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The Will to Reform: Public Opinion and the 1832 Reform Bill

Safwan Shabab, 2010

A news piece run by *The Times* on April 30, 1831 reported the sighting of two rooks – a pair of ‘aristocratic’ birds – at Wood-street in London, at just about the time when Lord John Russell presented the first Reform Bill to the House of Commons. The newspaper speculated that this appearance was an omen for the choice that lay in front of the British aristocracy of the time – whether they have “nothing to fear from citizens if the Bill passed…or if gentlemen will find it highly advantageous to obtain superior articles (popular support) at fair prices?”¹ This report, in a light hearted manner, underscored the brewing tensions in Britain over popular calls to reform the corrupt and aristocratic representative system of the 1830s. British public opinion was affecting national politics in an unprecedented manner. Spurred on by a vibrant press, the public seemed determined to influence politicians by manifesting their concerns and expectations. People “devoured the daily paper to read on the progress of the reform bill and watch the representatives they sent to Parliament to express their feelings.”² In this paper, I will argue that public opinion in Britain during the 1830s was the most crucial factor in ensuring the passage of Great Reform Act of 1832. I intend to validate this claim by contending that the alteration in relationship between the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the split within the Tories, the Whig response and King William IV’s role were direct outcomes of the popular agitation in Britain between 1831 and 1832. Alternative impetus for reform, including an inherent parliamentary dynamism and competence of British politicians and monarch will be also shown to be inadequate, in the absence of a public will, to explain the passage of the Reform.

This paper uses *The Times*, a traditionally conservative leading British daily established in 1785 as the primary source for defending its thesis. A series of 20 articles, including reports parliamentary proceedings, public meetings, commentaries by individual readers and editorial pieces, between March 1831 and June 1835 provide insight into the changing public mood as the Reform Bill was debated in the Parliament. With rapid improvement in newspaper printing by the 1820s, *The Times* was read by a large number of Britons, including middle class urbanites, mercantile groups and Church officials and often closely reflected popular views.³ In an editorial published on

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³ This spectrum of readers is seen in the letters received by *The Times* from businessmen.
August 16, 1831, *The Times* claimed that, in light of the public spirit, it supported the Reform Bill “not because it was the bill of Ministers, but as being a bill for reform”. Although it stated that its support for Whig Prime Minister Lord Grey was contingent upon his pursuit of reforms, this comment exposes the strong bias of the newspaper towards the Bill and its proponents. While this bias is consistently present in the publications, *The Times* still manages to provide comprehensive accounts of developments during the period. The surprising fact that *The Times*, despite its conservative leaning, endorsed the Reform Bill actually allows for the study of a stronger case for reform as the daily presented its coverage of the 1832 Reform Bill.

The bill, formally known as An Act to Amend the Representation of the People in England and Wales, sought to restructure the existing electoral system by redistributing seats and extending enfranchisement to the public. First presented on March 1, 1831 soon after the election of a Whig government under Lord Grey, the bill failed twice to pass through the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The repeated rejection of the reforms fuelled public agitation, resulting in violent unrest in Derby and other places. *The Times*, echoing popular sentiments, did not hesitate to shift the blame for these riots on the “obstinacy of the Lords” who were acting to preserve “every political and moral degradation” of the political status quo.⁴ Amidst a national crisis after the Duke of Wellington failed to form a government, King William IV finally gave royal assent to the bill on June 7, 1832. *The Times*, welcoming the news of the passage, printed clauses from the Act; it read "Be it enacted that all male persons of full age, seized of and in any lands or tenements of at least the yearly value of 10l, shall have a right to vote in the elections in all future parliament."⁵

Provisions such as these effectively increased the franchise by lowering the property threshold and included 217,000 new voters to expand the electorate to 650,000.⁶ Of equal importance was the effort to do away with rotten and pocket boroughs which had bred corruption in the electoral process.⁷ The Bill instead allowed for representation of larger population centers such as Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds. Both these measures were responding to popular demands for a reduction in the influence of aristocrats in the Parliament and to accommodate a burgeoning British middle class. When Lord Russell defined the objective of the Grey government was to “(pass a measure which) every reasonable man in the country should be

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⁷ Rotten boroughs were constituencies which had a very small population but were still returning members to Parliament, while pocket boroughs were constituencies which were under direct patronage of the British aristocrats.
satisfied with”, he was arguably playing to these very public sentiments.  

Primary sources reveal that the British public was acting in an unprecedented manner to alter the relationship between the House of Commons and the House of Lords. At its roots, such popular agitation was influenced by a heightened sense of expectation in a reformed Parliament, as reported in The Times. Speakers at a pro-reform county meeting in Essex argued that an unreformed House prevented the people from having the “object of their choice” and compromised a “just estimate of public rights.” The public right in question was the entitlement of British citizens to be represented by parliamentarians who could protect constituent interests against unpopular legislations, such as the Corn Laws and the 1829 Catholic Relief Act. The problem, as perceived by the public, was that the House of Commons was entirely controlled by the peers in the House of Lords, rendering it unresponsive to popular concerns. The Times reminded its readers that “the House of Commons is said to be the people’s house.” The legitimacy of any government, whether under the Duke of Wellington or Lord Grey, depended on the support of the people. What is remarkable about this time period in British politics is the strong belief that the House of Commons should serve the people – the time had come when “no House of Common dare defy popular opinion.” The public was increasingly less receptive to the idea of a House of Commons as mere political instruments of the House of Lords. On the other hand, the House of Lords was blamed to be dangerously defying calls for extending franchise and eliminating corruption. An editorial, echoing the calls in pro-reform county meetings across the country, argued that the peerage in the House was failing to realize that “their own greatness is dependent on the general welfare and happiness of the people.” By spending exorbitant amounts to send handpicked members to the Commons and thereby ‘pocketing’ constituencies, the Lords were effectively preventing “honorable men of moderate fortune” to run for public office and thereby rendering the Lower House of Parliament dysfunctional. The common expectation was that “with a reformed Parliament, (such) abuses will die a natural death”. Thus, it is clear the public actively anticipated and advocated against these abuses, which were a

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8 Editorial, The Times, Feb 20, 1837, 4.
10 Editorial, The Times, March 17, 1831, 2.
11 The Corn Laws imposed tariff on grain import, raising food prices for the general public while allowing for business owners to earn large profits. Similarly, the Catholic Relief Act was unpopular for removing restrictions on opportunities for Catholics such as the holding of public offices.
12 Editorial, The Times, April 21, 1831, 5.
14 Editorial, The Times, July 08, 1831, 4.
16 This heightened expectation sheds light not only into the motivations behind violent riots that broke out every time the Reform Bill was rejected by the Parliament, but also explains the alliances of disparate interest groups which were driving the Reform movement, see Editorial, The Times, March 28, 1831, 2.
product of the working relationship between the Houses of Parliament. With the House of Lords controlling the actions of the House of Commons, it is improbable that any other cause, such as an inherent dynamism in the parliamentary structure of the 1830s could have pushed for this change in the institutional setup. Alternatively, this alteration could have been attributed as a conscious move by the Lords to compromise with members in the House of Commons and hence, consolidate their position against popular opinion. However, this explanation does not lend itself to an independent cause of the change in parliamentary setup – the Lords actions were arguably were still a reaction to the ominous public agitation. Hence public pressure to revive the House of Commons as a popular institution, and not leave it as a pawn of the peers, was critical to introduce the Reform Bill in 1831.

The political split within the Tories was heavily influenced by the way in which the party handled public opinion during the early 1830s. In a speech to the House of Commons in 1830, Tory Prime Minister Duke of Wellington had asserted to the House of Commons that the system of representation in the status quo was sufficiently representative and possessed the nation’s confidence; he deemed it as his duty to oppose all reforms. A reading of the Duke of Wellington’s biography shows that he held that the “people are rotten to the core” and thus was opposed to allow ordinary middle class Britons a voice in Parliament. The Duke’s arrogance marked a certain disconnect of the ruling Tories from the prevailing public mood outside Westminster. Similarly, readings from traditional Tory periodicals show that pro-Wellington Tories dismissed the popular calls for reform as an ‘evanescent, periodical excitement’ and any measures toward reform as a futile attempt to reach a political utopia. The public received the Tory indifference to calls for reform negatively; a satirical prose in The Times mocking the Duke and his ministers summed up the popular perception of the Prime Minister, “Because / I scorn the people, and deny their claims/The Bill is therefore bad! / The Bill is therefore bad!” A section of the Duke’s Ministry, the ultra-Tories who had realized that their conservative interests could only be protected through a compromise and not by the Duke’s contempt of the public, decided to split and support the Reform Bill in April 1830. Shortly thereafter, the Wellington government collapsed and new elections were announced; pressures of public opinion evidently caused the divide within the ruling party. It may be contended that this Tory split was a

20 Arts and Entertainment, “Poetical Protest of the Duke of Wellington Against the Second Reading of the Reform Bill,” The Times, April 19, 1832, 2.
result of well intentioned desires by certain Tory Ministers to make Parliament more representative, and was not necessarily a product of public pressure. However, an examination of reports in *The Times* suggests differently. An ultra-Tory leader in Bury stated that he did not necessarily “approve of (reform), but admitted that it was the absolute necessity,” referring to the public indignation over rejection of the Bill.\(^\text{21}\) This Tory faction still strongly advocated for ‘closed boroughs’, believed that it was an inherent right of the aristocracy to dominate Parliament and thus insisted that the interests of the ‘landed classes’ must be protected.\(^\text{22}\) However, these politicians realized that without reform, the only option left was a popular and almost inevitable ruening of their privileges had they not acquiesced to public demands. Hence, what is seen here is that the split amongst the Tories was a direct outcome of public agitation and not a result of any political desire to reform the electoral system.

In contrast to its Tory predecessors, the Whig government safely positioned themselves as the proponents of reform. In the ensuing debates after the Bill was first placed, the Whig Prime Minister Lord Grey made clear his intention to pass the reforms, adding that “I will stand or fall with the bill.”\(^\text{23}\) Lord John Russell had already promised the nation ‘every reasonable man’ would gain from the Reform Bill, hinting that it would cater to the demands of the middle class which was advocating for reform.\(^\text{24}\) A reading from a pro-Whig journal reveals that the government was working to ensure that “all sections of people would be merged into one (political system)” and that no section will be endowed with separate political privileges.\(^\text{25}\) Importantly, the Whig government was simultaneously making attempts to secure the support of local political unions to consolidate its power at a time of turbulent popular movements. Civil society groups, such as the Birmingham Political Union, represented alliances between disparate interest groups such as anti-slavery activists, free trade proponents, business guilds as well as ordinary workers; *The Times* called it the “barometer of the Reform feeling throughout England.”\(^\text{26}\) The Whigs viewed an alliance with these groups as crucial for its survival in office, especially after the Tory government collapsed for ignoring public opinion. *The Times* reported on a series of meetings between Lord John Russell and Mr. Gregson, leader of the Birmingham Political Union, over the inclusion of a clause to prevent artificial tenantry.\(^\text{27}\)


\(^{23}\) News, *The Times*, April 25, 1832, 3.

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Correspondences such as these allowed the government, and specifically the Prime Minister, to be seen in consultation with civil society members who were in direct contact with the wider public. It is fair to argue here that the Whig government’s confidence to call for new elections after the House of Lords blocked the Reform Bill in late 1831 was a result of its success in securing popular support. Once again, it is evident that public opinion not only helped Lord Grey and ministers to hold on to power during a turbulent first term in office, but provided it political capital to win a second term and carry the Reform Bill using an affirmed mandate. A critical response to this argument may point to the fact that the Grey government might not actually have enjoyed such strong popular backing, as was portrayed in the pro-reform *The Times*. In fact, many of the Whig-backed Reform measures of 1831-32 resulted in complicated voter registration processes and poorly defined county divisions – boroughs like Southwark in Surrey with a population of 91,501 people risked being disenfranchised. However, the strong alliances that Grey and his ministers had built up with political unions allowed the government to survive the problems that arose from these electoral inconsistencies of the Bill. This was evident in the reports of celebration, where speakers at public gatherings confirmed that “the people supported the present Ministry”, displaying deference for the Lord Grey and his government. Hence, the Whig rule was validated by popular support and was provided the impetus with to eventually pass the Reform Bill in 1832.

An interesting proposition to examine in defending the original thesis is the role of the monarchy amidst the crisis and passage of the 1832 Reform Bill. King William IV assumed power after the death of King George IV in June 1830 amidst the constitutional crisis over reforms. Despite being new to the throne, the king played an influential role in initially opposing the Bill before finally assenting to the third draft in 1832 after the Duke of Wellington failed to form a government and block Lord Grey’s reform agenda. Importantly, he agreed to employ the Whig plan to create new peers in the event that the third Reform Bill was rejected and dilute the strength of the conservative Lords through ‘peer-making’. There appears to be a contradiction in *The Times* and secondary sources over whether the King was supporting reform (and thus being responsive to public opinion) from the onset of his succession to the throne. Reports from a Sussex County meeting in April, 1831 showed reformers expressing reverence for the monarch, claiming the King to be “generous” and wishing to “restore the people their just

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28 Letters to the Editor, “Reform Act, A Freeholder of Southwark,” *The Times*, August 08, 1832, 3.


and undoubted rights.”

Interestingly, this piece appeared at a time when secondary sources reveal that the King was in fact opposed to any parliamentary reform, upon advice from the House of Lords. Thus it becomes imperative to establish whether public opinion had any impact on the King’s decision to eventually resolve the crisis. In the period between 1830 and mid-1831, primary sources, such as news from the April 1831 County meeting at Sussex, depict him as favoring reform – and only calls upon the King to create new peers. The primary sources show that none of King’s initial inaction or active opposition to reform measures created public discontent. Hence, critics may contend that public opinion had little to do with the monarch’s decisions, including his eventual assent to the passing of the Bill. However, it is crucial to understand that when William IV did decide to use the prospect of ‘peer-creation’, he was acting reluctantly and only in the face of active pressure from the Whigs in government. The King had asked the Duke of Wellington to form a government in mid-1831 as a last attempt to hinder the passage of the Reform Bill; the attempt failed due to a lack of confidence in a new Wellington government. Thus the fact that only the Whigs commanded significant public support must not have been lost on the King in 1832. As the Bill was passed, The Times claimed that the monarch had sought to “to restore to his people those rights and liberties of which they have been so long deprived” – such deference amidst the volatile political environment of 1832 was arguably conditional upon the King’s willingness to respond to popular demands for reform. In hindsight, William’s decision to consider a redistribution of power within the House of Lord and consequently putting at risk his own position of authority only lends credibility to the sheer impact of public opinion which bound the king to allow for the reforms.

Critics have claimed that the Great Reform Act of 1832 may have well been the single most influential piece of legislation in British politics in the 19th century. Any inherent dynamism of British political institutions, competence of its politicians or even the astuteness of the monarch could have hardly provided such an impetus to ensure the passage of the 1832 Reform Bill and to restore the House of Commons as a representative body. Perhaps, it is not surprising that eventually it was public opinion which revived the nation’s most influential popular institution, the House of Commons and affirmed ordinary Britons’ stake in national politics in the decades following the eventful years of 1830-32.

Bibliography

I used a series of articles in The Times between March 1831 and June 1835 from The Times Digital Archive 1785-1985 on

32 Politics and Government, “Reform Bill, Sussex County Meeting.”, The Times, April 09, 1831, 3.


