

1) Politics in 1800 Britain

POLITICS IN 1800 –

- In 1800 there were 658 MPs in the House of Commons.
- Each MP was elected to serve a CONSTITUENCY or region. OLD SARUM had no voters at all, but still returned two MPs.
- A common rule to vote was that you needed to own land worth 40 shillings.
- There were no large towns or big cities represented.
- There was no secret ballot since voting was done by a show of hands.
- Boroughs where votes had been bought were known as ROTTEN BOROUGHES.

CORRUPTION IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM-

- There was plenty of corruption and hypocrisy in the British political system.
- Two events in the wider world opened up the idea that the British political system needed challenging. In 1776 the American colonies declared independence and in 1789 King Louis XVI of France was overthrown in a revolution.
- In 1791 Thomas Paine published an attack on the British political system called THE RIGHTS OF MAN. In this work Paine argued that the British political system was corrupt and only represented the landowning class. The book was popular and 200,000 copies were sold which led to the government banning the book.

WHY WAS THERE NO REVOLUTION IN BRITAIN BY 1800?

- The French Revolution became increasingly violent. Many were unsympathetic to the revolutionaries for this reason.
- The aristocracy was determined to stamp out revolution. The HABEAS CORPUS ACT was suspended which meant that people could be imprisoned without trial.
- In 1799 the government passed the COMBINATIONS ACT which meant that workers could not join together to protest.
- In 1800 there was still respect for traditional authority.
- The British system was not democratic, but it was democratic enough to stop revolution.

CHALLENGE QUESTIONS:-

In what way was Britain undemocratic compared to today?

Did the fact that Britain not have a revolution before 1800 prove that the political system was fair?

Is it fair to criticise the political system in the past because it is not the same as today?

2) The campaign for the Great Reform Act

1812

A new breed of radicals were formed to challenge the political situation. John Cartwright formed the Hampden Club and William Cobbett published a magazine attacking the social inequality. The growth of the new towns helped the radicals as they were able to reach more people. Britain was at war with France from 1792-1815 and the end of the war was met with an economic slump. In 1816 thousands of people went to SPA FIELDS in London to hear Henry Hunt speak about the need for a government that represented the people.

1819

Since 1784 the Tories had been in power. Their leader, Lord Liverpool, was completely opposed to reform:-

- He put a Corn Law tariff on imported food which protected landowners profits and increased food prices.
- He introduced GAGGING LAWS to prevent public meetings and free speeches.
- In 1819 a protest meeting at ST PETERS FIELDS in Manchester turned ugly with the local militia killing 11 people. This event was called the PETERLOO MASSACRE.
- Liverpool's government introduced 6 acts. This limited public meetings, censored newspapers, increased taxes on newspapers and allowed Radical campaigners to have their homes searched.

1830

- The radicals did not achieve electoral reform, but the issues were talked about.
- Thomas Attwood, a banker in Birmingham, formed the BIRMINGHAM POLITICAL UNION (BPU). He wanted businessmen and industrialists should become MPs and he wanted the middle and lower classes to unite against the government. 50,000-100,000 would attend the meetings.
- The chance of reform increased when the WHIG PARTY won the 1830 election. In 1831 they put a reform bill into parliament which was rejected by the Lords.

1832

- The reaction to the defeated 1831 reform bill was chaos across the country. There were riots in Nottingham, Derby and Bristol. There was great support for the bill across the country.
- In May 1832 the WHIG Prime Minister, EARL GREY, managed to pass the reform bill through the Commons again. This time he asked the King to create Whig Lords to ensure it passed through the Lords. The King refused and instead he asked the Tory leader, the DUKE OF WELLINGTON, to form a new government which he refused. The King and Lords reluctantly accepted the Reform Act of 1832.
- The Act is known as the GREAT REFORM ACT, but it was led to small change. The vote only gave the vote to some of the middle classes.
- The changes were:-
- 143 SEATS were taken away from the BOROUGHES and moved to the new INDUSTRIAL TOWNS.
- ONLY PEOPLE PAYING £10 RATES PER YEAR COULD VOTE.
- THE PROPORTION OF MALE VOTERS INCREASED FROM 11% to 18%.
- Many other aspects of the system did not change:-
- The majority of MPs were still landowners.
- There was still no secret ballot so the intimidation and corruption increased.
- Many historians think that the act is important because it showed the importance of public pressure and the act brought more middle classes into the POLITICAL NATION.

3) Post 1932 – the Labour Party, Chartists and Reform Acts 1867 & 1884

1834

Many working class activists were disappointed with the mild nature of the 1832 Reform Act. In 1834 the government made it worse with the Poor Law Amendment Act which introduced harsh workhouses for the unemployed.

1842

CHARTISM – A new movement emerged from the discontent which wanted to force change in the political system.

Chartism was a working class movement which had these principles:-

Universal suffrage
No property qualification to be an MP
Annual parliaments
Payment for MPs
Secret ballot.

In 1839 the Chartists presented a petition to parliament with over 1 million signatures on it so it was certainly a popular movement.

The Chartists continued to press for change, but were constantly rejected.

1848

In 1848 the Chartists planned a huge meeting at Kennington Common in London. A petition with 1.5 million signatures was presented to parliament and rejected.

After 1848 Chartism faded and historians have considered it to be a failure. However, new evidence considers Chartism in a more measured way:-
The Chartists were up against a powerful opposition in the landed class.

The Chartists did achieve the end of the corn laws.
Chartism helped the Trade Unions to develop.

1850s

In the 1850s NEW MODEL UNIONS were formed. The ASE (Amalgamated Society of Engineers) was the best known.

Members paid membership fees and the unions supported them if they were ill or out of work.

Membership grew steadily so that 1 million men were in unions by 1874.

1867

In the 1850s the Whig party merged with other groups to form the LIBERAL PARTY. They campaigned for the vote to be extended to some working men.

In 1864 Radical MP JOHN BRIGHT formed the REFORM UNION. They worked with the NEW MODEL UNIONS to form the REFORM LEAGUE. By 1867 Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, had passed the 1867 Reform Act. This led to:-

More seats in industrial areas.
Men who rented property could vote.
Men who owned or leased land could vote.
40% of men could now vote.

1884

In 1884 Liberal PM, WILLIAM GLADSTONE, who had fought with Disraeli to get the 1867 REFORM ACT passed introduced the 1884 REFORM ACT.

The 1884 REFORM ACT:-
Gave more seats to industrial towns and cities.

Allowed respectable householders in the countryside to vote.

Increased the electorate by 2 million.

For the first time the proportion of MPs to the size of constituencies was fair.