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DISRAELI, GLADSTONE, AND THE REFORM ACT OF 1867

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This research project investigated the rivalry between William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli, and how that rivalry resulted in the Reform Act of 1867. The competition between these two over expansion of the franchise led to a more radical reform than expected. Gladstone, a converted Liberal, encouraged moderate changes like a reduction in the householder qualification from £ten to £seven. Disraeli, a moderate Conservative, embraced more expansive reform for political advancement rather than as an extension of the suffrage. It was Disraeli's hope that an enlarged electorate would vote Conservative as a reward for their new privilege. Although many historians give Disraeli credit for the second Reform bill, most fail to connect Gladstone's initial attempts at reform with the bill's final shape. True credit for the passage of the Reform Act of 1867 lies with Disraeli and Gladstone. The Reform bill was created out of political infighting as opposed to popular opinion. An examination of the rivalry between Gladstone and Disraeli raises the question of what the bill would have looked like without these two politicians. This project used primary materials such as the parliamentary debates, the London Times newspaper, memoirs, and letters of public figures as well as secondary materials such as books, journals, and dissertations.

I. Introduction

Although the means to the end were unknown to most members of Parliament at the time, the Reform Act of 1867, unlike its predecessor the Reform Act of 1832, achieved the goal of opening the franchise to the British working class. The 1867 Reform Act was the culmination of two determined leaders of diametrically opposed parties, both of whom understood the importance of party unity in accomplishing reform. William Gladstone, leader of the Liberal party, had to contend with a loose coalition with Whigs of the old guard, represented by Robert Lowe on the right wing and Radicals, represented by John Bright on the left. Historian F.B. Smith wrote, “party organization was weak and the whips had no means of effectively disciplining members: men chose to follow a leader by their own volition”¹

Benjamin Disraeli led a Conservative party that was much more cohesive, but he would have to contend with men like Lord Cranborne, a staunchly conservative member of the status quo Tories. The Conservatives had spent a generation in the political wilderness, only sporadically finding the light and leading a minority government until a stronger Liberal government could be secured. Disraeli stated, and it was probably true, that if Gladstone was successful it “would seat the Whigs for a lifetime.”² The Conservatives needed an issue to regain government, and for Disraeli reform was that issue. Highly principled Gladstone believed in reform as a measure of civility. It could bond the responsible worker to the government and the country and justify government supremacy over them. Gladstone’s argument placed the opponents of reform in a position of having to deny the fitness of the working man. Disraeli, on the other hand, was indifferent toward reform and condemned it when it suited his position and demanded it when his position changed. The rivalry between these two shaped the final act and in the views of Conservatives wildly spun the measure out of control. Had the Liberal majority coalesced around the issue of reform instead of splintering, Gladstone’s bill in 1866 would have passed. Had Conservatives with true convictions against reform rallied against Disraeli’s 1867 Act, it would have certainly died. Disraeli is given total credit for the Reform Act which enfranchised the working-class for the first time, and while it was passed under his leadership, he could not have accomplished it without Gladstone who is given no credit for his part in initiating the moderate reform bill in 1866. Gladstone believed “that to carry enfranchisement...was essential to character, essential to credit, essential to usefulness,...not merely of the political party, but of this house, and of successive parliaments.”³ While much scholarly literature has been written on the Reform Act of 1867 there remains a need to examine where credit rests. Because of the condition of their parties, true credit for the passage of the Reform Act of 1867 lies with Disraeli and Gladstone.

Wilbur Jones paints a picture of Lord Derby from his youth to his ultimate position as a leader of the Conservative party in parliament.⁴ Under Derby’s leadership, however, the Conservative party remained out of politics for two decades, leading the author to question his leadership. Was it poor leadership, or insurmountable circumstances which led to this tenure out of office? Jones argues that it was a combination of both. Disraeli is given credit for many things during the time of this cooperation, but Jones suggests that Disraeli’s aggressiveness in the Commons and Derby’s ornamental presence in the Lords balanced the relationship and clouded the view

of who was responsible for reform. As Jones writes, “[Disraeli’s] whole career seemed to be a process of gradually compromising the special privileges of his class.”⁵

Henry Pelling argues that America’s democratic and representative system influenced British radicals who believed a similar system needed to be imported. While the radicals praised American democracy, Conservatives feared they would lose power to reform. The British working class felt strongly about the abolition of slavery and Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation turned support towards the north. America was then seen as the free and democratic nation it claimed to be. This newfound support for democracy fueled radical calls for parliamentary reform.⁶

Maurice Cowling explains the Reform Act from the perspective of the Conservative party and as a conservative he argues that historians think of mid-nineteenth century politics as a period influenced by liberals. They believe it was a combination of radical and liberal groups that gained the support of the working class while neglecting the influence of Conservatives to rally support from the same workers. Cowling questions the validity of the argument that the reform bill symbolized rapid political change because parliament not only thought of itself as the ruling assembly of a highly stable society, but that it took offense to any suggestion to the contrary.⁷

Gertrude Himmelfarb looks at the Second Reform Bill as an important step toward future reforms in 1884, 1918, and 1928, even placing it above the influence of the Great Reform Act of 1832. She suggests that Conservatives coped with a more flexible approach to reform than the Liberals, particularly because they placed greater emphasis on national identity and class linking. Liberals expected individual voters to pursue their own narrow and ignorant self-interest at the expense of the common good, and thereby expected the worst out of new voters.⁸

Giovanni Costigan examines important men in British politics, two of which are important to this research, Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone, and argues that it was Disraeli’s uniqueness that reinvigorated the Conservative party and Gladstone’s steadfastness that brought purpose to the Liberal party. To Gladstone, politics was a most serious business involving a lifetime’s dedication, to Disraeli it was a game. Gladstone perceived power as the triumph of principle and hard work whereas to Disraeli it meant the enjoyment of ambition achieved. Costigan suggests that “Victorian Liberalism, in its virtues and its defects, was incarnate in one man, William Ewart Gladstone,”⁹ and that Gladstone rationalized the government and transferred its control from the aristocratic elite to the leaders of the new democracy. To Costigan reform would be something indicative of Gladstone yet the victory of Disraeli in the second Reform bill was indicative of his drive for success and power.

E.J. Feuchtwanger’s first book examines the fragmented Conservative Party before the bill and the strengthening of the party after it. To Feuchtwanger, modern Toryism in the 1860s was the continuing belief in the need for authority and a governing elite in politics. He argues that the Liberal party responded to influences from outside the party by radical groups while the Conservatives reached out from their political base to potential new voters, an effort from the top leaders, not the grass roots. These top leaders, Disraeli in particular, helped weave a tight group of Conservatives into a party organization that the author believes was an important legacy that changed the nature of British politics. He believes the Liberals failed, because they did not have a strong,

cohesive party. Instead, it was loose coalition of Radicals, Liberals, and Whigs that were unable to stand internal pressure against reform for the greater good of the party.¹⁰

H.G.C Mathew argues that Gladstone wanted reform to legitimate the government's taxation of workers who until 1867 had no vote.¹¹

E.J. Feuchtwanger's biography on Disraeli is in many regards a very similar book to his older book, but he describes in better detail the scheme of Disraeli. He argues that Disraeli had planned his actions on the second Reform bill two years earlier and waited for Liberal rhetoric to hang them and their bill.¹²

Richard Shannon argues a similar point to that of Feuchtwanger and Himmelfarb. He believes that while not wanting extensive reform, Disraeli was the driving force behind Tory democracy and modern conservatism. He was the pre-eminent statesman who's "genius led him to discern in the inarticulate mass of the English populace" the desire and support for conservatism.¹³

F.B. Smith argues that the Reform Act of 1867 was a piece of legislation which directly affected the distribution of power in Britain. Eloquent speeches, intractable franchise law, and the leadership of the two protagonists, Disraeli and Gladstone, led to a more radical reform than expected. Gladstone was principled for reform while Disraeli was principled in regard to the landed interest. He suggests that Disraeli "create[d] the 'Tory faith in the people' almost as a by product, by emphasizing the necessity for the traditional ruling class to continue to lead and by appropriating from the Radicals the doctrine of social unity."¹⁴ This statement indicates his belief in Disraeli the reformer.

The works above have poured extensive time and effort into the topic of parliamentary reform and the second Reform bill in particular. They however lack the zeal to award half of the victory to the Liberals and their leader Gladstone. The 1867 bill was certainly indicative of Disraeli's guile and cannot be mistaken to be something that Gladstone would have allowed to happen. Whether or not Gladstone would appreciate the praise this scholarship levies upon him for his initial attempt at reform in 1866, and his successive reforms in the 1870s and 1880s, he will receive it anyway.

History of Reform from 1832-1865

In the eyes of radicals, the Reform Act of 1832 had been a sell out by moderates. These radicals believed that this was a temporary arrangement that would be superceded by something more substantial. Their fears surrounding the tenure of the Great Reform Act were confirmed when the government began passing acts that outraged the working class. The Anatomy Act of 1832 remedied the shortfall of corpses used in medical training, by making the unclaimed bodies of workers who had died in workhouses, available for study. This was seen as a threat to the dignity and, it was thought, hopes of salvation of the dead. The Poor Law Act of 1834 threatened to break up families that applied for poor relief. It aimed at turning a request for assistance in a time of hardship into a source of shame and moral failure. Parliament failed to acknowledge the need for factory reform and its continuing persecution of trade unions lead to heated protest. The Tolpuddle martyrs was an example of a group of workers who organized and in doing so broke the law. The martyrs were six farmers prosecuted for forming a branch of the Labourers' Union at Tolpuddle. They were convicted and sent to Australia and Tasmania to serve a seven year sentence. Only after protest and petition by trade unionists was the sentence reduced to two years.¹⁵ Concerns over issues outside of work, yet damaging to the working class nonetheless, lead to concern over the paying of taxes to the Church of

England regardless of membership as well as the permanence of the Corn Laws which kept the price of grain artificially higher than it should have been through the restriction of free trade.

These legislative programs against labor unions and the working class enabled the Chartist movement to enlist a mass following at a time of stress in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Chartism was an umbrella movement, sheltering and interlocking with other concerns, from temperance to education, from trade unionism to women's rights. Members of the movement adopted a six point plan: an extension of the vote to males over the age of twenty-one, a secret ballot, equality of constituency size, a removal of property qualifications for Members of Parliament (MPs), payments to MPs, and the meeting of annual parliaments. The chartists envisioned a plan aimed at making the parliament more accessible to the working class as well as gaining manhood suffrage. Enactment of the People's Charter would have provided a sweeping transformation of parliament greater than the 1867 act would eventually provide. In 1839, industrial workers in Newport revolted against harsh working and living conditions and were fired upon by soldiers. Despite the Newport Rising in 1839, a strike in 1842, and a mass meeting on Kennington Common in 1848, the Chartists were unable to gain success by constitutional or insurrectionary means.¹⁶ After 1848, they lost support which had been intermittent and indecisive. Economic conditions improved and governments became more responsive to moderate reforms. The issue of corn law repeal had been taken up by Peel on his own convictions and with the prodding of the Chartist rival organization, the Anti-Corn Law League. The church began to retreat from taxation. The new Poor Law did not turn out to be as bad as originally thought. Chartism was also challenged by other organizations such as William Lovett's People's League and Bronterre O'Brien's National Reform League which competed for Chartist followers. Chartists also faced opposition from middle class radicals like the Administrative Reform Association which held the view that the only thing that needed to be changed in parliament was the distribution of seats, not the qualification to vote.¹⁷ Working-class reformers began concentrating on narrower, readily attainable goals, one of which was educating the working man, making him respectable and worthy of the vote.

Limited reform proposals emerged in the parliaments of the 1850s, most from Lord John Russell.¹⁸ In 1849 he floated a bill to enfranchise £5 householders¹⁹ in the boroughs and £20 tenants in counties, but his cabinet expressed profound indifference toward it and the bill died. In 1852 he introduced a similar bill, this time including a merger of the smallest borough seats. However, his ministry was disintegrating over the issue and the bill was aborted. Russell was, however, not a radical and he would have nothing to do with proposals for the secret ballot or wider reaching reforms which emanated from the radical fringes of the party.²⁰

In October 1858, John Bright picked up the gauntlet of parliamentary reform and announced his commitment to reform at two meetings in Birmingham. His proposal was less radical than it would seem at face value. While he called for redistribution of parliamentary seats and the secret ballot, his proposal advocated a reduction in the householder rates to £10. Of this proposal Ernest Jones offers this criticism: "a suffrage for the middle classes, and exclusion for the great masses of the people."²¹ He later exclaimed, "Working Men! Brother Chartists!...Rush together in your meetings, and pass

formal emphatic resolutions, openly and formally repudiating the measure of Mr. Bright, . . . and declaring yourselves for registered manhood suffrage.”²²

Benjamin Disraeli was the moving spirit behind an 1859 Conservative bill that he felt was of expediency for the party. It aimed at equaling the county and borough franchises by compelling borough voters to vote within their city rather than in their county. This measure had the desired effect of creating a safe haven within county seats for conservatism. Seventy seats were to be transferred from small towns, fifty-two of them to counties and eighteen to larger cities. No new changes to voter qualifications would be made in this bill. The minority government was unable to stop the Liberals from mobilizing opposition from left and right. The failure of the bill was greeted with resounding apathy and little interest was taken in the extinguishing of another Russell scheme in 1860. He declared that “the apathy of the country is undeniable. Nor is it a transient humor; it seems a rather confirmed habit of mind.”²³

Edward Baines’ bill in 1864 elicited a response from Gladstone that indicates his movement toward reform, and would lay the groundwork for his future bill. This changing attitude toward reform led to his exalted name, “The People’s William.” Commentary between Gladstone and the Prime minister, Lord Palmerston, point to the uneasy relationship between the two. Palmerston wrote:

In what you may say upon Baines’ bill you will not commit yourself and the Government as to any particular amount of borough franchise. . . . No doubt many workingmen are as fit to vote as many of the ten pounders [the current franchise], but if we open the door to the class the number who may come in may be excessive and may swamp the classes above them.²⁴

Either Gladstone did not receive the message in time, or he misunderstood, because his speech in Parliament on the bill was far more provocative than anyone expected. He proclaimed that “Every man who is not presumably incapacitated by some consideration of personal unfitness or of political danger is morally entitled to come within the pale of the Constitution.”²⁵ Upon reading the transcript of Gladstone’s speech, Palmerston fired off a message to his lieutenant. “The function of Government” he reminded, was “to calm rather than excite agitation.”²⁶ Palmerston’s feeling toward what the population was entitled to is evinced by this statement, “what every Man and Woman have a right to, is to be well governed and under just laws.”²⁷ Their acerbic relationship would soon end, and the bulwark against reform was soon removed.

The failure of these initiatives and the lack of excitement over them from inside as well as outside of parliament made many wonder if reform was dead. Efforts to rally radical support were unsuccessful outside of London, in Tyneside, Birmingham, Manchester, and Glasgow.²⁸ There was not enough of a public presence to elicit the intended response of Parliament. Party factions made reform measures difficult endeavors because party discipline was weak.

Incredible disproportion remained in the distribution of parliamentary seats, especially when one looks at the electoral power of the largest cities. In 1864 the nine largest constituencies, Tower Hamlets, Marylebone, Finsbury, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Lambeth, Westminster, and Leeds had a combined population of 3.3 million people and returned 18 members to the House of Commons. This is a ratio of roughly one member per 180,000 people. Eleven small cities, Wells, Totnes, Thetford,

Northallerton, Marlborough, Ashburton, Lyme Regis, Evesham, Honiton, Arundell, and Dartmouth had a combined population of 44,000 returned 17 members, which equate to one member per 2,600 people. Sixty seven boroughs with a population under 10,000 elected 106 members. One hundred and forty five boroughs with between 10,000 and 20,000 people elected 215. And twenty six boroughs with population between 50,000 and 200,000, elected 52 members to parliament. In 1866, 250,291 electors in small boroughs of England and Wales, one-fifth of the electorate, were able to elect 328 members, or half of the House of Commons.²⁹ The borough franchise remained unchanged since the Reform Act of 1832. A man, twenty one years of age, residing in a house within seven miles of the city limits and paying a minimum yearly rental of £10 was qualified to vote.³⁰

The aristocratic element contributed to the stubbornness of Parliament. A reduction in the franchise could flood the Commons with new blood and push old established names and families out. In 1865 there were 37 peers or elder sons of peers, 64 younger sons, and 15 grandsons, a total of 116 members. There were 71 baronets, 11 elder sons, 19 younger sons, and 8 grandsons, a total baronetage of 109. Together these two equal 225 members. In addition there were 100 commoners connected to the peerage by marriage or descent. This amounted to 326 members, or half the House of Commons. These seats were rather evenly distributed, however, with the Conservative holding 175 and the Liberals holding 150. One member had thirty other sitting members related to him by birth or marriage. In 1859, 31 families supplied 110 members to the Commons, equal to the representation of Ireland, twice that of Scotland, and five times that of London.³¹ It has been suggested that “Politics had become a pastime, marked by oratorical combats and divisions, of which the outcome did not matter much.”³²

Making of the Second Reform Act from 1865-1866

Upon Palmerston’s death on 18 October 1865, Lord John Russell began his final stint as Prime Minister with Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer. With the intransigence to reform that was Palmerston out of the way, Gladstone and Russell began a move in 1866 toward reform. As Gladstone remarked during the first reading of the bill, “with no delay...after the death of our lamented head...we applied ourselves.”³³ They began to believe in a safe top layer of working-class city dwellers who could be granted the franchise without threatening the landed aristocracy in the counties. This would be accomplished by not only lowering the borough qualification, but including provisions to increase the number of seats in the counties for the gentry to control. This should appease Liberals without destroying the entire power structure, making passage potentially easier. The question which Russell and Gladstone focused on was how far below the current ten pound householder qualification in the cities was safe to enfranchise the responsible, deserving worker and yet high enough to keep those amenable to bribery and class warfare out.³⁴ On 7 March 1866 Gladstone and Russell settled on a seven pound annual rental as the basis for the borough franchise. A seven pound qualification works out to a weekly income of twenty six shillings, putting the franchise ahead of unskilled hand laborers, but within the range of artisans and shopkeepers.³⁵ Enfranchising these workers strengthens the constitution, “for the attachment of the people to the throne, the institutions, and the laws in which they live is...more than silver and gold.”³⁶ Two days later, evidence was presented that in one hundred and sixteen boroughs in England and Wales more than twenty five percent of the electorate was already working class.

Opponents of reform seized upon this and asked why reform was necessary. Despite this new found animosity toward reform, Gladstone introduced on 12 March a hastily concocted bill, based on inadequate information, but with little support from a cabinet that was at best indifferent and at worst hostile toward it.³⁷ During the first reading of the bill he asked the cabinet “to apply themselves and the best powers they possessed to the framing of a prudent, effectual measure”³⁸ During the first reading of the bill, Gladstone made reference to the Reform Act of 1832 and how it was insufficient and had not evolved to meet current possibilities. According to him the working class, “ought to have borne an increasing and growing proportion,” instead of a “dwindling and diminishing proportion.” and that “the time has arrived when something ought to be done to increase their share in the elective franchise.”³⁹

Aside from the lack of support from Conservatives, Gladstone had to deal with Aristocratic Whiggish Liberals of Palmerstonian flavor who were as vitreous toward reform. A combination of these two groups could easily defeat the bill. Right-wing Liberals under the guidance of Robert Lowe attacked the bill as unnecessary and a threat to constitutional stability. He proclaimed, “If you want venality, if you want ignorance, if you want drunkenness, and facility for being intimidated; or if, on the other hand, you want impulsive, unreflecting, and violent people, where do you look...Do you go to the top or to the bottom?”⁴⁰

They were in turn criticized by John Bright as the forty thieves and as Adullamites, a biblical reference to David at the Cave of Adullam.⁴¹ The verse reads, “all those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him.”⁴²

Stepping ahead of Lord Derby, Disraeli mobilized Conservatives against the bill. He claimed on 27 April that democracy would destroy an element of English civilization and degrade England “from being a first-rate Kingdom, to become a third-rate Republic.”⁴³ He further argued that,

There will be no charm of tradition; no prescription spell; no families of historic lineage; none of the great estates round which men rally when liberty is assailed; no statesmanship, no eloquence, no learning, no genius. Instead of this you will have a horde of selfish obscure mediocrities, incapable of anything but mischief, and that mischief devised and regulated by the raging demagogue of the hour.⁴⁴

They brought down the bill by joining with the Adullamites and forced the government to combine the redistribution of parliamentary seats with the franchise reforms instead of considering these two complex yet related measures separately. The cabinet proposed transferring 49 seats from small boroughs, 26 of them going to the counties and fifteen to the industrial towns and larger boroughs. Other smaller towns were to be grouped together to form larger more apportioned constituencies. This proposal however would have extended the electoral imbalance further toward the Liberals, but at the same time threatening the constituencies of several of their current supporters.⁴⁵

On 18 June 1866, Dunkellin’s Amendment was proposed to base the borough qualification on the payment of rates as opposed to payment based on rental value.⁴⁶ This made the bill unacceptable and the cabinet had to decide what action to take next. On the 19 June Russell, Gladstone, and three others voted to dissolve the House and call elections on the issue of reform. Clarendon, Grey, and four others voted to resign.

Granville and two others voted to continue the current bill.⁴⁷ After much wrangling within the cabinet, Russell tendered his resignation as prime minister on 26 June. A Conservative minority government then took over.

Despite the level of oratory surrounding the reform act, it was not a top priority. Parliament was occupied by issues involving the budget, foreign affairs, and a cattle plague. Malaise amongst the working class also contributed to parliamentary inaction. Lord Stanley suggested that “the political excitement among the upper classes is greater than it has been for the last seven or eight years. I do not believe that it is shared to any considerable extent by the people.”⁴⁸

This statement was made on 10 June. By the 24 June, however, these same workers began to change their minds as they followed the defeat of Gladstone’s bill in the newspapers. Serious reformers began angry meetings and demonstrations, led by The Reform League, whose leadership, composed of intellectuals, trade unionists, and manufacturers, gained the support of the workers they represented through meetings held at Trafalgar Square. On 23 July tempers boiled over and reform agitation culminated in the Hyde Park riots which attracted three thousand people. The most notable incident during the riots was the destruction of park railings, but this can probably be attributed to overcrowding, not intentional violence. The most unfortunate event during the riots was the death of a police officer. Events at Hyde Park did have the effect of frightening League leaders who feared violence would undermine the steadily increasing image of the responsible worker.⁴⁹ The riots were not the only thing that exemplified the irresponsible working class. During Lord Derby’s 1865 nomination, a man was pelted by dead cats and rabbits. At another, a man threw a mixture of rotten eggs, flour, soot, and red brick dust.⁵⁰

It also affected the Conservative minority government of Derby and Disraeli by adding public pressure to the reform question. But as has been argued, “The passage of the Reform Act of 1867 was affected in a context of public agitation: it cannot be explained as a simple consequence.”⁵¹

Derby and Disraeli were in a difficult position when they took office in 1866. The Palmerston majority from the election of 1865 had splintered upon the issue of the 1866 reform bill. If Liberals were able to coalesce, any bill brought by Disraeli could have been stopped by Gladstone. They also faced a ring-wing aristocracy that detested reform. Indifferent toward reform himself, Disraeli saw an opportunity he could not refuse. His party had been in the political wilderness for a generation and this issue, if played just right, might usher in a new era for the Conservative party. If he did nothing, his minority government would only prolong an inevitable loss to the Liberals in the next election. The last part of 1866 was spent establishing committees and drafting half-hearted clauses that would be drawn together to form a bill. Their purpose was to delay legislation while preventing Liberal initiative. The clauses were accepted on 8 November 1866.⁵² One of these resolutions stated a position counter to the eventual bill of 1867. “While it is desirable that a more direct representation should be given to the laboring classes, it is contrary to the Constitution of this realm to give to any one class...a predominating power over the rest of the community.”⁵³

There was another reform bill in 1866, this one proposed by a radical friend of Disraeli, James Clay, who introduced the idea that a persons voting fitness should be determined by his knowledge and cognitive ability. Such a test would include “writing

from dictation... simple addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of money.”⁵⁴
This test was however harder than the civil service exam for clerkships.

The Making of Reform from 1866-1867

Parliament reconvened on 5 February 1867 and from the beginning Disraeli worked to pre-empt Liberal initiative and, if possible, widen the gulf that doomed Gladstone’s bill while maintaining a suspicious cabinet. To quell talk of resignation amongst his fellow cabinet members, on February 25th Disraeli threw together a haphazard bill in a matter of minutes. This replaced his earlier more radical intention with a simple £6 rating in the boroughs. It became known as the ten minutes bill.⁵⁵ On 2 March Lord Cranborne, Lord Carnarvon, and Jonathan Peel, resigned from the government because it was clear that Disraeli’s bill was moving toward the more radical household suffrage regardless of rental value or rate paid.⁵⁶ Of Peel, Disraeli wrote that he was, “very placable, except on the phrase ‘household suffrage,’ when his eye lights up with insanity.”⁵⁷ Disraeli had toyed with ways of passing a household suffrage bill without the actual ramifications of true household suffrage. He conjured up the idea of what came to be known as the fancy franchises. Voters rated at and above £10 would receive two votes, those over £20 would receive three votes.⁵⁸ Public agitation, the fancy franchises, and the hope that a reform bill would sweep the Conservatives back into office garnered the support of rank and file members of the same Conservative party that killed Gladstone’s bill a year earlier. New proposals called for household suffrage for all those who paid rates in person, not through an intermediary. This provision would be a major restriction in towns where most property was rented and rates were paid through a landlord. The working vote in the county was to be reduced from the £50 rental established in 1832 to a rental of £15.

The bill was introduced to the Commons on 18 March. Disraeli’s speech on the first night was a resounding success, as is obvious by Derby’s congratulatory letter the next day. He writes, “I cannot let the day pass over without offering you my cordial congratulations on your splendid achievement of last night. I hear from all quarters that it was the finest speech you ever made;... In fact, you have won our game for us.”⁵⁹ Disraeli’s position on reform had changed somewhat in a year’s time. He proclaimed that reform was needed because “our object is not only to maintain, but to strengthen the character and functions of this House.”⁶⁰ In his speech Disraeli made his case for household suffrage: “you let in a very large and very indiscriminate number to the enjoyment of the right without the preliminary performance of duties, and when they are let in you leave a great many behind them, who, because others are let in, immediately cry out to be admitted. Then where is your settlement.”⁶¹

The fancy franchises were soon dropped as was the two-year residence requirement, which was reduced to a single year.⁶² The most controversial concession made by Disraeli came on 17 May. Hodgkinson’s amendment called for the abolition of compounding as a basis for the franchise qualification. Compounders paid their rates, or taxes, with their rent to their landlord who paid the collector. This arrangement suited the tenants because it spread payments out over time. It suited the collector because it made for certainty of payment. It suited the landlord because he collected a fee for taking on the risk.⁶³ This made household suffrage a reality by removing the last obstacle. The final bill also lowered the county franchise to twelve pounds.

The act went far beyond anything that Gladstone would have sanctioned and its final form can be attributed to Disraeli's guile and the fact that he was willing to accept any amendment to the bill as long as it was not Gladstone's. The extra-parliamentary pressure after the defeat of Gladstone's bill in 1866 created a swing of opinion amongst the Tory backbenchers. While they still were against reform on an ideological basis, they supported the radical measure for fear that something less would lead to their downfall.

The most striking feature of the Reform Act of 1867 was its wide extension of franchise, a surprise made all the more remarkable because it was a Conservative government that passed the bill. Had the bill been passed with the safeguards of compounding and plural voting intact, the increased electorate would have been marginally larger than the proposed extension in Gladstone's 1866 bill. Had plural voting remained, the aristocratic power would have been greatly increased.⁶⁴ In the boroughs of England and Wales, the electorate increased by 134 percent, the counties, by 46 percent. Another surprise is the outcome within cities.⁶⁵ Urban areas voted Liberal and any extension of the electorate would increase that lead. This was a conscious attempt to secure county constituencies for Conservative candidates while abandoning the cities to Liberals. However, the inequality of the parliamentary constituencies remained. It has been suggested that "there was nothing inevitable about the course they followed. If a restrictive act could have been passed on a conservative basis, they would have passed it."⁶⁶

At a speech in Edinburgh, Disraeli suggested that the other reform bills failed because they were not based on principle. "I say whatever degradation of value you make, whether it be £8, £7, £6, £5, you are equally far from a principle" and only pander to constituents,⁶⁷ and that "the Tory Party...is formed of all classes from the highest to the most homely" Later he claimed that he "had to prepare the mind of the country, and to educate our party."⁶⁸ He argued that a man with a house has a stake in the community and therefore should have the vote.

Lord Cranborne⁶⁹ voiced his concerns on the new act. He feared that democracy would introduce a spoils system for trade union leaders and corrupt party managers and that the working class that they purportedly served would siphon off aristocratic wealth. To Robert Lowe, democracy would degenerate as a result of the working class' lack of education and that their narrowly defined self-interest conflicted with the responsibility of looking to the nation as a whole. A Palmerstonian Whig remarked that "Derby has set himself to prove that dishonesty is the best policy... Where we have lifted the sluices of democracy an inch, he and Dizzy have raised them a foot. My hope is that they will be the first to be washed away in the flood."⁷⁰

Even with the redistricting clauses of the 1867 Reform Act, the distribution of Parliamentary seats remained skewed toward the system of the past. Medieval market towns like Calne, Bridgnorth, and Coleriane continued to return more than half the borough members and more than one fifth of the House of Commons.⁷¹

In 1867 there were 1,367,000 adult male occupiers in the parliamentary boroughs of England and Wales. Among them, 507,700 were compound householders. 94,000 of them were rated at or above the £10 line and 476,600 were rated below it. The bill after Hodgkinson's amendment enfranchised a total of 500,000 men. The original proposal estimated the number to be around 120,000 men.⁷² After the 1867 Act boroughs of Britain experienced an increase of 830,000 voters. The 1866 plan estimated an increase

of 200,000 men, and this was the one Conservatives and Liberals alike wrote off as too radical. The overall extension of the franchise in Britain increased from 1,360,000 voters in 1866, to 2,480,000 voters in 1868.⁷³

The fears of many Conservatives, who felt that an extension of the working class vote would lead to Liberal victory and not their own, seemed to be confirmed. The election of 1868 went to the Liberals and Gladstone formed his first government as prime minister. The Conservative challenge of Liberal seats failed in comparison to the effort mobilized by the Liberals. In 1865, 159 Liberal held seats had been uncontested, while 143 Conservative seats were uncontested. When, in 1868, Conservatives challenged all but 122 Liberal held seats, the Liberals fought back and left only 100 Conservative held seats unchallenged.⁷⁴ Complexities within the voter registration system hampered the effects of the Reform Act, and its full impact was not evident until 1874, when the Conservatives would win and Disraeli would form his first Government.⁷⁵

History of Reform from 1868-1885

Gladstone's first and second terms in office as prime minister are a further example of his commitment to reform. The passage of the Ballot Act of 1872 and the Reform Act of 1884 furthered democracy. These did so by increasing the number of people who could vote and by securing that vote free from outside pressure. These were not the immediate goal of Gladstone, but his beliefs changed when he recognized the need for such legislation.

He had come a great distance in his four decades of political life. There were very few subjects on which his views remained the same from the 1830s to the 1870s. He had, however, retained his resistance to the idea that those who deserved the vote also deserved the right to exercise it secretly. His idealized image of the independent voter, head held high, declaring his choice with fear may have represented himself and his social peers, but is hard to reconcile with the average worker, whose employer may be watching. His belief began to change and is exemplified by an ambiguous speech to his constituents in Greenwich. He said, "I have at all times given my vote in favor of open voting, but I have done so before, and I do so now, with an important reservation, namely, that whether by open voting or by whatsoever means, free voting must be secured."⁷⁶

Before 1872, voting took place in public. It was common for printers to publish lists of individual voters. These lists included the name of the voter, his address, and the name of the candidate he voted for.⁷⁷

In 1870, the Postmaster General, the Marquess of Hartington, Spencer Cavendish, introduced an anti-corrupt practices bill which would have introduced ballot voting. It was given low priority and the bill foundered. A new bill brought to the commons received a much greater push due to backing from the Prime Minister. Gladstone argued that many whose occupations made them vulnerable to pressure now had the vote and protection of these votes was necessary. This implied less of a desire and more of a necessity. This is confirmed by his diary entry on 29 June 1871. "Spoke on ballot, and voted in 324-230 with mind satisfied and as to feeling a lingering reluctance."⁷⁸

When the House of Lords threw out the bill, Gladstone reacted with more passion than he exhibited toward the bill originally. Speeches denouncing the Lords, the threat of calling an autumn session in 1872, and finally the threat of resigning began to change minds. The conservatives wanted Gladstone to fail and so would refuse to take office.

This convinced the House of Lords to accept Gladstone's bill. The first secret-ballot by-election took place 15 August 1872.⁷⁹

In 1881 there were still 72 members representing boroughs with populations under 10,000. Combined, these amount to less than half a million people. 75 members represented boroughs of over 100,000 people, and combined, they totaled a population of over 9,000,000.⁸⁰ Large towns had suburbs which were becoming increasingly middle class conservative. In 1884, Lord Salisbury wanted to capitalize on this urban conservatism by rooting for equal electoral districts. This would enable Tories to turn suburban support into seats in Parliament.⁸¹ An example of these conservative urban areas and their effect on elections can be seen in the results of the election of 1874. Tories won 44 of 114 seats in boroughs with populations over 50,000, up from 25 in 1868. In boroughs under 20,000 they won 60 seats, up from 52 in 1868.⁸²

This inequality within parliamentary districting and the fact that the 1867 Reform Act only enfranchised the working class of the boroughs, led Gladstone to drive for another reform bill. This one would introduce the voting qualifications of 1867 to the counties. Conservatives, such as Lord Salisbury, were against any extension of the franchise, that is letting any new voters in, and they demanded a redistribution bill accompany any reform bill.

After wrangling with the House of Lords, Gladstone's reform and redistribution bill passed. The number of men who could vote dramatically increased from three million to five million, creating the single largest enfranchisement out of the three Victorian Reform Acts.⁸³ Proportionally, however, the 1884 Act holds second place for percentage of new voters compared to original voters. The 1832 Reform Act added 217,000 to the electorate of 435,000, or 50 percent. The Reform Act of 1867 nearly doubled the electorate with the addition of over a million voters. This is a 90 percent change. The 1884 Act raised the electorate by 60 percent. The additions in Ireland make the outcome of the 1884 Act all the more striking. The effect of Catholic Emancipation was reduced by restricting the Ireland franchise. The new act ended this and 230 percent were added to Ireland's registers.⁸⁴

The Redistribution Act that was passed in 1885 changed the look of parliamentary voting districts from the antiquated and unrepresentative system of the past, to the even and fair system of today. The bill originally called for 46 boroughs with a population under 10,000 to lose their separate representation, and 30 boroughs fewer than 40,000 people were to lose their second representative. Separate representation refers to the common practice of small towns who should be lumped in with the county vote receive a borough vote instead.⁸⁵ Revisions to this bill called for towns under 15,000 people to lose their separate representation. Furthermore, counties and big towns were divided into single member districts. This provision is what visually resembles the even districts of today.⁸⁶

V. Conclusion

The Reform Act of 1867 increased the electorate of Great Britain from 1.4 million to 2.4 million people and it served as a transformation between the propertied constituencies of the 1850s to the inclusive reforms of the 1900s. The change in Disraeli's position at the end of 1866 was less about principle, as he claims, for if it were, how could a principled man work so vehemently against reform. He worked against Gladstone's bill because he wanted the reform victory for himself. He would be able to

proclaim that he passed reform when Liberals had tried so hard and for so long and had failed. Because of the condition of their parties, true credit for the passage of the Reform Act of 1867 lies with Disraeli and Gladstone. Someone had to start reform and someone else had to finish it.

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- ¹ F.B. Smith, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 53.
- ² Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1968), 343.
- ³ *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., vol. 182, col. 59 (9 February 1866).
- ⁴ Lord Derby was born Edward George Geoffrey Smith-Stanley on 29 March 1799 in Knowsley Park, Lancashire. From 1834 to 1851 he was known as Lord Stanley. In 1851 he succeeded his father and became the 14th Earl of Derby. As Prime Minister, he led short tenured governments in 1852, 1858, half of 1859, and 1866-1868.
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- ¹⁴ Smith, *Making of the Second Reform Bill*, 242.

¹⁵ John K. Walton, *What Did the Chartists Achieve?* (*Modern History Review* vol. 13, no. 4 (2002), 1.

¹⁶ Walton, *What Did the Chartists Achieve?*, 1-3; *idem.*, *Second Reform Act*, 5.

¹⁷ Keith McClelland, *Defining the Victorian Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 81-84.

¹⁸ Lord John Russell was born John Russell 18 August 1792 in London. He became Earl Russell in 1861. As Prime Minister he led governments from 1846-1852, 1865, and half of 1866.

¹⁹ The term householder refers to those men occupying a stand alone structure.

²⁰ Walton, *Second Reform Act*, 7.

²¹ McClelland, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, 88.

²² *Ibid.*, 89.

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²⁵ Par. Deb., 11 May, cited in, Guedalla, *Gladstone and Palmerston*, 72.

²⁶ Palm. to Glad., Guedalla, *Gladstone and Palmerston*, 72.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 281.

²⁸ McClelland, *Defining the Victorian Nation*, 78.

²⁹ F.B. Smith, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill*, 16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

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³³ Par. Deb., vol. 181, 12 March, 22.

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- ³⁵ Par. Deb., vol. 181, 12 March, 54.
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- ⁵¹ Cowling, *1867*, 3.
- ⁵² Walton, *Second Reform Act*, 16.
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- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 63.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 156.

- ⁵⁶ Jones, *Lord Derby and Victorian Conservatism*, 309.
- ⁵⁷ Smith, *Making of the Second Reform Bill*, 148.
- ⁵⁸ Jones, *Lord Derby and Victorian Conservatism*, 300.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 312.
- ⁶⁰ *Par. Deb.*, vol. 186, March 18, 6.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁶² Walton, *Second Reform Act*, 18.
- ⁶³ Smith, *Making of the Second Reform Act*, 18.
- ⁶⁴ Jones, *Lord Derby and Victorian Conservatism*, 321.
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- ⁶⁶ Cowling, *1867*, 308.
- ⁶⁷ David Strotter, *Modern British Eloquence* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 304-6.
- ⁶⁹ Lord Cranborne was born Robert Aurthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil 3 February 1830 in Hatfield, Hertfordshire. From 1865 to 1868 he is known as Viscount, or Lord Cranborne, the title of his late brother. Upon his fathers death in 1868, he became Lord Salisbury. As Prime Minister, he led three governments form 1885 to 1886, 1886 to 1892, and 1895 to 1902.
- ⁷⁰ Jones, *Lord Derby and Victorian Conservatism*, 322.
- ⁷¹ Walton, *Second Reform Act*, 24.
- ⁷² Smith, *Making of the Second Reform Bill*, 202.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, 236.
- ⁷⁴ Shannon, *Age of Disraeli*, 57.
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⁷⁶ Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone* (New York: Random House, 1995), 355.

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⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 356.

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