

The Reform Bills

The most outstanding change that took place in the nineteenth century was the gradual emergence of England as a democracy. This change was brought about by a series of Reform Bills. With the passing of each bill, a larger section of the population was given the right to vote. By the time the last bill was passed in 1928, every adult male and female could vote.

There had been no major change in the representative system of England and Wales since Tudor times. Each borough and county could send two representatives to the Parliament. After the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions, most of the people living in boroughs migrated to the cities. Some boroughs even disappeared completely. Yet they enjoyed the benefit of sending two representatives to the Parliament. Ironically, big industrial towns did not have any representation. The workers resented this as they had no scope for expressing their grievances to the government.

Another factor which led to the passing of the **Reform Bill of 1832** was the unjust qualification for a person to have the right to vote. According to the old custom, any freeholder with an income of forty shillings could vote while wealthy tenant farmers could not. This caused a lot of discontent in the minds of the people.

The Whig government appointed a committee to study parliamentary reform. **Lord Durham**, the chairman of this committee, made a thorough study of the existing state of affairs and submitted his report. **Earl Grey**, the Prime Minister, accepted the changes recommended by the **Durham Committee** and introduced the Reform Bill in Parliament in 1831. The House of Lords opposed the bill, and as a result, Grey requested King William IV to dissolve the Parliament. In the general election which followed the dismissal of the government, the Whigs were re-elected. This clearly indicated that the people wanted reform very badly. The Reform Bill was once again rejected by the House of Lords. Earl Grey resigned, and **Wellington** was asked to form the ministry. Wellington could not do so and Grey was asked to

return. When the bill was proposed for the third time in 1832, it was finally passed.

The total number of seats in the House of Commons remained unaltered. Fifty-six 'rotten boroughs' were disfranchised and thirty others could send only one member. As a result, a hundred and forty-three seats were released. Of these, sixty-five were given to large towns and cities that had been unrepresented so far. Sixty-five others were given to newly-created rural constituencies that were thickly populated. The remaining thirteen were given to Ireland and Scotland.

As far as the question of franchise was concerned, the forty-shilling freeholders retained the right to vote, but the franchise was extended to copyholders and leaseholders whose lands were worth £10 a year. Short lease holders and tenants whose lands were worth £50 a year were also given the right to vote.

These changes, although they might appear impressive at first glance, were not all that revolutionary. The people expected a great deal from the Reform Bill, but in reality only one section of society benefited—the middle class. It nevertheless broke the monopoly of power possessed by the gentry and the nobility. By giving the vote to the middle class, the centre of gravity in politics was shifted. A major result of the Reform Bill of 1832 was that it had set the ball rolling. Once one section of society got the franchise, the other sections were bound to make demands too. The working classes, who did not benefit through the Reform Bill, remained disgruntled. This led to several agitations and movements. Of these, the most important were **socialism**, **trade unionism** and **Chartism**.

Chartism was an uprising demanding reform. It was a movement started by **William Lovett** in 1836. It was a fervent and tempestuous protest by the poor against the sordid conditions under which they lived. A demand for the franchise was made for the working class. Lovett, with the help of Francis Place, drew up a programme outlining the reform of Parliament. This programme, which had six points, was known as the **People's Charter**. It was from this that the movement got the name of **Chartism**. The Chartists' demands were rejected by the Parliament in 1839 and in 1842. A general strike was declared and hundreds of Chartists were imprisoned.

Although the movement appeared a failure, ultimately, most of their demands were conceded.

The **Second Reform Bill** was introduced by **Gladstone** in 1866 and was rejected in the House of Commons itself. Later, there was a wave of resentment among the working classes and the lower middle classes. They demanded reform and held demonstrations at Hyde Park. **Lord Derby**, who was the Prime Minister then, passed the Second Reform Bill in 1867 with the support of **Disraeli**. This gave the vote to artisans and small householders. By the Reform Bill of 1867, all workmen who lived in towns got the franchise. After 1867, one out of twelve people had the right to vote. However, agricultural labourers and miners were excluded.

The **Third Reform Bill** was passed by Gladstone when he was Prime Minister. It was rejected by the House of Lords and was finally passed only after a series of conferences between Gladstone and Salisbury. Through this bill, all householders in the counties were given the right to vote. By this move, about two million new voters were created in England. It also increased the electorate in Ireland and thus gave it a greater representation in Parliament.

The most important effect of the third act was that it did away with the old practice of representation by counties and boroughs. The country was divided into single-member constituencies of equal population. Every man who lived in a permanent house, either as a landlord or as a tenant, had the right to vote. This act made England a democracy and dealt a severe blow to the power of the aristocracy. The power now passed over completely to the people.

The **Representation of the People Act of 1918** gave the vote to all men above the age of twenty-one and to all women over thirty. For the first time, women were given the franchise. This age difference was abolished in 1928 and since then both men and women were considered equals as far as the electorate was concerned.

A study of these Reform Bills unfolds before us the gradual emergence of England from the clutches of the king and the nobles. Step by step, the various sections of society were given the franchise until every adult male and female had a role to play in choosing the government. Today, England is one of the leading democratic countries of the world and serves as an example to the rest.

THE REFORM BILLS

Synopsis : Introduction — Parliamentary democracy in England the result of a political evolution — causes for parliamentary reform — defective old system of election — how the first Reform Bill was passed — provisions of the First Reform Act — its results — the Chartist movement — the second Reform Act, The third, fourth and fifth Reform Acts — conclusion — the result of all these Acts.

Parliamentary democracy in England was the result of a process of political evolution. It was not all on a sudden, as in India, that all the adults in England got the right of vote. It took nearly a century for the right of vote to be extended to more and more people to end in what is today called adult franchise.

Introduction

There were several reasons for the passing of the first Reform Bill in 1832. The most important was that the principle of distribution of seats in Parliament was found to be defective. According to the age long arrangement each borough and county was allowed to send two representatives to Parliament. But during the long period of the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions these boroughs were thinly populated as the people migrated to the industrial towns, seeking employment. But these pocket boroughs and rotten boroughs, as they were called, continued to send the same number of representative to Parliament. At the same time the big industrial towns did not have any representation. The qualification for a person to have the right of vote was not just. The custom in the earlier centuries was that any free-holder, having an income of forty shillings a year, could vote at Parliamentary elections. In the early part of the nineteenth century such a man was not wealthy and yet he continued to enjoy the same right. At the same time big tenant farmers holding land for long leases did not have any right of vote at all. This meaningless practice caused a lot of discontent among people. There was unemployment in the country. The price of corn was high on account of the Corn Law passed in 1815 to protect English agriculture. This caused a lot of suffering to poor people. It was felt that the only remedy for such a sorry state of affairs was more reasonable representation of people

in Parliament. So there was widespread agitation in the country for Parliamentary reform. But it was only after a long period of struggle that this long expected Parliamentary reform could be effected.

In 1831 at the time of William IV, the Prime Minister Earl Grey introduced a Reform Bill in Parliament. After the three readings in the House of Commons the Bill was sent to the House of Lords for its approval. The Lords opposed it and on that account Earl Grey resigned. This led to the unpopularity of the Lords. The King then asked the Duke of Wellington to be Prime Minister, but the strange thing was that the Duke was not able to get people to join his ministry. According to the Duke's advice Grey was recalled to form a ministry. Once again Grey introduced the Reform to form a ministry. The King, who was in favour of the Reform Bill, saw to it that about a hundred refractory Lords absented themselves from the House and the Bill was passed on 7th June 1832.

The following were the provisions of this epochmaking Reform Bill. Fifty-six rotten boroughs having a population of less than two thousand were deprived of representation in Parliament. Thirty-two boroughs having less than 4,000 people were given only one seat each. Sixty-five seats were given to new boroughs, twenty-two receiving two members each and twenty-one, one member each. Sixty-five seats were added to English counties, eight seats to Scottish countries and five seats to Irish countries. The franchise was also extended to all the householders in towns who paid ten pounds annual rent and in the counties to all who held a forty-shilling freehold or were ten-pound copy-holders or fifty-pound lease-holders. The newly constituted House of Commons consisted of 658 members.

According to this Act the King and the Lords lost much of their power but the middle classes got great authority. As the property qualification for franchise was lowered, the number of voters became much larger. About 220,000 received the right of vote. This increased the electorate by one-half. Most of the newly enfranchised were residents of towns and this helped the Whigs to become more powerful. Moreover, the Reform Bill also showed that people, through protests and organization, could change the laws to conform to the demands of the moment.

When it was announced that the Reform Bill had become law, the bells were rung and bonfires were burned every where as if a great victory had been won for the people. All sorts of benefits were expected, but the wages continued to be low and food was dear. A new party called the Chartists arose and their activities were known as the Chartist movement. This movement had great influence over the workmen in the towns. The Chartists drew up a plan for a more thorough reform of the Parliament and called it the People's Charter. This Charter demanded six things : manhood suffrage, vote by secret ballot, annual parliaments, election districts equal in numbers of Parliament and regular payment for the members of Parliament. At that time the Whigs as well as the Tories were shocked by the radical nature of these demands and tried to put down the movement by imprisoning the leaders. However, most of these demands were conceded in course of time.

After the death of the orthodox-minded Palmerston, Gladstone introduced the second Reform Bill, but owing to opposition from some of the Liberals the Bill was defeated in the House of Commons itself. However, some years later in 1867, Benjamin Disraeli introduced the Bill in Parliament and it was passed. The second Reform Bill had the following results : In counties the franchise qualification was lowered. This increased the county electorate from 540,000 to 790,000. In towns the franchise was given to all male householders and lodgers paying ten pounds as rent. This Act was certainly an improvement on the earlier one. According to the second Act all workmen who lived in towns got the franchise. However, the agricultural labourers and miners who formed a substantial section remained without the right to vote.

The third Reform Act was passed in 1884, when Gladstone was Prime Minister. According to this Act franchise was extended to the householders in the counties also. The Redistribution Act which he got passed in due course abolished small rotten boroughs and fifty-two seats were redistributed. England was divided into electoral districts. With the passing of this third Reform Bill the power of controlling the Government passed over to the people and thus Britain became what is called a democracy.

The fourth Reform Act of 1918 gave the right of vote to all men aged twenty-one and all women aged twenty-five and above. This age difference was abolished in 1928, and thus the equality of woman to man was officially acknowledged.