

Articles - Lesson 4: 1867 Reform Act and 1872 Ballot Act

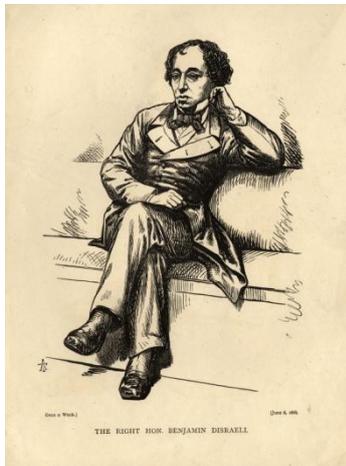
(Terms in ***bold italics*** are explained further in the Glossary, terms underlined have their own articles)

1865-1868 Parliament

Liberal (1865-66) and ***Conservative*** (1866-68) governments, Prime Ministers: Earl Russell (Liberal), Edward, Lord Derby and ***Benjamin Disraeli*** (Conservative)

In the mid-nineteenth century, after ***Chartism*** had lost support, Parliament grew less afraid of reform. For many years ***MPs*** debated how to continue to reform and give some working class men the vote. Very few wanted to give every man a vote, and only a few, such as John Stuart Mill, wanted votes for women too.

As with most mid-Victorian elections, in 1865 the ***Liberal*** party and their allies won the election. Lord John Russell became Prime Minister. He introduced a moderate ***Reform Bill***, which would have given some working-class men living in towns the vote.



Disraeli by 'A.T.', 1868
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This was rejected, however. When a group of ***Liberals*** opposed it, Russell resigned, and for the first time since 1859 a ***Conservative*** (the successor to the ***Tory*** party) formed a government. Lord Derby became Prime Minister but the rising star – ***Benjamin Disraeli*** – became Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Disraeli launched the ***Conservatives'*** own ***Reform Bill*** – which ended up being much more radical than the ***Liberal*** version! There was opposition to the bill from some Conservatives. These argued that working class people were 'unfit' to vote – which certainly upset the working class men! Organisations who supported the ***Bill*** arranged

marches and petitions around the country to try and influence Parliament. One, called the ***Reform League***, was responsible for the 'Hyde Park railings incident' in Marylebone, London.

With the support of the ***Liberals***, who suggested several ***amendments*** to the ***Bill***, it was passed. It went much further than anyone had expected – Derby said it was 'a leap into the dark.' It gave many more working class men in towns the vote, and made some changes to who could vote in the countryside (depending on what type of house they lived in). The number of men who could vote rose from 1.3 million to 2.45 million. Changes were made to the ***constituencies*** which could elect ***MPs***, although not on the same scale as in ***1832***.

It would, as in **1832**, change which towns could elect **MPs**, based on how many people lived there.

Disraeli, who became **Conservative** leader in 1868 after Derby died, hoped that it would lead to working class votes for the Conservatives. In the 1868 election, however, the **Liberals** won again. **William Gladstone** became Prime Minister, and he reformed many parts of government. In the long-term, however, Disraeli was right, and a 'working-class Conservative' vote grew.

? *Did you know?*

The **reform bill** proposed by **Disraeli** and Derby was changed so much as it passed through the Commons that one **Conservative** duke complained that only the first word, 'Whereas' (which is how all **Acts** of Parliament start), was the same in the original bill and the final Act!

John Stuart Mill (MP Biography)

1806-73, London

John Stuart Mill was one of the leading Victorian economists and philosophers. Born in London, he was the son of the Scottish philosopher James Mill. From a child he was raised to follow in his father's footsteps, and despite a nervous breakdown at the age of 20, he did. He believed that people should be free from most government control and wrote books on these issues, such as *On Liberty*.

By the 1860s, Mill had become involved in **radical** politics and causes such as women's rights. He was elected to Parliament for Westminster in 1865. He was well-respected in Parliament and played an important role in the reform debates.

He is remembered for being the first **MP** to argue that women should also be allowed to vote. On 20 May 1867 he introduced an **amendment** to the **Reform Bill** which would have replaced the word 'man' with 'person'. This would give women the right to vote on the same terms as men. It was rejected by 194 votes to 73.

Mill lost his seat in 1868 – and he was largely relieved! He continued, with his step-daughter Helen Taylor, to campaign for women's rights. He published *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. This argued that there was no justifiable reason for women to have fewer legal rights than men, but the book was very controversial at the time. Mill remained committed to women's rights and a number of other causes until his death in 1873. It would be many years, however, before the campaigns of the **suffragists and suffragettes** helped women get the vote.

? *Did you know?*

Mill wrote that his wife, Harriet Taylor, was responsible for many of his ideas. The two met when Harriet was still married, and spent nearly twenty years as friends before Harriet's first husband died.

John Bright (MP Biography)

1811-1889, Rochdale

John Bright was one of the longest serving Victorian **radical** politicians. Born in 1811 to a manufacturing family, his first entrance into politics came in the 1830s in the temperance movement, which argued that alcoholic drinks should be banned. He was soon drawn to radical causes, such as the movement against the **Corn Laws** – government measures which kept food prices high.

Bright became an **MP** in 1843 (for Durham). He soon gained a reputation in Parliament for his strong attacks on his opponents. In the 1860s his politics became more **radical**. Always a supporter of parliamentary reform, at this time he thought that at least some working class people should be able to vote. He supported the **Reform League** (see [Marylebone, London](#)). Bright was an important speaker in the 1865-68 Parliament debates on reform. He added **amendments** to the **Conservative Reform Bill** to give the vote to more working class men.

Bright also argued for the **secret ballot**. Before 1872, everyone knew which candidate people had voted for. Bright believed that this meant people were more open to intimidation – especially working class men who could lose their jobs or houses if they voted against their employer's or landlord's wishes. His brother-in-law, Edward Aldam Leatham, introduced in 1870 the bill which eventually led to the introduction of secret ballots.

The **Secret Ballot Act** has been seen as one of the most important democratic changes, although **corruption** still took place before later reforms in the 1880-1885 Parliament.

Bright became a **cabinet** member for the first time in 1868. He was an **MP** until his death in 1889. A funeral service was held for him in Westminster Abbey. He is remembered as 'honest' John Bright, and one of the 'most effective' Victorian **radical** speakers.

? *Did you know?*

Bright was **MP** for several different places, firstly Durham, then Manchester and finally Birmingham.

Marylebone (Constituency)

Borough in London from 1832, 2 MPs

Marylebone was one of the new **constituencies** created in London in 1832. It covered the areas of Marylebone, Paddington and St Pancras – a mix of populations in the growing capital city. In the 1860s, its **MPs** were **Liberals**.

Marylebone was the scene of the 'Hyde Park riots' of 1866. As Parliament increasingly debated reform, a number of societies sprang up to demonstrate popular support for the **bill**. One of the more radical of these was the **Reform League**, formed in 1865. The League campaigned for votes for every man and the **secret ballot**. Many skilled working class people joined the league. Over 400 branches were opened around the country.

Many of their largest marches took place in London. In July 1866 the group planned to march from their London headquarters to Hyde Park. Afraid of the number of marchers, the **Home Secretary**, Spencer Walpole, tried to ban the march. He brought in troops and **special constables** to try and stop the crowds entering the park. The **Reform League** decided to go ahead anyway. Crowds of 200,000 joined in. At the entrance to the park the police stopped the marchers.

However, there were so many marchers that they broke in to the park, removing all the iron railings that surrounded it. As they were outnumbered, the police and army did not try to stop them. Once inside, the meeting took place as planned. Another rally was organised for the next day, and the **Home Secretary** was forced to give his permission.

? *Did you know?*

The **Home Secretary**, Spencer Walpole, was severely criticised for his handling of the **Reform League** protest. He resigned in May 1867.

* Pontefract (Constituency)

Borough in Yorkshire, since 1621, 2 MPs

The town of Pontefract sent **MPs** to Parliament in 1621. In 1832 the boundaries of the **constituency** were extended to include smaller local towns. Throughout the mid-nineteenth century the MPs were from both the **Liberals** and **Conservatives**.

Pontefract became the first place in Britain that a parliamentary election took place by **secret ballot** in 1872. Before then voters turned up at a booth and were asked – in public – who they were voting for. The



A 'poll book' from 1708

answer was written down and the lists – 'poll books' – could be bought from local

newspapers. They are now great sources for historians! For many Victorians, even reformers like Lord Russell, the idea of voting in private was cowardly or 'un-English'. They believed that people should admit who they voted for.

But this system also meant there was plenty of opportunity for intimidation or bribery. From the eighteenth century onwards sometimes mobs were brought to polls to intimidate the voters. Elections could be like a party – many **candidates** 'treated' their voters to large amounts of alcohol!

After the **1867 Reform Act** more working class people could vote. This meant that more people were concerned about voting in public. John Bright argued that those who were poorer could face greater intimidation – or be easier to **bribe** – by those with more money or power.

The Pontefract 1872 election was watched with 'considerable curiosity' by party officials from all over the country. The town only had a few weeks to prepare, so there were some teething problems. Voters now placed a cross on a ballot paper next to the names of the chosen candidates – very similar to how we do now. They did so in private booths, although in some of the booths the

partitions were loose so people could see inside! There were other things to get used to. If a voter could not read or write the whole room had to be cleared before they could tell the official their choice. Despite these issues, the election went smoothly. It only took four hours to count the votes, and many people commented the town was much more quiet than a normal election.

Despite the positive reports, party officials felt that **bribery** could still be possible. This was not dealt with until the 1880-1885 Parliament.

? *Did you know?*

One of the first ballot box is still in Pontefract museum. It was sealed with the stamp used to make liquorice Pontefract cakes!