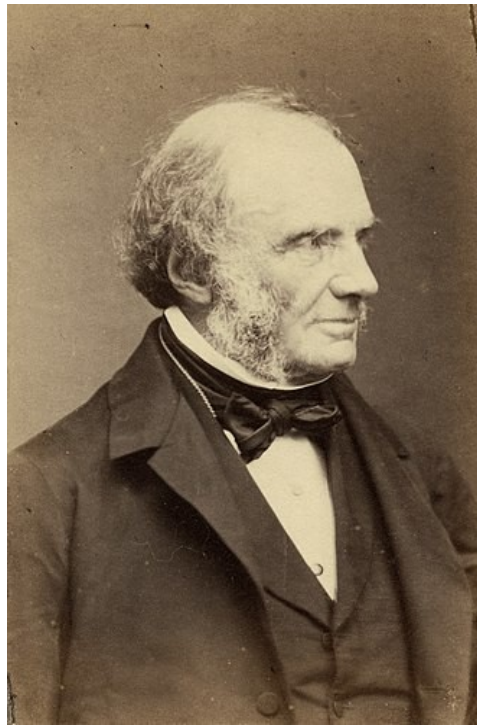


Lord John Russell – The Earl Russell

Aug. 1792 – May 1878



Early Life:

A younger son of one of the richest Whig families (his father was later to become Duke of Bedford), he was born some two months premature and was small and sickly as a child, and was less than 5'5" as an adult, and his small stature was frequently the butt of jokes by political opponents and caricaturists. Schooled mostly at home, in his teens his father was made Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and John became acquainted with Charles James Fox. Fox was Russell's formative political hero and would remain an inspiration throughout his life.

Russell attended Edinburgh University from 1809 to 1812, but did not take a degree. Although often in poor health, he travelled widely in Britain and on the continent, and held a commission as Captain in the Bedfordshire Militia in 1810. During his continental travels Russell visited Spain where his brother was serving as aide-de-camp to Wellington. The following year he had a 90-minute meeting with Napoleon in December 1814 during the former emperor's exile on Elba.

Political Career:

Backbench MP;

Russell entered the Commons as a Whig in 1813 at the age of 20. The future reformer gained his seat by virtue of his father, the Duke of Bedford, instructing the 30 or so electors of Tavistock to return him as an MP even though at the time Russell was abroad and under age!

He wasn't too keen, since the Whigs had been out of office for all but a very brief period since 1783, thus there seemed little likelihood of any ministerial opportunities. In 1815, Russell denounced the Bourbon Restoration and Britain's declaration of war against the recently-returned Napoleon by arguing in the House of Commons that foreign powers had no right to dictate France's form of government. That 90-minute meeting had clearly had an impact.

In 1817, tired of the prospect of perpetual opposition, Russell resigned from Parliament, but he changed his mind a year later and re-entered Parliament for Tavistock at the 1818 General Election. In 1819, Russell embraced the cause of parliamentary reform and he led the more reformist wing of the Whigs throughout the 1820s. In 1828, while still an opposition backbencher, Russell introduced a “Sacramental Test” bill with the aim of abolishing the prohibitions on Catholics and Protestant dissenters being elected to local government and from holding civil and military offices. The bill gained the backing of the Tory Home Secretary, Sir Robert Peel, and was passed into law.

Minister under Grey and Melbourne: 1830–1841;

When Earl Grey's Whigs came to power in 1830, Russell was made Paymaster of the Forces. Despite being a relatively junior minister, as a vocal advocate for Parliamentary reform for over a decade, Russell became a principal leader in the fight for the Reform Act, 1832.. He was one of the committee of four tasked by Grey with drafting the reform bill, and despite not yet being in the Cabinet, Russell was chosen to introduce the bill in March 1831 and over the following year he successfully steered the Reform Act's difficult progress through the Commons.

In May 1834, Russell made a speech on the Irish Tithes bill, in which he argued that the revenue generated by tithes was more than was justified by the size of the Protestant Church in Ireland and that a proportion of the tithe revenue should instead be appropriated for the education of the Irish poor, regardless of denomination. This speech caused a major split in the Grey government and directly led to Grey's resignation and replacement by Viscount Melbourne.

In November 1834, Russell was appointed the leader of the Whigs in the Commons (Melbourne being in the Lords), but his appointment led to the King (William IV) terminating Melbourne's government, partly because he objected to Russell's views on the Irish Church. This remains the last time in British history that a monarch has dismissed a government. The subsequent minority Conservative government lasted less than five months. Russell became Home Secretary in Melbourne's 2nd government, and later served as Secretary of State for War and the Colonies from 1839 to 1841.

As Home Secretary, Russell recommended and secured royal pardons for the Tolpuddle Martyrs and partial commutation of their sentences. In 1836, he introduced the Marriages Act, which allowed civil marriages in England and Wales and allowed Catholics and Protestant Dissenters to marry in their own churches.

In 1837, he steered a series of seven Acts through Parliament, which together reduced the number of offences carrying a sentence of death from thirty-seven to sixteen. This number was reduced further by the Substitution of Punishments of Death Act 1841. After these reforms the death penalty was rarely used in the United Kingdom for crimes other than murder. As Home Secretary Russell also introduced the public registration for births, marriages and deaths and played a large role in democratising the government of cities outside of London.

Opposition: 1841–1846

The Whigs lost the 1841 General Election and Russell returned to opposition. In 1845, the potato harvest failed across Britain and Ireland, Russell came out in favour of the repeal of the Corn Laws, calling upon Robert Peel to take urgent action to alleviate the emerging food crisis. Peel had also become convinced of the need for repeal, which was opposed by the majority of his own cabinet and party. On 11 December 1845, frustrated by his party's unwillingness to support him, Peel resigned, leading the Queen to invite Russell to form a new government. With the Whigs a minority in the Commons however, Russell could not assemble the necessary support, so he declined the invitation. Peel agreed to stay on as Prime Minister. In June 1846, Peel repealed the Corn Laws with Whig support, bitterly dividing the Conservative Party in the process. Later that same night Peel's Irish Coercion Bill was defeated after vengeful anti-repeal Tories voted with the opposition; and Peel, taking this as a vote of no confidence, resigned once more. Russell then accepted the offer to

form a government; this time successfully, since Grey did not object to Palmerston's appointment as he had earlier.

Prime Minister 1846-1852:

Russell took office with the Whigs a minority in the Commons. It was the bitter split in the Conservative Party over the Corn Laws that allowed Russell's government to remain in power in spite of this, with Sir Robert Peel and his supporters offering tentative support to the new ministry in order to keep Lord Stanley's protectionist Conservatives in opposition. At the 1847 General Election the Whigs made gains at the expense of the Conservatives, but remained a minority, with Russell's government still dependent on the votes of Peelite and Irish Repealer MPs to win divisions.

Domestic agenda;

Frequently frustrated by lack of a reliable Commons majority, his government was nevertheless able to secure a number of notable social reforms. Russell introduced teachers' pensions and grants for teacher training. The Public Baths and Wash-houses Acts (1847 & 48) enabled local authorities to build municipal baths and washing facilities for the growing urban working classes. Russell lent his support to the passage of the Factories Act (1847), which restricted the working hours of women and young persons (aged 13–18) in textile mills to 10 hours per day. 1848 saw the introduction of the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers and the Public Health Act 1848, by which the State assumed responsibility for sewerage, clean water supply, refuse collection and other aspects of public health across much of England and Wales.

However, he failed to get a Jewish Relief Bill (to allow Jews to take their seats in the Commons without having to take the explicitly Christian oath of allegiance) through. It was twice rejected by the Tory dominated House of Lords, as was a new bill in 1851. A Jews Relief Act was finally passed in 1858.

Ireland;

Russell's government led the calamitous response to the Irish Famine, which cost some 1 million lives and caused another million to emigrate. After taking office in 1846, His ministry introduced a programme of public works that by the end of that year employed some half-a-million but proved impossible to administer. In January 1847, this policy was abandoned as a failure and a mixture of "indoor" and "outdoor" direct relief; (the former administered via the Irish Poor Laws in workhouses, the latter through soup kitchens). The costs of the Poor Law fell primarily on the local landlords, some of whom in turn attempted to reduce their liability by evicting their tenants. In June 1847, the Poor Law Extension Act was passed, which embodied the principle, popular in Britain, that Irish property should support Irish poverty. Irish landlords were believed in Britain to have created the conditions that led to the famine, a view which Russell shared.

Financial crisis;

In 1847, Russell's government was confronted by a financial crisis. Peel's 1844 Bank Charter Act required that all bank notes issued by the Bank of England be fully backed by gold. However, the failure of harvests in Britain and Ireland during 1846 had led to large outflows of gold in order to pay for imported grain, resulting in a dramatic decline in the Bank's gold reserves over the course of 1847. Faced with the prospect of running out of gold and being unable to issue money, the Bank of England repeatedly raised the discount rate at which it would lend money to other banks, leading to a drastic curtailment of available commercial credit and contributing to the collapse of numerous businesses. This in turn led to a loss of public confidence in the creditworthiness of the banks, culminated in the "week of terror" of 17–23 October when a "rush on the banks" forced many to

close their doors. Faced with the potential collapse of the banking system, on 25 October Russell and his Chancellor, Charles Wood, wrote a letter to the Governor of the Bank of England authorising him to break the terms of the Bank Charter Act and issue new notes without gold backing to facilitate lending, which move restored depositor confidence in the banks, and the crisis abated.

Disagreements with Palmerston and fall of ministry;

Russell frequently clashed with his headstrong Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, whose belligerence and support for continental revolution he found embarrassing. In 1847 Palmerston provoked a confrontation with the French government by undermining the plans of the Spanish court to marry the young Spanish Queen and her sister into the French royal family. He subsequently clashed with Russell over plans to increase the size of the army and the navy to defend against the perceived threat of French invasion, which subsided after the overthrow of the French king in 1848.

In 1850 further tension arose between the two over Palmerston's gunboat diplomacy in the Don Pacifico affair. Russell considered the matter "hardly worth the interposition of the British lion," and when Palmerston ignored some of his instructions, the Prime Minister wrote to Palmerston telling him he had informed the Queen that he "thought the interests of the country required that a change should take place at the Foreign Department." However, less than a month later the House of Lords passed a motion of censure of the Government over its handling of the affair and Russell was forced to align with Palmerston to prevent a similar motion being passed by the Commons, obliging the Government to resign. The Government prevailed, but Palmerston emerged victorious since he was seen as the champion of defending British subjects anywhere in the world.

Russell forced Palmerston to resign as Foreign Secretary after Palmerston recognised Napoleon III's coup of 2 December 1851 without first consulting the Queen or Cabinet. Out of office, Palmerston got revenge by turning a vote on a militia bill into a vote of confidence in the Government, which he won, and thus Russell's ministry fell on 21 February 1852. This was Palmerston's famous "tit for tat with Johnny Russell."

In opposition: February–December 1852

Following Russell's resignation, the Earl of Derby formed a minority government due to the continuing rift with the Peelites. Derby called a general election in July but failed to secure a majority. Negotiations led nowhere and eventually, after the defeat of Disraeli's Budget in December, Derby's government resigned and the Queen tasked Aberdeen with forming a government.

The Aberdeen coalition: 1852–1855

Russell, as the leader of the Whigs, agreed to bring his party into a coalition with the Peelites, headed by Aberdeen. As the leader of the largest party in the coalition, Russell was reluctant to serve under Aberdeen in a subordinate position, but agreed to take on the role of Foreign Secretary on a temporary basis, to lend stability to the fledgling government. He resigned the role in February 1853 in favour of Clarendon, but continued to lead for the government in the Commons and attended cabinet without ministerial responsibilities. Russell was unhappy that half of Aberdeen's cabinet was made up of Peelites, despite the fact that the Whigs were the largest party. However, he came to admire some of his Peelite colleagues, particularly the Chancellor of the Exchequer, William Gladstone, who would go on to become an important political ally in later years.

The Crimean War in 1854 put back Russell's attempt at a further Reform Bill. Russell, together with Palmerston, had formed a very vocal voice against Russian expansion, which led, despite

Aberdeen's reluctance, to Britain entering the war that March. Aberdeen's reluctant and poor conduct of the war led Russell and Palmerston to strongly criticise their own government, which led eventually to Aberdeen's resignation. Asked to form a Government, Russell tried but failed and he returned to the backbenches in July 1855.

Return to the backbenches: 1855–1859

Throughout he remained a strong critic of Palmerston's foreign policies, particularly over the Anglo-Persian War, and the 2nd Opium War, but Palmerston remained very popular, winning an increased majority in 1857. Russell successfully defended his seat, however, and Palmerston's triumph was very brief and his government fell after losing a vote early 1858.

Foreign Secretary under Palmerston: 1859–1865

Following a short-lived Conservative Government, he and Palmerston made up their differences and he became Foreign Secretary under Palmerston in what is usually considered to be the first Liberal government. This was an eventful period in foreign affairs, with the Unification of Italy, the U.S. Civil War, and the war of Schleswig-Holstein all occurring during his term.

Elevation to the peerage: 1861

In 1861 Russell was elevated to the peerage as Earl Russell of Kingston Russell, in Dorset and as Viscount Amberley, of Amberley, in Gloucester, and of Ardsalla in the County of Meath. Henceforth, as a *suo jure* peer, rather than merely being known as 'Lord' because he was the son of a Duke, he sat in the House of Lords for the remainder of his career.

Prime Minister: 1865–1866

When Palmerston suddenly died in late 1865, Russell again became Prime Minister. His second term was short and frustrating, and Russell failed in his great ambition of expanding the franchise, a task that would be left to his Conservative successors, Derby and Disraeli. In 1866, party disunity again brought down his government. Russell never again held any office. His last contribution to the House of Lords was on 3 August 1875.

Personal Life

He was married twice, his first wife, Adelaide Lister, died shortly after the birth of their second child. Both were daughters. His second wife, Frances, daughter of Gilbert Eliot, Earl of Minto, he married five years later in 1841. They had four children, three boys and a girl. The eldest, also John, married and had four children, including a still-born daughter. Both he and his wife died and John and Frances brought the children up. The eldest, Frank, became the 2nd Earl, whilst Bertrand, the second son and third child, became the philosopher and 3rd Earl. He died at home in Buckinghamshire in May 1878.