THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER AND WHO IT INVOLVED

This document, written in 1838 mainly by William Lovett of the London Working Men's Association, stated the ideological basis of the Chartist movement. The Charter was launched in Glasgow in May 1838, at a meeting attended by an estimated 150,000 people. Presented as a popular-style Magna Carta, it rapidly gained support across the country and its supporters became known as the Chartists. A petition, populated at Chartist meetings across Britain, was brought to London in May 1839, for Thomas Attwood to present to Parliament. It boasted 1,280,958 signatures, yet Parliament voted not to consider it. However, the Chartists continued to campaign for the six points of the Charter for many years to come, and produced two more petitions to Parliament.

The People's Charter detailed the six key points that the Chartists believed were necessary to reform the electoral system and thus alleviate the suffering of the working classes – these were:

Universal suffrage (the right to vote)

When the Charter was written in 1838, only 18 per cent of the adult-male population of Britain could vote (before 1832 just 10 per cent could vote). The Charter proposed that the vote be extended to all adult males over the age of 21, apart from those convicted of a felony or declared insane.

No property qualification

When this document was written, potential members of Parliament needed to own property of a particular value. This prevented the vast majority of the population from standing for election. By removing the requirement of a property qualification, candidates for elections would no longer have to be selected from the upper classes.

Annual parliaments

A government could retain power as long as there was a majority of support. This made it very difficult to replace of a bad or unpopular government.

Equal representation

The 1832 Reform Act had abolished the worst excesses of 'pocket boroughs'. A pocket borough was a parliamentary constituency owned by a single patron who controlled voting rights and could nominate the two members who were to represent the borough in Parliament. In some of these constituencies as few as six people could elect two members of Parliament. There were still great differences between constituencies, particularly in the industrial north where there were relatively few MPs compared to rural areas.

The Chartists proposed the division of the United Kingdom into 300 electoral districts, each containing an equal number of inhabitants, with no more than one representative from each district to sit in Parliament.

Payment of members

MPs were not paid for the job they did. As the vast majority of people required income from their jobs to be able to live, this meant that only people with considerable personal wealth could afford to become MPs. The Charter proposed that MPs were paid an annual salary of £500.

Vote by secret ballot

Voting at the time was done in public using a 'show of hands' at the 'hustings' (a temporary, public platform from which candidates for parliament were nominated). Landlords or employers could therefore see how their tenants or employees were voting and could intimidate them and influence their decisions. Voting was not made secret until 1871.

So who were the people involved in the People's Charter?

William Lovett – drafted the People's Charter. The son of the captain of a small fishing vessel, Lovett was born in Penzance, Cornwall on 8th May, 1800. His father was drowned at sea before William was born. William's mother, who was a strict Methodist, sent him to the local school and at the age of thirteen he became an apprentice rope-maker.

After a couple of years of training William realised that ropes were gradually being replaced by chains and decided to leave the trade. William managed to persuade a local man to train him as carpenter, a trade that he believed would give him a better future.

At the age of 21 William Lovett decided to try and find work in London. Lovett eventually found work as a carpenter in a cabinet making company. He applied to join the Cabinet Makers' Society but he was rejected as the training he received in Penzance was not recognised as being good enough. It was not until 1826 that he was finally accepted as a member of Cabinet Makers Society. Later that year Lovett married a lady's maid working in London.

In 1831 William Lovett's name was drawn for service in the London Militia. As a punishment Lovett's household goods were seized. Lovett responded by establishing the Anti-Militia Association. Lovett's organisation adopted the slogan "No Vote, No Musket". The campaign was a great success and the authorities decided to abandon the idea of militia drawings. Lovett's victory brought him a great deal of attention and he was now a national political figure.

Lovett decided that parliamentary reform was now the most important issue facing working people. He joined the National Union of the Working Classes, an organisation formed by Richard Carlile, Henry Hetherington, James Watson, John Cleave and William Benbow. It proposed universal male suffrage, annual parliaments, votes by secret ballot and the removal of property qualifications for MPs. Some historians claim it became the "most effective working-class radical organisation in the early 1830s."

In June 1836, Lovett, Henry Hetherington, John Cleave and James Watson formed the London Working Men's Association (LMWA). Although it only ever had a few hundred members, the LMWA became a very influential organisation. At one meeting in 1838 the

leaders of the LMWA drew up a Charter of political demands. When supporters of parliamentary reform held a convention the following year, Lovett was chosen as the leader of the group that were now known as the Chartists.

In 1839 Lovett was arrested for making a speech in Birmingham. The authorities claimed that his description of the Metropolitan police as a "blood thirsty and unconstitutional force" was seditious libel. Lovett was found guilty and sentenced to twelve months imprisonment in Warwick Gaol. He described the experience in his autobiography, *Life and Struggles* (1876): "I was locked up in a dark cell, about nine feet square, the only air admitted into it being through a small grating over the floor, and in one corner of it was a pailful of filth left by the last occupants, the smell of which was almost overpowering. There was a bench fixed against the wall on which to sit down, but the walls were literally covered with water, and the place so damp and cold, even at that season of the year, that I was obliged to keep walking round and round, like a horse in an apple-mill, to keep anything like life within me."

While in Warwick Gaol, Lovett and a fellow prisoner, **John Collins**, wrote the book Chartism, a New Organisation of the People. After nine months Lovett refused to accept three months remission for good behaviour because, he argued, it implied admission of guilt.

Twelve months in Warwick Gaol severely damaged Lovett's health and he was forced to spend time recuperating in Cornwall. When Lovett returned to London he open a bookseller's shop in Tottenham Court Road. Lovett was still seen as the leader of the Chartist movement but he was under constant attack from people like Fergus O'Connor and James Bronterre O'Brien who raised doubts about his Moral Force campaign.

Upset by these criticisms, Lovett decided in 1842 to retire from politics and devoted the rest of his life to the development of working class education. He formed the National Association for Promoting the Political and Social Improvement of the People. Financed by workers' subscriptions, the association provided circulating libraries and employed educational "missionaries".

Lovett continued to run his bookshop, wrote school textbooks and taught evening classes. His bookshop failed to make money and William Lovett died in extreme poverty on 8th August, 1877.

Feargus O'Connor, - Editor of the Northern Star.

He was the son of Roger O'Connor, a United Irishman, and was born in 1796. When Feargus O'Connor was twenty-four he inherited an estate in County Cork. Although a Protestant, O'Connor was a reforming landlord and denounced tithes and the power of the Church.

In 1832 O'Connor's participation in the anti-tithe agitation in Ireland led to his arrest but the authorities did not prosecute him. Later that year, O'Connor, with the help of Daniel O'Connell**,** the leader of the Irish Radicals, was elected MP for County Cork in the General Election after advocating the repeal of the Act of Union, abolition of tithes, universal suffrage and the secret ballot.

Soon after arriving in the House of the Commons O'Connor attempted to replace O'Connell as leader of the Irish Radicals. O'Connell felt betrayed by O'Connor and the two men became enemies. In 1835 O'Connor was unseated for failing to meet the property

qualifications. He tried to stand for Oldham after the death of William Cobbett, but he split the Radical vote and the seat was won by the Tories.

O'Connor now toured the country making speeches advocating annual parliaments, universal suffrage, the ballot, equal representation, and the abolition of the property qualification. O'Connor's message was particularly popular with the handloom weavers who were suffering severe economic distress in the 1830s.

In November 1836, O'Connor joined the London Working Mens' Association. The following year he moved to Leeds where he established a weekly paper, the *Northern Star*, that supported the reform of Parliament. The newspaper was a great success and by the spring of 1839 was selling over 48,000 copies a week.

O'Connor became active in the Chartist movement. However, he was critical of leaders such as William Lovett and Henry Hetherington who advocated Moral Force. O'Connor questioned this strategy and began to make speeches where he spoke of being willing "to die for the cause" and promising to "lead people to death or glory". In a speech in Manchester he gave a date, 29th September, 1839, for violent action if Parliament did not grant the six points of the Charter. O'Connor's speeches outraged Lovett and Hetherington and he was excluded from the platform of a mass meeting organised by the London Working Men's Association.

O'Connor responded by forming a new Chartist organisation, the East London Democratic Association. O'Connor's speeches and newspaper articles became more threatening and he was blamed by the Moral Force Chartists for encouraging John Frost and the unsuccessful Newport Rising on 4th November 1839.

Four months later O'Connor was tried at York for publishing seditious libels in the *Northern Star*. He was found guilty and sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment. O'Connor continued to edit the newspaper from his prison cell and upset the other Chartist leaders when he told his readers that from "September 1835 to February 1839 I led you single-handed and alone."

After his release from prison in August 1841, Feargus O'Connor took control of the National Charter Association. His vicious attacks on other Chartist leaders such as William Lovett, Bronterre O'Brien and Henry Vincent split the movement. Some like Lovett, who were unwilling to be associated with O'Connor's threats of Physical Force, decided to leave the National Charter Association. Following the Plug Riots of August 1842, O'Connor was tried for his part in the rebellion. He was acquitted on most of the charges and escaped being sent to prison on a technicality.

In 1845 O'Connor launched his Chartist Land Plan. His objective was to raise money to buy a large estate that would be divided into plots of three and four acres. Subscribers would then draw lots and the winners would obtain a cottage and some land. O'Connor promised that his Land Scheme would "change the whole face of society in twelve months" and would "make a paradise of England in less than five years".

By May 1847, O'Connor had persuaded 70,000 people to pay £100,000 into a fund that enabled him to purchase Heronsgate (renamed O'Connorville) in Gloucestershire. O'Connor's Land Scheme was a disaster and by 1850 the company was virtually bankrupt and the settlers were being evicted.

Undaunted by this failure, O'Connor continued to be the dominant figure in the Chartist movement. However, at the great Kennington Common rally on 10th April 1848, O'Connor began to show signs of mental strain. He told the crowd that the latest petition contained 5,706,000 signatures, but when examined by MPs it was only 1,975,496, and many of

these were clear forgeries. His critics accused O'Connor of destroying the credibility of the Chartist movement.

O'Connor's behaviour became more and more irrational and after assaulting several MPs he was committed to a mental asylum in Chiswick. Feargus O'Connor died on 30th August, 1855 at the age of 59, 40,000 people witnessed the funeral procession.

Many of the early historians of Chartism attributed the failure of Chartism at least in part to O'Connor. He was accused of egotism and of being quarrelsome. In recent years, however, there has been a trend to reassess him in a more favourable light.

Henry Vincent (10 May 1813 – 29 December 1878) –

active in the formation of early Working Men's Associations in Britain, a popular Chartist leader, brilliant and gifted public orator, prospective but ultimately unsuccessful Victorian member of parliament, and later an anti-slavery campaigner.

By 1833 Vincent was in London working as a printer but also deepening his political awareness and knowledge. In 1836 he joined the recently formed London Working Men's Association and he was quickly recognised as one of the best young orators promoting universal suffrage and workers rights.

The authorities sought to obstruct Vincent and deny him the opportunity to speak out. They feared a worker's revolution with resulting violence and damage to property, and they were particularly opposed to those Chartists who were advocating the use of physical force to achieve their aims and vent their resentment and fury.

Government spies followed Vincent, seeking evidence to arrest and convict him at a time when transportation to Australia or death by hanging were some of the punishments for stirring up social unrest.

In May 1839 Vincent was arrested and imprisoned at Monmouth County Gaol for making inflammatory remarks. He was eventually tried at Shire Hall, Monmouth on 2 August 1839 and sentenced to one year imprisonment.

Whilst in prison, he was denied writing materials and only permitted religious books as reading material.

Upon release, Vincent found himself under close scrutiny again. He was re-arrested almost immediately for "using seditious language".

In court, he conducted his own defence, but was found guilty and sentenced to another year imprisonment.

Upon his release from prison in January 1841 Vincent made plans to marry Lucy, the daughter of John Cleave, editor of the *Working Man's Friend*. The newly married couple took up residence in Bath, amongst close friends and supporters and began the publication of *The National Vindicator*.

Vincent was immediately back on the road, making up for lost time and promulgating the Chartist message throughout the country. This time he was shrewd enough to take a stance with the "moral force" chartists under William Lovett rather than the "physical force chartists" and spoke using less inflammatory language, focusing on improving education and the moral improvement of the working classes. This, however, brought him into conflict with Feargus O'Connor and they fell out.

Vincent focused more on lectures, on wider subjects than Chartism in later years and toured America several times, focusing on promoting anti-slavery views. He stood as a Parliamentary candidate at least five times but was always unsuccessful. His later years were spent touring as a speaker in America, focusing on his anti-slavery views.

Vincent died on 29 December 1878 and is buried at Abney Park Cemetery in Stoke Newington.

Other key Chartists

John Collins – unsung hero who travelled the country and got support for the Chartist movement. He brought together the Birmingham Political Union, the radicals of Scotland and the first public appearance of the 'People's Charter' at Glasgow Green where a 150k crowd cheered its contents.

Thomas Cooper – a leading Chartist, again imprisoned where he wrote Purgatory of Suicides which runs to 944 stanzas.

George Julian Harney – Chartist leader who was in and out of jail. Endlessly feuded with fellow Chartists who ultimately expelled him from the Party. He remained convinced that insurrection was the surest route to achieve the demands of the Charter.

Henry Hetherington – joint founder with William Lovett, Francis Place and John Cleave of the London Working Man's Association in 1836. A printer, he published the Poor Man's Guardian, selling 22k copies a week in 1833. He was a Moral Force Chartist and very critical of Feargus O'Connor.

John Frost, William Jones, Zephaniah Williams – led the Newport Uprising

Organisations

The National Union of the Working Classes, an organisation formed in 1831 by Richard Carlile, Henry Hetherington, James Watson, John Cleave and William Benbow

The London Working Men's Association – formed June 1836 by William Lovett, Henry Hetherington, John Cleave and Francis Place. They drafted the People's Charter.

MPs who supported the Chartists:

Thomas Attwood
Thomas Wakely
Thomas Dunscombe
Joseph Hume