

Disraeli and the mid-Victorian Conservative Party

Seeking a way out of the political wilderness?

From 1846 to 1874, political power in Britain was largely monopolised by Whig and Liberal ministries. The Conservatives, led by the fourteenth Earl of Derby in the House of Lords and by Benjamin Disraeli in the Commons, were able to form only four short-lived **minority governments**. The period began with a major internal crisis caused by Sir Robert Peel's repeal of the **Corn Laws** in 1846. Peel's decision to abolish the tariffs (taxes) protecting agriculture was seen as a betrayal by the landowners, who dominated the Conservative Party in both Parliament and the country. The party was permanently split between opponents and supporters of the move.

The Conservative Party's only major achievement in this period was the Second Reform Act of 1867, which extended the vote to all male householders in borough (town) seats. The 'Great' Reform Act of 1832 had restricted the vote in the boroughs to occupiers of property worth at least £10 per annum — in other words it created an essentially middle-class electorate. Whatever the intentions of its authors, the 1867 Act was an important step towards making Britain a more democratic society.

This article will focus on two key questions:

- (1) Why was the Conservative Party so unsuccessful from 1846 to 1866?
- (2) Why did the Conservatives pass the Second Reform Act in 1867?

Why was the Conservative Party so unsuccessful from 1846 to 1866?

The mid-Victorian Conservative Party faced a fundamental problem of strategy. In an increasingly dynamic, urban and industrial society, it remained essentially a party of landowners and farmers. In the 1859 general election — the party's best performance between 1846 and 1874 — more than half of the Conservative wins were in county constituencies, and most of its borough seats were in small towns. The party's natural supporters were mainly concerned with the interests of agriculture and with the maintenance of social stability. It stood little chance of regaining power unless its support base could be broadened. Yet if the party tried to do this it ran the risk of offending its traditional followers.

The dilemma of the party leadership was illustrated by the experience of the brief Derby government of 1852. The party had abandoned the idea of a return to protective tariffs because this would not find favour with urban voters. Yet the government had to find some way of compensating the farmers for the loss of the Corn Laws. Disraeli tried to please them by halving the malt tax and giving them concessions on income tax. He proposed to make up the shortfall in government revenue by doubling the house tax, which affected urban as well as rural property owners. His budget was widely criticised for breaking with accepted financial thinking and its defeat in the Commons was followed by the collapse of the government.

Leadership problems dogged the party. The Corn Law crisis had deprived it of its most talented potential leaders — 'Peelites' such as W. E. Gladstone and Edward Cardwell, who supported repeal, eventually found a new political home in the Liberal Party. Disraeli, who had come to prominence through his verbal attacks on Peel in 1846, came to lead the Conservatives in the Commons largely because there were few credible alternatives. He stood out for his skills as a speaker and a parliamentary tactician, and survived because he had the confidence of the well-respected Earl of Derby. Yet he never fully overcame backbench Conservative mistrust of him as a clever but flamboyant and insincere opportunist. Prejudice against Disraeli on account of his Jewish origins also prevented him from winning the wholehearted acceptance of Conservative MPs.

For the greater part of this period Conservative strategy relied on awaiting divisions on the Liberal side, which could then be exploited. The Liberal Party represented the coming together of several quite different groupings: cautious, aristocratic Whigs, ex-Conservative Peelites, and Radicals, who wanted more far-reaching political changes. From the Conservative leaders' point of view it made sense to avoid clear-cut policies that might unite this diverse collection of opponents against them. As Derby wrote in 1853, Conservatives must do nothing that might 'consolidate the present combination between those who have no real bond of union, and who must...fall to pieces before long, if left to themselves'. The disadvantage of this approach was that it offered little inspiration to ordinary MPs who wanted to take on their opponents in a more direct manner.

Why did the Conservatives pass the Second Reform Act in 1867?

The 1867 Reform Act was subsequently presented by Disraeli as a planned extension of the vote, designed to demonstrate the Conservatives' confidence in the loyalty and good sense of the working classes. Although popular with later generations of Conservatives, who evolved the myth of a deliberate project of 'Tory Democracy', this explanation does not accord with the political realities of the time.

The Act was an improvised measure, whose main purpose was to re-establish the Conservatives as a credible party of government after many years in the political wilderness. By the mid-1860s the vote had become a live political issue, with a widespread demand for its extension to the more 'respectable', skilled working men.

In 1866 the Russell government brought forward a bill that would have enfranchised approximately 400,000 men, but a combination of Conservatives and right-wing Liberal rebels defeated the measure in the Commons. Taking office in the wake of the bill's destruction, the Conservatives now had an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to solve a major national issue. A background of popular pressure, with riots in Hyde Park and pro-reform demonstrations elsewhere, confirmed Derby and Disraeli in their decision to act, although most historians now regard parliamentary calculation as their most important preoccupation. Above all, it was vital to pass a measure that bore the Conservative stamp and which would seize the initiative from a startled Liberal opposition.

Mid-Victorian governments

1846–52	Lord John Russell (Whig)
1852	Earl of Derby (Conservative)
1852–55	Lord Aberdeen (Coalition)
1855–58	Lord Palmerston (Whig)
1858–59	Earl of Derby (Conservative)
1859–65	Lord Palmerston (Whig/Liberal)
1865–66	Lord John Russell (Whig/Liberal)
1866–68	Earl of Derby (Conservative)
1868	Benjamin Disraeli (Conservative)
1868–74	W. E. Gladstone (Liberal)

From the mid-1850s until his death in October 1865 the Whig/Liberal side was led by an individual whom it was particularly difficult for Conservatives to oppose. Lord Palmerston stood for moderate domestic policies and a nationalistic stance in foreign affairs, and could be relied upon to hold his Radical supporters in check. At this time politics largely revolved around foreign issues which played into Palmerston's hands. An example was the conflict with China, where his robust handling of the matter contributed to his victory in the 1857 election. Not until the late 1860s, when Gladstone emerged as Liberal leader, did the Conservatives face a more promising target, against whom they could appear suitably patriotic.

This explains the decision to base the bill upon a clear principle — that of household suffrage in the boroughs — while hedging it around with various safeguards intended to check the arrival of genuine working-class power. The vote was to be granted to those householders who had resided at the same address for 2 years and who paid their rates (local taxes) in person rather than through a landlord. In the ensuing parliamentary debate Disraeli surrendered these and other qualifications one by one, in order to win the support of Radical MPs on the other side of the House. His priority was to divide the Liberals and to ensure that his bill passed.

It seems likely that Disraeli knew that an accompanying measure, which provided for a limited redistribution of parliamentary seats, would in any case protect Conservative Party interests. It was significant that 25 of the 45 redistributed borough seats were allocated to the counties, where the Conservatives were traditionally strongest. Urban and rural areas were kept separate as far as possible for electoral purposes, so that county seats could be preserved from Liberal influences in neighbouring towns.

Although the Reform Act doubled the size of the electorate in England and Wales, creating a working-class majority in many boroughs, Disraeli's underlying strategy was essentially conservative. Far from anticipating a brave new world of Tory Democracy, he sought to safeguard the party's traditional heartlands. A major reallocation of seats, bringing constituency boundaries more closely into line with the distribution of population, would have to wait until the electoral map was redrawn again in 1885.



AS question

Explain why the Conservatives held office for such a short period of time between 1846 and 1866.



A2 question

To what extent was Disraeli's decision to introduce a reform bill in 1867 due to pressure from outside Parliament?

Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81)

