of Newcastle who had expelled tenants for voting against his candidate. In Bristol rioters burnt down the Bishop's palace and other buildings and it took three troops of cavalry to restore order; at least 12 people were killed and some 400 seriously injured.

In Birmingham, Attwood's Political Union organised a more orderly protest meeting and around 100,000 people gathered to listen and protest against the defeat of the Bill. Elsewhere, the Duke of Wellington had his windows smashed and several Bishops were attacked by mobs in the street.

- 4) A third version of the Bill was again passed in the Commons and this time passed in the Lords, only for it to fail again in the Committee stage. Tory peers had wanted to make amendments that Lord Grey was not willing to allow. Consequently, Lord Grey asked William IV to create 50 new Whig peers, enough to give the Whigs a majority in the Lords. However, the king refused and Lord Grey resigned.



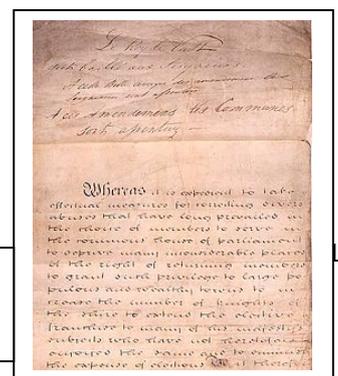
- 5) After Grey's resignation, William IV invited Wellington to form a new government. Amidst great excitement in the country and fears of revolution, Wellington tried to form a cabinet that he intended to use to introduce a much watered-down version of the Reform Bill. However, the Tories regarded it as another Wellington betrayal and when Robert Peel (future Tory leader and PM) refused to give his support, the Duke had to admit failure.
- 6) Grey returned to office under the proviso (condition) that the king would create enough Whig peers, in the House of Lords, to ensure the Bill was passed.
- 7) Recognising there was no way out; many Tory peers stayed away and abstained from the voting process. The king did not need to create any more peers. Thus, on 4th June 1832 the Reform Bill passed its third reading in the Lords by 106 to 22 votes, receiving royal assent 3 days later on the 7th June and becoming law.

Terms of the Act

The Great Reform Act of 1832 changed both electoral representation and the franchise, nevertheless, how 'Great' actually was it?

- (i) Boroughs with a population of less than 2,000 (56 in all), lost both MPs.
- (ii) Boroughs with a population of between 2,000 and 4,000 (31 in all), lost one MP.
- (iii) Consequently, there were 143 seats available for redistribution: 65 were given to the counties (Yorkshire was given an additional two MPs, giving it six in total), 65 were given to boroughs which had never had an MP (these included Leeds, Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Bolton, Oldham and Bradford), and eight were given to Scotland and five to Ireland. The total number of MPs in the Commons remained the same at 658.
- (iv) In borough constituencies the vote was given to owners and occupiers of property rated at £10 a year or more.
- (v) In the county constituencies the vote was given to owners of copyhold land, tenants who had held land for generations. It was also given to long-lease holders on land worth at least £10 a year, short leases on £50 a year and tenant farmers who paid at least £50 a year rent.
- (vi) Eligible voters had to register to vote, i.e. put their names on the electoral roll for a fee of one shilling coin (5p).

First page of the
1832 Reform Act



The Results of the Reform Act

A few of the worst faults of the electoral system were remedied but many still remained.

- 1) Rotten boroughs may have disappeared but constituencies still varied enormously in size of the electorate. There were 35 boroughs with less than 300 voters, while Liverpool had 11,300. Although industrial towns were given MPs, the agricultural south was still hugely over-represented. Scotland, Ireland and Wales continued to be under-represented compared with England.
- 2) In real terms the electorate increased from roughly 478,000 to 813,000 out of a population of 24 million. This was clearly a long way from being democratic: large sections of the population - agricultural and industrial workers - still had no vote.
- 3) In England only one in five men had the vote, in Scotland it was one in eight men, for Ireland it was only one in twenty.
- 4) The Act did not introduce a secret ballot so bribery and corruption was able to continue unabated. At Ipswich between £20 and £30 was being paid quite openly for one vote during the 1841 election (Pickwick Papers).
- 5) Although some businessmen and industrialist did enter the House of Commons, the wealthy landed aristocracy still dominated. A prominent political commentator at the time noting that the first general election under the new system turned out 'to be very much like every other parliament.' Many of the pocket boroughs had survived and there were at least 50 boroughs in England and Wales where some members of the local gentry could still nominate the MP.
- 6) In the counties the landowners' position was actually strengthened by the fact that tenant farmers who now had the vote felt obliged to support their landowner's candidates or potentially suffer eviction.
- 7) The House of Lords had remained unaffected and any fears the Tories had of losing control quickly became clear that they had been unnecessary worries.
- 8) The £10 householder qualification meant different things up and down the country, but simply put, working class houses were usually valued between £5 and £8, which excluded them from the vote.

The fears held by Britain's ruling elite quickly disappeared, in reality, very little changed to suggest any significant shift in power had occurred or was likely too.

However, if in the short term very little had been done to shift the balance of power, the Reform Act did have longer consequences for the British political system.

- 1) The working classes were bitterly disappointed and began to look towards Trade Unionism and Chartism to obtain political representation.
- 2) The requirement to keep voting rolls actually strengthened the system, as local committees were formed to maintain the upkeep of the voters roll. This led to less corruption and more organised system of voting.
- 3) The real importance of the Act however, was not in the changes it introduced, but in the fact that it was the first breach of a political system that had not been altered for centuries. Much to the dismay of the Whigs who had hoped the Reform Act would satisfy appetites, it conversely, led to more demands for further reform of parliament. It also encouraged those who called for other types of reform: in factories, coal mines, of the poor law and local government.

The Great Reform Act of 1832 certainly had no immediate bearing on the majority of Britain, but after it had been passed, the door had been opened and further calls for reform would be taken up by new protest leaders and organisations championing the plight of the working man.

