

How far did the 1832 reform act rectify the defects of the political system essay...



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As I mentioned earlier, the political system before 1832 was not an effective way of running the country and this was because of the major disadvantages it brought with it. The most important defect in my view was the aspect of representation. For a political system to work then primarily it needs to be fairly balanced and to make sure that every town, city and region had an equal representation with regard to politics. But this simply wasn't the case, take Scotland for example who returned only 45 out of the 558 members and also five south-western counties elected made up a quarter of the entire House of Commons[1].

These two examples really outline just how unfair the system actually was and that the uneven distribution of seats was going to have a negative effect on how Britain was being ran. The system basically did not fully represent the population as a whole and as the population was continuing to increase, it was becoming more evident that this was going to cause a significant problem to the unreformed political system. Another major defect was the voting qualification system that was in place at the time.

There were different qualification rules that applied to different boroughs in Britain and as there wasn't an overall rule that applied to everyone, there were obviously going to be disadvantaged people and disadvantaged boroughs. In Northampton for example, householders who paid local taxes were eligible to vote and this rule is automatically excluding people who didn't own a house and also people who were quite poor. But people who lived in places like Liverpool and Coventry could only vote if they had been given freedom of the town or had gained it through inheritance or purchase[2].

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So from this, it is quite easy to see that you could easily lose your right to vote if you moved for example and because there was no universal voting qualification it was extremely hard to maintain a well ordered political system whilst under these complex voting variations. On top of these fairly important defects, the political system also had a number of loopholes which could easily be exploited by powerful and even wealthy people. Under this system, there was no secret ballot so people had to publicly announce their vote.

Voting even today is seen as a relatively personal topic and that's why discretion is vital. By knowing who people have voted for, it can ultimately cause a whole host of problems and violent behaviour often erupted amongst the voters. Another loophole the political system had was the fact that there was no electoral register, and this to me is quite an important thing to have if you want to run a country successfully. By having no record of who was voting you can imagine just how easy it was for people to impersonate others in order to receive multiple voting.

This loophole also allowed people to be easily bribed into voting for a specific person so the voting system as a whole was not exactly representative of the opinions that the voters had. It was basically all to do with money and as some people had it and some people needed it, it was a perfect opportunity for electoral candidates to gain power and for poorer people to pay debts or bills. This may have worked to people's advantage but people should not gain from something that is ultimately corrupt.

But despite having a corrupt political system in place, it was other aspects that influenced people towards a change in how the country was run. Some of the events that led up to the Reform Act eventually being passed were in effect, quite significant as they ultimately helped towards a reformed political system. One aspect that played a big part in changing British politics were foreign influences. These influences ultimately came in the form of revolutions and one particular Prime Minister was very aware of what effects that could have in Britain.

During Lord Liverpool's reign as Prime Minister, he and his government experienced encounters with the British people and in most cases they often resorted to violent acts. Every time there was a riot or a mass movement in England, Lord Liverpool believed that they all had the potential to spark a revolution and create similar scenes which were witnessed during the French Revolution in 1789. I think he was right to come to this conclusion because when there is a growing tension of unrest between the people and politics then it can send the entire country in to turmoil and create a widespread crisis.

Expecting the worse was a wise thing to do as it allowed Lord Liverpool and his government to be a little more precautionary in how they ran the country. The French Revolution influence was seen in the Spa Fields riot in 1816, where the French Revolution flag, the tricolour was raised at the Tower of London. But the aim of this riot was to get public ownership of all land and at the same time of this riot, a radical speaker called Henry Hunt called for lower taxes and also for the reform of government.

The discontent with government policies began to rise and because of this, large scale riots and also non-violent movements were becoming even more popular. The march of the Blanketeers in 1817 is another great example to sum up the dissatisfaction. In this particular movement, a crowd of almost 4000 gathered in Manchester at St Peter's Field. Their aim was to organise and carry out a march to London to hand over a petition to the Prince Regent. The people's demands was dominated by the wish for parliamentary reform and also they wanted the Corn Law to be abolished as people couldn't afford the high prices for wheat.

This particular movement wasn't successful as only one person got to London with the petition. But I think that successfulness is irrelevant and the important thing is that there is intent to challenge the political system and push the government towards the idea of reform. The pressure quickly began to mound up against the government and when the Duke of Wellington became Prime Minister in 1828 he had to inherit all this pressure. This made his job even more difficult and this pressure turned out to be the start of the downfall for the Tory government and a push towards the Reform Act.

One of the major aspects that contributed to the Tory decline was Catholic Emancipation. After the Catholic Emancipation Act was passed 1829, it led to a further split in the Tory government and Wellington's fight against reform was becoming weaker. He announced the fall of his government in a speech he made in the House of Commons. " I will go further, and say that the legislature and the system of representation possesses the full and entire

confidence of the country[3]. ” This for me is the most significant part of his speech.

He is basically saying that the entire country backs how the political system is run and they are in full support of his government. This simply was not the case; Wellington was losing trust from all areas, including the majority of his own party members and also the public, and the idea of reform was becoming extremely popular with many people. By saying this, Wellington no longer had the credentials to maintain a strong Tory government and a couple of weeks after the speech was made, he resigned as Prime Minister.

The new King (William IV) invited the Whigs to form a government under the leadership of Lord Grey. This was a major development in the push towards a Reform Act as the Whigs were in support for reform. The Whigs' main aim was to 'outline a measure large enough to satisfy public opinion' and as the public wanted parliamentary reform, the Whigs would be working to make sure they met this request. The most crucial stages towards political reform ultimately came between 1830 and 1832, the lead up to the Reform Act being passed.

There were obstacles in the way of reform and aspects that slowed down the process of the Reform Act being passed. The main topic that dominated the most of this time period was the rejection of two reform bills in the year 1831. These bills were twice overruled by the House of Lords, where the majority did not agree with a government reform and the reaction to these rejections was very negative indeed. The unrest amongst the population was

rising, just like it was when the Tory government was at helm and the idea of a revolution was slowly coming back to haunt the parliament.

Protests were beginning to spread to agricultural areas and the Luddites were attacking once more because they were dissatisfied with the government. The state of Britain also deteriorated and a sudden influx of riots were once again sweeping through the entire country. The most violent scenes were witnessed in places such as Bristol and Derby. A revolution now looked imminent and Lord Liverpool's theory of every riot had the potential to turn into a revolution looked more accurate than ever. The Act was eventually passed in 1832 after the House of Lords finally saw just how much of a crisis Britain was in.

This change of opinion purely happened because of the Days of May, where the people of Britain began to take all of their money out of the banks which would leave the government in turmoil. The power the people now had showed that a revolution was going to happen and the Act needed to be passed quickly to stop this happening. The Act is referred to as the ' Great Reform Act' but it is somewhat debatable to whether or not it deserves to be labelled as this. One of the main positives of the Act was in relation to the aspect of representation.

Before the Act, there was no balance in how the country was represented and the statistics I showed earlier back up this point. In the reformed Act, county seats and borough seats were both restructured in order to create a fairer representation of the British people in government. This was a positive aspect as it showed signs of an improvement to the political system and that

the government were working towards a well represented government. This idea of balance can be seen through the re-adjustment of both county and borough seats, one specific aspect shows that 19 new boroughs with one MP would be created[4].

In relation to the question, this particular aspect was an improvement compared to the original political system but I don't think it improves the system as a whole. After all, there isn't a completely fair representation as not every single borough in the country was represented by two people but it ultimately rectified the original defect to some extent. The defect that was rectified fully though was the impersonation aspect. There now was an electoral register which put a stop to this and it allowed elections to be a lot more efficient and also less prone to cheating.

But after reading the Act, I still could see things that were wrong with it and also some aspects that did not rectify the defects whatsoever, so the Act itself being labelled as the ' Great Reform Act' does come under some scrutiny. The most crucial factor I noticed was the voting methods. Under this new Act, voters still had to publicly announce who they voted for, rather than placing their vote into a ballot box. So as this remained the same, the original defect therefore are still going to be present and will ultimately allow acts that are mainly orientated around violence to continue in an event that is deemed to be peaceful.

This topic I feel is very significant as it shows that despite all the efforts the King and the Whig government made to change the original system, it still had a number of loopholes within it. Further improvements would still need



to be made to make the political and electoral system a good, solid system for the country to run off. Personally, I think that the 1832 Reform Act was a good starting point to change the political system. I agree that it did need changing in the first place as it was just bombarded with defects and that was providing a major downfall to the political system as a whole.

I however do not agree with the Act being referred to as the ' Great Reform Act'. There isn't really a strong case for calling it ' great' as it did not automatically wipe out all the defects of the original system and some of the defects even remained in this new Act, which indicates to me that this Act is just progressing towards a finished article which would ultimately lead to sort out all the problems with British Politics. The fact that the voting procedure still had to be done in public acts as a contribution to why the Act shouldn't be given the label.

Representation was a significant improvement in the Act which to me is a positive move but I can also understand why some people might be disappointed with the new system. The Act took an awfully long time to pass and to say that this new system is the outcome would leave people very dissatisfied because it did not solve all the problems with the original political system. Yet more protests and demonstrations would be needed to push the idea of a secret ballot to the forefront, and after studying some of the riots that took place just to ask for a reformed system, the government would not want to see the state of Britain decline once more.

But they left this opportunity to rise once more, simply because they did not produce an entirely effective reformed government policy in 1832. This in my

view is moderate reform. It had positive effects to some aspects of the system but still left some of the original loopholes to be exploited by the voters and politicians and this to me is simply not a good enough. So in relation to the question, the 1832 Reform Act did to some extent rectify the defects of the original political system. The Act set the foundations for an improved system but a lot more work needed to be done to do it to make it a complete success.

By calling it the ' Great Reform Act', it gave me the sense that this Act may have been slightly overrated by some people and I too think that it is an over-exaggeration. Furthermore, I would've been bitterly disappointed with the Act. The chaos and the utter turmoil that it caused suggested to me that this Act should've solved all the problems and not just some of them. Lives were lost just to get the government reformed, and lives were certainly not worth losing with an Act like the 1832 Reform Act.