

Parliamentary reform

[History](#)



There are many arguments as to what was the main reason for the parliamentary reform during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. There is the one argument of that it was the fear and the actual popular pressure which pushed the reform acts through. But however it can also be argued that reform was inevitable and that it was pushed through for party advantage. In this essay I will be dealing with these arguments and coming to a conclusion. The First Reform Act or the Great Reform Act as it is also known opened the door of reform and never shut.

The First Reform Act was a like a tug of war battle between the two parties as each held a case as to why they wanted or not wanted the reform. The Tories were naturally against the idea but however the shocking thing was that the equally aristocratic Whigs wanted the reform. There were many problems to the system and social changes also during that time which warranted the reason for the act. The old system was riddled with corruption and rotten boroughs. This of course constantly favoured the rich who would bribe themselves back into power.

Furthermore the rotten borough provided irregular representation especially of the major cities such as Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds. This allowed a lot of power to be held by the landed gentry. However revisionists¹ have opened up a new debate by stating that actually the un reformed system and Old Corruption was in fact quite representative and responsive and that despite the high number of non voters, local people could still express their views and that the local elite had to work hard to keep control of their power. However there is scepticism about this argument as there is a lack of evidence.

The changes in British Society was the first in the steps that led to pressure for change. A change in the population growth and growth of towns was mainly down to the industrial revolution which made the people flock from the countryside to the city. However this raised consequences such as it put huge strain on the towns it selves. Furthermore this created discontent amongst the people because major towns which were getting even bigger had no representation until the 1832 act. This also led to an increase in social tension.

The industrial revolution also created a man job losses as well this is because, the old ways of working became out of date this was a particularly true for cotton farm workers. Further pressure came from the fact that there was the new emergence of the middle and working class, with the middle having growing economic power but yielding little political power. With the working class there were earning good wages but however their employers were making massive profits. This had led the working class to form trade unions and take the first steps to pressuring the government.

There was fear that the two classes would merge in order for the vote. One big factor which shows that the government may have wilted under public pressure was the fact there was a growing change in ideas. One form of this was the French Revolution in 1789 when the monarch was overthrown; this created the fear amongst the elite that what of the germ of revolution would jump across the channel. This was fear was not helped by the great book by Tom Paine called The Rights of man. This was based on male adult suffrage and derived from the idea of John Locke's government based on consent of people.

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This provided pressure to the government as it sold a staggering 200, 000 pamphlets within 6 months. This made the people aware of what was happening and created a new style of getting their message across and this was 'mass demonstration'. Events of mass demonstration were highly popular with the most famous being the Spa Fields demonstration and the Pentrich March and the infamous Peterloo demonstration which led to the killing of 11 people and hundreds injured. There was continued pressure during the period of 1828-30. One of these reasons was the pressure from the middle class.

The middle class people began to change their mind in the fact that they began to desire moderate change to system in order to protect their growing business interests. The middle class began to side with views of people such as Jeremy Bentham who felt that it was better to safeguard the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people against the selfish interests of the few. ² This highlighted their continued resentment of the elite and it was further intensified by the fact they couldn't get jobs in the civil service.

The Corn Laws did not help reduce the pressure as it kept price of the corn high to satisfy the landowners, the middle class saw this as the main reason of the economic instability during the period of 1815 - 20.

Furthermore another form of public pressure is the working class discontent. This was when the working class people started to get disgruntled with the aristocracy with even an alliance with the middle class being thrown into the equation just for moderate reform. This discontent was closely linked with a lot of trade union activity as this was the only viable way the working class people could get their voice across.

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The repeal of the Combination Acts did not help the government as it triggered a wave of union activity. Although many unions collapsed during the economic slump of 1825-26, the development of General Unionism alarmed the government as this had an ideological aspect on top of its organisational side. This paved the way for people like William Cobbett to call for reform using papers such as the 'Twopenny Trash'. Another way which can be said was political pressure was the Swing Riots which were caused by the bad harvests and the fact that the industrial revolution was causing unemployment in the countryside.

Swing riots were named after the mythical Captain swing and involved in maiming animals, rick burning and burning of agricultural machinery. This was seen as political pressure particularly because of the severity of the punishments the government gave when they caught the people who took part, 19 people being executed, 500 transported to Australia and 600 imprisoned with heavy sentences. After the failure of the first two reform bills which did not make it past the House of Lords, mainly because of the sheer number of Tories in there, there began widespread rioting across the UK with the heaviest coming at Bristol and Nottingham.

On the third attempt of the reform act trying to get through it again hit a Tory brick wall despite having minor amendments. Grey the leader of the Whigs resigned after William IV decided against giving 50 new peers in the House of Lords this led to Wellington being recalled to form a new government, this sparked widespread public pressure such as the infamous Days of May which led to 200, 000 people protesting in the streets of

Birmingham with a majority of the people from the Birmingham Political Union.

The middle class also were in furore and followed Thomas Attwood's saying of "To stop the Duke, go for gold", this meant that the middle class began to deposit their savings from the bank. This commotion had claimed however after it was clear that Wellington failed to reform a government, so therefore Grey returned and in fear of a bigger backlash the Lords finally let the bill through and it became law in 1832.

There are many reasons that suggest why the First Reform Act went through, the Hamburger Thesis³ discounts the theory that there was a real threat of revolution by saying that there was no real organisation and would Attwood have been brave enough to lead the demonstration nationally. It is also said that the Whigs who were also equally aristocratic only fought so vigorously to bring in the Reform Act was because they had been out of political power for so long that they had to reform the borough as the Tories had such a stranglehold on the pocket boroughs.

So therefore when there was a collapse of the Tory part, when the it split three ways with the Canningites, the Ultras and Wellington the Whigs so a chance to exploit it get some advantage over their rivals. But however there is the age old theory of the Whigs which was that they wanted reform in order to preserve. Overall I feel that it was the public pressure and hostility which scared the elites into forcing the Reform Act through.

The new regulations also excluded miners and agricultural workers who lived in the counties. Chartism was the first sign of reform after 1832. This was <https://assignbuster.com/parliamentary-reform/>

created after the disappointment of the First Reform Act so after the Peoples Charter was published, the working class movement of Chartism grew and posed a threat until 1948. During its time Parliament rejected Chartist ideas on three occasions.

The movement finally lost momentum due to the infamous Kennington Fiasco this is when the physical force and the moral force had an argument over which tactics should be used this led the movement to just wither away. There are many political and public reasons as to why the need for reform sparks back into life. One of the reasons was the death of Lord Palmerstone who was an ever-present figure in the Commons for about 58 years; he was also a staunch anti reformer. His death was seen as an obstacle removed for the potential reform.

Another reason is that Gladstone came into power and decided that the issue needed to be raised up the political agenda. There were also many public acts of pressure which helped spark the 2nd Reform Act back to life. One of the reasons was that radicals such as John Bright kept on campaigning for reform and democracy in the UK. Another factor is the fact that the Trade Union Movement campaigned for reform. This was when skilled workers started setting up Model Unions, this showed that the working class were becoming responsible and were begging to show desire for the improvement in standards of working by political means instead of violence.

This was true all over the country where working class people began to get politically literate and started reading newspapers and started to deposit money. This gained recognition of a majority of the Liberal party and most

importantly Gladstone, they also managed to persuade some of the Tory party. They highlighted this political maturity when the workers of Lancashire stood by the people in the north of America against slavery, although this meant that the north having to block the ports which blocked cotton coming into Lancashire which was a direct cause of their unemployment.

This showed their political maturity. This can be seen as political pressure as the people began to become more aware of what was going on and therefore would push for change. The Tories and the Whigs soon began to warm to the idea of reform with Gladstone now backing the working class with some moderate reform and the Tories feeling that if introduced they can gain party advantage.

Though it was not only the Tories who did not want the reform a section of the Liberal Party which was now split in three ways with the radicals, the ultras and Gladstone. The ultras who did not want reform were led by Robert Lowe and were also known as the adullamites, they felt that the working class people were the dregs of society, that they were the swinish multitude and were incapable of voting. The Tories defeating Gladstone's bill triggered a host of unrest amongst the people with radicals such as Bright giving more talks.

The most violent coming together was the Hyde Park fiasco of 1865 where there was 3 days of skirmishes with the police and many railings tore down. This put immense pressure on Disraeli who now felt that reform was inevitable so therefore made a dash for party advantage and felt that the reform would provide more long term security for the Tories. So in August

1867 the bill finally became the Second Reform Act with many Liberal amendments on the way.

Overall I feel that the Second reform Act was helped with by the growing public pressure but however would have went through because the party rivalry and desire for party advantage greatly intensified. The 3rd Reform Act was seen as a more of a way for the parties to gain political advantage rather than popular pressure. It is said that there are five main reasons as to why the subject of reform again comes to the fore. One of the first reason is that the experience of the 1867 electoral system.

This was the fact that there were still many flaws left in the electoral system, as there were still regional imbalances with the south being over represents. There were also irregularities between electorates in different constituencies. It also excluded industrial workers living outside the borough boundaries. Some historians say however that this was part of Disraeli's cunning plan. But also can be seen as a way of the people again rising up for reform. Another reason is the fact that there was continued corruption in the electoral system despite the introduction of the 1872 Secret Ballot Act.

This is seen to add more pressure to the government as they sought more reform. This was mainly advantageous to the Liberals as people could now vote in secret which allowed them to vote for who they wanted. There was also again continued pressure from the radicals such as Joseph Chamberlain and Charles Dilke, it is said that together they both launched a national campaign to revive the flagging spirit of radicalism. This is clearly public

pressure as they both tried to rally the public to swing their support behind them.

One of the key factors however is the fact that many people were having a change of attitude toward democracy, Pearce and Stearn argue that a change of attitude was now becoming a matter of part advantage and how each party could oust each other. This was linked with Gladstone's own support for change as he sought to get rid of Faddism by uniting the party so these factors can be seen as way of the parties trying to gain an advantage over their rivals. The 3rd Reform Act therefore was proposed by Gladstone's in February 1884 and it aimed to create a uniform franchise in which it includes both the boroughs and the counties.

However this did not contain any redistribution of seats this caused a problem as it sailed through commons it met a block in the Lords. This was however solved by the Arlington Street Compact with both Salisbury and Gladstone wanting a compromise; this was that Salisbury would allow the Reform Act to go through if Gladstone introduces the Redistribution Act. The Redistribution Act created new single member constituency this was seen as a political triumph by Salisbury as they now stood a better chance of getting into Parliament.

Overall I feel that the 3rd reform act was mainly passed mainly due to the fact that people were having a change of attitude and felt that maybe reform can work towards Party Advantage however I also feel that the lingering feeling of the people again rising up was a key factor The 4th Reform act was a different act in the fact that this time it sought to enfranchise women.

Despite there still being problems to the current system which still didn't enfranchise every single man. The radical suffragette movement led by Christabel Pankhurst created a national hype amongst the people for women to get the vote.

The government also were slowly swaying towards this motion after Kirenski in Russia gave middle class women the vote in order to prevent revolution in October. The spread of bolshevism along with the fear of the Suffragettes persuaded many politicians to back them but however once the war kicked in they became hugely patriotic and the Suffragists had to revive the movement after the war. However the new bill excluded women under 30 because of the fear that they will vote Labour.

In 1918 the bill finally went through albeit it only enfranchised a small portion of women it was landmark success for The Suffragists. It is said though however if the war did not take place that the women may have gained the vote as early as 1815. In conclusion I feel that each of the reform acts had a mixture of public pressure and party advantage but however I feel that it were the lingering fear and the constant 'looking over the shoulders' feeling that drove the politicians to the eventual reform. It is no disputing though that the acts did create some sort of advantage of the party who passed it.