Chapter Fifty-Four

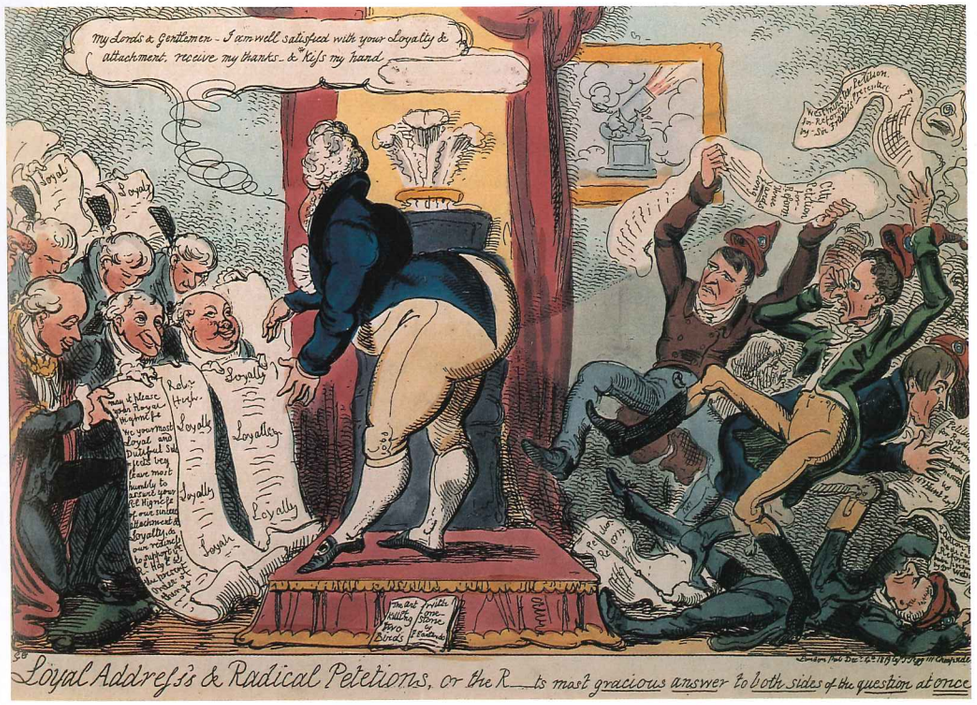
REVOLUTION AVERTED: THE GREAT REFORM BILL

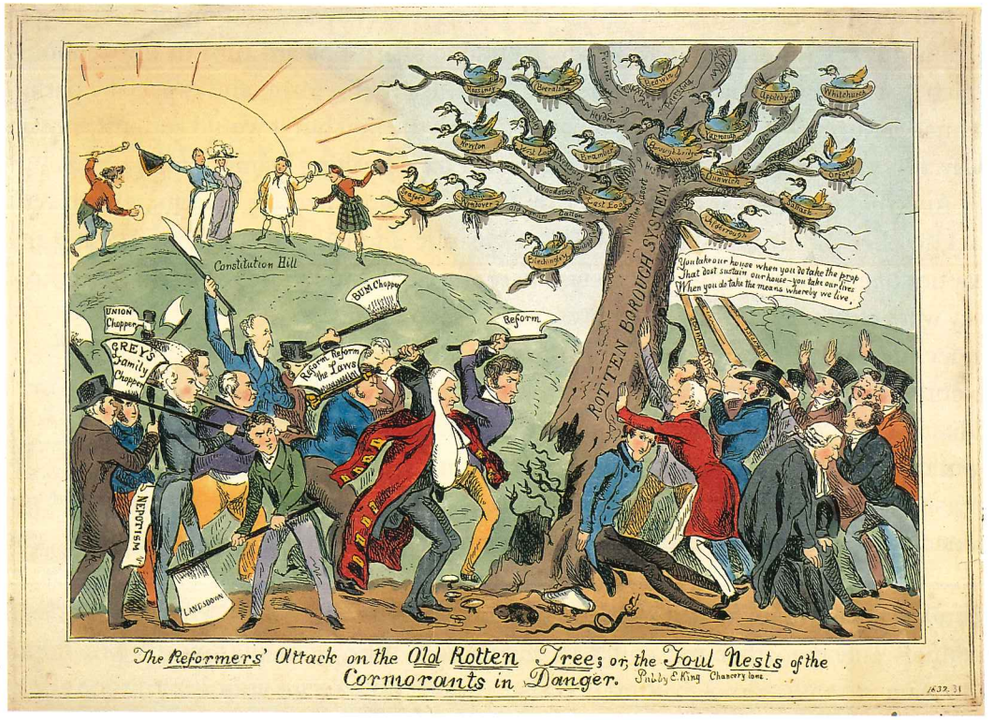
WAR is the harbinger of change. Suddenly three hundred thousand soldiers and sailors flooded onto the job market, bringing mass unemployment. There was a trade depression and the harvest was bad. The five years following 1815 were to bring Britain nearer to the brink of revolution from below than at any other time in her history. They were years of social turbulence and unrest, expressed in monster marches, huge open-air rallies and occasional insurrections. The radical voices, which had been suppressed in the aftermath of the French Revolution and through the long years of war, re-surfaced. In the new industrialised areas of the country working men's associations, called Hampden Clubs after the man who had challenged the absolute rule of Charles I, sprang up. These were replaced just before 1820 by the Political Unions which held open-air meetings and sent huge petitions to Parliament, signed by thousands of people. The artisans and workers in the towns demanded a reform of Parliament, universal male suffrage, lower taxation and relief from poverty. At one of these vast rallies outside Manchester the local yeomanry dispersed the crowd and eleven people were killed, immediately billed as martyrs to the cause in the 'Peterloo Massacre'. Another group, of shoemakers and silk weavers, plotted to blow up the Cabinet in what was known as the 'Cato Street Conspiracy'. They failed, but all this was evidence that a revolutionary underground was clearly active, borne out also by the scattered uprisings that occurred across the country. This was an era when the radical press was in full flood with William Cobbett's *Political Register* at the forefront. Caricaturists mercilessly ridiculed what they saw as an extravagant and corrupt ruling class led by a man whose decadence was a throwback to the previous century, the Prince Regent and future George IV. In 1819, after Peterloo, Parliament passed the Six Acts, designed to suppress any revolu-tionary movement by tightening the laws on sedition and libel, and imposing a crippling stamp duty on newspapers. It was not long before the main trouble-makers found themselves in gaol.

No revolution occurred. The radical groups were diverse and divided, but more significant was the fact that 1820 saw a sudden sharp upward turn in the economy which was to last for most of the decade. The idea that reform, and especially parliamentary reform, was desirable may have gone off the boil but it would certainly not go away. It was henceforth to be firmly on the agenda, awaiting its moment.

And that is hardly surprising, for by 1815 the parliamentary system, which went back to the Middle Ages, had become a gigantic anomaly, no longer reflecting the realities of a rapidly changing society. There were 658 MPs in the Commons but how they were elected and who they represented was to come under increasing fire. There was no independent representation, for instance, of the burgeoning new industrial and commercial centres such as Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield. In sharp contrast the long-abandoned medieval borough of Old Sarum returned two MPs. Worse, there were only seven electors and they were open to bribery. In 1830, eighteen of Cornwall's twenty-eight seats were in the control of individuals and the other ten could be purchased. Who

George Cruickshank's *Loyal Addresses and Radical Petitions* satirises the official reaction to the 'Peterloo Massacre' of 1819. The future George IV as Prince Regent receives loyal addresses from those who support 'the present order of things'. To them he graciously extends his hand to kiss while his posterior emanates a very different kind of experience to those who demand reform.





Caricature showing those for and against the 1832 Reform Bill. Those against prop up a tree labelled 'Rotten Borough System' filled with birds sitting in nests, each one identified as one of the corrupt boroughs. Those for reform advance with axes while on 'Constitution Hill' William IV and Queen Adelaide stand arm in arm, receiving the salute of an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman against a rising sun.

had the vote also varied wildly. In thirty-nine boroughs it went with certain properties, in forty-three the electors were the town council, while in sixty-two others the freemen voted. In the counties the forty-shilling freeholders naturally cast their vote in deference to the wishes of the local landowner or else he withdrew his favours. Parliament remained one large interconnected family, the aristocracy forming the House of Lords and their sons, brothers and cousins, along with a sprinkling of gentry, making up the Commons.

Nonetheless the system had worked well, and it was not to be until the third quarter of the previous century that anyone was to suggest that it was in any way in need of revision. The idea that reform might be desirable went back to the notorious career of an outright rogue and demagogue, John Wilkes. Although Wilkes had become an MP under aristocratic aegis he found his path to advancement blocked and turned to polemic, attacking George III's minister, Lord Bute, so violently that he was put in the King's Bench Prison. By getting his friends to apply for a writ of Habeas

Corpus, thereby implying that he had been arbitrarily arrested, the equation Wilkes and 'Liberty' was born. Later, in 1768, Wilkes was to get himself elected MP for Middlesex on a tide of public outrage on his behalf, and although he was repeatedly expelled from the House he was always re-elected back again. The fact that he was utterly pernicious, however, was neither here nor there. Looked at from the outside it seemed that the will of the electorate had been over-ruled by a corrupt élite, and that something about Parliament was in need of reform. As a result a parliamentary reform movement came into being which reached its zenith in the 1780s, coinciding with the population increase. There were many more people, some of whose fathers had had the vote which was denied to them. All of this was then to cool, firstly in response to the economic recovery following the American war, but even more in reaction to the outbreak of the French Revolution.

During the war years, however, in spite of the fact that action was ruled out, there was still a reform movement and the debate in terms of ideas continued. Jeremy Bentham was one of the many writers who gave vent to the view that a 'ruling few' dominated a 'subject many', and that an accumulation of influence and patronage controlled Parliament, the army, the church and the law. Such a view was of course attractive to the ever-growing numbers of people who found themselves outside the system but whose aspiration was to be in it. These included not only Dissenters and Roman Catholics, but also some of the new commercial and industrial classes. It was all of this which erupted in the years immediately after 1815 reaching a peak in 1820 and then suddenly falling off. But everything remained in place ready to spring to life again at the appropriate time, and that was to come quite suddenly.

In 1827 Lord Liverpool, whose greatest achievement had been to keep an administration in power for so long, resigned, dying shortly after. His successor, George Canning, died soon after his appointment and was followed by Viscount Goderich who resigned after only a few months. George IV then asked the hero of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington, to put together a new administration. Wellington was, in fact, to be the prime cause for the collapse of the long years of Tory rule, for he split his party right down the middle, firstly in 1828 by repealing the Test and Corporation Acts, which had excluded Dissenters and Roman Catholics from holding office, and then, the following year, committing what the ultra-Tories viewed as the ultimate betrayal, Catholic Emancipation. This meant that Catholic peers could once again sit in the Lords and that Catholics could be elected to the Commons. Although the measure had been carried to avert what was an even worse scenario, unrest in Ireland, the twin props of church and state were seen to be under fire. There followed a dramatic sequence of events which suddenly brought parliamentary reform once again to centre-stage.

The 1830s opened with a severe economic crisis which precipitated industrial unrest and uprisings in the countryside, the so-called 'Swing Riots'. Abroad there was a revolution in France. Radicalism re-emerged. In April 1831 a National Union of the Working Classes was formed and political unions began to be founded in all the major manufacturing and commercial centres. The middle classes began in some instances to look towards working class radicals to help them achieve political status. This tentative alliance had the long-term possibility of a revolution erupting from below.

In 1830 George IV died, unloved and unmourned, and the country went to the polls. The Tories were in disarray and Wellington was unable to hold together an administration. The new king, William IV, found that he had no alternative but to turn to a Whig, Earl Grey, who would accept office on one condition: parliamentary

The Meeting of the Unions on Newhall Hill, Birmingham, in 1832 by Benjamin Robert Haydon. The months leading up to the passing of the Reform Bill witnessed stormy meetings of political protest in the large cities. Haydon endows the one at Birmingham with an aura of religious fervour.

reform. Grey, a Whig aristocrat endowed with extraordinary perspicacity, realised that the days of aristocratic government – the rule of the élite – could only be prolonged by major reform. Tinkering with the existing system would not be enough, for that would only leave aristocratic rule under threat. In order to reinforce it, not only did the landed interest in the counties need to be strengthened but also the new industrial and commercial middle classes needed to be given greater weight.

A committee, made up largely but not exclusively of Whig ministers, was created to draft a Reform Bill which was presented to the House by Lord John Russell in March 1831. Its contents were so radical that MPs were incredulous, but it passed its second reading in the Commons, albeit by only one vote and amidst scenes of high drama. Opponents then began to amend the bill at the committee stage against the wishes of the government, so Grey prevailed upon the king to dissolve Parliament and embark on what was in effect a plebiscite on reform. What is so extraordinary is that it was the system to be swept away which voted for its own demise in a resounding Whig victory. A second Reform Bill passed its second reading in July, this time with a majority of 136, but there was still the Lords. Overwhelmingly Tory, the Lords rejected the Bill in October, leading to riots in towns and cities. The Bill was presented a second time in December and again rejected. Government by then had serious doubts as to whether it would be able to suppress the riots and uprisings which would certainly follow a third rejection. An increasing number of peers and MPs came to believe that a further rejection would trigger revolution on the streets.

In this tense atmosphere Grey resigned in May 1832, and William IV turned once more to Wellington to form an administration. He failed, and the king was forced to call again upon Grey, whose one condition this time was that if the Lords failed to pass the Bill the king would create enough new peers to outvote the opposition. In the face of this threat the Lords crumbled, and on 7 June the Great Reform Act received the royal assent. These had been months during which many feared that the whole stability of society was at stake. What had been achieved was indeed remarkable: an unreformed Parliament had willed its own demise and its replacement by another, thus redrawing the political map of Britain. The Reform Bill remains one of the greatest events in the history of the country. Just how great was only to be revealed in retrospect, as the political calm of the Victorian age unfolded in sharp contrast to the turbulence of the continental mainland.

As Lord Grey said: 'The principle of my reform is, to prevent the necessity for revolution . . . reforming to preserve and not to overthrow.' Fear was certainly one motivating force, but it was not the only one. There was a genuine spirit of reform, a belief that the new middle classes could no longer be ignored. Their presence in

terms of property and intelligence was necessary, and by 'intelligence' they meant information. The House would be richer for those who could speak with authority on behalf of the new commercial and industrial concerns. Grey also saw those new voters as potential Whigs who would help to keep his party, so long in exile, in power. Support for the changes came even from unexpected sources like reactionary Tories who actually thought that a reformed House of Commons would never allow such a thing as Catholic Emancipation to happen. Everyone believed that a reformed House would curb what was seen as an extravagant government. More than anything else, however, this was an Act by the élite to perpetuate the élite, a measure designed to silence every critic, to secure the state from any revolutionary murmur from below, and to ensure the perpetuation of aristocratic power. In that they were astonishingly successful, for it was not to begin to crumble until the 1870s.

But what did the Act do? There was never any question of universal male suffrage. Not only would the upper classes have been swamped but the general view as to what a vote meant would have been eroded. The vote was for those regarded as capable of exercising it, a privilege bestowed upon men (there was no question of women) who had a vested interest in the stability of the state. That vested interest was embodied in property. In towns, the vote was therefore given to all whose houses were valued for rates at £10 p.a., a definition which brought in shopkeepers. In the counties it remained the forty-shilling freeholders, but went on to include £10 copyholders, long leaseholders and those tenants who paid more than £50 p.a. rent. In England and Wales this gave the vote to one in every five. Separate acts were passed for Scotland and Ireland. In Ireland the effect was an increase of only 5% in the electorate but in Scotland it suddenly leapt from 4,500 to 65,000.

The Act led to the redistribution of seats. This began with a swingeing attack on pocket boroughs. Some seats with less than 2,000 voters lost their MP altogether, others with between 2 to 4,000 voters were reduced from two MPs to one. The seats thus gained were then redistributed, twenty-two to towns not previously represented. These were chosen not on the basis of their population but on the interest they embodied, such as cotton or shipping. Sixty-five more seats were allocated to the counties, many of which were divided into two. Even with all this rooting out of what was regarded as the old corruption, seventy seats still remained in the control of aristocratic patrons. Indeed such a system had its uses, for it enabled the politically brilliant to begin their careers at a very young age. Under the aegis of the Duke of Newcastle one such twenty-three-year-old was returned in the post-reform Bill election. His name was William Ewart Gladstone.

There was, however, no change in the type of person who became an MP. The

landed interest remained secure, for in order to stand for Parliament there was a £300 property qualification for a borough MP and £600 for a county MP. The job was to remain unpaid until 1911. Thus rank and property was consolidated and the middle classes, who had flirted with working class radicalism, were firmly hitched to the aristocratic bandwagon. Their instincts anyway were conservative, and they had achieved what they most wanted, recognition. They were accorded a supporting role within the system, one which could not altogether be ignored, for a hugely enlarged electorate meant that more than ever Parliamentary candidates had to listen to the electorate. The House of Commons also emerged from the Reform Bill crisis with a greatly enhanced status, for although it continued to be an extension of the Lords, the upper house in the final stages had been forced to submit to them. There were, of course, more significant losers. The working classes whose rallies had earlier ignited the cause of parliamentary reform emerged empty-handed. In addition the 1832 Act effected a new polarity, for it divided the nation right down the middle between those who had property and therefore political rights, and those who possessed neither.

The Great Reform Bill must not be viewed in isolation but as the crowning glory of a series of Acts which preceded the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837. These began with the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and Catholic Emancipation and went on, after the Reform Bill, to include others of major importance which radically affected the whole of society. In 1833 came the Abolition of Slavery in the British Empire, and the earliest Factory Act regulating child labour and introducing factory inspectors. The first state grant towards public education was also made in 1833. The following year the Poor Law Amendment Act restructured the Elizabethan system of poor relief, creating instead larger units under the control of Boards of Guardians elected by the ratepayers. In 1835 the Municipal Corporations Act dissolved the centuries old oligarchical town corporations, in the main solidly Tory and Anglican, and replaced them with municipal councils elected by the ratepayers, thus inaugurating an era of local reform. Finally, in 1836, the Tithe Commutation Act swept away another age-old practice, the payment to the clergy in kind, one amongst a major series of changes under the aegis of the Church Commissioners reforming the Church of England.

The importance of the passing of the Great Reform Bill of 1832 can never be overestimated. Its implications still affect us today, for it demonstrated how change could be achieved through Parliament by peaceful constitutional means without resorting to violence. Although it perpetuated aristocratic power no one could deny that the aristocracy had acted against its own interests in deference to a far greater one, a reform of the constitution to avert civil war or revolution.