

Robert Peel

February 1788 – July 1850



Born in Bury, Lancashire, the son of Sir Robert Peel (1750–1830), 1st Baronet and a wealthy Lancashire cotton mill owner and MP for Tamworth, Robert Peel (2nd Baronet) was the first prime minister from a “new -money” industrial business background.

After Harrow, where he was a contemporary of Lord Byron, he earned a double first in classics and mathematics from Christchurch, Oxford in 1808.

His father was extremely ambitious for him, preparing him for politics and buying him his Commons seat. It is claimed that he told his son “Bob, you dog, if you do not become Prime Minister someday I’ll disinherit you”.

He entered the House of Commons in 1809 as MP for Cashel Tipperary, and became a rising star in the Tory Party. (he was to represent many constituencies during his career, including that of Oxford University.)

His maiden speech in the Commons was a sensation, and famously described by the Speaker of the House of Commons as “the best first speech since that of William Pitt”

Considered an arch-unionist, and at that time opposed to Catholic emancipation, he was nicknamed ‘Orange Peel’.

His early political career included appointments as under-secretary for war and colonies (1809) and chief secretary for Ireland (1812)

In 1822 he became Home Secretary, after voluntarily resigning his position as chief secretary for Ireland in 1817. During his time, he introduced a number of important reforms of British criminal law; his changes to the penal code resulted in around 100 fewer crimes being punished by death. He also reformed the gaol system with payment for jailers and education for the inmates.

He was out of post for a few months in 1827 after falling out with George Canning, but he returned to the post of Home Secretary under the Duke of Wellington in 1828. As Home Secretary, he created the Metropolitan Police in 1829, leading to the nicknames of 'bobby' and 'peeler' for London's police officers.

During this time he was persuaded of the case for Catholic emancipation after 20 years of opposition to it, and pushed the Catholic Emancipation Bill through Parliament in 1829, arguing that though emancipation was a great danger, civil strife was a greater danger". This bill admitted Irish and English Roman Catholics to Parliament and to all but a handful of public offices. His turn-about on the matter shocked his supporters and he was bitterly attacked for his sudden change of heart and lost his seat for Oxford.

After being in Opposition from 1830 to 1834, he became Prime Minister in November 1834.

On Lord Grey's resignation in July 1834, Peel refused King William IV's invitation to form a government. However, he did accept a second request. In the hope of winning a large majority, he lost no time in calling fresh elections but the majority he won in the election was small.

However Peel issued the Tamworth Manifesto (December 1834), laying down the principles upon which the modern British Conservative Party is based. His first Ministry was a minority government, dependent on Whig support and with Peel serving as his own Chancellor of the Exchequer. After only four months, his government collapsed and he served as Leader of the Opposition during Melbourne's second government (1835–1841).

Peel became Prime Minister again after the 1841 general election. His second Government ruled for five years.

It was a time of economic strife, with many out of work and Britain's international trade suffering. Peel, though never an ideological free trader, took steps to liberalise trade, which created the conditions for a strong recovery. He also passed some groundbreaking legislation, such as the Mines Act of 1842 that banned the employment of women and children underground and the Factory Act 1844 that limited working hours for children and women in factories.

Peel's government was weakened by anti-Catholic sentiment following the controversial increase in the Maynooth Grant of 1845.

(The Maynooth Grant was a cash grant from the British government to a Catholic seminary in Ireland. In 1845, the Conservative Peel, sought to improve the relationship between Catholic Ireland and Protestant Britain by increasing the annual grant from the British government to St Patrick's College, Maynooth, a Catholic seminary in Ireland in dilapidated condition. It aroused a major political controversy in the 1840s, reflecting the anti-Irish and anti-Catholic feelings of the British Protestants.)

After the outbreak of the Great Irish Famine (1845-1849), he decided to join with Whigs and Radicals to repeal the Corn Laws. In 1845, he faced the defining challenge of his career. Failed

harvests led much of the population to call for the repeal of the 30-year-old Corn Laws, which banned the import of cheap foreign grain - a crisis triggered by the Irish potato famine. Unable to send sufficient food to Ireland to stem the famine, he eventually decided the Corn Laws must be repealed out of humanity.

Landowners saw the attempt as an attack on them, and fiercely protested in the House of Commons. Peel's Conservative Party would not support him and the debate lasted for 5 months.

Eventually, in June 1846, the Corn Laws were repealed. However, on the very same day, he was defeated on another bill, and resigned for the final time. Peel remained an influential MP and leader of the Peelite faction until his death in 1850, aged 62, as a result of a riding accident, leaving seven children by his wife, Julia Floyd, and a magnificent art collection – particularly strong in paintings by the Dutch and Flemish Schools – which was displayed in the long gallery of his London home.

Peel often started from a traditional Tory position in opposition to a measure, then reversed his stance and became the leader in supporting liberal legislation. This happened with the Test Act 1828, Catholic Emancipation 1829, the Reform Act 1832, income tax (abolished 1816 – a war tax, reinstated 1842) and, most notably, the repeal of the Corn Laws.

Historian A. J. P. Taylor wrote: "Peel was in the first rank of 19th century statesmen. He carried Catholic Emancipation; he repealed the Corn Laws; he created the modern Conservative Party on the ruins of the old Toryism."

Peel was the first British Prime Minister to have his photograph taken.

He fought no Duels but In 1843 Peel was the target of a failed assassination attempt; a criminally-insane Scottish woodsman named Daniel M'Naghten stalked him for several days before accidentally killing Peel's personal secretary Edward Drummond instead.

Peel had married Julia Floyd in 1820, and they had seven children, of whom the third son, William, became a Naval Officer and won the Victoria Cross at Sevastopol in 1854, and was wounded in 1857 at the relief of Lucknow during the Indian Mutiny, before dying of smallpox at the age of 33.

Peel is buried in St Peter Churchyard, Drayton Bassett, near the family home near Tamworth.