



Articles – Lesson 2: 1832 Reform Act

(Terms in ***bold italics*** are explained further in the Glossary, terms underlined have their own articles)

1830-1832 Parliament(s)

Whig government, Prime Minister: ***Charles, Earl Grey***

Pressure had been growing for reform since the 1790s as many middle and working class people could not vote, or the places they lived in were not ***represented*** in Parliament. Many working class people also faced economic hardship (see articles on Edmund Burke, Henry Hunt, Old Sarum and Lancashire). The **Tory** government had blocked moves for reform.

In 1830 the **Tory** government led by the ***Duke of Wellington***, hero of the ***Napoleonic Wars***, won the election. However, just a few months later it lost the support of a group of MPs opposed to any reform at all (known as the ***Ultra-Tories***, such as Sir Richard Vyvyan). This meant that Wellington had to resign, and a new **Whig** government, led by ***Earl Grey***, came in to power. From the start this government wanted to reform the system.

Earl Grey was an unlikely reformer. He was himself a wealthy landowner and many of those in his government were related to him. They all believed, however, that the system needed reform otherwise there was a risk that people would turn to violence to get their political rights. More disturbances, like that at '***Peterloo***' in Lancashire might follow.



'Reform jugs', 1831-32 © Philip Salmon

Grey's government introduced a ***Reform Bill*** in 1831, written largely by Lord John Russell. It was first defeated in the House of Commons, so the government held an election to ask for more support. They won the election, and tried to pass the Bill again. This time the House of Lords rejected it. Following riots across the country, such as those in Bristol, Grey asked the king, William IV, for his support to pass the Bill. When he agreed, the House of Lords gave in, and the '***Great***' ***Reform Act*** became law in June 1832.

Despite the name given to it by its supporters, historians now think that the reforms in the '***Great***' ***Reform Act*** were quite moderate. It did remove many '***rotten boroughs***' (such as Old Sarum) that had fewer than 2,000 voters but still elected 2 MPs. It gave these parliamentary seats to the growing industrial towns, such as Manchester and Birmingham. The qualification to vote was also standardised in towns across the country – if you were a man and lived in property worth £10, you

could vote. This meant that some people actually lost the right to vote, but overall about one fifth of men could vote after 1832.

These changes meant that the middle classes and those in industrial towns now had a say in Parliament. There were other reforms in the 1830s, such as measures to reform local government, improve conditions in factories and, more controversially, the **Poor Law** which established workhouses.

However, working class people did not gain any new political rights, and many hated the **Poor Law**. Pressure for more reform would continue.

? *Did you know?*

Earl Grey gave his name to 'Earl Grey' tea.

Lord John Russell (MP biography)

1792-1878, London

Lord John Russell was the third son of the duke of Bedford, an important **Whig** family. Outside Parliament he was also an author and historian. He was a long-time supporter of reform. His historical studies led him to believe that **revolutions** could be avoided if moderate reforms were passed.

He entered Parliament in 1813, and by the 1820s emerged as the leading **Whig** spokesman on reform. He condemned the '**Peterloo**' massacre in Lancashire and argued that it would never have happened if Manchester had its own **MP**. On 25 April 1822 he gave a famous pro-reform speech in Parliament. He argued that the government was 'obliged to enforce, by arms, obedience to acts of this House – which, according to every just theory, are supposed to emanate from the people themselves.'

When **Earl Grey** came to power in 1830, Russell was placed on the committee to draft a **Reform Bill**. His ideas shaped the measure itself: he argued that the population numbers recorded in the 1821 census should be the basis for which constituencies kept or lost their **MPs**, and which towns should get new MPs. Russell's beliefs were quite moderate, however. He did not believe that everyone should have the right to vote, and argued against introducing the **secret ballot** at elections.

Russell was given the job of managing the **Reform Bill** in Parliament. In his speech explaining it to the House of Commons, he argued it 'would not advance democracy, but it would make the constitution [political system] harmonize with the present state of the people.' After the election of 1831 Russell became a full **cabinet** member. He enjoyed a long cabinet career and was twice Prime Minister, although historians argue that his record as Prime Minister was less successful than his time in cabinet.

? *Did you know?*

Lord Russell was one of the most popular politicians in the country after the Reform Bill. There was a craze for 'Reform memorabilia' commemorating him and other members of the government.

Sir Richard Vyvyan (MP biography)

1800-1879, Cornwall

Sir Richard Vyvyan was born to an old, landowning Cornish family. He became one of the leaders of the '**Ultra-Tories**' – a group who opposed reform.

In the 1820s, no Catholics were able to vote. Yet the **Duke of Wellington's** government changed this in 1829. For Vyvyan and the other **Ultra-Tories**, this should not have happened. They believed that Catholics had a greater loyalty to the Pope in Rome than the British Parliament (a view that many people held in Britain since the seventeenth century).

Vyvyan did believe in a small amount of slow reform, but believed the **Reform Bill** introduced by Lord Russell went much too far. It was not 'safe at any time to attempt an entire change' in the system. He believed reform was a 'fearful experiment'. He felt that the unrest in the country was due to economic difficulties, not a desire for political reform, so these would remain.

Vyvyan lost the support of his own constituents at the 1831 election. Luckily he had friends who could use their influence to help get him elected in another seat! He continued to oppose the **Reform Bill** right until the end. In June 1832 he wrote that if the bill passed: 'I do not believe that any earthly power can save this country from a social **revolution**.'

After the **Great Reform Act** Vyvyan kept his seat, but he lost many of his political allies who re-joined the **Tories**. He remained in Parliament until 1851, and died in 1879.

? Did you know?

Sir Richard Vyvyan was a philosopher, and a member of the Royal Society.

Bristol (Constituency)

Borough in Gloucestershire, Parliamentary constituency since mid-12th century, 2 MPs

Bristol in 1831 had a population of 59,034, but only 6,385 men could vote. They sent two **MPs** to Parliament, but tensions were high. The city faced economic difficulties after it was overtaken by other cities, like Liverpool, as the most important port in England.

In 1831 the House of Lords rejected the **Reform Bill**. This rejection led to rioting around the country. In Nottingham, the castle (home to the anti-reform Duke of Newcastle) was attacked.



Rioters in Queen's Square, Bristol

In Bristol, the riots lasted for three days at the end of October, and caused a large amount of damage. They began when an anti-reform judge, Sir Charles Wetherell, arrived at a court on 29 October. Wetherall's carriage was pelted by stones and a mob soon cornered him in the city's Mansion House. He was forced to flee from the rooftop.

The violence continued. On the next day the rioters attacked the Mansion House, gaol [prison] and Bishop's palace.

Troops and **militiamen** refused to open fire on the rioters. On the third day the army commander in Bristol, Lieutenant-Colonel Brereton, decided it was time to send in the troops. Hundreds were said to have died in the violence.

Many rioters were arrested: 4 were executed, 29 **transported** to Australia and 43 imprisoned. The **militia** commander, Brereton, was **court-martialled** for being too 'cautious and compassionate' to the rioters. Before a judgement was reached Brereton committed suicide.

Over £300,000 worth of damage was caused in Bristol. Events in the city shocked many, and lots of people feared that this violence would spread if the 1830-32 Parliament(s) did not pass the Reform Bill. The riots helped convince the King to back Earl Grey in his plans for reform.

On 18 June 1832 a procession was held by organisations in the city to mark the passing of the Reform Act. The number of people who could vote in 1832 rose to 10,309. However, it was politics as usual in the town: in 1832 election the MPs were a **Liberal** and the '**Ultra-Tory**', Sir Richard Vyvyan.

? *Did you know?*

There were plenty of women who rioted in Bristol in 1831. The Spectator reported on 5 November that the 'lower orders of females were particularly vociferous.' Despite this no woman would be able to vote until 1918.

Birmingham (Constituency)

Borough in Warwickshire, Parliamentary constituency since 1832, 2 MPs

Birmingham was one of the growing industrial towns that did not elect an **MP** before 1832. The town was an expanding manufacturing centre that produced

'every metallic article': keys and locks, pins, hinges and bolts, wire, chains, tubes, buckles, guns, steel pens, files, swords, tea trays, toys, screws, buttons, brassware, watches, cast iron, japanned and plated goods, and many others.

The town was one of the centres of campaigning for electoral reform. A campaign was launched to take the right to elect **MPs** away from the **rotten borough** of East Retford and instead let Birmingham elect these two MPs. The plan was rejected in 1827. A local banker and campaigner, Thomas Attwood, decided to build more popular support for the reform campaign.

At a public meeting on 25 January 1830 the Birmingham Political Union (BPU) was formed. The BPU intended to use peaceful methods, such as petitioning and mass meetings, to gather support for parliamentary reform, and once **Earl Grey** became Prime Minister it wholeheartedly supported the **Reform Bill**. Some historians have argued that there were few tensions between the middle and working classes in the city, whereas others have suggested that it was a 'temporary alliance' intended to just promote reform. Either way the BPU was extremely successful in rallying middle and working class support for the Reform Bill. Its peaceful methods were copied throughout the country.

In 1832 Birmingham gained two parliamentary seats – yet the town of 142,251 still only had 4,000 electors. **Radical** politics remained popular and Attwood, leader of the BPU, was one of the first **MPs** elected for Birmingham. Shortly afterwards the town also gained its first elected local council.

Attwood and others soon became disillusioned with Parliament. In the city, working class people did not see their lives improving. The BPU was restarted in the late 1830s and soon became involved in **Chartism**, the working class movement that argued for votes for all men and working class involvement in politics. Attwood was chosen to present the first **Chartist petition** to Parliament.

However, the middle-class members of the BPU were uneasy with **Chartism**, not agreeing with all of their aims. That summer, national Chartist meetings were held in the Bull Ring in Birmingham. The middle class leaders, who controlled the town council, were afraid of the movement. They used police from London and **special constables** to break up meetings and arrest speakers. In the tension after Parliament rejected the first **Chartist petition**, this led to the ‘Bull Ring riots’ in July 1839. Damage costing over £20,000 was caused and many **Chartists** were arrested and **transported** to Australia.

Birmingham continued to grow, but thanks to the splits between the reformers became less politically **radical**.

? *Did you know?*

Birmingham was known as the ‘toy shop of Europe’ thanks to the levels of manufacturing.