1.1 The growth of parliamentary democracy, c1785–1870

KEY QUESTIONS

- Why was the unreformed parliament criticised?
- How significant was the pressure for change between 1820 and 1852?
- What promoted further parliamentary reform after 1852?

INTRODUCTION

Political participation is a well-established feature of British democracy today. It is the foundation of our **parliamentary system** of government and ensures that the broadest elements of society are represented as effectively as possible. This principle is so universally accepted that people rarely give it a second thought as they get on with their busy lives. Such acceptance was not always present and in the late 18th century the political landscape in Britain was far removed from that which is enjoyed today.

Despite originating in ancient Greece, the concept of '**democracy**' came to Britain through a series of reforms designed to promote stability and maintain interests rather than further a political principle. Towards the end of the 1700s, industrialisation slowly began to develop in Britain and into the 19th century it spread dramatically, transforming socio-economic fortunes and unleashing a plethora of new challenges that raised questions of the existing political structures. Created in the Middle Ages, these were antiquated and increasingly seen as unreflective of the rapidly modernising nation. Having witnessed revolution in France, where calls for political change went unheeded, politicians in Britain became aware of the expediency of reform as the country began making similar demands. Over time first moderate reform was offered, and then, as society grew more 'respectable', more widespread amendments gradually transformed the political landscape.

KEY TERMS

Parliamentary system
A system of government where the people elect representatives to sit on their behalf in a parliament. The government is then drawn from whichever collection of representatives has a majority in this institution. As the embodiment of the people, parliament retains ultimate power and is the body that holds government to account.

Democracy
Originating from the Greek words *demos* and *kratos* meaning 'people' and 'power'. This concept promotes the idea that political authority is most legitimate when people are able to make their own choices.

The system of political power that existed in Britain towards the end of the 18th century was created over time and established by convention rather than from any specific effort to create a **codified** model like that produced by the Americans in 1787. Without the constraint of being written down, the British **constitution** promoted a more flexible approach to government, which was at the same time both an effective means for finding political solutions and also allowed for corrupt practices to go virtually without censure.

Britain's slow political evolution had created a unique system whereby the traditional role of the monarch was retained alongside more modern ideas such as government by the people. The outcome of this was that Britain had both a king who ruled with hereditary power and also a parliament that consisted of representatives of the public. The latter was separated into two 'houses': the 'House of Commons' represented the interests of the ordinary citizen, while the 'House of Lords' reflected the will of the nobility. Collectively these institutions wielded immense authority over the country and, unlike today, the monarchy and House of Lords played a more prominent role in the working of government. Although reliant upon his parliament, the king made the major policy decisions and was able to select his own ministers while the Lords had the power to block legislation proposed by the government. In this sense there was some evidence to suggest that power was reasonably divided and the system had some positive features to it.

In particular, this distribution of power appears to have the basic prerequisites of democracy – notably a parliament that reflects the will of the people – however, in reality parliament was anything but representative. Those who sat in each house were there primarily by virtue of wealth and influence rather than any democratic principle. To sit in the House of Lords required a peerage, while entry to the Commons was achieved through a national election, although eligibility was dependent on wealth; candidates had to own property worth at least £300 per year, depending on the constituency. If elected then the candidate would receive no salary and would serve his term without any official recompense for any expenditure incurred whilst carrying out his duty. Under these circumstances it was almost impossible for a man of modest means to stand for election unless he had the backing of a peer who would fund his ambitions. This practice of **patronage** eroded any pretence of democracy by giving significant influence over the Commons to the wealthier House of Lords; in 1761, for example, it was calculated that the election of 111 members to the Commons was financed by 55 peers. This activity remained the norm as elections continued and by 1801 approximately half of Britain's 658 members of parliament (MPs) owed their positions to benefactors in the Lords. The implication of this set up was that despite the anticipated opportunity to exercise a free choice that an election presented, the idea that people were actually given a real choice when casting their votes was significantly undermined. It also gave excessive political influence to the richest strata of society, which ensured that any notion of a true and accurate representation of the breadth of British society was purely in spirit only.

KEY TERMS

Codified
A term used to describe something that has been clearly organised, usually having been written down.

Constitution
A collection of fundamental principles on which a state organises its government.

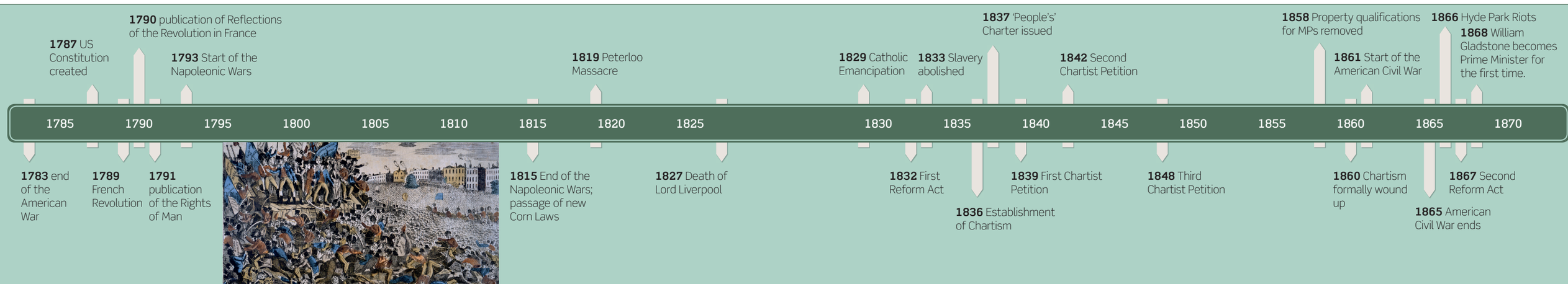
KEY TERM

Patronage
The practice of sponsoring someone's ambitions either by funding them or using influence to promote them. Given the expensive nature of election campaigning, this system was widely used in Britain before 1832.

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THE UNREFORMED PARLIAMENT AND ITS CRITICS

The pre-reform franchise

The right to vote in Britain was a curious affair, having also been established in the Middle Ages and based upon a range of long-standing traditions rather than any coherent structure. To make matters more complicated, the qualifications differed depending on which constituency you lived in. In Britain there were two distinct types of constituency – the counties and the boroughs.

The Counties

These were the rural shires in Britain which each elected two MPs to Westminster. The qualification in these elections was perhaps the most straightforward of all the franchise restrictions and was based upon an Act of Parliament in 1430 that set the requirement as ownership of a freehold property worth more than 40 shillings (about £2) a year. Although in Scottish counties the value was set at £100 a year, as inflation went up and the value of money went down, this became quite a wide franchise. The problem with the county vote was therefore not the numbers it excluded but rather the fact that each country returned two MPs regardless of size – in 1800, for example, Bedfordshire had a population of 2,000 while Yorkshire had grown to 20,000 and yet did not receive any more MPs.

The Boroughs

If the counties seemed unrepresentative then the borough franchise was arguably even more exclusive. Boroughs were the urban towns which had been granted administrative rights since the Middle Ages. Like the counties, they elected two MPs but, given the individuality of these towns, the franchise qualification in them was very broad. However, by the 19th century there were six generally recognised types:

Corporation:	Only members of the town council could vote.
Freemen:	Anyone with the status of 'freeman' could vote. This title could be inherited from a person's father or acquired through marriage and was bestowed if the recipient had received an honour from the local corporation or served as an apprentice in the borough.
Scot and Lot:	Anyone who paid poor rates could vote.
Burgage:	'Burgage' was an ancient form of rent applied to property in a borough and the owners of this property were able to vote.
Potwalloper:	Householders who had a hearth that was big enough to boil a pot on could vote.
Freeholder:	A similar franchise as the counties.

Parliamentary seats and elections before reform

Uncontested elections and selective representation

Understandably, the extent of the franchise varied widely in the boroughs and this lack of clarity presented great opportunities for powerful individuals to manipulate the system for personal gain, for example in 1780 only two counties were contested as the leading families in these areas chose to divide representation among themselves rather than go to the expense of bribing voters in a contested election. Where elections did take place the lack of a **secret ballot** meant that on election day voters were exposed to public viewing when they cast their votes. Such practice made the opportunity for intimidation particularly effective, especially if the voter depended upon the landowner or employer who was standing for election. This was evident in the counties where the landed gentry were able to apply pressure on any of their tenants who were able to vote. However, it was most obviously the case in those boroughs where very few voters actually resided and therefore intimidation and bribery was especially effective. So common was this practice that the majority of the smallest boroughs were directly controlled by either the local landowner or by the government itself. These **pocket boroughs** were an easy way for wealthy interests to ensure their political dominance and, although the process could be expensive, it was money well spent if it meant that they could influence the political process or further their own ambitions. The pocket borough of Gatton in Surrey, for example, was 'bought' at auction in 1801 for £90,000 just so the 'owner' did not have to stand for election against a rival.

KEY TERMS

Secret ballot
A method of voting whereby the voter can cast their vote anonymously or in private. Until the 1872 Secret Ballot Act voting in Britain was done publicly by standing up on a stage and declaring who you were supporting.

Pocket boroughs
These were small boroughs which could easily be manipulated or controlled by the prominent family or landowner of the area either by coercion or, more commonly, through the extensive use of bribery.

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The inadequacies of the electoral system promoted great opportunities for corruption and the political dominance of the upper classes. In certain quarters of British society this alone would have raised questions about the need for reform; however, the system was also completely out of date. Having been created in the medieval period the actual distribution of seats was based upon the importance of the constituency *at the time of creation* and did not necessarily reflect modern developments. By the turn of 19th century, many of the recognised boroughs were no longer the important towns they once were. This was perhaps most famously the case with the borough of Old Sarum, just to the north of Salisbury, which by the late 1700s had all but disappeared and despite only having seven residents still returned two MPs to Westminster. Dunwich, on the coast in Suffolk, was equally unrepresentative with 14 voters and only 32 dwellings, having lost the most of its houses to the sea due to coastal erosion. These **rotten boroughs** used to be very important – Dunwich had been a thriving port before the sea swallowed up the majority of the town and Old Sarum had been the seat of the Bishop of Salisbury in the 11th century – but clearly fortunes had changed and such over-representation was a stark indication that things needed to change. If this evidence was not enough, by contrast new towns and cities such as Manchester, which in 1831 had more than 182,000 inhabitants, and Birmingham, which boasted a population of 144,000, were not even recognised as parliamentary boroughs and had no representation at all.

KEY TERM

Rotten boroughs
These were small towns or hamlets that used to be prominent settlements in the Middle Ages but had over time declined in stature. Despite their reduced status they still retained their two MPs because of their past importance.

ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

The unreformed system
Using the text and your own knowledge think about the strengths and weaknesses of the unreformed political system and write down five points that defend its continuance and five points that support its reform.

Demands for reform, c1785–1820

Given the evident problems generated by this haphazard system, there were several attempts to promote reform of parliament. Groups dedicated to this task were already common before 1785, including the London-based Society for Constitutional Information which emerged in 1780. This organisation was created by Major John Cartwright and sought to promote public awareness of the need for reform by pamphleteering. Although this group was ultimately undermined by the anti-Catholic Gordon riots, which scared the propertied classes and turned them away from political change, it did raise the issue of reform in a more public sphere and ensured that reform would not be forgotten. Taking up the cause in 1785, the prime minister, William Pitt, proposed disenfranchising 36 of the worst boroughs and redistributing their seats to larger counties but was defeated by 74 votes in the Commons. Despite pockets of reformers within Britain, parliamentary reform was not a popular issue during the 1780s and few MPs were motivated to change a system that they themselves benefited from. Under these circumstances attention was turned elsewhere and the reform issue was dropped.

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Gordon Riots (1780)
These were anti-Catholic riots that took place in 1780 after the passage of the 1778 Papist Act which intended to reduce Catholic discrimination in Britain. As a Protestant, Lord George Gordon had called for the repeal of the Papist Act, believing that toleration of the Catholic Church was unnecessary and his violent speech encouraged rioting against this faith.

Impact of the French Revolution

Demand for political reform presented itself again in 1789 when revolution in France broke out and in the presence of that unfolding drama – which saw aristocratic rule violently overthrown – criticisms of the British model started to re-emerge as people began to question the legitimacy of what they increasingly saw as 'rule by the rich'. Faced with this criticism, a vociferous defence of the unreformed electoral system ensued from conservative politicians and others who benefited from it. Primarily they argued that the system did not need to be reformed and that the criticisms levelled against it were unfounded. At the heart of this defence was a simple argument: why change something that was working well? Citing the successes of Britain in recent years – particularly the victorious wars against Napoleon and the slowly developing industrialisation of England – champions of the existing model were quick to point out that whilst France after its revolution had descended into violence and the 'Reign of Terror', Britain remained a stable and increasingly prosperous nation. Chief amongst those celebrating these virtues was the Tory politician Edmund Burke whose book *Reflections on the Revolution in France* had prophesied the violence abroad and blamed it on the sudden and radical political change undertaken. For him the real virtue of the British system was its slow and adaptive nature based upon sound traditional practices and a belief that although not all of society was able to vote, those MPs elected served as representatives of the entire nation were the best individuals in society and therefore knew how best to govern.

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EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Edmund Burke (1729–97)

Edmund Burke was the son of an Anglo-Irish solicitor who first entered politics after being appointed secretary to the **Whig** Leader Lord Rockingham. Serving as MP for Bristol between 1774 and 1780 and then the pocket borough of Malton until his retirement in 1794, Burke became the chief exponent of conservatism. His defence of the British constitution upon the outbreak of revolution in France became the rallying cry for **Tory** politicians and his pronouncements about the importance of tradition and social order are today recognised as cornerstones on classic conservative thought.

KEY TERM

'Whigs' and 'Tories'

These were originally terms of abuse levelled at different political factions after the 17th century. 'Whig' came from Scottish Gaelic and was a term used to describe horse thieves while 'Tory' meant a 'papist outlaw'. During the Glorious Revolution (1688–89) the terms were used to denote those who wished to deny hereditary rights to James Stuart and therefore prevent him from becoming James II ('Whigs') and those who supported his claim ('Tories'). Although both groups shared a common, gentrified, background, after 1784 the terms became more defined as political parties began to become more distinctly partisan. 'Tories' became more closely associated with religious intolerance while 'Whigs' championed the financial interests of the middle class.

SOURCE 1 Extract from Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* published in 1790.

Our constitution...is a constitution, whose sole authority is, that it has existed time out of mind...It is a presumption in favour of any settled scheme of government against any untried project, that a nation has long flourished under it. It is a better presumption even of the choice of a nation, far better than any sudden and temporary arrangement by actual election...The multitude, for the moment, is foolish, when they act without deliberation; but when the species is wise, and when time is given to it, as a species, it almost always acts right.

SOURCE 2 Extract from Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, published in 1792.

All hereditary Government is in its nature tyranny. An heritable crown, or an heritable throne, or by what other fanciful name such things may be called, have no other significant explanation than that mankind are heritable property. To inherit a Government, is to inherit the people, as if they were flocks and herds...Government ought to be a thing always in full maturity. It ought to be so constructed as to be superior to all accidents to which individual man is subject; and, therefore, hereditary succession, by being *subject to them all*, is the most irregular and imperfect of all the systems of Government.

This defence did little to assuage the growing discontent in Britain, which by the turn of the century was given intellectual credibility by the writer Thomas Paine. Inspired by the events in France, his book *The Rights of Man*, penned in response to Burke, eloquently condemned the inequities of the existing system and became a bestseller in Britain – by 1793 more than 200,000 copies had been sold. Paine's work emphasised the natural rights belonging to human beings and called for radical reform, particularly rule by the people which, in his eyes, was the only justifiable means of government. Pouring scorn on the notion of monarchy and drawing attention to the widespread corruption within British politics, *The Rights of Man* inspired a raft of young reformers who sought to bring greater democracy to the country.

New organisations spread throughout Britain, including the predominantly working-class Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information formed in 1791 and the larger London Corresponding Society a year later. Like their predecessors these groups sought to raise public awareness of reform by writing political pamphlets but they also undertook more assertive measures and in May 1792 the Sheffield Society had nearly 10,000 signatures on a national petition calling for manhood suffrage. More startling was a demonstration organised by the London Corresponding Society at Copenhagen Fields on 26 October 1795 which attracted more than 100,000 people. The more determined activities of these groups and the growing participation suggests that reform was

TIMELINE

1780 Society for Constitutional Information is established

1783 William Pitt the Younger becomes prime minister and unsuccessfully proposes moderate reforms to parliament

1785 William Pitt tries to introduce parliamentary reform again but is defeated

End of the American War of Independence

1789 French Revolution breaks out

1790 Edmund Burke pens his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* condemning excessive change

1792 Thomas Paine publishes *The Rights of Man* in response to Burke

1793 The new French Republic declares war on Britain

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becoming a more pressing issue for the country, particularly in the wake of revolution across the channel. However, any threat posed by these events was quickly overshadowed by the outbreak of war with the new French Republic in 1793. Any sympathy that existed for reform was replaced by a strong sense of patriotism which reinforced the existing status quo. In addition, war brought more rigorous government control, which saw the prime minister pass the Treason Act in 1795, allowing for the death penalty in the event of any treasonable activity, including political meetings and the publication of seditious material that might challenge government authority. Under such pressure reform movements were quickly wound up and although there remained the occasional flourish in London by radicals such as Sir Francis Burdett and William Cobbett, who each raised the issue during the 1807 election, there was no sustained parliamentary reform movement until the end of the war in 1815.

SOURCE 3 *Wha wants me?* Print of Thomas Paine reading a scroll of the rights of man and appealing to Englishmen to overthrow their monarchy, dated 26 December 1792.



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AS Level Section A Exam Question

Was parliament's unwillingness to modernise the electoral system the main reason for the growth in reform agitation before 1800? (20 marks)

Exam Tip

Make sure you read the question carefully and take note of any key phrases it uses. These are clues as to how to answer it.

Demand for reform, 1815–20

TIMELINE

- **1812** Lord Liverpool becomes prime minister of a new Tory government
- **1815** End of the Napoleonic Wars
- **1815** Introduction of the Corn Law
- **1816** Riots in Islington break out
- **1816** Harvests fail after a very poor summer
- **1817** William Cobbett reduces the price of his radical newspaper, *Cobbett's Political Register*
- **1817** March of the Blanketeers
- **1818** The Derbyshire Rebellion led by Jeremiah Brandreth
- **1819** The 'Peterloo' Massacre
- **1820** Passage of the 'Six Acts' that strengthened the hand of government when dealing with discontent
- **1820** The failure of the Cato Street Conspiracy sees the end of significantly radical reform attempts

Demands for reform re-emerged with the end of war in 1815, when the experiences of the general population took a dramatic downturn as soldiers returned home looking for work in a depressed economic climate. This was made worse in 1816 when the harvests failed in what was one of the worst summers in British history. With basic foodstuffs in scarce supply the cost of merely subsisting became burdensome to many of Britain's poorest people as demand forced prices higher. Coupled with a decline in wages because of the ready supply of labour provided by returning soldiers, the majority of Britain's poorer classes fell into economic distress which, only weeks after victory against Napoleon, refocused attention upon the aristocratic political regime.

In the post-war years, agitation from the re-awakened reform movement reflected the diversity of its members, which included both working class and also radical members of the new, commercial interests. There was an active reform press that churned out political articles and pamphlets to whoever wanted to read them; the radical newspaper *Cobbett's Political Register* was particularly popular after its owner, William Cobbett, reduced the price of his paper in November 1816 from 1s ½ d to 2d, while Thomas Wooler's *Black Dwarf* offered a wry look at the reform issue. In support of the written word, the well-known orator Henry Hunt made rousing speeches to crowds on the topic of reform. These activities ensured that political awareness spread throughout the county at a time when people were interested in listening once again. As the message of reform was carried further north, agitation became more hardnosed; writing and making speeches was replaced by marching and attempted rebellion in those areas where distress was acutely felt. Riots at Spa Fields in Islington during 1816 (see Source 4) were trumped by weavers in Manchester organising an armed march to London in 1817 and although this 'March of the Blanketeers' was broken up by local yeomanry in Stockport, it heralded a wave of more threatening actions that sought to rock the political establishment. In Derbyshire the following year there was an attempted rebellion led by Jeremiah Brandreth, a stocking maker by trade, who later went to the gallows after the attempt failed. Across the country people were visibly criticising the ruling classes and the rising level of agitation was quite alarming for the government. When further mass demonstrations took place in 1819 their high-handed response evidenced a sense of control being lost.

SOURCE 4 Part of a pamphlet distributed at the Spa Fields meeting in December 1816.

> Britons to Arms!
>
> The whole country waits the signal from London to fly to arms! Haste, break open gunsmiths and other likely places to find arms! run all constables who touch a man of us; no rise of bread; No Regent; no Castlereagh, off with their heads; no placemen, tythes or enclosures; no taxes; no bishops.

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The Peterloo Massacre

SOURCE 5 A contemporary cartoon showing the dispersing of the crowds at St Peter's Fields, an act that became known as the 'Peterloo Massacre', August 1819.



During 1819, reform momentum increased and across the country there were a series of four political rallies held, the last of which was at St Peter's Fields in Manchester on 16 August. The speaker at the rally was Henry Hunt and it attracted upwards of 60,000 people, mostly dressed in their Sunday best clothes. In the wake of the failed rebellion in Derby the previous year and fearful of riots occurring given the large numbers concentrated in one location, local magistrates ordered the meeting to be disbanded and Hunt arrested. Using yeomanry, the crowds were forcibly dispersed by a sabre charge and in the action 11 people were killed and more than 400 wounded.

The victims of what became known as the 'Peterloo Massacre' became martyrs for reform although none was forthcoming. The immediate outcome of the event was further repression by the government through a series of Acts designed to strengthen its hand against protestors. The 'Six Acts' passed in November were introduced by the home secretary, Lord Sidmouth, and included the prohibition of public meetings of more than 50 people and introduced harsher punishments, including the death penalty, for sedition. The draconian nature of these Acts in the aftermath of the massacre suggests that the government was fearful of a violent reprisal from the more aggressive elements of the reform movement who might have seen the brutal event as an invitation to revolt. By taking such a strong position the government hoped to crush any seed of further discontent.

For the reform movement the Peterloo Massacre had a mixed effect. In the first instance the shock of such brutality fractured the working- and middle-class alliance by driving much of the more conservative middle class away from the cause. After the arrest of respectable reformers such as Henry Hunt and Francis Burdett MP many of the moderate supporters of the movement quietly dropped their reform intentions as they tried to preserve their positions in society and avoid the stiff reactionary policies of the government. For others the massacre stirred up even greater determination to challenge the political regime and in 1820 a group of disaffected reformers led by the London radical Arthur Thistlewood plotted to assassinate the cabinet while they dined in Grosvenor Square. The attempt was discovered by the authorities and the group was seized at its Cato Street headquarters. The leap from public speechmaking to attempted assassination suggests that Britain was in a dangerously revolutionary position; however, this would be an overassessment of the conspiracy and state of the country.

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

The 'Six Acts'

Passed in December 1819, this legislation was some of the most authoritarian ever passed in Britain during peacetime. The Acts prohibited any meetings for military-style drilling; gave magistrates more powers to search for weapons; banned any meeting of more than 50 people without consent from a magistrate; protected magistrates from any consequences arising from persons injured during crowd dispersal at illegal meetings; increased penalties for writing seditious material; increased punitive stamp duties on pamphlets inciting discontent; disallowed defendants from postponing their answers to charges.

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The main source of discontent had been the declining economy. However, by 1820 this was improving once again and therefore much of the population was focusing on making the most of this good fortune rather than seeking any further reform, especially after the sharp response that met those at St Peter's Field. As a result, the conspirators at Cato Street were very much a minority acting on personal motives rather than any altruistic community spirit. Any significance that might be applied to the event, beyond the obvious suggestion regarding its aims, perhaps lies in the brief flurry of radical activity that took place immediately after the failed attempt. There was a woeful effort by weavers to seize Glasgow and some of their English counterparts endeavoured to take control of Huddersfield, both to no avail. In themselves, these actions were not overtly threatening to the government but they evidenced an ongoing and fairly robust feeling of animosity toward the current system which some politicians started to take notice of (Source 6).

SOURCE 6 Extract from a private letter by the Tory MP Robert Peel to fellow Tory John Wilson Croker in 1820.

> Do you not think that the tone of England – of that great compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy and newspaper paragraphs, which is called public opinion – is more liberal, to use an odious but intelligible phrase, than the policy of the government?

Although violent agitation was very much in decline after 1820, kept alive only by pockets of radicals in London and the North, the message had been sent to Westminster that something needed to be done. The majority of the population might have abandoned radical reform measures after an economic revival and what many perceived to be the growing excesses of radicals, but unless steps were taken it would not require much to push them back into the arms of reform.

The political demands of the manufacturing interests

Just as the beginning of industrialisation towards the end of the 1700s was transforming the economy, it also started to have a social impact by establishing a new class in Britain. These were the owners of the new factories, self-made men with a commercial drive that would translate into a political appetite big enough to consume the unreformed model of governance. This 'middling' class, of manufacturing interests, located between the labouring classes and traditional landed aristocracy, was a collection of individuals who carried the potential to force political change as they were not only educated men, but also employers of thousands of workers reliant on their beneficence. As men of property, this interest was initially conservative and when reform had been raised in the past had generally sided with the establishment to maintain their prosperity. However, as men of business, they favoured efficiency and a ***laissez-faire*** approach to commerce. The latter principle was a source of contention during the wars with France when the government maintained a tight grip on the country; at the end of the wars, when the government passed further legislation to restrict trade, vocal criticisms were raised with alarming alacrity.

KEY TERM

Laissez-faire
This is a principle that says government should have no control over economic matters. Markets should be free and people should be able to trade as they like.

The foundation of these criticisms lay with the government's decision to pass a new Corn Law to protect British farmers from foreign competition now that war was over. This law prohibited the import of foreign corn until the price of domestic corn reached 10 shillings a bushel (approximately 36 litres in metric volume). Ostensibly this was a policy designed to protect domestic markets at a time when economic fortunes were waning; the security of wartime contracts were gone and the floods of soldiers returning home was driving wages lower and lower. However, the law was seen as a stark example of how the government was 'looking after its own' and prioritising the interests of landowners. For employers in the cities the Corn Law forced up bread prices and, as this was the staple food source for many of the poor, employers were forced to raise wages so as to retain a healthy workforce.

In voicing its concerns, the commercial 'middle class' was beginning to assert its own political opinions. Entangled within the financial impact of the Corn Law was a further criticism of the inefficiency of the existing political structure. The practice of patronage itself often ensured that ineffective men found themselves in office by virtue not of their talent but rather of rich backers. To many of the self-made and determined new leaders of industry this was both aristocratic nepotism writ large and also an abject waste of talent that bred inefficiency. Worse still was the blatant unrepresentative distribution of seats in parliament which failed to reflect the huge migration of people to the cities (see pages 12-13). Increasingly it appeared to members of the growing urban middle class that, as the providers of both employment and much of Britain's resources, they perhaps merited more of a say in how the country was to be governed. In their eyes the hegemony of the landed gentry was in decline; people were leaving the rural areas and moving in vast numbers to the cities for work supplied by themselves. In this sense it was logical that they, as the new elite, ought to share in the political bounty.

ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

How revolutionary was Britain?

Using the material presented above about the growing agitation and demands for reform, plot a graph to provide an overall impression about the extent of threat present in Britain between 1785 and 1820.

Make the *x* axis (horizontal line) the event and the *y* axis (vertical line) the level of threat posed. On plotting the *y* axis you should use your own judgement as to the level of threat produced, using a scale of 0 (absolutely no threat) to 10 (excessive threat).

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PRESSURE FOR CHANGE AND REFORM, 1820–52

Economic and social distress; emerging popular pressure, 1820–32

In the wake of the draconian 'Six Acts' and with the gradual improvement of the economy after 1820, popular demand for reform reduced as the country settled into a more prosperous period and trade with Europe picked up as markets became more established once again. Between 1821 and 1829, the Gross National Product of Britain rose by 16.8 percent while manufacturing grew by approximately 25 percent. The consequence of this prosperity was that there was now the opportunity to pursue commerce rather than public order and the Tory government was able to relax its grip upon the country.

The relaxation of government policy which saw radicals such as Henry Hunt released from prison in 1823 has created a general impression among some historians of an administration undergoing a dramatic transformation from 'reactionism' of the 1815–21 period to 'liberalism' after 1822. This view has found much favour and encouraged the reasonable notion that with improving economic circumstances the government became more progressive in its attitudes. Within this interpretation the government was keen to stabilise the country and, having replaced controversial Tory stalwarts such as Lord Sidmouth with younger minds like that of Robert Peel, the government was endeavouring to take advantage of the prevailing positivity.

SOURCE 7 Extract from an article in the *Stockport Advertiser* in June 1823.

> Never in our memory was this part of the country in a state equally flourishing: out manufacturers are employed, our artisans happy and industrious, and loyalty and content have given place to **Jacobinism** and sedition, which distress had mainly contributed to foster.

KEY TERM

Jacobinism
A term used to describe individuals who wished to promote revolutionary ideas such as equality and were prepared to use violence to achieve their goal. The phrase comes from the Jacobin Club or, more formally, Society of the Friends of the Constitution set up at the start of the French Revolution to pursue these aims.

In terms of reform, however, this liberality of thought remained a fiction. Despite the corrupt Cornish borough of Grampound being disenfranchised in 1821 and its two seats being transferred to Yorkshire, wholesale reform of the electoral system remained a long way off. In 1822, for example, when the Whig leader Lord John Russell sought to introduce a bill designed to disenfranchise 100 of Britain's most rotten boroughs and redistribute the seats to the growing industrial cities, the motion received no support from the government and failed by a large majority. Such inaction by those in power continued to reflect the dominance of aristocratic thinking.

During this period of prosperity, political radicals were muted in their demands as the general public was contented. Towards the end of the decade, however, economic fortunes declined and, as they did, so the voice of reform was raised once more.

The basis for this decline was a series of poor harvests in 1828 and 1829. The predictable rise in food prices brought the equally predictable discontent. Between February and March of 1830 alone there were more than 200 petitions sent to parliament from those living in rural areas demanding tax reductions. Despite receiving a positive response to this request, when conditions failed to improve rioting broke out in the countryside and the government faced its first direct challenge. The 'Swing Riots' as they became known lasted for more than 18 months and saw much of the South East of England ablaze as hay ricks were burned and prominent authority figures were accused of failing the local people. These riots were not directly motivated by reform demands but did none-the-less inform this debate. As a massive display of public unrest in the countryside the riots greatly alarmed the landowners in parliament who, motivated by self-preservation, began to see reform as a means to appease the discontent.

Equally disturbing was the impact of economic decline in the urban areas. Having been silent for so long, the depressed markets gave opportunity to the radical reformers once more and they were able to galvanise the distressed workers into supporting their cause. Protest marches began in earnest and the radical press found its circulations rise dramatically.

Perhaps most significant of all was the visible support for reform given by the manufacturing interests. Whereas in 1815 they had been on the fringes of the movement and quick to abandon the cause after the clampdown following the Peterloo Massacre, in 1830 the situation was different. The affluence they had attained in the economic boom of the 1820s had given them a desire for more political recognition. Furthermore, the relentless growth of industry had seen towns like Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield expand to become major centres of commerce in Britain and yet none had direct political representation. The opinion of the middle classes in these areas, therefore, was that parliament had no real understanding about the problems they faced and that the only logical solution was an increased electorate to include those with knowledge of these issues.

The Birmingham Political Union

Established in December 1829 by the banker Thomas Attwood, the Birmingham Political Union (BPU) was created precisely to achieve greater representation for the industrial centres. Attwood believed financial reforms to be of paramount importance to British prosperity but increasingly felt that this would not be possible without first political reform. With this view he set about pressurising government to make the necessary changes by uniting the working and middle classes in a respectable campaign that focused on these issues. The BPU quickly became a model for other political unions and with their combination of working-class numbers, middle-class money and, crucially, respectability they began to yield some positive results.

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Reasons for the passing of the Great Reform Act, 1832

Declining Tory hegemony

The lack of significant parliamentary change during the 1820s was certainly a feature of economic prosperity which quieted the majority of British voices, but of equal significance was the complete dominance of Tory control. Since 1812, there had been no change in leadership and Lord Liverpool was very much at the head of a party that publicly exuded confidence and assuredness of purpose. These qualities made it very difficult for the Whig opposition to mount an effective challenge and therefore the government did not feel threatened enough to consider changes.

Despite outward appearances, the Tory party was showing signs of division over the issue of Catholic Emancipation in Ireland. Since the introduction of the Penal Laws in 1691, Catholics had been barred from sitting in parliament, but among elements within the Tory membership there was increasing sympathy with the Catholic cause. The 'Catholic question' had always been a difficulty and Liverpool had made every effort to keep it off the political agenda. However, with the creation of a new protest group – the Catholic Association in Ireland in 1823 – by a determined Irish lawyer named Daniel O'Connell, the issue was thrust into the public arena where it quickly became a poisoned chalice for Liverpool's party.

Following a reshuffle of cabinet there was significant division among prominent members of the government, with the new home secretary, Robert Peel, an avowed anti-emancipator and the foreign secretary, George Canning, a keen supporter of the measure. Led by two of the most important ministers in government, each position became polarised to the extent that emancipation became the single most important issue in the 1826 election as Whigs saw an opportunity to break Tory dominance. Despite such a widening division, the Tories secured another term in office and what kept the party together was Liverpool himself. Though criticised as an unoriginal leader he was generally regarded as competent and decent person who was able to inspire trust in those around him. Using these talents in unison with his many years of political experience he was successful in managing the more explosive characters in his government and ultimately this ensured party unity did not evaporate.

The resignation of Liverpool and Tory crisis

By 1827, the Tory party and Lord Liverpool had been in power for 15 years. However, in February, following a stroke, Liverpool resigned from office and with his departure went the ballast that had kept the party on an even keel through difficult waters. Following his resignation there was a brief power vacuum as factions in the party manoeuvred to get their candidate the leadership. The sudden vulnerability that the governing party found itself in created an opportunity for the opposition which began to think about reform as a vehicle to achieve power and to capitalise on the growing crisis within the Tory party. The process of choosing a new leader opened up old wounds within the party which further improved the Whig cause, as in the space of 11 months the Tories had three different leaders. The third leader, the Duke of Wellington, took office in August 1828 but quickly divided the party by allowing Catholic Emancipation in 1829. This decision split party members into 'liberals' who accepted the decision and 'ultras' who rejected it. The impact of this divide reduced public confidence and the consequence was very evident in the June 1830 election when the Tory party was returned with a working majority of only 42 MPs. This was tenable if liberals could be relied upon to support government policies, but given the level of distrust and animosity that had been generated, Wellington was unable to maintain an effective government and had to step aside for the first Whig administration since 1807.

The significance of this turn of events was that reform suddenly became a political possibility, as the incoming Whig administration under the leadership of Earl Grey had been considering extending the vote as a way of enhancing their chances of attaining office. By creating the opportunity for a Whig government, the Tory leadership crisis opened the door to reform and on 1 March 1831 a bill was presented to parliament.

Passage of the Act: The first and second bills

In March 1831, a measure of reform was presented to parliament. The bill presented was by no means an excessively radical measure and reflected the Whig's own conservative instincts by not including either a secret ballot or uniform voting qualifications. Instead it simply proposed to disenfranchise 100 rotten and pocket boroughs and redistribute their seats to the industrial towns. Even despite this modest reform it struggled through the commons and was then subject to rigorous amendment during the committee stage where bills were closely scrutinised before moving to the House of Lords. Although the Whigs were certainly not out-and-out reformers, it is testament to Grey's commitment to some degree of reform that, rather than accept Tory changes, he asked the king to dissolve parliament so that he might go to the people and achieve the majority he needed to get the bill passed in its current form.

The election was essentially a referendum on the issue of reform and Grey had judged the public demand accurately. The Whigs were returned with a majority of nearly 140 and the second reform bill passed the commons only to be blocked in the Tory-dominated House of Lords in October.

Riots and a third reform bill

Following the electoral success of the reform-minded Whigs there was much excitement about the prospect of reform, such that when the bill was defeated in the Lords serious rioting broke out across the country. The most threatening of this was arguably in Bristol, which saw three days of rioting and approximately 130 people killed or wounded after a cavalry charge brought the disturbances to an end. Bristol was not an isolated case and there were additional riots in Nottingham and Derby, but given the prominence of Bristol – it was the largest port on the west coast after Liverpool and had grown substantially wealthy as a result of the slave trade – the upset that occurred in the city sent unsettling reverberations through the establishment and prompted a third bill to be presented in December.

The third bill involved substantial changes, including a reduction in the number of boroughs scheduled to lose one of their two MPs, from 41 to 30, and 10 new boroughs to be given two MPs instead of the initially proposed one. These changes were aimed at securing an easier passage through parliament and by April 1832 the bill had successfully reached committee stage in the House of Lords with a slender majority of nine. If Tory peers had voted in favour of the bill after having been sufficiently shocked by the level of rioting that followed the failure of the second bill, then they rallied very quickly and blocked any further progress. To keep reform alive Earl Grey beseeched the king to create 50 new Whig peers so that it could be forced through the upper house but his pleas fell upon deaf ears. Faced with the failure of a third attempt Grey resigned his office in May and the country erupted in protest once more.

The 'days of May'

The resignation of Grey saw the king ask Wellington to form a new Tory government which immediately drew the condemnation of the British public. The manner in which the public responded was financial; the frustrated middle classes began to withdraw their savings and investments from banks in an attempt to destroy government finances – in 10 days more than £1.8 million was removed. Although not physically threatening, the extended period over which the reform crisis had now been operating created a sense that if it continued any longer frustration would boil over into something more dangerous.

Under the prevailing circumstances Wellington found it very difficult to form a new government as many of his desired ministers were reluctant to sit with him on the government benches when the country was so against him. Unable to recruit enough supporters, Wellington had to inform the king that he could not offer an administration and consequently Grey was called back with the promise that if necessary he would have the Whig peers he needed to pass reform.

A Level Section A Exam Question

To what extent does the strength of government resolve explain the decline in demand for reform in the years 1785–1830? (20 marks)

Exam Tip

Make sure to take note of any timeframe presented in the question and try to cover the whole of the specified period. This will add some of the necessary breadth that examiners are looking for.

The 'Great' Reform Act, 1832 and its significance

In the event there was no need for extra peers as the opposition toward reform collapsed under public pressure. Faced with the inevitability of reform, rather than have their power in the House of Lords diluted, the Tories acquiesced to the measure and on the 4 June Britain's first Reform Act was passed by a vote of 106 to 22.

Provisions of the Act

Under the new legislation the distribution of seats was altered to reflect the modern demographical changes in Britain:

- 56 boroughs in England and Wales were disenfranchised completely with another 30 losing one of their two MPs
- 42 new borough constituencies were created
- Scotland received eight extra seats and Ireland five.

In addition the franchise was extended to include more people.

- In the counties the vote was now given to adult males who owned copyhold land worth £10 a year or rented land worth £50 a year, in addition to the existing 40 shilling freeholder.
- In the boroughs the vote was uniformed and now given to adult males who either owned or rented property worth £10 a year provided they had paid all relevant taxes and had been in possession of the property for at least one year. Existing voters could also retain the franchise but not pass on this right to heirs.
- Voters were required to be registered.

Significance of the Act

Under this new franchise the electorate in Britain rose from 366,000 to 650,000 which equated to about 18 percent of the adult male population in England and Wales alone. On this basis the reform measure did not create democracy but simply removed the obvious injustices within the old system. Given that the men who formulated this Act were products of their unreformed environment it is reasonable to suggest that they naturally sought to retain as much continuity as possible and change only enough to appease the public clamour. Under this interpretation it is popular to view the legislation as a means of shoring up and preserving a system under threat. This idea had a lot of merit and certainly became the dominant belief in the years that immediately followed, prompting further reform demands from those who felt cheated by the limitations of the reforms.

It is worth considering, however, a longer-term view on the impact of these changes. Given the extent of injustice within the old system it would be too much to imagine that, with one piece of reform legislation, the wrongs of that system would be righted and a perfectly democratic system created. If those producing the Act were indeed products of their time then it was natural that they should behave as they did simply because that is all they knew. To effect wider changes, attitudes would first have to progress but this does not happen immediately. Perhaps it is more appropriate, therefore, to view the current reform as a stepping stone: a means to further progress in the future when attitudes have moved on and society can countenance more radical political change.

ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

Why was reform passed?

Using the material presented above create a storyboard depicting the most important events that led to the passage of the Great Reform Act in 1832.

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THINKING HISTORICALLY Causation (3c&d)

Causation and Intention

1 Work on your own or with a partner to identify as many causes for the passage of the Great Reform Act in 1832 as you can. Write each cause on a separate card or piece of paper.

2 Divide your cards into those which represent:

- **a** the actions or intentions of people
- **b** the beliefs held by people at the time
- **c** the contextual factors or events (i.e. political, social or economic events)
- **d** states of affairs (long- or short-term situations that have developed in particular ways).

3 Focus on the intentions and actions of the key people in the run-up to the creation of the Great Reform Act. For each person draw on your knowledge to fill in the table below, identifying:

- **a** their intentions
- **b** the actions they took to achieve these
- **c** the consequences of their actions (both intended and unintended)
- **d** the extent to which their intentions were achieved.

Key figure	Intentions in 1832	Actions taken	Consequences	How far intention achieved
John Russell	To pass reform and consolidate his party To protect the country from further reform	Introduced moderate reform	Extended the franchise Promoted expectation for more change	Short term – party was consolidated and enjoyed further success Long term – further reform took place
William IV				
Duke of Wellington				
Earl Grey				

4 Discuss the following questions with a partner:

- **a** Did any one party intend the Reform Act to be passed?
- **b** How important are people's intentions in explaining the passage of the Great Reform Act?

The rise and fall of Chartism

Reforming reform, 1832–52

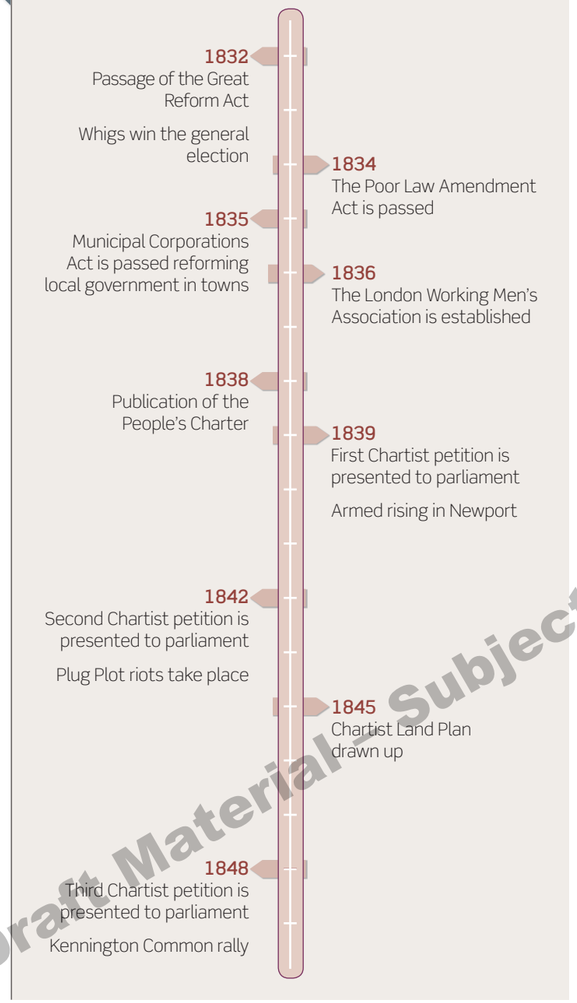
Despite things changing for many in Britain, the reality was that the passage of the Great Reform Act did not herald significant differences to the underlying political make-up of the country. Under the terms of the legislation it was primarily the propertied middle classes that benefited rather than the general public and as a result it quickly brought rebuke from the radical reformers.

Chartist demands

The opinion of Henry Hetherington (see Source 8) was not an isolated one and across the country many people became jaded by the sense of propertied nepotism that the 1832 Act had established. In the wake of reform ordinary people expected their lives to improve now that parliament was more representative of them and therefore their problems. In reality, however, the immediate legislation that followed signified a large degree of vested self-interest rather than any new-found social awareness. In a country that continued to industrialise rapidly, the working and labouring classes found much cause for improvement and yet the government still failed to appreciate their plight.

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TIMELINE



SOURCE 8 Extract from an article by Henry Hetherington in his newspaper, *Poor Man's Guardian*, dated 27 October 1832.

...with a little instinctive sense of self-preservation, have the Whigs manufactured a 'great measure'. They know that the old system could not last, and desired to establish another as like it as possible, and also to keep their places, they framed the BILL, in the hope of drawing to the feudal aristocracy and yeomanry of the counties a large reinforcement of the middle class. The Bill was, in effect, an invitation to the shopocrats of the enfranchised towns to join the Whiggocrats of the country, and make common cause with them in keeping down the people, and thereby quell the rising spirit of democracy in England.

Measures such as the 1833 Factory Act were felt to benefit the newly enfranchised middle classes in that they failed to offer adequate working conditions or a maximum working day for those outside of the textile industry, while the 1834 Poor Law seemed to punish rather than support those who had no work.

It was against this background of social discontent that the London Working Men's Association was founded in 1836 with the intention of demanding further political reform so that working people might be accurately represented. Founded by William Lovett and attracting familiar reform-minded names such as Henry Hetherington and Thomas Attwood, the association published its manifesto in 1839 to raise awareness of its cause.

The 'People's Charter'

The aims of the organisation were very ambitious and certainly reflected a desire to made Britain a fully fledged democracy, even by modern standards.

The manifesto was known as the 'People's Charter' and it called for:

- equal representation
- universal manhood suffrage for those over 21 years old
- annual parliaments
- the removal of property qualifications for MPs
- a secret ballot
- payment of MPs.

So radical were the aims of the 'People's Charter' that the Working Men's Association quickly became better known as the 'Chartists' and once again political reform was thrust into the public eye.

The motivation behind such far-reaching demands was simple: with a more democratic system that included the rank and file and protected their vote, any successive parliament would not be able to ignore them, or at least could be held accountable if it did. Equally, by guaranteeing a wage to MPs, not only would the working classes be able to vote, they would also be able to afford to stand for election. Traditionally viewed as a privilege of the propertied classes, only once parliament had been opened up to every class would Britain finally have a governing system that operated in the interests of every person; only then in their view might government be truly representative. These were the principles of the Chartists and over the next 20 years they would endeavour to achieve them.

Chartist membership

The membership of the Chartist movement was very broad as the principles of their charter attracted a range of individuals, each with a different locus of interest. Unsurprisingly, the majority of members were working class: usually craftsmen and skilled workers from declining industries looking for protection during difficult times, although there was also a significant contingent of middle-class reformers who sought to build on the foundation laid by the 1832 Act.

The diverse nature of the movement was both its strength and its weakness. During times of economic prosperity, for example, the membership declined, as working people felt their conditions to be acceptable because they were able to earn good wages. However, during economic decline the number of members grew, as people

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saw Chartism as a means to promote a better deal for themselves. This fluctuation has given rise to doubts as to the overall political motives of the movement, with some commentators such as J. R. Stephens suggesting that the Chartists were primarily a product of the economic climate and only sought political change to alleviate economic suffering. Even if the motivation of this group is in doubt, the range of opinion it garnered generated a truly mass movement that was difficult to ignore, but such numbers needed to be carefully directed in order to maximise their effectiveness. In terms of such direction Chartism was found to be wanting.

'Physical force' and 'moral force' Chartism

At their first National Convention held in London during the winter of 1839, Chartists were immediately divided over how to achieve their aims. Men like William Lovett and Thomas Attwood were keen to use peaceful means such as pamphlets and petitions in the belief that parliament would best listen to respectful requests rather than forceful demands. These individuals became known as '*moral force*' Chartists and they sought to play on the growing need for politicians to listen to the electorate. They reasoned that given the majority of voters were now middle-class property owners, the most likely way to win favour was through behaving respectfully and not promoting the generally held image of the working class as brutish and ignorant.

By contrast others within the organisation, such as Fergus O'Connor, James Bronterre O'Brien and George Julian Harney, were more disposed toward offering a direct challenge. These '*physical force*' Chartists favoured a general strike and O'Brien and Harney in particular even considered an armed revolution to achieve their aims if the government did not listen.

The mixed attitudes of those in charge were reflected in the generally unco-ordinated and, some might say, uninspired actions of the movement which began by presenting a petition signed by 1,280,958 people to parliament in May 1839.

SOURCE 9 Extract from the first Chartist petition presented to parliament in May 1839,

> ...when the State calls for defenders, when it calls for money, no consideration of poverty or ignorance can be pleaded, in refusal or delay of the call. Required, as we are universally, to support and obey the laws, nature and reason entitle us to demand that in the making of the laws, the universal voice shall be implicitly listened to. We perform the duties of freemen; we must have the privileges of freemen. Therefore, we demand universal suffrage. The suffrage, to be exempt from the corruption of the wealthy and the violence of the powerful, must be secret.

The nature of the demands echoed the same principles as the *Rights of Man* had done more than 40 years before. The difference, however, was that there was no violent revolution to focus the attention of politicians and the government felt comfortable enough to reject the petition in July by a vote of 235 to 46.

With this failure, adherents of 'physical force' saw their opportunity and embarked upon what became known as the 'sacred month', which involved a general strike and protest meetings that usually turned into fights with the local authorities. More disturbing was an attempted uprising in Newport which saw nearly 10,000 miners clash with troops outside the Westgate Hotel. After a brief skirmish the Chartists fled into the night leaving more than 20 dead.

In the aftermath of the Newport rising Chartist leaders were arrested by the authorities and, between 1839 and 1841, 500 of them were held in prison. The consequence of this action was that Chartism was temporarily paralysed and after recovering in 1842 was unwilling to risk further reprisal from the government. More conservative elements sought to rehabilitate the movement by returning to its original plan of petitioning but despite a second petition attracting three million signatures, parliament was in no mood to acquiesce and once again rejected the second petition by an increased margin of 43.

Any remaining confidence among the Chartists was smashed by the iron resolve of parliament and after a second defeat the movement started to unravel. One leader, Fergus O'Connor, looked to a new venture that was designed to give working-class families the opportunity to own their own land and live in a rural community away from the struggles of urban life. The Land Plan was set up in 1845 and initially proved successful, attracting 100,000 people by 1848. Though lacking a specific political agenda, the Land Plan is evidence that Chartism was waning and people were looking to find other solutions to their problems. Compared to the smog-ridden cities, a pleasant rural living was seen to be particularly attractive.

The Kennington Common rally and third Chartist petition

Just as Chartism was appearing to drift into terminal decline, revolution ignited the continent and cries for democracy were heard once more. In Britain this manifested itself in a massive Chartist demonstration at Kennington Common on 10 April which was to be followed by the presentation of a third petition to parliament. In the wake of revolution abroad the government declared the meeting illegal and enrolled 85,000 special constables in anticipation of trouble. In the event, although the meeting defied the ban and went ahead, it was attended by working men and women in their Sunday best clothes and children played as speeches were made. The third petition was then driven to parliament by O'Connor and a small group of fellow Chartists where it was politely, but firmly, declined on the basis that of the claimed five million signatures, less than half were genuine.

The failure of Chartism

Following the rejection of a third petition, Chartism was effectively moribund. As the revolutionary fires on the continent were extinguished so too was the Chartist movement. Although it was not formally wound up until 1860 it ceased to be a serious movement and lost support almost as quickly as it had gained it more than a decade before. There were several reasons why the movement failed.

The most popular reason offered for Chartist failures is the idea of '**hunger politics**'. This classic interpretation has its basis in the reform movement which saw levels of active support rise and fall alongside economic fortunes. In this analysis the Chartists found

SOURCE 10 *A physical force Chartist arming for the fight*, cartoon from *Punch*, dated 1848.



KEY TERM

Hunger politics
This is a phrase that is often used to denote economic hardship as the cause for unrest. It posits the idea that when people are gainfully employed and have sufficient money to feed their families then protest is unlikely to take place. During times of economic difficulty, however, when people do not earn enough to feed their families then protest is more frequent.

popular support primarily among the working class because it was they who felt the acute sense of despair during the times of economic hardship which mirrored the high points of Chartist activity; 1839, 1842 and 1848 each saw a stark decline in economic prosperity which then gave way to improved conditions when Chartism was quiet. There is merit to this argument but it does not wholly account for the failure of arguably Britain's largest working-class movement.

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In addition to such conditional support, the Chartists also lacked effective leadership. Charismatic men like O'Connor were able to attract the support but were equally unable to maintain a definitive approach in the face of determined opposition and therefore the movement splintered very quickly after its first petition was defeated. Augmenting this weakness was the divisive nature of the movement from the outset. Unable to agree on the best means to proceed when the choices made were unsuccessful, dissent crept in and without decisive leadership this undermined the cohesiveness of the movement.

Perhaps most significant of all to the failure of the Chartists was their ambition. The aims they set themselves were very noble but in the mid-1800s perhaps a little ahead of their time. In a period which had only reluctantly granted the vote to a modest number of propertied and respectable members of society, the idea that only a few years after this measure the British establishment would countenance complete democratisation and hand power over to the working class is, at best, naive. A useful example of ongoing conservatism comes from the Chartists themselves. Originally when writing their charter the vote was to be extended to men and women but they baulked at such a move, believing that they would never be taken seriously if the request for genuine universal suffrage was retained. Further evidence can also be found at their first Convention where many of the middle-class attendees were put off by the talk of physical force and actually resigned before any action was taken. Given the movement itself was divided over both its aims and its methods, it was very unlikely that it was ever going to be seriously listened to, especially when what the Chartists generally agreed on was so radical and their audience so hostile to further change.

THINKING HISTORICALLY Change (4a)

Significance

Look at the two accounts of the Chartist movement in Sources 11 and 12.

a In what ways does Elizabeth Gaskell think that the Chartist movement is significant?

b How significant does Gaskell seem to think the movement might be in the long run?

c Compare this to the historian Clive Behagg. What significance does Behagg ascribe to the Chartist movement?

d Why do you think these views might differ so greatly?

SOURCE 11 Elizabeth Gaskell writing about the first Chartist petition in her novel, *Mary Barton*, published in 1848.

> Besides, the starving multitudes had heard that the very existence of their distress had been denied in Parliament; and though they felt this strange and inexplicable, yet the idea that their misery had still to be revealed in all its depths, and that then some remedy would be found, soothed their aching hearts and kept down their rising fury.
>
> So a petition was framed, and signed by thousands in the bright Spring days of 1839, imploring Parliament to hear witnesses who could testify to the unparalleled destitution of the manufacturing districts.

SOURCE 12 Clive Behagg, *Labour and Reform: Working-class Movements 1815–1914* (1991).

> But Chartism was not made up of cowed and hungry simpletons. For its rank and file, as well as its leadership, radical politics represented a perfectly logical way of viewing the world and rectifying its abuses. The commitment to the vote stemmed from the brain rather than the belly. Nor does the fact that there was no formal system of education mean that these were ignorant people.

Change and continuity in post-reform Britain

With the demise of Chartism the British radicalism settled down and there was a sense that order and stability was, once again, established. In light of this view several historians have concluded that the reforms made at the start of the 1830s were entirely successful in securing the political establishment. By extending the franchise to the middle class, the aristocracy destroyed any alliance it may have had with the working class and instead created a strong union between the propertied interests in Britain. In forging such a bond, far from establishing a more representative system, the newly enfranchised classes simply reinforced the existing political elite.

Viewed through this lens very little had fundamentally changed in Britain. Corruption was still widely practised and without a secret ballot so too was intimidation. In the first election after the Act had passed, for example, the famed orator Henry Hunt lost his seat in Preston to a Whig–Tory coalition formed between two of the area's wealthiest families, while a young William Gladstone owed his electoral victory to the Duke of Newcastle who controlled the Newark constituency in which he stood. The failure of Chartism was evidence of a government confident in its actions and therefore without the fear that might have forced it to offer significant changes beyond that which it deemed suitable.

This is quite a bleak impression of the post-reform political landscape and only a partially accurate one. Certainly, there remained significant continuity as the reform measure was only intended to make limited changes. However, even the smallest of changes can have unintended consequences and in Britain this was without doubt the case.

The most obvious change was that more people could now vote. Not only this, but they had to be registered in order to do so. The significance of registration was that in order ensure success each party needed to encourage supporters to register. Political clubs such as the Tory-leaning Carlton Club and Whig-sponsored Reform Club were established to achieve this and in the bigger constituencies local party activists started to appear as part of a general effort to raise the profile of their respective parties. In effect, after 1832 the political system started to become more professional.

In direct consequence of this development, parties also became more definitive in their ideologies. Whereas in the past Tories and Whigs were from the same background and therefore generally of a similar dispensation, often only differing on points of technicality, after 1832 they became more polarised, which both reduced the chances of an 'independent' candidate being successful but also established the dominance of the **two-party system**.

KEY TERM

Two-party system
A term that describes a system of elected government that is dominated by two parties to the detriment of all others. Under such systems these parties usually take turns in forming governments depending on the results of each election.

Most tangible of all the changes was perhaps the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act which changed the way in which local town councils were run. Prior to 1835, these bodies were self-elected and accountable to no-one. Following the findings of a Royal Commission into local governance, the Whigs pushed through a bill that abolished the existing corporations and replaced them with elected councils. The franchise in these new local elections was granted to all male ratepayers, which was substantially broader than the voting qualification to parliament.

More pervasive than any other change, though, was the subtle shift in attitudes that reform engendered. After 1832, the establishment was increasingly more responsive to the electorate. Although at a national level political reform was ignored, there was substantial social and economic reform, ranging from the abolition of the slave trade to a new Poor Law, which will be considered in subsequent chapters. What is most important to remember in the post-reform landscape is that, politically, the first breach had been made and what followed was a slow awakening to the fact that Britain was becoming a modern nation that would demand an equally modern system of governance.

Although in its own lifetime Chartism had been an abject failure, having achieved none of the aims in the 'People's Charter', it was successful in keeping alive radical ideas that, as the country developed, found a more appreciative ear after 1852.

ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

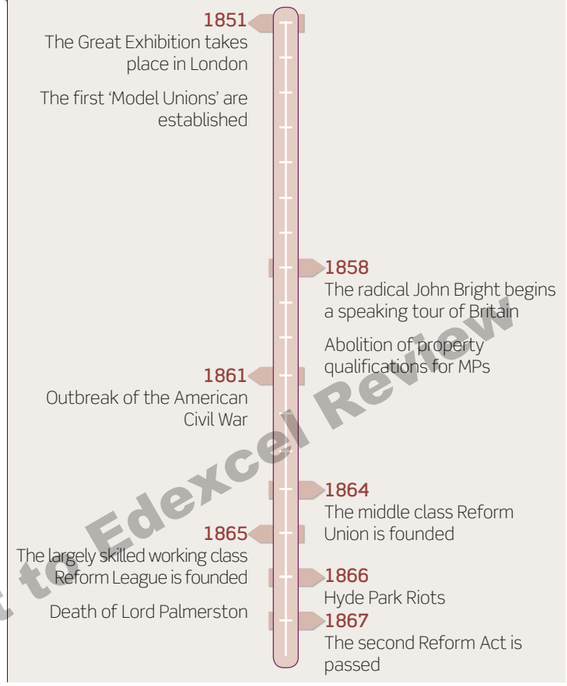
What impact did the 'Great' Reform Act have?

Write a list of the key features of the electoral system before 1832 and then a list of the changes that the Act made. Using these lists together with the material above, consider the impact that reform had and write a 300- to 500-word summary justifying your opinion.

'REACHING FOR DEMOCRACY'? FURTHER PARLIAMENTARY REFORM, 1852–70

Demand for political reform after 1852 was not limited to external forces and there had always been a reformist contingent in parliament, even if it was largely ineffectual during the Chartist campaigns. With the end of that pressure, however, there was an opportunity to push for moderate reforms without the hysteria attached to the excessive demands made by that working-class movement.

TIMELINE



EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

'Conservatives' and 'Liberals'
After defeat in 1832, the Tory party sought to rehabilitate itself. Under the leadership of Robert Peel in 1834 the party issued a new manifesto at Tamworth using the title 'Conservative Party'. Just as the Tories had rebranded themselves, the mostly aristocratic Whig party also began to think in terms of a more appropriate name after they were joined in parliament by a host of new non-aristocratic members following the recent reforms. With the increased reliance on these new MPs after 1850, the term 'Liberal' became a more appropriate title for the party. Collectively these new titles also nicely reflected the polarising political landscape that reform had created.

Many old Whigs remained positively inclined toward some further reforms, especially as politics was beginning to become more professionalised and reform would be an obvious way to enhance the fortunes of their party. For these individuals, therefore, any reform should be undertaken with careful thought as to how it would affect voting patterns and seat distributions.

In contrast to these men, there was also a more altruistic minority who sought reform as a means of purifying the system and making it more genuinely democratic. Among those who might be described as 'radical reformers' were Joseph Hume and Peter Locke King, each passionate about the need for further change; Hume, a veteran campaigner, had produced reform bills in every session of parliament between 1848 and 1852, while King was committed to extending the county franchise.

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There was a third group who were also willing to accept a degree of political change. This was a growing number of new Tories who recognised, like the Whigs, that some reform could be beneficial to their party if they were seen to introduce it. This understanding had been hard earned by the Tories, now renamed the 'Conservative Party', who, between 1832 and 1852, had only found themselves in office for just seven years: briefly in 1834 and then for a five-year term in 1841. The cause of this extended period in the wilderness was felt to be public gratitude for the Whig/Liberal's successful passage of reform.

In view of this development there was a growing consensus among the two main parties about the political expediency of further reform.

A modernising nation

The motive for reform has so far been suggested as primarily that of self-interested preservation brought on by acts of popular discontent that have been interpreted as threats to order. Given the limited nature of the subsequent changes there is certainly compelling evidence for this interpretation. However, to see the evolution of parliamentary democracy simply as a reaction to force is not to appreciate the full story. Without doubt that motive is very persuasive and holds a lot of weight but if it was the only motive then why did the Chartists not succeed with their own political demands?

Arguably Chartism failed because it was too ambitious for the times in which it operated. The demands it made were too excessive for those in parliament and, regardless of any threat they posed, the strength of conservative thought destroyed any hope of further political improvement *at that time*. By the 1850s, however, Britain was a different country with new priorities that would open up the case for reform once more.

Population changes

Between 1821 and 1861, the population in Britain rose from just over 24 million to more than 31 million. The majority of this growing population resided in the ever-developing towns and cities and as such fell under the borough franchise qualifications which, in 1832, had been set at occupancy or ownership of property worth more than £10 a year. Under this qualification, the growing majority of working men living in the boroughs did not have the right to vote. The implications of this development was that having redrawn the electoral map in 1832, that map was now out of date. This realisation offers an additional motive for the evolution of democracy: progress. As Britain underwent fundamental structural and demographic changes, it was necessary for the political system to mirror such transformation.

Early political efforts to extend the franchise

Given the growing awareness among the Liberals and Conservatives of the potential benefits of extending the franchise, there were tentative efforts made during the 1850s by each party to do so. As early as 1852, the aging Lord Russell proposed to reduce the existing borough qualification from £10 a year to £6. Despite popular consensus that some reform was necessary, the bill was rejected then and on two more occasions, in 1854 and 1860, when the peer had wrongly judged that enough time had passed for his bill to be acceptable. At the heart of this opposition was both an underlying fear of the working class and partisan politics. The majority of Conservatives felt that such a low qualification would allow too many of the working class to influence politics while at the same time give the Liberals more support. Their own reform offering in 1859 retained the existing borough franchise and sought to extend it into the counties. Under this proposal, modestly respectable lodgers living in the rural areas would become enfranchised. To the Liberals this was equally distasteful as Russell's bill had been to Conservatives; the counties were traditional heartlands of Conservative support and therefore it was felt they would gain the political advantage if the measure was passed.

Neither franchise proposal survived the obsessive scrutiny that party politics encouraged and, as the 1850s came to a close, with the exception of the abolition of property qualifications for MPs in 1858, further reform seemed a long way off.

Changing political attitudes

In 1859, the Liberals were returned to power under the premiership of Lord Palmerston. Under his tenure reform was largely ignored as foreign policy took priority and he was personally averse to the notion of democracy, blocking further proposed changes. Despite, or perhaps because of, Palmerston's opposition the reform question was raised once more, first by the Birmingham MP John Bright, and then by circumstances abroad.

Bright had been a moderniser throughout his political career; along with Richard Cobden he had founded the Anti-Corn Law League in 1839 and had opposed Britain's involvement in the Crimean War. Reform, however, was his main objective and in 1858 he had begun a series of public speeches aimed at promoting the issue. Although the tour faded, the message he projected concerning the rights of the working class was well heeded by those who listened and by the mid-1860s had inspired a more determined movement.

In 1860, however, the message he was conveying did not yield any significant change. Championing the virtues of the working class was not especially attractive to the aristocratic elements of both the Liberal and Conservative parties. Although open to the idea of extending the franchise, these elements were still unsure of the wisdom in allowing what they believed to be a largely self-interested body of men into the political fold. For this group, rather ironically, the working class was incapable of the selfless service that representative government demanded.

The American Civil War

Strangely it was events across the Atlantic that finally debunked the commonly held myth of working-class selfishness. The economic prosperity that Britain continued to enjoy into the 1860s was in part due to the thriving textile industries in the North West of the country. Since 1825, cotton had been Britain's biggest import and the cloth it produced accounted for a substantial part of the nation's income. More importantly, in Lancashire it provided work for 355,000 people. Much of the cotton was imported from the USA, but with the outbreak of the US Civil War in 1861 supplies dried up as the Republican North blockaded the Confederate Southern ports. During what became known as the 'Cotton Famine' thousands of workers were laid off and consequently found themselves upon hard times. Rather than bemoan their plight, however, these men and women stoically supported the principle of anti-slavery in the USA and made the best of what they could.

Visiting Lancashire during these difficult times was the chancellor of the exchequer, William Gladstone, who was impressed by the forbearance of the textile workers and became convinced of their readiness for the vote (Source 13).

SOURCE 13 Extracts from a speech made by William Gladstone to parliament in May 1864.

> ...What are the qualities which fit a man for the exercise of a privilege such as the franchise? Self-command, self-control, respect for order, patience under suffering, confidence in the law, regard for superiors....I am now speaking only of a limited portion of the working class... hearts should be bound together by a reasonable expansion...among selected portions of the people, of every benefit, and every privilege that can justly be conferred on them.

The behaviour of the Lancashire cotton workers broadened the minds of those in power who had tended to retain a critical opinion of the lower classes – Palmerston had even referred to them as the 'residuum', a term referencing a substance that is left behind after processing. In tandem with the growing awareness of the value of the working class to British commerce, this new perspective gradually encouraged reluctant politicians to become more accepting of their proposed inclusion in any future extension of the franchise.

AS Level Section B Exam Question

How significant was party rivalry in keeping reform alive after 1832? (20 marks)

Exam Tip

Take careful note of the question stem at the beginning of each question as this will help you to understand what the examiner wants you to evaluate. In this case 'how significant' was the role of party rivalry?

The Reform Union and the Reform League

Reform was not only being considered in parliament. With an expanding economy and Britain's growing prominence in the world raising the general expectations of the public, attention became focused on how to capitalise on these successes and once again parliamentary reform gained fresh impetus.

Among those pushing for new reforms was a progressive middle class which felt improved political co-operation between itself and the working class would promote further stability by binding each to the other in one unified aim. By showing that there was space for commonality it was generally felt that potential divisions among employer and employed might be avoided. A group was formed in 1864 and, calling itself the 'National Reform Union', sought to extend the franchise to include all male ratepayers, promote an equal distribution of seats and establish a secret ballot.

The membership of this group was primarily liberal-minded employers such as Samuel Morley, a woollen manufacturer from Nottingham, who was later elected MP for that city in 1865. Morley was a keen advocate of liberal concerns and had been a supporter of the abolition of slavery in 1833. His participation in the Reform Union was an affirmation of his belief in the positive effects of further enfranchisement and also the greater empowerment of the working class which, he believed, would enhance British society.

The inclusion of prominent employers such as Morley gave the Reform Union a significant degree of influence which the government was reluctant to completely ignore; as a voter himself and then as an MP, Morley represented the growing influence of the upwardly mobile middle class whose position in the country was increasing each year as the economy expanded and manufacturing opportunities improved. The impact of this organisation, therefore, was as a respectable **lobby group** who were able to demand the attention of those in power.

KEY TERM

Lobbying
The practice of establishing personal links with politicians in order to promote an interest.

The same year a similar organisation was established by members of the working class. Known as the 'Reform League', its ambitions were more radical than the Union, campaigning instead for universal manhood suffrage and a secret ballot. Although the middle-class Union had more money, the League enjoyed more widespread support and attracted many ex-Chartists and trade unionists. Generally the League was seen as a more radical group than the Reform Union but it was still very moderate in its methods. The more radical trade unionists were disallowed from joining and the president of the organisation was a barrister by the name of Edmond Beales. Under this leadership the League employed the well-worn tactic of demonstration to promote its cause. This was seen as an assertive but respectable means to gain attention in a political world where increasingly politicians were becoming more receptive to popular pressure.

The methods employed by the League were crucial to its likely success. Viewed by the government as a radical organisation, it was keen to allay this concern, in the belief that violent action would not serve its cause well and would perhaps only promote an equally hostile response. Instead, by acting in a manner perceived as acceptable and by using these methods to promote public discussion, the League might be able to take advantage of the more open political climate where politicians were more willing to listen to public issues. In this sense the League exhibited a thoughtful appreciation of the impact that reform in 1832 had produced. By extending the electorate based upon property qualifications, as the economy grew and more people were able to meet this requirement, so political parties became more aware of the need to take into account the wishes of the growing enfranchised population.

This was the basis of power for each group and both were prominent in enhancing the reform agenda by stirring up popular demand and winning the subsequent attention of politicians who were continually seeking to mine new seams of public support.

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Gladstone's reform bill, 1866

With reform slowly gaining momentum during the early 1860s, it enjoyed a sudden burst of pace in 1865 when the anti-reformist prime minister, Lord Palmerston, suddenly died. His death was unexpected but, for reform, fortuitous as it brought back into office the inveterate reformer Earl (formerly Lord) John Russell.

The moderate bill presented to parliament by the chancellor of the exchequer, William Gladstone, evidenced a cautious willingness to integrate some of the working classes, and a clear party political incentive. By reducing the borough franchise to a proposed £7 a year, it was expected that more than 200,000 skilled workers would be enfranchised and that these would primarily be Liberal voters. In the counties the £50 a year rental qualification would be reduced to £14 with the hope that this would encourage 170,000 potential Liberal voters.

Predictably, the Conservatives objected to the measure but so too did conservative elements within the Liberal party itself.

KEY TERM

'Adullamites'
A biblical reference to the story of discontented Israelites who sought refuge from Saul with David in the cave of Adullam. In 1866, it became a label to describe those who disliked the reform proposals of Gladstone.

The 'Adullamites' and Liberal divisions

Within the Liberal Party there was deep-rooted division that Gladstone's reform bill exposed. Since the introduction of new MPs after 1832, the Liberals had become more inclusive, adopting a broader platform so as to establish stronger links with these new constituencies. Consequently the party became an amalgam of 'Old Whigs', radical reformers and respectable leaders of commerce. Within the more progressive environment of the 1860s, each of these groups accepted the need for further reform but differed on the extent of such change. For those most loyal to the late Lord Palmerston, Gladstone's measure was excessively liberal and threatened to enfranchise far too many of the working class. Perhaps the most able of these critics was the barrister Robert Lowe, whose argument amounted to a fear that members of the working class were unable to understand politics and enfranchising so many of them would lead to the corruption of parliament.

In an effort to dilute the bill, opponents sought an amendment that would reduce the number enfranchised. When the amendment was passed, and in the face of deep division in his party, Lord Russell resigned. Amidst rising popular pressure such as the Hyde Park Riots which had been inspired by the Reform League, the Conservative Party was invited to form a minority administration.

EXTEND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

The Hyde Park Riots (1866)
Following the failure of the 1866 Reform Bill, the Reform League resolved to hold a political meeting in Hyde Park in on 23 July 1866 to discuss future action in the campaign for reform. The meeting was declared illegal by the home secretary, Spencer Walpole, Hyde Park was cordoned off by police and the gates chained. Confronted by this action the large crowd that had assembled for the meeting clashed with police and was able to enter the park by swinging on the railings until they gave way.

A leap in the dark? The Second Reform Act, 1867

The role of Benjamin Disraeli

Britain was a very different place from the country that passed the first reform legislation. In every sense it was a more modern state and, to match this, the new chancellor of the exchequer, Benjamin Disraeli, was a modern politician. Fully aware of the benefits that reform could bring to the party that passed the legislation, Disraeli was happy to adopt a more pragmatic attitude and immediately sought to introduce his own bill in March 1867. Despite three of his cabinet colleagues resigning in protest, Disraeli pressed on with his modest reform package. The proposal was less progressive than the Liberal offering but over the course of its debate the chancellor accepted the radical amendments of his critics. In doing so Disraeli evidenced a keen appreciation for manipulating an opportunity. For him, political success was more important than the final shape of the bill; certainly, conservative ideology might be offended but the passage of any reform would, in his eyes, ensure the future success of that party and therefore it was imperative that the bill go through. In compromising the principles of the Conservative Party, Disraeli was, in one sense, recognising the political animal that the British public had become and, in another, was seeking to harness that emotion for the benefit of modern conservatism. Such was his belief in the necessity of this bill that he alienated several older members of his party, including Lord Cranborne, the Earl of Carnarvon and the war secretary, Jonathan Peel, who each resigned in protest in March. Despite these exits, the bill was passed in August 1867.

Political attitudes to reform in the 1860s

Provisions of the Second Reform Act

The distribution of seats involved the following changes:

- 45 seats were taken from boroughs with less than 10,000 people; seven were completely disenfranchised
- 25 of these seats went to the counties; 20 went to new boroughs; six existing boroughs got an extra seat and one seat was reserved for the University of London.

The franchise was extended to include:

- in the boroughs, all male householders provided they had lived there for at least a year and lodgers who occupied property worth at least £10 for at least one year
- in the counties, in addition to the existing franchise, all owners or leaseholders of land worth £5 a year.

SOURCE 14 '*A leap in the dark.*' A cartoon commenting on the Second Reform Act, dated August 1867.



The impact of the Second Reform Act

The immediate impact of the 1867 Act was electoral defeat for Disraeli in 1868. Despite enfranchising more than one million of the working class, the Conservatives lost the next general election and disproved Disraeli's own rationale for reform. In this philosophical sense, perhaps the significance of the reform was that it proved to all that members of the working class had their own minds and would vote as they saw fit. More tangibly, the British political system became more honest and professional. With more than 2.46 million voters it became almost impossible to use corrupt means to achieve votes and therefore parties began to recognise the importance of campaigning. It was perhaps the early recognition of this that gave the Liberal party greater success after 1867, as during the 1868 election members maintained a more active attempt to influence voters by speaking all over the country, while Disraeli was confident enough only to issue a printed election address to the people. In recognising and then pursuing the task of persuading voters to their causes, British parties became more representative of public interest and this was the start of a more democratic establishment.

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To suggest the Act completely eradicated 'old corruption', however, would be too optimistic. There were certainly many failings with the reform: large areas in the Midlands and the North were still under-represented while the Southern counties were over-represented; property still determined the franchise in the counties; in the boroughs, a residency clause demanding occupancy for at least one year discriminated against around 30 percent of the working-class population. Additionally, a system of 'plural voting' was also permitted for those who owned property in both a borough and county and seats were reserved for prominent universities.

Clearly then, the reform was not perfect. Like the reform of 1832 before it, there was much room for improvement and over the next 15 years there would be several attempts to do so. But, also as in 1832, the 1867 reforms took Britain one step closer to the panacea that is democracy. Given the nation's starting point in 1785 and the enormity of this journey, small steps were perhaps the safest way of proceeding.

A Level Section B Exam Question

How far do you agree that the 1867 Reform Act was more significant than reform in 1832? (20 marks)

Exam Tip

When answering this question you should consider the context and motivation for each of these Acts.

ACTIVITY
KNOWLEDGE CHECK

How had British politics changed by 1867?

Using the material above, write down the three most important ways that Britain had changed between 1832 and 1867. Justify your answers briefly.

THINKING HISTORICALLY Causation (3a&b)

'The Might of Human Agency'

'Our lack of control'. Work in pairs.

1 Describe to your partner a situation where things did not work out as you had intended. Then explain how you would have done things differently to make the situation as you would have wanted. Your partner will then tell the group about that situation and whether they think that your alternative actions would have the desired effect.

'The tyranny of failed actions'. Work individually.

2 Think about Fergus O'Connor, one of the leaders of the Chartist movement after 1838, who took the third petition demanding greater political equality to parliament in 1848. Like the two previous attempts this third attempt failed and as a result Chartism fell into decline.

a Write down three ways in which the Chartists could have acted differently in that situation.

b Now imagine that you are Fergus O'Connor. Write a defence of your actions. Try to think about the things that you would have known about at the time and make sure that you do not use the benefit of hindsight.

'Arguments'. Work in groups of between four and six.

In turn, each group member will read out their defence. Other group members suggest ways to reassure the reader that they were not a failure and that in some ways what happened was a good outcome.

3 Think about William Gladstone and his reform bill which he presented in 1866.

a In what ways were the consequences of the 1866 reform bill not anticipated by Gladstone?

b In what ways did the 1866 reform bill turn out better for Gladstone than the intended consequences?

4 Think about Benjamin Disraeli and his efforts to pass the Second Reform Act in anticipation that the Tory party would benefit from the gratitude of those newly enfranchised. Answer the following:

a In what ways were the consequences of the passage of the Second Reform Act not anticipated by Benjamin Disraeli?

b In what ways did the passage of the Second Reform Act turn out worse for Benjamin Disraeli than the intended consequences?

5 To what extent are historical individuals in control of the history they helped to create? Explain your answer with reference to specific historical examples from this topic and others you have studied.

ACTIVITY
SUMMARY

Continuity or change?

The focus of study within this paper is on developments and changes over almost 100 years of British history. In this chapter you have looked at the motivations for political change and surveyed the political system from 1785 through to 1870. Over this time there were many forces at work which prompted those in power to make significant changes to the political landscape.

Now that you have read the chapter it will be useful to take a step back and think about a broad overview of the material to get a good appreciation of the general dynamics at work.

1 Consider the following questions to help focus your reflection:

a What were the forces that promoted changes to be made?

b What were the motivations of those in power when they considered making changes to the political system?

c Did the reforms offered significantly alter the nature of the political system?

d Are there any strongly consistent features running through the period?

2 Having answered the questions above now provide some examples that support each point you have come up with.

WIDER READING

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