

Progress towards democracy – politically and socially

Key Dates

1729 - Bribery Act

Passed to address corruption in elections

1776 - Motion by John Wilkes MP for parliamentary reform

1832 - Representation of the People Act (the first 'Reform Act')

Extends vote to men meeting property qualification, reduces 'rotten boroughs' and redistributes Parliamentary seats to better represent urban areas

1867 - Representation of the People Act (the second 'Reform Act')

Extends vote to urban working men meeting property qualification

1872 - Ballot Act

Introduces the secret ballot at elections

1883 - Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act 1883

Effectively ended serious corruption in British elections

1884 - Representation of the People Act (the third 'Reform Act')

Addresses imbalance between men's votes in boroughs and counties

1885 - Redistribution Act

Boundaries redrawn to produce equal electoral districts. Single member seats become the norm
(<http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/houseofcommons/reformacts/keydates/>)

The first Reform Act 1832

The Representation of the People Act 1832, known as the first Reform Act or Great Reform Act:

- disenfranchised 56 boroughs in England and Wales and reduced another 31 to only one MP
- created 67 new constituencies
- broadened the franchise's property qualification in the counties, to include small landowners, tenant farmers, and shopkeepers
- created a uniform franchise in the boroughs, giving the vote to all householders who paid a yearly rental of £10 or more and some lodgers

Limited change had been achieved but for many it did not go far enough. The property qualifications meant that the majority of working men still could not vote. But it had been proved that change was possible and over the next decades the call for further parliamentary reform continued.

(<http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/houseofcommons/reformacts/overview/reformact1832/>)

The 1833 Factory Act

By the 1830s, the determination within Parliament to regulate factory conditions had strengthened. To a large extent it was driven by the battle for political reform (which resulted in the famous 1832 Reform Act), and by the anti-slavery campaign. Campaigners did not hesitate to compare the treatment of mill-workers, including children, with that of slaves.

'Ten-Hour Movement'

Even mill-owners were beginning to speak up for improved conditions. A strong humanitarian campaign had grown outside Parliament, championed by the MPs Anthony Ashley-Cooper (later the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury) and Michael Sadler, and by manufacturers in the textile areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Ashley-Cooper led the 'Ten-Hour Movement' aiming to reduce the working day for children under 16. Another Factory Act was passed in 1831, limiting the working day to 12 hours for all those under 18. Yet again, there were no procedures for enforcement. Further parliamentary inquiry and a Royal Commission produced reports full of details of the appalling abuse and mistreatment of children in factories. In 1833 Parliament passed a new Factory Act. Previous Acts had been restricted to the cotton industry, but the 1833 Act also applied to the older woollen producing communities in and around Yorkshire which had been ignored in previous legislation.

No children were to work in factories under the age of nine (though by this stage numbers were few). A maximum working week of 48 hours was set for those aged 9 to 13, limited to eight hours a

day; and for children between 13 and 18 it was limited to 12 hours daily. The Act also required children under 13 to receive elementary schooling for two hours each day.

Factory Inspectors

What made the 1833 Act so important was that it established a system to ensure that regulations were enforced. A small, four-man 'inspectorate of factories' was created, responsible to the Home Office, with powers to impose penalties for infringements. In its early days the inspectorate was far too small to enforce the Act in 4,000 mills, and so the Act was widely evaded. It did, however, create the beginnings of a much-needed system of government control.

(<http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/factoryact/>)

Second Reform Act 1867

The 1832 Reform Act proved that change was possible. The parliamentary elite felt that they had met the need for change but among the working classes there were demands for more. The growth and influence of the Chartist Movement from 1838 onwards was an indication that more parliamentary reform was desired.

The Chartist Movement had peaked by the 1850s but there was an acceptance among Members of Parliament that there was more work to be done to remove anomalies in the system that the first Reform Act had not addressed.

Landowners

However, the call for universal manhood suffrage or 'one man, one vote' was still resisted by Parliament and the second Reform Act, passed in 1867, was still based around property qualifications.

There was no question of campaigning for the right to vote for women too. They were still excluded.

The 1867 Reform Act:

- granted the vote to all householders in the boroughs as well as lodgers who paid rent of £10 a year or more
- reduced the property threshold in the counties and gave the vote to agricultural landowners and tenants with very small amounts of land

Men in urban areas who met the property qualification were enfranchised and the Act roughly doubled the electorate in England and Wales from one to two million men.

(<http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/houseofcommons/reformacts/overview/furtherreformacts/>)

Third Reform Act 1884

Parliament's resistance to 'one man, one vote' was partly overturned in 1884 with the third Reform Act which:

- established a uniform franchise throughout the country
- brought the franchise in the counties into line with the 1867 householder and lodger franchise for boroughs

Redistribution of Seats Act

The following year, the Redistribution of Seats Act redrew boundaries to make electoral districts equal. As a result of this Act, most areas returned only one Member to Parliament, although 23 seats, including the City of London and Bath, continued to return two Members until 1910.

Parliament and the political landscape changed greatly over the 19th century, beginning with a small ruling elite in Parliament and gradually increasing to be more democratic and representative.

Votes for women

However, one section of society was still completely excluded from the voting process - women. To be truly representative, Parliament still had changes to make.

(<http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/houseofcommons/reformacts/overview/one-man-one-vote/>)

Task: *Sort the reforms according to how much they improved the lives of working class people.*