

1830s Britain: a decade of reform?

Why was so much legislation introduced?

The fierce battle over parliamentary and electoral reform in the early 1830s was considered an essential first step to prepare for a new dawn in politics. The success of the Reform Act, which saw the Tory share of the vote dipping below 30%, emboldened Whig leaders such as Earl Charles Grey, Lord John Russell and Henry Peter Brougham to plan an ambitious programme of legislation. There were also key local campaigners, for example, Edward Baines in Leeds.

The reforms were underpinned by ideological principles. Foremost was the influence of the Utilitarians, founded by Jeremy Bentham, who advocated the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Represented by the so-called 'philosophical radicals' in parliament, they promoted individual and economic freedom and the separation of the Church and state.

Also influential was laissez-faire economic theory advocated by political economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo. They argued that 'natural self-regulation' by markets meant that the state should limit

its intervention. This was influential in legislation such as the Poor Law Amendment Act.

Finally, there was strong and sustained pressure from below from key groups who wanted to capitalise on the opportunities the Reform Act had brought. Foremost among these were the anti-slavery societies who wanted slavery eradicated throughout the empire. Hundreds of thousands of people signed petitions in support of their aims.

There was also growing concern about the impact of rapid industrialisation, particularly on the textile districts in Lancashire and Yorkshire. Campaigners did not hesitate to compare the treatment of mill workers, including children, with that of slaves. Anthony Ashley-Cooper established the 'Ten-Hour Movement' aiming to reduce the working day for children under the age of 16. Non-conformist dissenters were a significant group, and a range of legislation restricted the role and powers of the Anglican church.

How successful were the reforms?

The reforms introduced in the 1830s should be viewed as a testing ground for mid-Victorian liberalism. Despite the dominance of laissez-faire economic thought, the state was moving into unregulated areas. These included education, industry and religion. But they were fighting against powerful vested interests. An example is the established Anglican Church. Although various reforms were introduced to commute tithes and for the state to take over the registration of births and deaths, disestablishment was never achieved.

The power of the Church of England (and Scotland, Ireland and Wales) had a profound impact on the improvement of educational provision. Although there was agreement among campaigners that education needed to be improved for most of the population, key religious groups wanted to maintain their control of the sector and a secularised education system has never been achieved. These arguments hampered the introduction of compulsory education for over four decades. Much of the legislation remained permissive. For example, although towns such

as Birmingham and Manchester petitioned for incorporation following the 1835 Act, other areas such as Sheffield resisted inaugurating councils and setting municipal rates because of costs.

It is also important to understand that there were many competing ideologies for the different reforms. Factory reform was strongly influenced by Tory paternalists such as Michael Sadler and Richard Oastler and Poor Law reform by political economists.

Despite the illusion of Whig dominance in the 1830s, the governments were often coalitions (with liberal Tories, radicals and the Irish). The Lichfield House Compact of 1835 meant that the Whigs allied with Daniel O'Connell's Irish Repeal Association and Radicals to unify in opposition to Robert Peel's Conservatives. Peel had held office in a short-lived minority government from November 1834 before being defeated in 1835. The balancing of competing interests diluted many of the main objections of key pieces of legislation and thus the reforms did not always achieve what was promised.

Reform Act increased electorate by c.350,000 and reformed boroughs
Anatomy Act licensed doctors and medical schools to dissect donated bodies

Chimney Sweepers Act restricted apprenticeships to those over the age of 14 and no master could have more than 6
Poor Law Amendment Act reformed treatment of the poor based on principles of the workhouse test, less eligibility and centralisation. Poor law costs were reduced and workhouses introduced

Established Church Act established the Ecclesiastical Commission to prepare reforms for parliamentary legislation
Prisoners Counsel Act gave defendants the formal right to be represented by a counsel in English courts
Births and Deaths Registration Act created a centralised and secularised registration of births and deaths

Marriage Act meant marriages could take place in buildings belonging to non-Anglican religious groups
Tithe Commutation Act established fixed money payments instead of an annual contribution of a portion of the value of crops and livestock

Pluralities Act prevented Anglican clergy from holding more than one benefice

1832

1833

1834

1835

1836

1837

1838

Education Act saw a government grant of £20,000 go to two religious societies involved in schooling
Factory Act made it illegal for children under 9 years old to work. Children aged 9–12 could work a maximum of 8 hours and must receive 2 hours of schooling a day. Children aged 13–18 could work a maximum of 12 hours a day

Slavery Abolition Act allowed for gradual abolition of slavery in the British Empire
Reform of the Church of Ireland reduced the number of bishops, abolished church rates and abolished churches with no Anglican churchgoers

Engraving of a woman reading to the work girls in a workhouse

Cruelty to Animals Act prohibited bull, dog and bear baiting
Municipal Corporations Act reformed local government, allowing some areas to set up town councils

Slave Compensation Act compensated enslavers in the British Empire for losses following freeing of slaves

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Sarah Richardson is a professor of British history at the University of Glasgow.