Reform or Revolution?

Britain, like most countries on the European continent, experienced significant political change in the 19th century as a result of the Industrial Revolution. The new urban social classes – firstly the middle class and later the working class – demanded changes in the way in which the country was run. Political systems seemed increasingly out of date and often retained feudal features which gave disproportionate power to the major landowners who inherited their wealth and titles. The story of political change in the 19th century is a story of the gradual democratisation of the political system. By 1900 ordinary people, men and eventually women also, had a much greater say in how their countries were run. For most countries on the European continent these democratic changes were brought about by a series of violent revolutions and wars. But in Britain revolution was avoided and the political system evolved gradually through a series of parliamentary reforms. There may have been a threat of revolution, particularly in the period 1815-32, but the fear of revolution was enough to persuade those with political power to share the power more widely.

Why was Britain different?

Politically, Britain was different in two important respects. Firstly, as a result of a political revolution and civil war in the mid 17th century, Britain had established a parliamentary system of government and a constitutional monarchy as early as 1688. This system of government had ended the absolutist control of the king and had established a more ‘liberal’ political culture than was the case in mainland Europe. As we have seen, this is perhaps one of the important reasons why Britain was the first country to experience the Industrial Revolution. Secondly, as we saw in the last unit of study, Britain, unlike most of continental Europe, had retained her independence from Napoleonic influence. Unlike much of Europe which had experienced military defeat and political revolution, British government did not need to be ‘restored’ in 1815. Because it had slowly evolved over time, the tradition of the British system of government was perhaps more stable and secure.

The Great Reform Act, 1832

In 1832 Parliament passed a law which changed the arrangements about which places could elect a Member of Parliament (MP) to represent them. It also changed the rules about who could vote in Parliamentary elections. These were the first big changes of this kind ever made. The law has been known ever since as ‘The Great Reform Act’. Both before and after 1832 the right to vote depended on how much property a man owned. Women could not vote at all. Many big landowners opposed reform because they were worried about losing power. Others opposed reform because they were worried that new voters might use their vote to overturn the
old way of doing things. They believed the existing system worked and should not be altered in case it made things worse rather than better. They were frightened of the crowds of people who met to demand reform. For them, democracy meant the Terror of the French Revolution. Before the 1832 Act one adult (over 21) man in ten could vote; after it, one adult man in five. The new voters were the fairly well-off farmers in the countryside, and the middle classes in the towns, together with a very few of the better-off among the working classes. There were only 650,000 voters out of a total adult population of about 14 million. It took two further Reform Acts in the nineteenth century, and two in the twentieth, before this right was held by all adults, men and women.

**Chartism – The first working class political organisation**

Throughout the nineteenth century, many people found that despite reforms and changes, Parliament was not able to respond to their needs. The Chartists were the supporters of 'The People's Charter', which made six demands for the reform of Parliament. The most important demand was that every man over the age of 21 should have the right to vote. As we saw in the previous lessons, the growth of cities meant that many working-class people lived in unhealthy houses in filthy streets. They often worked very long hours in factories in dangerous conditions. Their wages were low and they could be put out of work if the demand for what they were making suddenly dropped. Most working people wanted a better life and believed that Parliament had the power to change things for the better. That is why they wanted the vote. They wanted to be able to elect MPs who knew what their lives were like and would do something to improve them. The Chartists generally used peaceful means, but each time they presented their Charter, Parliament refused to consider it, even though by 1842 it was supported by a petition signed by three million people. In 1848 the Chartist leader, Feargus O'Connor, announced that over six million people had signed a new petition. He planned a mass meeting on Kennington Common in London, followed by a march to

*The Great Chartist Meeting on Kennington Common, April 10, 1848. One of the earliest photographs ever taken*
present the petition to Parliament. The governments of most European countries had been overturned by revolutions in that year (1848) so the British government was worried. Ministers thought the Chartist rally might be the start of a revolution in Britain. They called in troops and extra police. O'Connor took the petition to Parliament where officials read it and counted the signatures. They found that only two million were genuine. The rest were made up of names and forgeries. The petition became a joke. This allowed Parliament once again to ignore the Charter and its six demands. After that, Chartism died out.

**Trade Unions**

Many workers joined the Chartist movement in the 1840s in the hope of winning the vote so that they could be properly represented in Parliament. When this failed, many skilled workers turned to trade unions as a way of improving their lives. By the 1870s skilled craftspeople such as carpenters, textile workers, coal miners, engineers and bricklayers had succeeded in forming strong unions that were accepted by both employers and the government. These ‘model unions’, as they were known, such as the Amalgamated Society of Joiners and Carpenters and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, were national organisations that brought together what had previously been local craft associations. They were expensive to join and only well-paid skilled workers could afford the subscriptions. In return they provided important benefits such as unemployment pay, sick pay and old age pensions.

**New unions**

The great majority of workers, the unskilled ones, did not belong to the model unions. In the 1880s they began to form their own ‘new unions’. Improved levels of literacy, improved communications and large concentrations of unskilled workers living together in the rapidly growing towns helped make this possible. The new unions had low subscriptions and aimed to improve their members’ pay and working conditions. Unlike the old craft unions, they were prepared to take strike action. In 1888 the matchgirl workers at Bryant and May's factory in London formed a union and held a successful strike for better wages and conditions of work. In 1889 London gas workers formed a union and used the threat of a strike to win the right to work only eight hours a day. Later in 1889 the London dock workers went on strike to persuade employers to pay them 6d (2.5p) per day. These strikes were well organised and peaceful and made the public realise how very poor and badly paid most unskilled workers were. They also helped to increase union membership. In four years, between 1888 and 1892, it grew from 750,000 to 1.5 million.

**Dissatisfaction with the Liberal and Conservative Parties.**

Britain in the mid-19th century had two political parties, Liberals and Conservatives. Neither party represented the interests of unskilled workers. The members of the New Unions wanted Parliament to help them in their struggles against employers, and to provide the working class with better houses, and schemes for unemployment and sickness benefit. But both the Liberals and Conservatives supported the employers’ right to be free to run their businesses as they liked. They did not believe that the state should interfere in the economy (a policy
known as laissez-faire) nor did they believe that the state had a duty to provide anything but security and property protection. Consequently the New Unions asked the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to set up an organisation to send independent working class representatives to Parliament. Although the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884 gave many working-class men the right to vote, very few of them became Members of Parliament. It was difficult for a working-class man to become an MP because MPs were still not paid at this time, and it cost a candidate a lot of money to take part in an election. In the 1890s people became convinced that a new party was needed, independent of both the Conservatives and the Liberals, to put up working-class candidates in elections. The members of the New Unions agreed to work with the socialists to increase the number of working class members in Parliament.

Socialism

Socialists believed that society worked in an unfair way that left a large number of working-class people very poor and badly housed. They believed the only way to improve things for them was to change the system. Instead of wealthy individuals owning things such as land, factories, and shops, socialists wanted the people to own them. In that way everybody would be able to share in the wealth they helped to create. They also wanted the government to help working people straight away, for example by setting up a system of state pensions, so that everyone would have money to live off in their old age.

There were several socialist organisations in Britain such as the Social Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society. By 1890 there were only 2,000 socialists altogether, but they were important because of the ideas they spread through their meetings and writing.

The Labour Representation Committee

In 1900 the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) was established to organise Labour candidates for the next election. Fifteen candidates were put forward; only two were elected. In the election of 1906 the LRC won twenty-nine seats. Working class candidates standing as Liberals won a further twenty-three. The two groups joined together in Parliament and called themselves the Labour Party.

Activities

1. Suggest at least two reasons why Britain avoided revolution in the 19th century.
2. Who opposed political reform and democracy in the 19th century and why?
3. Chartism aimed to give the working class the right to vote. Why did they think this would improve the quality of their lives?
4. What was the difference between the model unions and the new unions? In what sense had the new unions been made possible by the industrial revolution?
5. Explain why many working class people became dissatisfied with the established Liberal and Conservative political parties?
6. What is socialism? Why did many working class people join socialist political parties at the end of the 19th century?