

Disraelis' reputaion and promises



To establish whether this statement is true, the promises and reputation of Disraeli must first be identified. In his speeches in 1872 at Crystal Palace and in Manchester's Free Trade Hall, Disraeli once again showed his skills as an orator. He laid out three basic aims or policies that he wanted to pursue, should he get in power. These were; to conserve the institutions in Britain, uphold British interests abroad and to improve the standard of life for the general population and especially the working classes. Disraeli had also created a reputation for himself with the 1867 Reform Act.

He had successfully destroyed the liberal party and due to the nature of the act, extending the franchise by a considerable number, had acquired a reputation for being more open minded about matters of reform, even though the act was mainly passed through necessity, because the act would be passed and it was just a question about which party would do it. He had also tried successfully to establish the Conservative Party as the nationalistic party in the government, the one that would uphold British interest abroad and repair the damage that he claimed that Gladstone was causing.

The Alabama arbitration and the dealings that Gladstone had with Russia over the situation in the Black Sea were perfect opportunities for Disraeli to show how Gladstone was destroying Britain's Empire by his weakness in his dealings with other major powers. This meant that when Disraeli came into power he had to act upon his criticisms of Gladstone as he had condemned the way that Gladstone had put his faith so strongly in arbitration rather than in action and the way that Gladstone was more concerned about the way that the negotiations were carried out rather than the end result.

The only way that Disraeli could fulfil his promises about the welfare and conditions of the people and conserving the institutions was by bringing about various social reforms. In his famous speeches in 1872 he promised the people that he would improve the standard of their lives and give them "air light and water". To an extent it would be fair to say that he achieved this although some of the acts that were meant to do this were not very effective at all.

The Factory Legislations in 1874, 1875 and 1878 were major steps in Disraeli achieving what he had promised. These were some of his more effective acts because they were compulsory and the consequence of this was that it had a further reaching effect than a large number of the acts that Disraeli passed. In this respect it is very similar to the Public Health Act in 1875 because this also had aspects of it that were compulsory, for example the local councils were compelled to employ a Ministry of Health.

The fact that acts like these were compulsory and not permissive is what makes them more successful than the others. While other acts would appear to conform to Disraeli's claims that he was fulfilling his promises, upon closer inspection they did not have much effect upon the lives of the workingman. The Friendly Societies Act in 1875 was another act that could be used to support the statement that Disraeli's was a government that lived up to its promises.

The societies were formed as a kind of self-help organization and Disraeli's government supported this, which indicates that he was trying to live up the promise that he would improve conditions for the working classes. The

Labour Legislation and the amendment of the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act in 1875 were other legislations that lived up to the promises of Disraeli, because they both attempted to change the law in order to make it more fair and even for the workers so that they could negotiate on equal grounds as the employer and to ensure that the laws were equal for both parties involved.

The Enclosure of Commons Act in 1876 was an act that showed Disraeli trying to fulfil his promise that he would provide enjoyment of " air light and water. " However convincing these acts may seem to be in arguing that Disraeli lived up to his promises it must be recognised that there were a great many acts that he passed that were either totally ineffectual or would work in principle but not in practice. The River Pollution Prevention Act in 1876 was a totally ineffectual act.

In principle it was supposed to prevent the factory owners who were polluting the rivers from doing so but in practice the pollution of the rivers continued and the act did not stop pollution. This is one of many examples of Disraeli's government attempting to fulfil the promises that Disraeli made, but in the end passing an ineffectual act that simply does not achieve half as much as was promised. While these acts may have set a precedent to other acts in the future, they do not achieve very much at the time.

Other acts like the Sale of Food and Drugs Act in 1875 show how that while the act looks to be a major act, it is only a permissive act that gives the power of change to the local councils who have men on their board who own the shops that are going to lose revenue if they are no longer allowed to

adulterate the food or Drugs that they sell. As it was not in their interests, and as it was an enabling act, they simply did not bother to put anything into practice. There was a similar situation with the Merchant Shipping Act and the Artisans Dwelling Act in 1876 and 1875.

These two were both permissive instead of compulsory, and both gave the power to change to those who would not benefit and may well lose out if they put the laws into practice. In the case of the Merchant Shipping Act the initiative was left with the owners of the ship who were never personally in danger abroad the ships and profited from the overloading. Again, in the Artisans Dwellings Act it was the councils decision whether to build houses or not, and to do this would require a raise in taxes for the rest of the constituency, and so the council may lose the next election so would not do anything.

To illustrate this, by 1881, only ten out of 87 towns would take any action under the act. The Education Act in 1876 was not a very successful act either because it did nothing to ensure that the laws would be carried out until 1891 so there was a high level of truancy and children still worked when they should not, so although it added to the growing improvement of the education system, it did not really change anything significantly. The foreign policy that Disraeli followed between 1874 and 1880 was one that certainly appeared to be consistent with the reputation that Disraeli had acquired.

It was very aggressive and he appeared to be fulfilling promises that he had made in 1872. His severe criticism of Gladstone's weaknesses on foreign policy was one factor that formed peoples expectations that he would act

upon the criticisms and that his foreign policy would be constructed so as to protect British interests abroad. Disraeli lived up to his reputation and promises in his foreign policy more than he did at home with his domestic policies. However it was not as he had promised to the people.

He had promised to uphold British interests abroad, and to a certain extent he did, but there were events that he could not control and certain concessions that had to be made to foreign powers that diminished the influence and threatened the power that Britain held abroad. The problems with Russia were a prime example where he had to concede and let Russia have a fleet in the Black sea even though this was against the interests of Britain. He could not realistically deliver all that he promised, as there would be times like these where he had to make concessions.

On the other hand it must be said that Disraeli managed to fulfil the majority of his promises and reputation in regards to his foreign policy, even if at times he did not mean to. In a lot of his speeches a lot of what he said was rhetoric, but when men like Frere and Lytton took him at face value, and started wars with the Afghans and with the Zulus and started wars in order to preserve the British interests in those particular areas, they put action to his words.

Even if Disraeli did not actually want these wars, which he did not, the two wars were both in keeping with the reputation that he had gained for being a very aggressive imperialist, even if these wars did work to his detriment. The Congress of Berlin was one of the high points of Disraeli's foreign policy because in this he managed to rebuild Britain's reputation as a major

imperial power, which adds to the evidence that he did live up to the reputation that he had acquired, and he made secret agreements with the Turks, Russians and Austria-Hungary in order to preserve British interest in that area.

The purchase of the Suez Canal shares in 1875 was another one of Disraeli's best judgements because for years on from then it was one of the biggest trade routes in the world and Britain's involvement in it was a major asset to Britain's power as an imperial nation. One side of Disraeli's foreign policy that cannot be ignored is the fact that Disraeli took massive risks in his policy and could have got Britain involved in a war with Russia without any powerful allies and with an obsolete navy, and also agreed to defend one of Turkey's frontiers without the resources to do so.

The fact that he was lucky and managed to steer clear of any problems is a credit to Disraeli as it would have been very easy for him to make a very costly mistake. Though Disraeli passed a large number of reforms for his time, he still managed to fulfil his final promise of his 1872 speeches and conserve the institutions. The institutions that he meant were the aristocracy, like the rich landowners and the Anglican Church. While someone like Gladstone was a fanatical Anglican, Disraeli was only really interested in it to keep everyone else happy.

It has been argued that acts like the Education Acts sole intention was to prevent the board schools which were more financially popular with the working or lower classes from getting too much of a hold on the education system because most wanted the Anglican churches from being the

dominant force in education and the board schools were not. During his period in rule, he did not do anything that was actively conserving the constitutions, he simply avoided doing anything that would offend or threaten the institutions.

It would be fair to say in conclusion that while Disraeli fulfilled some of the promises that he made, he did not do so with all of them. His domestic policy is a hard one to say whether he achieved accomplishment of the aims that he laid down in 1872. He certainly tried to do so, as the number of acts that he passed, and the nature of them indicate that they were probably passed with the interests of the people that it would effect, in mind. However there are some opinions that argue that all of the acts passed in Disraeli's era were in reaction to public opinion at the time.

While this is not totally fair to Disraeli, there is a lot of evidence pointing to this being a major contributing factor to the decision. In the case of the Education Act the other politicians were mainly or all Anglican and so wanted to conserve the churches hold over education, in the 1876 Merchant Shipping Act, the reason was predominantly to pacify the people who worked on the docks and Samuel Plimsoll as he was getting particularly worked up over the issue.

However far it is possible to give credit to these ideas, it would be unfair to Disraeli to say that he tried to pass acts solely to pacify public demand it is much more likely to be that he was more genuine in his actions than that. However, he did not live up to all of the promises that he made, he may have set a precedent for governments before him in what their duties were

to the people, but to the majority of the people of the time he did not have the ability to pass anything that would significantly change their lives.

This was due to a number of limiting factors, like a hostile cabinet and a general public that were already sick of reform after a great reforming ministry from Gladstone. In his foreign policy in upholding the interests of the British Empire Disraeli fared a little better. He did not make any disastrous decisions in terms of upholding British interests abroad, although his attitude to problems got him into trouble at home, and did not make any major concessions to foreign powers.

His diplomacy in Turkey in 1878 probably saved the Turkish Empire and he was aggressive to an extent that nearly got him into trouble. He certainly lived up to his reputation and promises in his foreign policy, although certain reckless comments landed him in trouble. Overall I think that Disraeli's government did not live up to the promises that Disraeli made in 1872 and although his foreign policy was very similar to what people would expect and so lived up to his reputation, he did not deliver on the domestic front.

The reasons for this were not solely attributable to Disraeli, but the fact remains that he did not deliver what he promised, and if anything the situation worsened with the depression even though this was not his fault. Disraeli tried hard to deliver what he promised but the government, the budget and the attitude of the people, who were not overly enthusiastic to more reforms, limited him in what he was able to do.