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## A Critical Analysis of the Ups and Downs of the British 1832 ‘Great’ Reform Act

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**Abstract:** *This work scrutinises the British struggle for the 1832 ‘Great’ Reform Act by exploring its ups and downs. It, in fact, aims at showing that that Reform Act does not deserve the qualifier ‘Great’ put in inverted commas. Through the historical perspective, the findings have revealed that the 1832 Reform Act took much time to be recognised and passed by Parliament, because political leaders at that time were tyrants and hated all sorts of change. In the long run of time, the bill was then adopted and became law under the masses’ pressure and upheaval. However, after its passage, the political system was slightly changed and the idea of democracy in Britain was, indeed, still a mere masquerade. There were no salaries of MPs, no secret ballot, no regular parliaments, no vote for women, no abolition of property qualification and no constituencies of the same size. It is evident that this appellation is but window dressing. So, this historical misconception should be reviewed and corrected.*

**Key Words:** Struggle, the 1832 ‘Great’ Reform Act, Tyranny, Democracy

### Introduction

Also known as the First Reform Act or the Representation of the People Act, the British 1832 ‘Great’ Reform Act was an Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom that introduced major changes to the electoral system of England and Wales. Between other things, the Act introduced the first explicit statutory bar to women voting by defining a voter as a male person, only qualifying men were able to vote, which was already a problem. Also, the House of Commons of the Unreformed Parliament was composed of two representative communities namely the counties and the boroughs. Before 1832, there was a big difference between these communities in terms of representativity. In this respect, Veitch (1965, pp.1-2) wrote:

In the eighteenth century the representation was already disproportionate. It was the product, not of plan or principle, but of growth, of custom, even of

caprice. It was, therefore, unequal and inequitable; borough was favoured as against county, one district as against another; and, to adopt the phrase of modern politicians, the time was ripe for a distribution of seats.

Moreover, the right to vote in undemocratic Britain was subject to hard conditions. So, voting was not a right but a godly privilege given to the wealthier only. By the way, Pearce and Stearn (2000, p.11) state: “Like everything else in the unreformed political system, the ability to vote in parliamentary elections was determined largely by a number of different long-established local conditions. It was not a right accorded to individuals based on a coherent nationwide system.”

Elections were an actual battlefield where only the strong and rich people could win the votes. Violences, corruption, quarrels, and imprisonment of opponents’ fans sometimes were the relevant instruments used by candidates in order to intimidate voters to vote in favour of each one of them. When it came to vote,

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electors fulfilled their duty publicly. Bribery and corruption were legitimate during elections. Money was a powerful means through which candidates won easily the elections. So, this means that the contests were costly affairs. In fact, these aforementioned facts were the most relevant issues which led to the passing of the First Reform Act. Thirsty for the betterment of the political kingdom, radical intellectuals with the help of the common people decided to attack the government's leaders who believed in 'Divine Right of Ruling'. Given that the latter hated change, they took severe and repressive measures to intimidate them. These measures plunged the government into a complex conflict with the population.

The Act took much time to be passed, and it met most of the time opposition in the House of Lords. The reason is that aristocratic leaders always wanted the inhabitants to remain under their control in order to manipulate them. However, as time went on, Parliament approved the Reform Bill under the masses' upheaval and became law. It, in fact, drastically changed the electoral system for the first time, but left plenty of anomalies at work which necessitated to be cleansed. Therefore, the foregoing indications result in "A Critical Analysis of the Ups and Downs of the British 1832 'Great' Reform Act." This work thus aims to show that the 1832 Reform Act does not deserve the title of 'Great Reform Act'.

Numerous studies exist somehow on this topic. Aidt and Franck (2015) examine the causal effect of the threat of revolution on democratic change by exploring the impact of plausibly exogenous variation in threat perceptions on constituency level support for democratisation in the context of the Great Reform Act in 1832. Aidt and Franck (2008) also suggest a new approach to the study of franchise extension. They investigate the underlying causes of democratisation by studying the votes of the politicians who adopt suffrage reforms. Pearce (2003) provides a vivid and dramatic account of the gruelling parliamentary struggle to pass a radical reform act in Britain at a time of extreme political frustration and social unrest. Evans (1994) emphasises the travails of Toryism at the end of the 1820s, complex questions of policy, the connections between the Reform Act of 1832 and subsequent radical activity and reform legislation and presents revised electoral statistics. Brock (1973) examines the 1832 Reform Act from its struggle to its passage, including the radicals' failure.

Grounded on these previous works, this research seeks to answer the following question: can the Reform Act of 1832 actually be hailed as the Great Reform Act? It is supposed that after the adoption of this Act, the idea of democracy in Britain was still a mere illusion.

Things would have, however, been worse than pre-1832 period. So, tyranny and anarchy would have taken a new code of ethics and strengthened themselves. To achieve its objective, this analysis is focused on the historical perspective, and a particular emphasis is put on the struggle made before the Act's passage, its passage, its merits and weaknesses.

## Attempts Made Before the Passing of the Act

This section aims at showing the way the British proceeded so that the Bill of the First Reform Act could be accepted and given Royal Assent. It is subdivided as follows: Early Attempts at Reform before the French Revolution, Attempts at Reform after the French Revolution and Reform in the 1820s and in the Start of 1830s.

### Early Attempts at Reform before the French Revolution

In the beginning of the struggle for Parliamentary Reform, English radicals detested theories; and had only a strong desire for rapid change forgetting that change does not come automatically, but step by step with time. To sustain this view, Veitch (1965, p.43) asserts:

English parliamentary reformers had not, as rule, much taste for spinning theories of the State. They were practical men, impatient of theory, who were seeking practicable solutions for definite problems, and were groping about for the readiest satisfactory means of mending the existing Constitution at the points where they found it most defective.

Furthermore, for Molesworth (1972, pp.4-6), the abuses of which the reformers complained had existed many centuries earlier. It is evident that many of them were probably as old as the representative system which expanded in ages when anarchy and oppression coexisted. If some of these anomalies were occasionally abolished, but others remained there. Under the reign of Charles I, these anomalies became hugely visible that they attracted the attention of the Long Parliament, and decided to increase the number of members returned by the counties; and the metropolis gave representatives to Manchester, Leeds, and Halifax; disfranchised an important number of decayed boroughs, and conferred the elective franchise on every owner of land whatever might be his tenure. In the same way, it was enacted that representatives should be sent to the House of Commons from Scotland and Ireland, which was thought fair. Unfortunately, the civil war was presented as a real obstacle to the implementation of the proposed changes, but this proposal was later adopted by Oliver

Cromwell in summoning the Parliament of 1645. Hereupon, we can judge this important passage by saying that the proposal made to redress the prevailing disparities in the distribution of seats was cordially approved.

## Attempts at Reform after the French Revolution

The American and French Revolutions including the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the Glorious Revolution in 1788 had positive and negative impacts on British politics. Here, we will comment a bit more on the French Revolution of 1789. Indeed, positively, it gave a real and powerful impetus to the movement of Parliamentary Reform. It brought inspiration to the friends of reform, both old and new. It is said in the previous lines of this section that English reformers were practical men, but the revolution led them to focus more and more their claims for reform on abstract right and justice. They were now more interested in justice than convenience.

Negatively, it again strengthened the opposition's camp to resist by all possible means the question of reform. Opponents of reform considered this revolution as a monster willing to rob their natural power which was established by God himself. But, here, we are going to focus more on the positive effect of this revolution to show how it helped the British to move forward with the reform movement despite any resistance they met. In this light, Andrews (1927) maintained, "(...) the outbreak of the French Revolution was regarded by the liberals of England as an attempt to eradicate abuses and secure a more representative government. They greeted it with outspoken approval (...)"

In the same way, the revolution led Pitt, quoted by Veitch (1965, p.III), to make the following crucial observation:

The French Revolution produced a great change. It induced men to look beyond mere party squabbles. It taught them to despise the jugglery of parties.... The numbers, too, which now began to think for themselves in respect to government was increased. Many now saw, or thought they saw, information was necessary to produce good government. They comprehended their own ignorance and they sought for information.

Therefore, we understand that the French Revolution was a radical movement which seriously galvanized the people of Britain to renew the question of reform with an immense pleasure and a stirring spirit until its implementation.

## Reform in the 1820s and in the Start Of 1830s

As it can be noticed, until this level, motions which had been presented to Parliament to correct the flaws of the political system, to make it fair and diminish the distresses and sufferings of the people were all rejected by considerable majorities of anti-reformers. Nevertheless, the fact that the government still refused to approve these motions did not deter the reformers to continue their journey. This leads Evans (1994, p.38) to write:

(...) the Whigs Lambton and Russell both introduced reform bills in 1821 and 1822. Lambton called for parliaments to be elected at least once every three years and for a householder franchise in broadly equal electoral districts. Russell (...) proposed disfranchising 100 small boroughs and transferring the seats to the largest towns and the counties. It was no coincidence that internal party calculations had revealed the smaller boroughs to be disproportionately held by government supporters! Though Russell was defeated by more than 100 votes (...)

Woodward (1962, p.76) argues that in 1828, Huskisson and his friends suggested the abolishment of the corrupt boroughs of East Retford and Penryn so that their seats should be transferred to unenfranchised towns. He adds that after a discussion:

A compromise was arranged: East Retford was to be dissolved into the county, and the representation of Penryn was to be transferred to Manchester. The house of lords refused to create a new seat for Manchester; Huskisson then declared himself free to reject the proposal about East Retford. In May 1828 he voted against the government, and offered to resign.

In February and May 1830, Russell proposed the enfranchisement of Leeds, Manchester, and Birmingham, and the removal of the sixty smallest boroughs. But all the proposals were rejected. Mason (2015, p.25) states:

(...) in February Lord John Russell tried to give direct representation to Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham. This was defeated by 188 to 140. In May he tried to take sixty seats from the smallest boroughs and give them to the counties and the biggest towns. This failed by 201 votes to 117.

Molesworth (1972, pp.49-50) clarified that on 18th February 1830, the Marquis of Blandford took the first opportunity of renewing his attempt by bringing forward a measure of Parliamentary Reform in accordance with the indications of his rejected motion. It was entitled "A bill to regulate abuses in the elections of members of parliament", and it was set to restore the fundamental principles of representation which had been established under the reign of Henry III and the

three Edwards. Those previous battles arguably resulted centuries later in the passing of the 1832 Reform Act said to be 'Great.'

### The Passing of the Act and Its Ups

To begin with, it is obvious to hold that the supporters of Parliamentary Reform were not discouraged even after meeting obstacles in their struggle for reforming Parliament. In fact, Mayer (1999, p.39) asserts that in 1830, George IV who had resisted the Catholic emancipation and Parliamentary Reform died, and his brother William IV succeeded him to the throne. The accession of the latter necessitated a general election during which many people across the country spoke in favour of reform. This election coincided with significant advancements in France where a peaceful constitution revolution had taken place (July Revolution), stating that political change could not happen without violence. Nevertheless, it abolished tiny districts, gave representation to cities, gave the vote to small landowners, tenant farmers, shopkeepers, householders who paid a yearly rental of £10 or more, and some lodgers.

The First Reform Act was a response of many years battle to the British electoral system. Indeed, through Mayokey's analysis (2002, p.32), we understand that the Act eradicated many abuses of the old representative system. It abolished some of the rotten and pocket boroughs without compensation for their owners, and the industrial capitalist and commercial classes began to have their own representatives. It also served as a basis on which people could claim further political reforms to positively change the state of things.

The Tories won a majority in the election, but the party was not united, and support for the Prime Minister (the Duke of Wellington) was unimportant. When the Opposition raised the question of reform in one of the first debates of the year, the duke delivered a controversial speech concerning the existing system of government. In fact, he, quoted by Mason (2015, pp.26-27), declared:

(...) I am fully convinced that the country possesses at the present moment a legislature which answers all the good purposes of legislation, and this to a greater degree than any Legislature ever has answered in any country whatever. I will go further and say, that the legislature and the system of representation possess the full and entire confidence of the country (...) I am not only not prepared to bring forward any measure of this nature, but I will at once declare that (...) I shall always feel it my duty to resist such measures when proposed by others.

We clearly understand by this quotation that the prime minister had severely manifested antipathy against the question of reform. These absolutist ideas were extremely unpopular, even within their party. Conacher (1973, pp.6; 11-16) put that on 15th November these absolutist views made him lost enough support and led to the defeat of his government in the House of Commons by a majority of twenty-nine, with some sixty supposed supporters joining the Opposition. After this defeat, Wellington immediately resigned and the king directly invited Grey to form a new government. This new government was especially focused on the question of Parliamentary Reform, as was attested by the inclusion of Durham and Russell in the ministry (Russell was initially left outside the Cabinet) as well as Henry Brougham, a one-time Radical reformer, who became Lord Chancellor.

It is crucial to recall that the new government was composed of four Canningites or Liberal Tories, including Lords Palmerston and Melbourne, and one Ultra Tory, the Duke of Richmond, who were separated from Wellington and prepared to accept a Reform Bill. Lord Grey was greatly influenced by his Radical son-in-law, Lord Durham, and the latter's nomination as president of the Cabinet committee to draft the bill was extremely necessary. When Lord Grey formed his first Government, his core vision was to propose a large and efficient measure of Parliamentary Reform. Then he nominated the committee which was in charge of the framing of the first draft of the measure. This committee was administered by Lord Durham, Lord John Russell, Sir James Graham and Lord Duncannon on the Prime Minister's instructions.

In January 1831, the Cabinet Committee on Reform wrote a Report. Indeed, this report was hugely important. It contained in a great number of proposals which aimed at changing the political system for the better in order to satisfy the expectations of the people. As we can see, it intended to disfranchise the boroughs which had fewer than 2,000 inhabitants, decided to eliminate one member from those which had the population under 4,000 and suggested to extend the franchise to all householders within the town or borough and parish paying the house tax estimated at £20 per year.

It also proposed to give representatives to large and populous towns which had more than 10,000 inhabitants, but had still unrepresented in Parliament. Counties which had the population over 150,000 should be given additional members and divided into districts. The forty shillings franchise had to be abolished and leaseholders paying £50 per annum including copyholders paying £10 per annum should

be enfranchised. It then suggested to reduce the expenses of elections by insisting on the enforcement of residence, the registration of votes, the adoption of secret ballot, the increase of the number of polling booths, the shortening of the duration of the poll and the division of counties. It finally proposed that the duration of Parliament (parliamentary elections) should be reduced to five years.

Machin (2001, pp.16-18) declares that on 1st March 1831, Lord John Russell presented the bill to the House of Commons and after a debate it passed its second reading by a majority of one vote only on 23rd March. On 18th April, General Gascoyne proposed an amendment in committee which claimed to keep the representation of England and Wales as it was; was defeated by a majority of eight votes. After this defeat, Parliament was now dissolved by the king on the recommendation of the ministers. The election that followed weakened the Tory strength in the House of Commons and greatly enlarged the government's majority of about 130.

But outside Parliament, there was much radicalism claiming to obtain manhood suffrage and the ballot. When the new Parliament met, ministers introduced a second Reform Bill thanks to radicals' support, which passed its second reading by 367 votes to 231 on 6th July. At the committee stage, however, the famous ultra-Tory amendment known as the Chandos clause was included by a majority of 84. This clause extended the county franchise to £50 'tenants at will' (meaning farmers without leases or without guaranteed occupancy for any period, paying at least £50 annual rent). The clause was effectively viewed as an extension of the political influence of landlords or landowners, and the government found it unfair. But some radical leaders including Henry Hunt and Joseph Hume voted for it because it at least enfranchised several people.

Apart from these merits, the Reform Act failed to satisfy the British radicals because several anomalies and abuses of the old system remained at work, which could be labelled as the downs of the Act.

### **The Downs of the Act**

First notice has hereby to be given that after the 1832 Act, the representative system was still not under public scrutiny. The influence of patronage, bribery and corruption continued. Ilbert (1911, p.50) states, "There was no finality about the Act (...) It did not put an end to bribery, corruption, or the exercise of undue influence." At that time, the British population increased as evidenced by Whitfield (2001, p.72) who writes, "The number of adult males who were entitled to vote increased from around 478,000 to over 800,000." However, although there was an increase in

the electorate, imbalances were still prevalent in the number of voters, especially in boroughs. This disproportion is evidenced by Cunningham (2001, pp.33-34) in these words:

In 1832 in older boroughs in England with both franchises in operation about 40 per cent of the adult male population had the vote, whereas in the new boroughs it was about 15 percent. In particular boroughs there could be more extreme differences: in Birmingham, newly enfranchised, only 11 per cent of adult males were registered to vote, compared to 88 per cent in Preston.

It is worth noting that the Act just attempted to centre political activity on middle-class males because their allies from the working-class remained voteless. This can be understood that it was the Whigs' prime mission about reform to secure their interests in Parliament. Smith, quoted by Mayoke (2002, p.34), explains their mission as follows:

The Whigs had no intention for giving power to the uncouth and violent masses of the people. They aimed only to enfranchise respectable and intelligent men 'who are most interested in preserving tranquillity, and who know how to preserve it'. The new voters were to be responsible, middle-class people whose qualification was the amount they paid in rates or rents.

In addition to this, the distribution of seats in Parliament was still unfair. Old Corruption never ceased to be influential as Machin (2001, p.22) puts it:

It is true that much in the electoral system remained the same after the Acts. Traditional aristocratic influence, and the deference with which it was accepted, continued to be a marked feature, especially because many small boroughs survived and continued to return MPs.

Moreover, the changes brought about by the Reform Act were not always for the better. It did not change things as people wished them to be. There was much disorder in the way elections were held. Money was still powerful in elections' application and victory. By the way, Cunningham (2001, p.34) makes a crucial analysis:

(...) the conduct of elections after the Reform Act closely resembled the pre-reform era— and where there were changes, they were not always for the better. It was expensive to become an MP. To be qualified to stand in England and Wales (though not in Scotland) you needed a landed estate worth £600 per annum for a county seat and £300 per annum for a borough seat.

With all these imperfections, even if this Act is called the 'Great' by some historians, there is no doubt that after its passage Britain was still too far to be a truly democratic country because many of the criteria of

democracy were not yet achieved. Evans (2000, p.26) pinpoints:

It is easy to list what the so-called 'Great' Reform Act did not change: no shorter parliaments; no secret ballot; no constituencies of the same size; no payment of MPs who anyway still needed a hefty property qualification before they could take their seats; certainly no manhood suffrage.

However, from Cunningham's analysis (2001, p.34.), what is surprising is that candidates were confronted with hard conditions after 1832. They could not stand without meeting the official and authorised expenses or costs of elections. They were in charge of erecting booths and hiring rooms in which the poll should be held, expenses of the returning officers and clerks, the administration of oaths, fees to local officials, expenses for people to ensure the security. Apart from this obligation to fulfil, there were other expenses which some of them resorting to bribery and corruption.

In some constituencies, there was an established tradition which, unfortunately the Reform Act did nothing special to eradicate it. This can be illustrated by the fact that in Yarmouth there was the custom to pay 2 guineas (£2 2s.) to each voter. In the 1835 election, there was information that the Tories would give the usual sum of money to people who trusted them. After the failure of the two Whig sitting members, 550 Tory voters were rewarded. Trying, in fact, to eradicate corruption of this kind electorally cost death because this practice was normal in the sight of political opportunists. Those candidates who only tried to use their speeches to persuade the audience to vote for them were drastically defeated. Evidence is from the contest held at Norwich in 1835. When standing for this town, Harbord believed in the issue of purity of elections and was largely defeated with only few votes in his favour than other Liberal candidate at Norwich in the first decade after the 1832 Act. He continues by saying that even if the new enfranchised men in 1832 were not really interested in bribery, but they were also corrupted because in constituencies where there was the large majority each elector voted twice and he (2001, pp.35-36) says:

The new voters enfranchised in 1832 were less likely than older voters to expect or to receive a bribe. They were also more likely to vote in a partisan way that is for one party only. In two-member constituencies (the vast majority) each voter had two votes. Increasingly they either cast both votes for the candidates of one party, or, if there was only one candidate for the party they supported, they would 'plump', that is use only one of their votes.

In this way of doing things, we wonder how can a person vote twice at an election? This is a serious situation in the sense that at that time there were too

many people who could be allowed to vote, but they were excluded from exercising their right to vote.

In the same way, the Reform Act failed to grant the right to vote to the majority of the working-class people. Mason (2015, p.57) stresses that in London where some of the better-off artisans qualified to vote under £10- householder franchise were deliberately excluded due to the abolition of 'potwalloper' and 'scot and lot' franchises. That is the reason why fewer working-class men could vote than before. As far as women are concerned, no special attention was paid to their enfranchisement. It means that they were completely ignored in society.

After the Reform Act, elections continued to be held publicly as it is aforementioned that there was no secret ballot so far, for they resulted in entropy. For more clarification, Whitfield (2001, p.75) asserts:

(...) Bribery and corruption at elections not only continued but also became more visible and, probably, more prevalent. There was no effective limit on election expenses for candidates and the new voters were every bit as corrupt as their predecessors. At the 1841 election, votes were sold for £4 at Penryn, £7 at Sudbury and £15 at Ipswich. Contested elections cost candidates large sums of money; at Nottingham in 1841 the unsuccessful candidates spent £17,000.

He keeps on explicating that on top of this, there were

other forms of influence which remained. The new voters among tenant farmers were threatened by their landlords unless they voted in conformity with their wishes. Violence and intimidation were still unavoidable in post-1832 elections. In brief, patronage was not ended. Evans (1994, p.64) said:

Continuity after 1832 went much further than the survival of a reduced number of managed boroughs. Effectively, the same people ruled Britain. Of those elected in December 1832, between 70 and 80 per cent represented the landed interest; the largest specific category was that comprising sons of peerage.

This simply means that a kind of dictatorship was prevailing in Britain in the form of parentocracy, a system in which a child's education must conform to the wealth and wishes of parents rather than the abilities and efforts of the pupil. Brown (1990, p/66) suggested this in his text the 'third wave': education and the ideology of parentocracy. Is Britain a parentocracy? Published in the British Journal of Sociology in which he explored whether the British really have a choice in their children's schooling. According to the spirit of the era and Evans's quote, Brown's question is positively answered.

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## Conclusion

This work was premised on the assessment of the British 1832 Reform Act as the 'Great' Reform Act through the exploration of its achievements and failure. In other words, the question raised was on the recognition of that Act as the Great Reform Act or not. The results have revealed that the Act took much time to be recognised and passed by Parliament. The radicals tried many times but their attempts resulted most of the time in failure. However, these setbacks did not deter them to continue the struggle. Thanks to their determination and perseverance, the government yielded and the bill was passed and became law. The Act was important because it somewhat succeeded in cleansing Parliament for the first time. It, for example, abolished some pocket and

rotten boroughs, increased the electorate, redistributed seats and put in place a register of electors in each constituency and gave birth to a long-term democratic battle. Despite the passage of the bill, the majority of the people remained without the vote, especially women. Many democratic criteria were still to be met. Through this historical approach, we are inclined to state that the 1832 Reform Act does not resemble the appellation of the Great Reform Act. When it was passed, democracy in Britain was merely a masquerade. It basically gave the vote to middle class men, leaving working men disappointed. So, this historical misconception should be reviewed and corrected.

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