

Passing of the uk 1832 reform act



The passing of the 1832 Reform Act (also known as the 'Great Reform Act') and the consequent extension of the franchise was due to the culmination of several factors. It did not, in itself, make a great difference at the time but it certainly had an undeniable effect on what was to follow. It was rather the beginning of the satisfaction for reform; a way of opening the way for legislation that went further, than an achievement of this aim. Many MPs who voted for it saw it rather as a way of preventing further future change and avoiding revolution. At the time, only the land-owning class could vote. They represented areas of land as opposed to the actual people within. The lower classes were considered an uneducated rabble; they were seen to be unable to be trusted. Property and wealth determined who was able to vote. This essay will examine how the Act came to be passed and also the ways in which its passing affected British politics in the years to come.

The issue of Catholic emancipation was arguably a factor in paving the way for the ability to reform. The Conservative government of the time was deeply against the issue of Catholic emancipation; ideologically, it was concerned with the preservation of tradition. As Robert Blake commented;

" The Tory party never tired of proclaiming its determination to uphold the traditional institutions of the United Kingdom, the monarchy, the House of Lords and the Protestant establishment, both its property and its privileges." [1]

This became a problematic position. William Vesey Fitzgerald was obliged to resign as MP and stand for re-election after entering into the position President of the Board of Trade. Daniel O'Connell ran against him for the

seat of County Clare, and won. Due to his being a Roman Catholic, he could not actually serve if elected. Therefore, the Conservative government had a problem; the opposition of Catholic emancipation was a point of unity for the Tory Party. On the other hand, the Catholic Association could cause significant disruption if no action was taken. Catholic emancipation caused a severe split within the Tory party. It convinced many ultra-Tories to support reform.

Eric J. Evans comments that it was in fact an ultra-Tory, the Marquis of Blandford, as opposed to a radical that called for reform regarding the issue of rotten boroughs- he called for the seats of rotten boroughs to be given to larger towns, among other reformations. The ultra-Tories believed that the increased voters would lend support to their opposition of Catholic emancipation.[2]

Economic conditions also contributed to a desire for reform. The economy had largely been dependent on the war- when Britain went to war against France in 1793. When the war ended in 1815, the country entered into an economic depression due to the lack of demand in peacetime for that which the country had been producing during wartime. In 1829, the harvest failed and resultantly, food prices increased. Radicals used this as an opportunity; William Lovett and Henry Hetherington formed the National Union of the Working classes in April, 1831. The goal was suffrage for all adult males and it campaigned for that.[3]

A new middle class emerged in England as a result of the Industrial Revolution- this was composed of factory owners and entrepreneurs. This

new middle class believed, justifiably, that their inability to vote was unfair as they were creating wealth. Middle class desire for increased representation in the political system was leading to a greater support for reform on their part, and this in turn led to increased collaboration with the working class. The middle class felt that they deserved more representation in parliament than they currently possessed; industry and commerce were becoming more important and legislation such as the Corn Laws was in the interest of the aristocracy, which controlled parliament, as opposed to that of the middle class. Hence, they desired greater political power in order to do something about this. In 1830, Thomas Attwood formed the Birmingham Political Union due to the awful economic conditions. He "founded 'a General Political Union between the Lower and Middle Classes of the People'".

[4]Attwood's Union was not the only one of its kind; the creation of others followed in various forms. Their activities -political rallies which were well-attended and organised- indicated that the middle class did indeed desire reform and was prepared to work towards such a goal. The effect of the economic distress; the political unions and the French revolution was to prove to parliament that reform was an unavoidable issue, lest a revolution occur. MP Thomas McAulay said,

"...I support this measure, because I am sure that it is our best security against a revolution..."[5]

Many politicians came to view reform in this manner; as a means of preventing revolution and greater change to the system at a later point.

The reform act, once passed, meant that more populated areas received a more proportional representation. It changed the areas represented by MPs to better reflect the changes in population distribution caused by industrialisation. Middle class males were enfranchised; all householders paying a yearly rental of £10 and, if they had been resident for a year, lodgers paying £10 received the vote. This, however, meant that the working class was excluded from the vote. Those living in cities were still not adequately represented and MPs still did not receive a salary- they also had to own land to be able to stand. This brought to an end the alliance between the middle class and the working class. The working class was resentful of this; they were aware that without their pressure, the government would not have felt such an urgent need to reform.

Chartism was a movement born of working class resentment at their exclusion from the newly expanded franchise. There were two types; "moral force" and "physical force" Chartism. The principle of moral force Chartism was that demonstrating that the working class was respectable and trustworthy (e. g. Chartist churches) was the way to achieve their goals. In contrast, physical force Chartism was the idea of a more forceful, direct manner. That is not to say there were two distinct groups; most viewed the physical force concept as a last resort. The People's Charter consisted of six demands:

- * Institution of a secret ballot.
- * General elections be held annually.
- * Members of Parliament not be required to own property.

- * MPs be paid a salary.
- * Electoral districts of equal size.
- * Universal male suffrage.

The first meeting specifically organised for Chartism[6] took place on Kerstal Moor on 24 September. The message was that universal suffrage, as opposed to direct action, would achieve their aims. Chartism was closely linked to the present state of the economy; if the economy was doing well then demand was low. If it was doing badly, demand was high. Chartism did not last; its high point could be said to be 1848. After a meeting on Kensington Common on the 10 April of that year, the Chartists presented a petition to parliament. The procession to bring the petition to the House of Commons was banned, some of the upper class having come to believe the Chartists intended revolution. Many of the signatures on the petition itself were later found to be forgeries.

There was still, of course, a demand for reform after the act of 1832. The "Great Act" did not, in fact, do much to expand the electorate at all. However, it created a precedent- it could be said to have opened the door for further reform. In 1851, The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations took place. Thomas Cook took 165, 000 people to attend it. There was a fear that the working class would damage/cause trouble in the city, but the concerns proved to be unfounded. In reality, they demonstrated interest and were peaceful. There was a growth in public libraries and such services- this can be traced from the principles of moral force Chartism. By the 1860s, the general feeling was that the working class had demonstrated sufficient

respectability to gain the vote. However, the Liberal/Whig party was divided over the extent to which reform should go. Elements of the aristocracy were unsure, whereas radical members were very keen. The split of the Conservative party had allowed the Whigs to come in. Disraeli desired to lead the party into power once more; he pushed through reform far more radical than the Liberals had envisioned in an effort to win popular support- as a result, the working class became the majority. This was the 1867 reform act, and enfranchised the urban working class. His was a pragmatic move; he was taking advantage of the Liberal's split, and trying to demonstrate the Conservatives had the ability to lead.

The factors leading to the passing of the 1832 Reform Act were myriad; for example, the French revolution inspired radicals, the middle class resented their exclusion despite their creation of wealth and also the restriction on the growth of industry and the working class desired power in order to improve their quality of life. However, the effects of it were very limited. It was still deeply restrictive; the working class still did not possess the vote after it. It was this very fact that led to the creation of movements such as Chartism; the reform act set a precedent and the working class campaigned in earnest for universal male suffrage.