

The Great Reform Act 1832

George IV died 26.6.1830 and his death triggered a general election

Duke of Wellington had been Prime Minister since 1828. His party, Tory, had been in power for the best part of the previous 60 years and was returned again following the 1832 election.

Catholic Emancipation Act was passed in 1829. This split the Tories with the majority approving the bill reluctantly. A break-off group, the Ultra Tories, vehemently opposed “giving way “ and allowing Catholics a seat in Parliament. This group were in favour of “reform” regarding it as a chance to correct what they saw as an error by Government.

Since the 1801 Act of Union England held 489 seats in the House of Commons, Ireland 100, Scotland 45 and Wales 24. In terms of relative populations this was heavily weighted in favour of England (see table). The House of Lords only contained hereditary peers. Ireland were required to elect 28 of their peers to sit in it. Scotland had only been allowed 16 peers after the 1707 Act of Union.

BRITAIN IN THE 1830S				
	% of UK population		MPs in 1832	
	1832	1901	No.	%
England	54	73	471	72
Scotland	10	11	53	8
Wales	4	5	29	4
Ireland	32	11	105	16
Total	100	100	658	100

The English constituencies, some of which elected 2 members, totalled 379 and were broken down into Borough (405 seats), County (80 seats), and University (4 seats). The borough seats were more susceptible to being “owned” by an individual patron and therefore subject to corruption. In about 2/3rds of the borough constituencies candidates were returned unopposed thus saving the expense of holding an election. To qualify to stand as an MP candidates had to have an estate worth £600 per annum for a county seat or £300 for a borough seat. They also had to meet the costs of elections: hiring venues, paying the returning officers and clerks, administration of oaths, and peace-keeping officers, in addition to any gifts they distributed to potential electors. Several of these boroughs were rotten e.g. Old Sarum consisting of a lump of stone and a field, elected 2 MPs, Dunwich, Suffolk, which had fallen into the sea also elected 2 MPs.

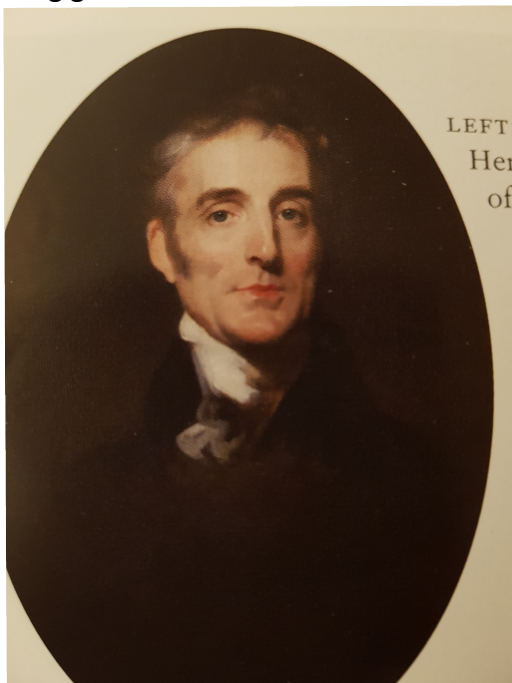
The County seats had been set up between the 8th and 16th centuries and were supposed to cover the whole country. In England each county returned 2 MPs while in Wales each county only had one representative. They had a larger pool of voters and therefore there was less chance of the latter being paid to vote for a particular individual or individuals. In

comparison with the rotten boroughs' handful of voters sizeable cities such as Birmingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and Bradford, had no MPs at all. About 239,000 men were entitled to vote for English and Welsh county constituencies. They had to own land and property with a freehold value in excess of 40/=.

The Borough system was a legacy from the 15th century and was greatly skewed towards the South of England. Cornwall elected 40 MPs whereas Lancashire had only 10.

There had been efforts to correct these anomalies towards the end of the 18th C. Charles, Earl Grey, leader of the Whig Party, proposed Reform to the House in 1792 when the Society of the Friends of the People was formed. Although Grey championed Reform all through his parliamentary career it was side-lined following the atrocities which developed as the French Revolution progressed and the Napoleonic wars, the abolition of slavery, catholic emancipation and the corn laws kept parliament fully occupied.

During 1832 the country, which had experienced a couple of years of poor harvests, was in a state of unrest with "Captain Swing" protesters smashing up the new-fangled farm machinery which they saw as putting them out of work. The Duke of Wellington's unequivocal speech at the state opening of parliament in November 1830 "that Parliament was an excellent instrument of legislature to govern a country where landed interests held the main influence" gave rise to mob behaviour in the streets of London to the extent that King William and Queen Adelaide were advised not to attend the Lord Mayor's Banquet in the city. A few days after this speech the Tory Party was defeated in a vote of confidence in the House of Commons. Wellington resigned and the King called on Lord Grey to form a Whig government.



In March 1831 Lord Grey presented a radical reform bill to the House of Commons. It passed its second reading by only 1 vote and Grey realised that it would not be passed in the

House of Lords. There was a strong move for reform in the country led by the political unions which had been started in Birmingham in January 1830 and had spread to other large towns. Grey persuaded a reluctant King William to call another general election. Normally these were held every 7 years or on the death of the monarch. However, this election was fought on the issue of reform and returned a substantial majority in its favour. Grey's next reform bill was passed easily by the House of Commons in July 1831. The House of Lords rejected this bill in October 1831 resulting in riots in Derby, Nottingham, and Bristol and scattered outbreaks of violence around the country.

A third Reform Bill with some concessions to the fears of the Lords was taken through Parliament in April 1832 and actually passed with a majority of 9. However, the Government was then defeated by an amendment and Grey tried to talk the king into creating 50 new pro-reform peers to swing the vote. The king refused and Grey resigned. William called on Wellington to form a Government but he was unable to do so mainly because Robert Peel, a staunch Tory, refused to join his cabinet and others followed his lead. So the king had to return to Grey with a promise that he would create the new peers if necessary. In the event, rather than have their ranks swelled with unwanted Whig reformists, on the secret instigation of the Duke of Wellington, only 22 Lords voted against the Reform Bill when it was presented again to them in June. The others not in favour of the bill chose to abstain. And so the Great Reform Bill was passed and received the royal approval on 7th June 1832.

The distribution of seats was greatly improved however, the extension of the franchise remained restricted. Grey and many of his reformist friends were not in favour of universal suffrage. 56 of the small boroughs lost their seats and 30 more had their representation reduced to one member. 64 of the new seats went across to the county system and 63 new parliamentary boroughs were created. Wales got an extra 5 seats and in Scotland 8 extra borough seats were created. Borough seats were created so that a particular trade or manufacturing industry could be represented in parliament.

The number of voters in England and Wales was increased by about 50% so that 18% of the adult male population could now vote. In Scotland the number of voters increased from 5,000 to 65,000. In county seats franchisee males still had to own freehold property in excess of 40/=. Female property owners were now excluded. However, males in possession of copyhold (a form of tenancy in existence since the middle ages and phased out in the 19th C) in excess of £10 per annum were enfranchised as were tenant landholders renting land worth in excess of £50 per annum. This was the Chandos clause brought in to sweeten the House of Lords. It ensured that tenant farmers were still subject to voting as their landlord wished for fear of losing their tenancy. To qualify to vote in Borough seats a man had to prove that he owned or occupied property worth at least £10 per annum. The plan was to give the vote to middle class men, however, in London where property prices were high those allowed to vote were coming from the lower orders. It was also ruled that anybody who had held a vote before 1832 should not lose it. This led to a short term (20 years or so) anomaly where for new seats such as Birmingham only 11% of the population could vote

while in Preston 88% of the male population had the vote. As these voters died out this anomaly disappeared.

Many believe that the passing of the Great Reform Bill replaced the heat of revolution with the reason of reform. Thomas Macaulay commented that the changes produced by violence were often followed by reaction, whereas 'the victories of reason, once gained, are gained for eternity'.

Sources: The Challenge of Democracy Britain 1832-1918; Hugh Cunningham

Perilous Question; Antonia Fraser

Wikipedia

The Reform Act 1832: The extract below is taken from the UK Parliament website.

As the 19th century progressed and the memory of the violent French Revolution faded, there was growing acceptance that some parliamentary reform was necessary. The unequal distribution of seats, the extension of the franchise and 'rotten boroughs' were all issues to be addressed.

The Tory Prime Minister in 1830, Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington, was resolutely opposed to parliamentary reform. However, there was growing support for limited change within his party, primarily because partially extending the franchise would allow the wealth and influence of Britain's growing middle class to be exploited.

Lord Grey

When the Tory government was ousted later in 1830, Earl Grey, a Whig, became Prime Minister and pledged to carry out parliamentary reform. The Whig Party was pro-reform and though two reform bills failed to be carried in Parliament, the third was successful and received Royal Assent in 1832.

The Bill was passed due to Lord Grey's plan to persuade King William IV to consider using his constitutional powers to create additional Whig peers in the House of Lords to guarantee the Bill's passage. On hearing of this plan, Tory peers abstained from voting, thus allowing the Bill to be passed but avoiding the creation of more Whig peers.

The first Reform Act

The Representation of the People Act 1832, known as the first Reform Act or Great Reform Act:

- disenfranchised 56 boroughs in England and Wales and reduced another 31 to only one MP
- created 67 new constituencies
- broadened the franchise's property qualification in the counties, to include small landowners, tenant farmers, and shopkeepers
- created a uniform franchise in the boroughs, giving the vote to all householders who paid a yearly rental of £10 or more and some lodgers

Another change brought by the 1832 Reform Act was the formal exclusion of women from voting in Parliamentary elections, as a voter was defined in the Act as a male person. Before 1832 there were occasional, although rare, instances of women voting.

Limited change had been achieved but for many it did not go far enough. The property qualifications meant that the majority of working men still could not vote. But it had been proved that change was possible and over the next decades the call for further parliamentary reform continued.

Further summary of the Great Reform Bill 1832 from the BBC website.

1832 Reform Act

Reform riots, 1831

In 1831 there were riots in England when Parliament decided against reform to give Britain's industrial cities and towns better representation.

In Nottingham, people attacked the castle, home of the Duke of Newcastle. Protestors were arrested and some were executed.

In Bristol, protestors threw stones at the Mansion House, broke in and destroyed it, and three protestors were killed by police. The Bristol gaol and Bishop's palace were also set on fire. In total an estimated 70 people died in the violence.

People believed that something similar would happen in London unless Parliament reformed the voting system.

The 1832 Reform Act

Partly in response to the riots, Parliament passed the 1832 Reform Act.

The act stated that:

- One in five men - those whose homes had a lease of £10 or more per year - got the vote
- Seats must be created for MPs in new industrial towns such as Birmingham
- Seats for MPs from rotten boroughs had to be removed

There was a mixed reaction to the new political changes.

The middle class was happy about the changes, but the working class still could not vote.

Elections remained corrupt and the country was still run by the rich. MPs in the countryside continued to have more power than those in industrial towns.