

How effective was peel in restoring and reuniting his party

[Politics](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The fact that the Conservatives, under Peel, managed to reverse ignominious defeat to Earl Grey's Whigs into resounding electoral success within a decade appears to confirm rather unequivocally the idea that under Peel, his party enjoyed a period of widespread restoration and re-unification. However, as later divisions over the Corn Laws and other issues show, electoral success is not necessarily conclusive evidence of the Conservative's success in redefining themselves, nor accomplishment in healing old divisions within the party.

What is more, where there clearly were steps taken forward in these areas, it is often unclear as to the extent to which Peel was himself responsible. This is especially marked when Peel's own attitude towards his party is considered, in that he tended to see them as a tool through which he could carry out his duties to the crown, rather than a role within which the interests of his followers could be more fully represented.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that the Conservatives did not make visible changes in this period which almost certainly increased their public acceptability, as well as the cohesion and efficiency of their party organization, both of which led to success at the polls. Following the passage of the Great Reform Act in 1831, it had become increasingly obvious that they must adapt to the changed political environment, or face extinction.

The changes had meant the Tories were no longer able to count on such traditional 'pocket' or 'rotten' boroughs nor the counties to deliver a governable majority, and thus for the first time were forced to create a new

form of Toryism which both continued to protect traditional interests while presenting an acceptable public face to make them electable again.

The altered political landscape was recognized by Peel and fellow modernisers, leading them to give the party the name 'Conservative'; casting themselves as cautious pragmatists in the face of the ideologues and vested interests which were beginning to take hold of the Whigs, as well as the entrenched opposition to change which had characterised the old Tories.

This shift was reflected in Peel's first address to the reformed parliament and in the Tamworth Manifesto, in which he stressed his party's new-found acceptance of the Reform Act, thus staunchly positioning the new Conservatives as a party that would be seen to be fighting for the national interest into the future, rather than one caught up in old battles and overturning old defeats.

Despite these steps taken by Peel to broaden support, and thus restore the party to power, however, many of the Conservative's subsequent successes in the elections of 1835 and 37 owe just as much to internal divisions which had taken hold of the Whigs as well as the inevitable subsidence in pro-reform enthusiasms following the passage of the Great Reform Act, which had left the party divided over what should follow.

While these divisions certainly aided Peel in his appeals for pragmatic moderation rising above party or political loyalties, they cannot realistically be credited as his doing. At the same time, however, the Conservative's strategy of principled opposition to the Whigs, lending their support to

moderates when threatened by their own radical elements, as well as taking a position favourable to the defection of disaffected MPs, most notably in the 'Derby Dilly' of 1834, owes much to the work of Peel as leader.

The Conservative's ability to propagate their ideas to newly-enfranchised sections of the electorate, and to voice them effectively in the House of Commons was essential in efforts to restore a sense of shared purpose to the party's MPs, as well as to win back public trust. Efforts to do this were led by Sir Thomas Fremantle, appointed the party's chief whip in 1837 along with Lord Stanley and the other Whig defectors, who succeeded in compelling greater numbers of MPs to vote along agreed lines, thus instilling greater levels of discipline in the party which allowed it's opposition to be all the more effective as a single voice.

This, along with the founding of the Carlton club and local constituency clubs ensured that the party enjoyed much greater coordination, allowing it to exploit the Whig's weaknesses to a much greater degree. In addition, the new Conservatives also recognized the role of voter registration in the new political order, with Peel commenting in 1841 that " the battle of the constitution much be fought in the registration courts".

Despite this realisation, the formalization of party ties seems to have come in spite of, rather than led by Peel, whose later actions seem to indicate that his political agenda and actions were not so much dictated by a desire to reunite the party, nor to restore it to political power for its own sake -unlike those driven partly out of a motivation to topple the government- but rather

as almost a necessary evil, through which his own principles could be expressed.

Indeed, this appears to be the case among many similar steps taken by Peel, which, while certainly benefiting the party and aiding it in its reclamation of power, did not have this as their primary motivation, but rather Peel's own political philosophy. Moves towards a moderate, pragmatic approach to politics were more Peel's own personal view, driven by a desire to safeguard traditional institutions, than those absorbed by the core of his party, who were willing to cooperate with such an approach for as long as it was necessary in order to survive through the height of Whig power, and to win back public confidence.

Once the initial euphoria of Whig reforms began to subside and the image of the new conservatives had been well established, beyond this, fundamental changes to the party, penetrating into its core support and ideals, was no longer a necessity. By 1841, the Conservatives enjoyed electoral success, overturning a ruling party at the ballot box for the first time in British history.

While this is thanks in no small part to the efforts and leadership of Peel in transforming perceptions of the party, and taking an approach which allowed it to capitalise on Whig discord while maintaining Peel's own principles of pragmatism and cautious reform, such changes were to a large extent superficial. The 1841 election, and Peel's efforts did indeed bring electoral success around a newly energized and well-organized party, however, the Conservatives' core support continued to be drawn from the counties and

small boroughs as it always had been, on a platform of traditional values such as public order and agriculture.

While Peel succeeded in uniting and restoring his party to enough of an extent that they were able to reclaim power, what he clearly did not do, nor perhaps attempted to do, was to significantly alter the underlying fabric of the party, nor its motivations or support. This ensured that while enough changes took place to bring the Conservatives back into government, Peel's efforts did not go far enough to ensure the long-term sustainability or unity of the party beyond that point.