



Rewarding Learning

eGUIDE//History

Historical Investigations and Interpretations

Unit AS 1

Option 3: Britain in the Age of Reform 1830–80

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Introduction

In this option, students focus on a period of significant political, economic and social reform in Britain between 1830 and 1880. Students chart the emergence of the modern Conservative and Liberal parties and analyse the part played in that process by the great political figures of the age: Peel, Disraeli and Gladstone. The core theme of this option is reform, highlighted by the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867, which set Britain on the road to full democracy. Students also examine the rise of the Chartist movement and the Anti-Corn Law League, as well as the reasons for their contrasting fortunes.

This option is assessed in a written examination lasting one hour 30 minutes. Candidates answer two questions. Question 1 is a short response question and candidates answer one question from a choice of two. Question 2 is a source-based question with two parts. In Question 2(a) candidates assess the usefulness of a primary and/or contemporary source to an historian studying a particular historical event or development. In Question 2(b) candidates assess which of two different interpretations of a particular historical event or development they find more convincing.

Question 1 targets Assessment Objective A01: the candidate's ability to demonstrate, organise and communicate knowledge and understanding to analyse and evaluate the key features related to the periods studied, making substantiated judgements and exploring concepts, as relevant, of cause, consequence, change, continuity, similarity, difference and significance. Question 2(a) tests Assessment Objective A02: the candidate's ability to analyse and evaluate appropriate source material, primary and/or contemporary to the period, within its historical context. Question 2(b) targets Assessment Objective A03: the candidate's ability to analyse and evaluate, in relation to the historical context, different ways in which aspects of the past have been interpreted.

For ease of consultation, the following study is divided into six sections:

1. The Reform Crisis and the Parliamentary Reform Act 1830–32
2. The Whig Reforms under Grey and Melbourne 1833–40
3. The Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law League 1838–48
4. Robert Peel and the Creation of the Modern Conservative Party 1833–46
5. Benjamin Disraeli and 'Tory Democracy' 1846–80
6. William Gladstone and the Creation of the Liberal Party 1849–80



1. The Reform Crisis and the Parliamentary Reform Act 1830–32

(a) Britain in 1830

In 1830, Britain stood on the cusp of the most concentrated period of political, economic and social reform in its history. For the next 50 years, governments would take the initiative to address the problems that had largely arisen from Britain's rapid industrialisation, producing an impressive legislative record. It was as if a dam had burst, and in many ways that is a fitting analogy, for it can be argued that none of the legislative progress that was made in this half-century would have been possible without the nation first addressing the question of parliamentary reform. This was to lead to the breakthrough measure popularly known as the Great Reform Act of 1832.

(b) The case for parliamentary reform

There had been some agitation for parliamentary reform in the eighteenth century – and some support for the principle in Parliament itself – but the whole issue had largely been put on hold during the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. When that conflict ended in 1815, and in the context of the depression that accompanied the return to a peacetime economy, parliamentary reform was taken up once again as a popular cry, particularly by radical spokesmen such as Henry Hunt and the Whig opposition in Parliament. There were signs, too, that on the government side of the House of Commons in the 1820s, some of the more liberal Tories thought that the political system was no longer fit for purpose. This was the view, for example, of William Huskisson, appointed President of the Board of Trade in 1823.

The case for reform was a strong one, for the anomalies of the existing system of parliamentary representation were all too obvious. One of the most important flaws was the lack of representation in Parliament of the great cities of the North, which had emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a result of the Industrial Revolution. This was in contrast to the so-called 'rotten boroughs', many located in the South of the country, which retained their long-held right to send MPs to Westminster even though their population had declined significantly as the country changed. In fact, in 1830, England and Wales sent the same number of MPs to Westminster as they had in 1680. Yet during that same time period the population had risen from around 5 million to just under 14 million. Manchester, with a population of 142,000 in 1830, had no MPs, but Old Sarum, situated near Salisbury, with a population of 374, of whom only 11 were entitled to vote, returned two MPs.

The case of Old Sarum highlighted a second critical flaw in the unreformed system – the restricted franchise. This was a problem greatly exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution because it led to the emergence of a business or commercial class and a working class. It could be argued that these classes had their origins in an earlier period, but by the nineteenth century their scale had grown dramatically, and for all the power of their numbers – in the case of the working class – and of their wealth – in the case of the business or middle class – they had no voice in Parliament. That institution continued to



be dominated by the landed interests of the country and did not reflect the type of nation Britain had become by 1830. It was also a system that was not just open to abuse, but seemed to be inherently corrupt.

**Web Article**

For some points on the background to the campaign for parliamentary reform, visit the Web of English History website:

www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/refact/backref.htm

(c) The Reform crisis 1830–32

The Tories had been in power since 1807, and the Prime Minister in 1830, the Duke of Wellington, was resolutely committed to maintaining the existing parliamentary system. However, divisions had begun to appear in the Tory ranks in the late 1820s, not just over parliamentary reform but also Catholic Emancipation. Wellington's u-turn in favour of the latter in 1829 alienated the right wing of his party – the Ultra Tories – and pushed them towards rebellion against their party leader. They also believed that a House of Commons more truly representative of the nation would not have passed the Catholic Relief Act. Thus, the way was now open for the Whigs under Earl Grey to assume power after Wellington's government was defeated on a Civil List motion in November 1830.

The Whigs were fully committed to reform, and their position was strengthened by the disturbed state of the country at that time, with the so-called Swing Riots affecting many areas. Conscious also of the recent overthrow of King Charles X in Paris, there was a growing fear in parts of the political establishment that England itself might face revolution if reform was not granted. Most Tories, however, remained opposed.

**Web Article**

Consider some reasons for Whig support for parliamentary reform, as outlined on the Web of English History website:

www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/refact/whigref.htm

In March 1831, Russell introduced the Reform Bill in the House of Commons, but after passing two readings, the Tory opposition proposed amendments to which the government would not agree. In order to strengthen the government's position, Grey persuaded the new king, William IV, who had just succeeded to the throne in June 1830, to agree to a dissolution of Parliament. The resulting general election of May 1831 saw the Whig government gain around 70 seats, boosting its majority in the House of Commons to about 150.

A revised Reform Bill was presented to the House of Commons in June 1831 and passed its third reading in September, but was defeated in the Tory-dominated House of Lords the following month. As during the Swing Riots of the previous year, attention now switched to events outside Westminster, with civil protest against the rejection of the Bill turning violent, notably in Bristol, Nottingham and Derby.

**Web Article**

Consider some reasons for Tory opposition to parliamentary reform, as outlined on the Web of English History website:

www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/refact/antiref.htm



A revised third Reform Bill was introduced by Grey's government in December 1831, but William IV was reluctant to agree to his Prime Minister's request to create sufficient Whig peers to overcome Tory opposition in the House of Lords. Matters again came to a head after the Bill had passed its third reading in the Commons in March 1832, but once more faced a stalemate in the House of Lords. William's IV's refusal to create 50 new Whig peers prompted Grey and his government to resign in May. The constitutional crisis was played out against a backdrop of increasing political agitation and unrest in the country. Wellington, however, was unable to form a government and the king had no option now but to accept the return of Grey's government and agree to create sufficient Whig peers to ensure passage of the Bill in the House of Lords. Faced with the prospect of losing their permanent majority in the upper house, the Tories gave way and the Reform Bill was passed in June 1832.



Web Article

For an overview of the reform question and how the Reform Bill was passed, read the Guardian's review of Antonia Fraser's book, *Perilous Question: The Drama of the Great Reform Bill 1832*:

www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/03/perilous-question-antonia-fraser-review



Teaching and Learning Activity

Source evaluation and analysis

Read the source and answer the question which follows:

Attitudes towards parliamentary reform

Source 1

Extract from a speech by Lord John Russell, a leading member of the Whig Government, to Parliament, 1 March 1831. He is introducing the Parliamentary Reform Bill.

A stranger visiting this country would find that, while a small piece of land can send two members to Parliament, there are large flourishing towns in the north of England which have no representatives in the assembly which is said to represent the people. The confidence which people used to have in the House of Commons is gone for ever. Now all the people call loudly for parliamentary reform, pointing to several grievances. One concerns the practice of the nomination of MPs by individuals. Another is the expense of elections. This Parliamentary Reform Bill will allow half a million people to vote. Since they all own property, they have a valuable stake in the country, being deeply interested in its institutions. This Bill will produce another benefit. A man will find that, as a result of his hard work, he can earn the right to vote. As a result, we are providing for the moral, as well as the political, improvement of the country.

Study Source 1. How useful is Source 1 as evidence for an historian studying attitudes towards parliamentary reform in the early 1830s? You must use contextual knowledge in your answer.



(d) The Great Reform Act of 1832

The First Reform Act addressed some of the most blatant problems of the parliamentary system, redistributing seats and amending the franchise. In total, 56 English boroughs lost their representation entirely, while 42 new English boroughs were created. The total electorate was increased by 217,000. Electoral qualifications were lowered so that many smaller property holders now gained the right to vote.



Web Article

For some points on the background to the campaign for parliamentary reform, visit the Web of English History website:

www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/refact/reftext.htm

However, the Parliamentary Reform Act was not as far-reaching as many had hoped or anticipated. The working class remained without a political voice, as did some of the lower middle class. This was quite deliberate on the part of Grey's government. The Act of 1832 was not intended to be the first step on the path to democracy, but rather to redress the worst elements of the old political system and bind the new business or middle class to the new political order, thereby defusing political agitation and unrest. The landed influence remained dominant in Parliament, while the political struggle of the working class would go on, no longer in alliance with the middle class by whom they felt abandoned after 1832, but in the form of their own political movement: the Chartists.



Web Audio

Listen to a panel discussion, chaired by Melvyn Bragg, about the Great Reform Act on the website of the BBC Radio 4 programme *In Our Time*:

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00flwh9



2. The Whig Reforms under Grey and Melbourne 1833–40

(a) The economic and social problems facing Britain in 1833

The legislative record of the Whig governments of Grey and Melbourne was an impressive one – but then, there was much to reform, while the reforms that were passed by Parliament in many instances only scratched at the surface of the economic and social problems facing Britain, and – in the case of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 – actually made things worse.

As had been the case with parliamentary reform, legislation had not really kept pace with the social changes arising from the rapid industrialisation of Britain: the growth of large cities, characterised by overcrowding, slum housing, poor sanitation and the spread of disease; unregulated factories that were often unsafe and where the hours of work were long and poorly paid; general poverty, where the state system struggled to provide for the destitute whose numbers were growing. The novels of Charles Dickens, such as *Hard Times* and *Bleak House*, provide an insight into the problems of this period.



Web Article

For further detail on life and work in this period, use the list of subheadings provided on the Victorian Web website:

www.victorianweb.org/history/work/index.html

(b) The Whig reforms

There is no doubt that both Grey and Melbourne were genuinely committed to addressing the economic and social problems besetting Britain in the 1830s – though Grey with more enthusiasm than Melbourne, perhaps – but the two great driving forces behind the reforms of this period were not the prime ministers but rather the ideas of utilitarianism and evangelicalism.

The doctrine of utilitarianism argued that the guiding principle of conduct should be the promotion of the greatest happiness of the greatest number. It was mainly associated with the philosopher Jeremy Bentham and later J. S. Mill, and its principles were associated with several of the Whig reforms of the 1830s, such as the Factory Act and Poor Law Amendment Act.

Equally important was the evangelical movement that was breathing new life into the Anglican Church. Evangelicalism promoted the moral values of charity and respectability and their corollary: social improvement. For the evangelicals, earnest piety went hand in hand with public virtue. Reform was not just about changing institutions – such as the electoral system – but restoring society's moral compass. Evangelical peers such as Lord Althorp were prominent in Whig politics, and the party in general presented itself as the guardians of Britain's moral values. Althorp, indeed, was the principal sponsor of the Factory Act of 1833, which restricted the employment of children in textile mills. Factory reform was also championed at this time by Lord Ashley – the future Earl of Shaftesbury



– who would later help to drive further reform during Peel's second ministry in the early 1840s.

However, it could be argued that the chief mark made by the evangelicals on the Whig programme of legislation was an Act that had nothing to do with the social condition of Britain: the Abolition of Slavery Act of 1833. It was the crowning achievement of the most prominent evangelical MP of all, William Wilberforce, who died just three days after the Bill had passed its third reading in the House of Commons.

Other significant legislation included: the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, which reformed local government; the Registration Act of 1836, which established the General Register Office and provided for the official registration of births, marriages and deaths; and the Marriage Act of 1836, which allowed for civil marriages in registry offices and gave official recognition to marriages held in nonconformist and Catholic places of worship. Grey's government was also the first in British history to provide a grant (£20,000) for education, to be administered by two religious organisations, the National Society (Anglican) and the British and Foreign Society (Dissenting). Further educational reforms would follow at the end of the decade.



Web Article

For more detail on the Whigs' changes to education, visit the Web of English History website:

www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/education/education.htm

(c) The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834

Without question, the most controversial of all of the Whig reforms was the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. The existing Poor Law, which had been in place since 1601, was now considered to place an unacceptable financial burden on ratepayers, costing over £7 million annually by 1830.

A Poor Law Commission was set up in 1832 to consider the issue, a body driven by the utilitarian principles of its most influential member, Edwin Chadwick. The twin objectives were economy and efficiency, and this was to shape the legislation that was presented to Parliament two years later.

The amended Poor Law ended 'outdoor relief' or direct payments to the poor (except for the sick and elderly), and also abolished the Speenhamland system (named after the place in Berkshire where the system was first established in 1795), which was in effect a supplement to low wages, paid out of the rates. Relief for the able-bodied poor would now be provided in workhouses, to be supervised locally by Poor Law Unions with elected boards of guardians. The Poor Law Unions were in turn responsible to a Board of Commissioners, whose secretary was Chadwick. In terms of the goal of economy, the Poor Law Amendment Act was an undoubted success, with the cost of poor relief falling dramatically by the end of the 1830s.

The human cost of the 1834 Poor Law was quite another matter. The workhouse, which was made deliberately harsh and unwelcoming in order to discourage people from seeking relief, soon became the despised symbol of the whole regime. The fact that workhouses were often referred to as 'Whig Bastilles' summed up their widespread unpopularity, often becoming the focal point of popular protest and in some instances direct attacks.



Web Video

Watch Tony Robinson's take on the workhouse at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=blyYxpNbgeU



Web Article

For a more detailed consideration of the Poor Law Amendment Act, visit The Workhouse website:

www.workhouses.org.uk/poorlaws/newpoorlaw.shtml



3. The Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law League 1838–48

(a) The Chartists

Chartism was partly a response to the failure of the Great Reform Act of 1832 to extend the franchise to the working class, but also a reaction to the harsh conditions of working-class life in the 1830s. One of the features of the Chartist movement was that it was strongest when the economy was weakest, that is, when the working class was suffering the most due to unemployment and rising prices. At the same time, there is no doubt that the campaign for parliamentary reform, though it ultimately was to prove disappointing in terms of what it achieved, did stimulate working-class interest in politics and a determination to attain a more representative system.



Web Article

For a view on the origins of Chartism, visit the British Library website:
www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/21cc/struggle/chartists1/introduction/historyofchartism.html

Another formative influence on the Chartist movement was the political unions set up in the late 1820s and early 1830s to campaign for parliamentary reform. There was some overlap between the aims of the unions and those of the Chartists and it is significant that most of the political unions were established in the great industrial cities of the North, such as Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield, where Chartism would gain much of its support in the future. Perhaps the most important of these organisations was the Birmingham Political Union (BPU), founded in 1829 and setting the example for others to follow. The BPU was also important because one of its founder-members was Thomas Attwood, who became one of the most significant leaders of the whole political union movement.



Web Article

For a brief insight on the Birmingham Political Union, visit the UK Parliament website:
www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/chartists/case-study/the-right-to-vote/thomas-attwood-and-the-birmingham-political-union/birmingham-political-union/

The direct link between the political unions and Chartism is provided by William Lovett, who helped to set up an expressly working-class political union, the National Union of the Working Classes, in 1831. Five years later, Lovett was involved in the establishment of the London Working Men's Association, and it was under the auspices of this organisation that he and Francis Place drew up the People's Charter in 1838. Chartism had arrived.



Web Article

For a summary of the People's Charter, visit the British Library website:
www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/21cc/struggle/chartists1/historicalsources/source4/peoplescharter.html



Lovett was an advocate of what became known as ‘moral force’ Chartism, with an emphasis on education and peaceful persuasion to achieve the movement’s goals. This approach provided the rationale for the three petitions presented to Parliament in support of the Charter – in 1839, 1842 and 1848.

However, not everyone agreed with these methods, and so ‘physical force’ Chartism also emerged, championed by Feargus O’Connor. Although O’Connor used the Northern Star newspaper to spread the Chartist message and was actually elected to Parliament in 1847, he was quite prepared to confront the authorities directly, and at least the fringes of the Chartist movement were associated with rioting and civil unrest, such as in Newport in 1839 and Bradford in 1840.



Teaching and Learning Activity

Source evaluation and analysis

Read the source and answer the question which follows:

Problems faced by the Chartist movement, 1839–1848

Source 1

Extract from the diary of General Napier, 1839. Napier was commander of the British Army in the north of England. He is describing the activities of the Chartists.

It is said that the Chartists are arming for revolt. This is the result of bad government, which has produced much hardship, and the people who support the Chartists are to be pitied rather than blamed. In April, I informed the Home Office of Chartist plans to obtain weapons, attack soldiers and cut railway communications. I have no doubt that we can deal with any such unrest, because the Chartists are lacking the funds, leaders and discipline needed to move large numbers of people. The people of this country should have universal suffrage, as it is their right. The Poor Law should also be reformed. In August the Duke of Portland told me that there would be a general uprising. I feel sorry for the supporters of Chartism. Unlike them, we have physical force. They talk of their many thousands of men. How can they move when I am dancing around them with cavalry and pelting them with my cannon-shot?

Study Source 1. How useful is Source 1 as evidence for an historian studying the problems which faced the Chartist movement in the period 1839–1848?

The whole question of moral against physical force highlighted one of the fundamental weaknesses of the Chartist movement: the divisions in its leadership, represented by Lovett and O’Connor, and among its members who were more willing to use force in the North than in the rest of the country. There was also little sympathy in Parliament for the Chartist cause. The landed and middle classes closed ranks to ensure that the working class was kept out, while fear of revolution (which was widespread in Europe in 1848) meant that the authorities were on their guard and ready to use the armed forces to quell any unrest. Arguably, the Chartists were ultimately undone by Peel’s programme of social and economic reforms, which laid the foundations for the mid-Victorian economic boom and removed one of the greatest grievances of the period: the Corn Laws.



Web Article

For an overview of Chartism, read the article by Stephen Roberts on the BBC History website:

www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/chartist_01.shtml



Web Video

Watch a short film about the Chartists on YouTube:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWucd5tXlqY

(b) The Anti-Corn Law League

The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 marked the successful culmination of the campaign by the Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL). This victory was in marked contrast to the failure of the Chartists to achieve any of their goals. Although the two groups operated in the same time period (roughly the late 1830s to mid-1840s), they had almost nothing in common, an exception being Francis Place, who was a founder-member of both movements.

Unlike the Chartists, the ACLL was almost exclusively middle class and committed to peaceful and constitutional methods in the pursuit of its objective. Furthermore, while the People's Charter had six points, the ACLL had just a single goal: the repeal of the Corn Laws, which it saw as restrictive on commerce, detrimental to society and morally indefensible.

While the Chartists lacked an effective voice in Parliament, the ACLL was very ably represented by a group of MPs, notably Richard Cobden and John Bright. It was Cobden who in 1838 in Manchester had first established a branch of the Anti-Corn Law Association, a campaign group formed by Francis Place and others the previous year. Cobden then played a leading role in turning the Anti-Corn Law Association into a national organisation in 1839, renamed the Anti-Corn Law League.



Richard Cobden

© Photos.com / PHOTOS.com/Thinkstock



Web Article

Read the biographical entry for Richard Cobden provided by the Encyclopaedia Britannica website:
www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Cobden

Cobden was among five ACLL supporters elected to Parliament in 1841. He was joined there, after a disputed election contest, by his friend and fellow-ACLL campaigner John Bright. The case for repeal of the Corn Laws was now very impressively articulated at the very seat of power.



Web Article

Read the biographical entry for John Bright provided by the Encyclopaedia Britannica website:

www.britannica.com/biography/John-Bright

As well as arguing its case on the floor of the House of Commons, the ACLL also waged an effective campaign outside Parliament. Using lectures, pamphlets, circulars to the general public (utilising the new penny-post system), newspapers such as the Anti-Bread-Tax Circular, fund-raising events and even campaign buttons, the ACLL mobilised public opinion to put pressure on Parliament, and in particular the government of Robert Peel. As will be considered below, Peel may well have intended to repeal the Corn Laws in any event, in keeping with his general support for free trade, but that in no way diminishes the achievement of the ACLL as a public campaign that secured its legislative goal just seven years after its formation.



Web Article

For a view of the Anti-Corn Law League from the perspective of a current political party, read the short article on the website of the Liberal Democrat History Group:

www.liberalhistory.org.uk/history/anti-corn-law-league/



4. Robert Peel and the Creation of the Modern Conservative Party 1833–46

(a) Peel as leader

Robert Peel was the man who found the Tory party in ruins after the Reform Act crisis of 1830–32, refashioned and rebuilt it as the modern Conservative Party in the 1830s and then tore it apart over the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. It was, to say the least, quite a record. Was Peel, in the end, a traitor to his party or a principled statesman who put the needs of the country above partisan politics? That question continues to be debated.



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Robert Peel – creator of the modern Conservative party in the 1830s

(b) The Tamworth Manifesto and the 100 day ministry

After the dismissal of Melbourne's ministry by the king, and on the advice of the Duke of Wellington, Peel was invited to become Prime Minister in December 1834. Although the new government was to be short-lived, this was an important event as it confirmed Peel as the leader of his party. With that authority established, he was now in a position to begin the rebuilding of the Tories, who were in disarray after their opposition to the Reform Act, and transformed them in the process into the Conservatives.

The first step in that process was an open letter to his constituents, which in effect became the first party manifesto in British history, the Tamworth Manifesto, published on 18 December 1834. In this document, Peel charted the party's course for the future, based on acceptance of the Reform Act, a willingness to consider further reform when a good case could be made for it, but also a firm commitment to maintain the traditional institutions of the state. In essence the Tory party was to be modernised to make it more attractive to the new middle-class electorate, signified in the change of name to Conservative.



Web Article

Read the full text of the Tamworth Manifesto on the Web of English History website:

www.historyhome.co.uk/peel/politics/tam2.htm

Although the Conservatives lost the general election held early in 1835, their performance had markedly improved from the previous election of 1832. Then, the party had won just 175 seats, but under Peel's leadership for the first time, the tally rose to 273. The Whigs remained the largest party, but they actually lost seats in 1835. Though he was only in office from December 1834 to April 1835, Peel had shown that he could govern capably and responsibly and was able to resign with dignity when it became obvious that his minority government could not continue in the face of the new alliance of the Whigs and O'Connellites.

(c) The creation of the Conservative Party

For the rest of the 1830s, Peel fashioned the Conservative Party as a credible alternative government to the Whigs, who noticeably began to run out of steam as a reforming force under the leadership of Melbourne. A greater emphasis was placed on party organisation and, in particular, the registration of voters. Here Peel was ably assisted by Francis Robert (F. R.) Bonham, the party's election agent – roughly equivalent to today's Conservative party chairman – who built an effective party machine. Operating out of the Carlton Club, which was established in 1832 and became in effect the Conservatives' headquarters, Bonham was instrumental in the electoral progress of the party in the late 1830s. In the general election of 1837, occasioned by the death of William IV and accession of Victoria, the Conservatives made up further ground on the Whigs, winning 314 seats compared to 344 for Melbourne's party.



Web Article

Read a short biography of F. R. Bonham on the History of Parliament website:

www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/bonham-francis-1785-1863

Peel also demonstrated political astuteness during the Bedchamber Crisis of 1839, when, following Melbourne's resignation after a government bill had only narrowly been passed in the House of Commons, the Conservative leader was invited to form a government. When the Queen subsequently refused to make the changes Peel requested to the Royal household, he did not press the issue as he might have done, but instead allowed Victoria to recall Melbourne, whose flagging government was forced to struggle on. Peel's judgement was rewarded just two years later when the Conservatives triumphed in the general election of 1841, securing 367 seats to the Whigs' 271.



Teaching and Learning Activity

Historical Interpretations

Read Interpretation A and Interpretation B and answer the question which follows:

Robert Peel's creation of the modern Conservative Party

Interpretation A

Extract from Robert Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Thatcher*, published in 1985.



Peel's approach to politics after 1832 was similar to his attitude as a member of Liverpool's Government during the 1820s. He supported cautious reform, accepted the new parliamentary system and attempted to win the support of moderate voters who had been alienated by the Tory attitude to the Reform Bill. However, he was determined to resist any move to alter further the constitution which was, in his opinion, threatened by the radicals. The events of 1834–1835 were crucial in the development of the Conservative Party. First, Peel's position as leader of the party became secure when he was offered the premiership. Secondly, the general election compelled the Conservatives to become professionally organised. Thirdly, after gaining a hundred seats, the 100 Days ministry showed that Peel could govern effectively. The Tamworth Manifesto of 1834 also helped to outline the principles of Conservative reform. The Conservatives made further gains in the election of 1837. In 1841, defeated in the House of Commons, Melbourne dissolved parliament. The ensuing election gave Peel an overall majority.

Interpretation B

Extract from Paul Adelman, *Peel and the Conservative Party, 1830–1850*, published in 1992.

The result of the general election of 1841 was a decisive win for the Conservatives and a personal triumph for Peel. The Conservatives obtained a majority of 80 seats, but their base of support remained largely the same, as Peel's appeal to the new urban middle classes was ignored. It was the traditional Tory slogans – the Church in danger, the Corn Laws under threat – rather than the spirit of the Tamworth Manifesto which explain his election victory in 1841. This is an important comment on Peel's attempts to educate his party in the 1830s. The Conservative Party still remained above all the party of the landed interest, a fact that was to have dramatic consequences for Peel and his party in the 1840s.

Study Interpretation A and Interpretation B. Historians have different views about particular issues. Using both interpretations, and your understanding of the historical context, which of these different interpretations of Robert Peel's creation of the modern Conservative Party in the period 1833–1846 do you find more convincing?

(d) Peel's Second Ministry and its reform programme

The challenge facing Peel's second government was a daunting one. The Whigs had bequeathed a deficit of £2.5 million in the public finances, economic recession had set in (the 'Hungry Forties') and there was political agitation from both the Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law League. However, the new Prime Minister was determined, as he put it, to make Britain 'a cheap country for living'.

Peel's free trade budgets of 1842 and 1845 significantly reduced some tariffs and removed others completely, but the books were balanced by the reintroduction of income tax. At the same time, the financial and business sectors of the economy were effectively regulated by measures such as the Bank Charter Act and the Companies Act.

As well as reducing the cost of living by his free trade policies, Peel also directly addressed some of the social problems with which the working class had to deal at the time. For example, the Mines Act of 1842 prohibited the employment of women and children under 10 years of age from employment underground, while the Factory Act of 1844, as well as introducing a number of health and safety regulations, limited the hours worked by children between the ages of 8 and 13 to six and a half hours per day. It was also under



Peel's government that Edwin Chadwick produced a report on the sanitary conditions of the working class in Britain's cities (1842) which went on to form the basis of the Public Health Act passed by Russell's Whig government in 1848.

**Web Article**

Read about the reforming work of Edwin Chadwick on the History Learning Site:

www.historylearningsite.co.uk/a-history-of-medicine/edwin-chadwick/

(e) Repeal of the Corn Laws and break-up of the Conservative Party

Perhaps the most important of Peel's reforms as Prime Minister was that which concluded his premiership, the repeal of the Corn Laws, but it came at a high price, namely the unity of his party and his own future career in politics. The immediate justification for repeal was the outbreak of famine in Ireland, but Peel had already been moving away from protectionism with the free trade policies referred to earlier and an adjustment to the Corn Law sliding scale at the beginning of his period in office. This adjustment had put his protectionist backbenchers on their guard, and when Peel committed himself to complete repeal in 1845, he faced a revolt from within his own party ranks.

Indeed, it was only with Whig support that repeal was finally passed in 1846. However, on the same night that repeal passed the House of Lords, Peel was defeated in the Commons over an Irish Coercion Bill by a combination of Whigs, Radicals and Conservative protectionists, notable among whom were Lord George Bentinck and Benjamin Disraeli, perhaps his most vociferous critic. Disraeli had helped to bring Peel down, but it was also his destiny to restore and rebuild the shattered Conservative Party.

**Web Article**

For a Liberal perspective on the repeal of the Corn Laws, read the article on the website of the Liberal Democrat History Group:

www.liberalhistory.org.uk/history/free-trade-and-the-repeal-of-the-corn-laws/

**Web Article**

For a résumé of Peel's remarkable career, read the biographical entry on the Encyclopaedia Britannica website:

www.britannica.com/biography/Sir-Robert-Peel-2nd-Baronet



5. Benjamin Disraeli and 'Tory Democracy' 1846–80

(a) Reinventing Conservatism as 'Tory Democracy'

The Corn Law crisis of 1845–46 changed the political landscape of Britain. As will be considered in more detail below, a new political force emerged as Peelites, Whigs and Radicals came together to form the new Liberal Party, ultimately with William Gladstone as leader. For what was left of the Conservative Party, a narrow protectionist rump, there appeared to be no way back, and indeed, apart from a few brief interludes between long periods of Whig/Liberal domination, the party remained banished to the political wilderness for the next 25 years. The man who would eventually lead them out of that wilderness was ironically one of most notable political outsiders of the nineteenth century, yet also the man whose name would become synonymous with Britain's greatness in the Victorian age: Benjamin Disraeli.

Disraeli, born in London in 1804, was of Jewish descent. His father, the writer Isaac D'Israeli (the spelling of the surname was changed by his son) had converted to Christianity, and Benjamin was brought up in the Anglican faith, but never lost consciousness of his Jewish roots. He was self-schooled in his father's well-stocked library, so did not follow the customary route of public school and university to enter politics. Disraeli had already an established reputation as an author before entering politics, and his literary talent would be put to use in his political career.

The Conservative Party was in disarray after the overthrow of Peel – in which Disraeli had played a prominent role – and it was Disraeli who gave it a new vision and rationale, based on the concept of 'Tory democracy' or 'one-nation Toryism'. This concept was founded on both a romantic view of the past, and the paternalistic relationship between the aristocracy and peasantry, and an equally romantic view of the future, where the Conservatives would bring together the landed wealth of the country and the new industrial or working class in common cause against the rising capitalist or middle class, an idea that found expression in Disraeli's trilogy of novels *Coningsby* (1844), *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (1845) and *Tancred* (1847).



Web Article

Read about Disraeli the novelist, and the political significance of his literary output, in Daisy Hay's article for the *Daily Telegraph*:

www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/9200279/Disraelis-sensations-for-a-jaded-public.html

'One-nation Toryism' was the answer to the much vaunted problem of 'the condition of England' where two different 'nations' existed in industrial Britain: the rich and the poor. He presented the Conservative Party – his Conservative Party – as the natural protectors of those at the bottom of society.

**Web Article**

Read about the term 'one-nation Toryism' or 'one-nation Conservatism' on the Victorian Commons website:

<https://victoriancommons.wordpress.com/2012/10/05/disraeli-and-one-nation-conservatism/>

Disraeli also instinctively felt that the ordinary people were inherently conservative – that what Britain stood for, as expressed in the Crown, the Church, the Empire and the constitution, was something of which they were proud. He believed that this conservatism with a small 'c' could be translated into Conservatism with a large 'C', that is, votes for his party. This was the rationale behind his famous speeches at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester and the Crystal Palace in London in 1872.

Disraeli, however, combined pragmatism with his romanticism. Hence, protectionism was abandoned in 1852 after his brief tenure as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Earl of Derby's minority Conservative government: it was time now to get rid of what was clearly a millstone round the party's neck. Disraeli served again as Chancellor in Derby's next minority Conservative government in 1858–59, but it was in the third Derby government (a minority one, yet again) in 1866–68, that Disraeli made his most dazzling contribution to British politics up to that point.

(b) The Second Reform Act of 1867

The Liberals had tried but failed to pass a Reform Bill in 1866 since the party was divided on the issue. Such was the pressure for further parliamentary reform at this time that Disraeli believed that it was inevitable and his party might as well get the credit for it and at the same time outflank their political opponents and frustrate his arch-rival Gladstone. This was more than mere political opportunism, however, for the extension of the franchise was consistent with Disraeli's idea of Tory democracy.



*Benjamin Disraeli –
romantic visionary and
Conservative leader*

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So it was that the Second Parliamentary Reform Act was passed by a Conservative government, arguably a more significant measure than the Great Reform Act of 1832. It also propelled Disraeli to the forefront of British politics – and to the post of Prime Minister in 1868, when Derby stood down.



Web Article

For more detailed consideration of the Second Reform Act of 1867, read the article by Henry Miller on the Reviews in History website:

www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1131

The result of the general election of 1868, a resounding victory for Gladstone and the Liberals (more than 100 seats ahead of the Conservatives), seemed to suggest that Disraeli's strategy had failed – or perhaps the test of the new electoral system had come too soon? Certainly, over the next six years, Disraeli worked incessantly to spread the message of one-nation Toryism and he was rewarded by his own resounding victory in the general election of 1874, reversing the result of 1868 and giving the Conservatives their first overall majority in the House of Commons since Peel's victory in 1841. Now was the chance to put Tory democracy into practice.



Teaching and Learning Activity

Short response question

Analyse the significance of the Second Reform Act of 1867.

(c) Disraeli's Conservative government 1874–80

Disraeli's government was true to the spirit of the age: reform was the constant theme, and a theme that chimed with the doctrine of Tory democracy. Much of the legislation was aimed at improving the condition of the working class, such as the Factory Act (1874), the Public Health Act, Artisans' Dwelling Act, Employers' and Workmen's Act and Friendly Societies Act (all 1875). Was this one-nation Toryism in action? The one-time trade union activist Alexander MacDonal certainly thought so: 'The Conservatives have done more for the working class in five years than the Liberals have done in fifty.'

Despite an impressive legislative record of reform, the Conservatives lost the general election of 1880. This was partly due to British military setbacks in wars in Afghanistan and in southern Africa against the Zulu, but also due to the fact that Disraeli now sat in the House of Lords as Earl of Beaconsfield and it was the convention of the time that peers did not get involved in election campaigns. This left the field clear for a reinvigorated Gladstone in a barnstorming performance to lead the Liberals back into power. Yet just two years earlier, in 1878, Disraeli had perhaps achieved the zenith of his political career at the Congress of Berlin, helping to secure peace when war had threatened with Russia. As the German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, observed of his British counterpart: 'The old Jew, he is the man.'



Web Article

Read Lara Barton's article on Disraeli's imperial policies on the Victorian Web website:

www.victorianweb.org/history/empire/ljb1.html



Web Article

Read Robert Blake's short biography of Disraeli on the Encyclopaedia Britannica website:

www.britannica.com/biography/Benjamin-Disraeli



6. William Gladstone and the Creation of the Liberal Party 1849–80



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W. E. Gladstone, the leading Liberal politician of the second half of the nineteenth century

(a) Gladstone's political journey

W. E. Gladstone was first elected to Parliament in December 1832 as a Tory – and a Tory who was vehemently opposed to the Reform Act. In that decade in which the Tories – or rather, the Conservatives as they now styled themselves – were in opposition, Gladstone became an ardent supporter of the new party leader, Robert Peel, and would carry Peelite principles with him for the rest of his political career. When the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 brought down Peel, they also shattered the party he had created, and it was now for the Peelite remnant of the Conservatives, including Gladstone, to find a new political home for themselves. In the end, they decided to build that home, along with the Whigs and Radicals, and so the Liberal Party came into existence.

(b) Creation of the Liberal Party

As noted above, it took some time for the Conservatives to recover from the political trauma of 1845–46. In fact, they did not command an overall majority in the House of Commons again until 1874, so the Whigs now dominated British politics under Russell and Palmerston. There was no question of Gladstone or his fellow Peelites rejoining the Conservatives, especially after Disraeli's savage attacks on Peel, and so they gradually gravitated towards the Whigs and Radicals in the course of the next ten years, sharing a common commitment to civil and religious liberty and the idea of progress. Ultimately, it was their support for Italian unification – an issue of national freedom – that led to the establishment of the new Liberal Party in 1859.

**Web Article**

For more detail on the creation of the Liberal Party, read the article by Tony Little on the website of the Liberal Democrat History Group:

www.liberalhistory.org.uk/history/the-age-of-russell-and-palmerston-1846-1868/

(c) Gladstone's rise to the party leadership

Gladstone established his credentials as a potential party leader during his two terms as Chancellor of the Exchequer: first under Lord Aberdeen in the Whig–Peelite coalition government of 1852–55 and then during Palmerston's second ministry of 1859–65. Gladstone's budgets completed the task started by Peel of making Britain a completely free-trade country. He sought to improve the condition of the people through financial reform, but this was to an extent at the cost of more direct social reforms. Gladstone supported the principle of a minimalist state and limited government expenditure, but he made a popular stand on the question of further parliamentary reform in 1864, which the people would remember, though, as we have already seen, he found himself outmanoeuvred by Disraeli who passed the Second Reform Act in 1867. Nonetheless, the general election of 1868 was a triumph for the Liberals (with 387 MPs compared to the Conservatives' 271); No. 10 Downing Street now beckoned W. E. Gladstone.

**Web Article**

Read or download the article by John Maloney on 'Gladstone as Chancellor' on the website of the Liberal Democrat History Group:

www.liberalhistory.org.uk/journal-articles/gladstone-as-chancellor/

(d) Gladstone's Liberal government 1868–74

A characteristic of the Gladstone ministry of 1868–74 was that it was much more focused on institutional than social reform. Initially Gladstone gave Irish matters a higher priority than British affairs, leading to the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869 and an Irish Land Act, passed in 1870. Nonetheless, the British reforms were important ones.



*W. E. Foster – the man behind
the Education Act of 1870*

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In 1870, Foster's Education Act – named after the Liberal MP who drafted it, William Edward Foster – provided for the establishment of school boards to build and manage schools in areas where they were needed, that is, in places where there were no voluntary schools. The Act also stipulated that religious education in board schools should be non-denominational and education between the ages of 5 and 13 could be made compulsory



in the board schools. While the Act did not go as far as many of the government's own Nonconformist supporters wanted, it is one of the landmark pieces of educational reform in the nineteenth century.

Other significant reforms included the War Office Act of 1870, the Army Regulation Act and the abolition of the purchase of army commissions in 1871, collectively known as Cardwell's army reforms after the Secretary for War, Edward Cardwell. The Trade Union Act of 1871 recognised the right of trade unions to exist, but the effectiveness of trade unions was undermined by the Criminal Law Amendment Act of the same year which made picketing illegal. In 1872, voting by secret ballot was established – a proposal that had been discussed since the start of the century and which was one of the six points of the People's Charter – and a controversial Licensing Act sought to regulate opening hours for public houses. The reform was so unpopular with the licensed trade and much of the drinking public (though very popular with Liberal Nonconformists), that Gladstone, commenting on the Liberal defeat in the general election of 1874, ruefully concluded that his government had been 'swept away, literally, by a torrent of beer and gin'.



Teaching and Learning Activity

Short response question

Analyse the success of the reforms of Gladstone's Liberal government of 1868–1874.

(e) Gladstone and Disraeli's leadership style and political philosophy

So who was the greater of the two great Prime Ministers – Disraeli or Gladstone? It is not an easy question to answer, for they were such different individuals and each had his successes and failures. According to the Conservative MP and former Chancellor Kenneth Clarke, Gladstone considered Disraeli a charlatan, while Disraeli thought Gladstone was mad. They were certainly fierce rivals: Disraeli the romantic visionary, who reinvented the Conservative Party as patrons and protectors of the working class, the consummate showman, as for example in his audacious purchase of the Suez Canal shares in 1875 with a loan from the Rothschilds, but someone who was little concerned with legislative detail; Gladstone the master of detail, and with a formidable record as Chancellor and Prime Minister to prove it. As they were in their heyday in late Victorian Britain, so they remain today in historical debate and discussion: inseparable.



Web Video

Watch this dramatised account of Disraeli's purchase of the Suez Canal shares from the ITV series *Disraeli: Portrait of a Romantic*, with Ian McShane in the title role:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=heEUMXmeHI8



Web Video

Watch the excellent BBC Four documentary by Huw Edwards on the two giants of late Victorian politics, *Gladstone & Disraeli: Clash of the Titans*:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZwBIY-o_cQ



Web Article

Read Robert Blake's view of the rivalry between Disraeli and Gladstone on the BBC History website:

www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/disraeli_gladstone_01.shtml