



## Seminar 2: An Age of Reform – Politics and Economics



**Prof. Dr. Alison E. Martin**  
**[amarti01@uni-mainz.de](mailto:amarti01@uni-mainz.de)**



## **Reform**

Different types of reform in the (pre)-Victorian period, loosely categorised as:

### **Political Reforms**

### **Economic Reforms**

### **Employment Reforms**

### **Educational Reforms**

### **General Reforms**



# Introduction – an Age of Reform

1. Political Reforms

2. Economic Reforms

3. Employment Reforms

4. Reformists



## **Political Reforms**

- (First) Reform Act of 1832
- People's Charter of 1837 (Chartism)
- (Second) Reform Act of 1867
- (Third) Reform Act of 1884

## **Economic Reforms**

- Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834
- Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846

## **Employment Reforms**

- Trade Union Act of 1871



## Political Reforms and Political Parties

- (First) Reform Act of 1832
- Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834

**Whig Party** in power from 1830 to 1841, with one interruption of power by **Tory Party** government by Robert Peel (1834-5)

- (Second) Reform Act of 1867
- Trade Union Act of 1871
- (Third) Reform Act of 1884

Alternately **Whigs** and **Tories** in power, under influential Prime Ministers Disraeli (Tory) and Gladstone (Whig)

# 1. Political Reforms



## (First) Reform Act of 1832

- changed English class structure, lessened impact of patronage
- extended right to vote to all men owning property
- redistributed seats to reflect population shifts caused by Industrial Revolution



George Hayter,  
*The House of Commons in  
1833*  
(1833-1843)

# 1. Political Reforms



## (First) Reform Act of 1832

**Old system** of political representation **unsuited to modern times**  
particularly with regard to:

### “Rotten” boroughs

- only had a **tiny electorate** but sent 2 members to parliament
- were **over-proportionately represented**
- electorate **could not vote as it pleased**, due to dependence on “owner” of the borough (no secret ballot)

### “Pocket” boroughs

- boroughs effectively **controlled by a single person** who owned at least half of the “burgage tenements” – occupants who had the right to vote in the borough's parliamentary elections;
- **wealthy patron** bought up houses and **installed his own tenants** in them, who would **vote in his favour**

# 1. Political Reforms



## (First) Reform Act of 1832

The labourers along here [Wiltshire] seem very poor indeed ... I never saw country people ... so miserable as these. There were some very pretty girls, but ragged as colts and pale as ashes. The day was cold too and frost hardly from the ground; and their blue arms and lips would have made any heart ache. A little after passing by these poor things, whom I left, cursing, as I went, those whom who had brought them to this state, I came to a group of shabby houses upon a hill. The whole of the houses are not intrinsically worth a thousand pounds.

... „This place sends Members to Parliament, don't it?“ said I to the ostler. “Yes, Sir.“ “Who are the Members now?“ “I don't know, indeed, Sir.“



William Cobbett

Left-wing politician  
and author of *Rural Rides* (1830)



# 1. Political Reforms



## (First) Reform Act of 1832

### **June 1830: death of King George IV**

Parliament is dissolved by law -> general election, electoral reform as major campaign issue

### **March 1831: Reform Bill brought in the House of Commons**

#### **Reform Bill:**

- disfranchised 60 of the smallest boroughs, and reduced the representation of 47 others
- caused some parliamentary seats to disappear, redistributed others to London suburbs and large cities
- standardised and expanded rights to vote to include holders of long- and medium-term leases, thus increasing size of electorate by about 1/2 million voters

# 1. Political Reforms



## Chartism

- vocal working-class movement emerges that is an “ominous matter at present” (Thomas Carlyle, 1839)
- **Peterloo Massacre** of 1819 – 15 working-class protesters killed

*To Henry Hunt, Esq., as chairman of the meeting assembled in St. Peter's Field, Manchester, sixteenth day of August, 1819, and to the female Reformers of Manchester and the adjacent towns who were exposed to and suffered from the wanton and fiendish attack made on them by that brutal armed force, the Manchester and Cheshire Yeomanry Cavalry, this plate is dedicated by their fellow labourer, Richard Carlile*



# 1. Political Reforms



## Chartism

**1838-1848:** Chartists start to demonstrate, making 6 demands:

- 1. universal male suffrage (over 21)
- 2. equal size of electoral districts
- 3. voting by secret ballot
- 4. no property qualification for members of parliament
- 5. wage for members of parliament
- 6. annual elections of members of parliament – direct democracy

Parliament passed three laws to quell popular agitation – i.e. a reform from above

# 1. Political Reforms



## (Second) Reform Act of 1867

- arguably not a constitutional breakthrough in the same way as the First Reform Act
- extended right to vote to working class men
- essentially almost doubled the number of people who could vote



THE DERBY, 1867. DIZZY WINS WITH "REFORM BILL."

MR. PUNCH. "DON'T BE TOO SURE; WAIT TILL HE'S #20000."

Caricature of the outcome of the Second Reform Act, 1867. "Dizzy [Isaac Disraeli] wins with "Reform Bill – against William Gladstone, *Punch*, 1867.

# 1. Political Reforms



## (Third) Reform Act of 1884

### Agricultural workers (male) now have the right to vote

- 1881: 8.3 of the total population of 26 million people lived in Britain's rural areas (approximately 32%)

Compared with:

- 1801: 5.8 of the total population of 8.9 million people lived in Britain's rural areas (i.e. approximately 65%)
- 1901: 7.5 of the total population of 32.5 million people lived in Britain's rural areas (i.e. approximately 23%)



Farm workers voting for the first time, *Illustrated London News* (1884)

Source: Lawton 1973.

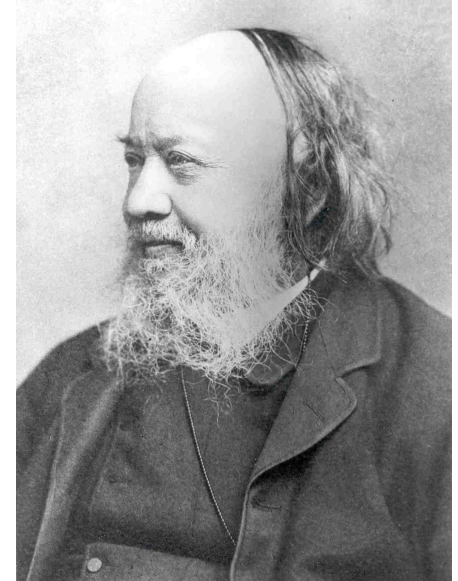


# 2. Economic Reforms



## Poor Law Amendment Act (1834)

- amended what was known as the 'Old Poor Law'
- reflected concerns about the burden of a growing population
- responded to the spiralling cost of poor relief under the Old Poor Law
- a draconian piece of legislation, designed to make poverty less attractive
- Edwin Chadwick: the system of Workhouses should be 'uninviting places of wholesome restraint'



Edwin Chadwick

# 2. Economic Reforms



## Repeal of the Corn Laws (1846)

- **Corn Law (1815):** protective tariff on foreign wheat – artificially raises price of foreign wheat – thus price of domestic wheat can also be raised, benefiting landowners
- **Liberalism** is gaining steam i. e. system not valuing protectionism (concerned with producer) but free trade (concerned with consumer)
- 1845-49 **Great Irish Famine**
- emergence of **Anti-Corn Law League** (Radicals + Liberals) – radicals want lower grain prices because cheaper food; liberals own factories and if price of food is low then their wages can remain low

Robert Peel (Cons.): supports Repeal of the Corn Laws, passed by **Opposition majority**, Peel resigns having acted in the people's interest

→ **REFORM better than REVOLUTION**

# 3. Employment Reforms

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## **1841 Mines Act**

- No child under the age of 10 to work underground

## **1868 Agricultural Gangs Act**

- No child under the age of 8 to be employed in a gang (= group) of farm workers

## **1874 Factory Act**

- No child under the age of 10 to work in a factory

## **1875 Climbing Boys Act**

- No child to be sent up chimney to sweep it



# 3. Employment Reforms



## Trade Union Act of 1871

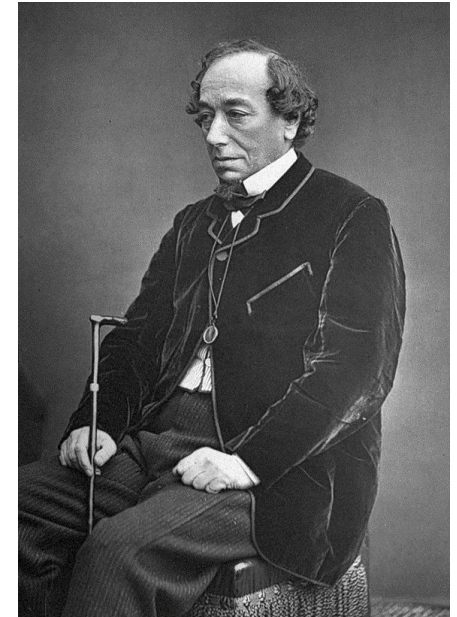
- legalised Trade Unions for the first time in British history
  - workers in combination should not be liable for conspiracy unless acts committed would be criminal if committed by a single person
  - all unions should receive full legal protection of their funds
  - passed by Gladstone's administration, the Act clarified the legality of trade unions and provided for their funds to be protected
  - Disraeli's government legalized peaceful picketing in 1875
- recognises the growing electoral importance of skilled urban workers

# 4. Reformists



## Benjamin Disraeli

- London-born, Jewish politician
- suffered financial hardship on several occasions
- author of “silver-fork“ novels
- Conservative Prime Minister (1868; 1874-80)
- sympathetic to some of the aims of Chartism, suggesting that landed aristocracy should form alliance with working class against the emerging industrialist classes
- close friend of Queen Victoria



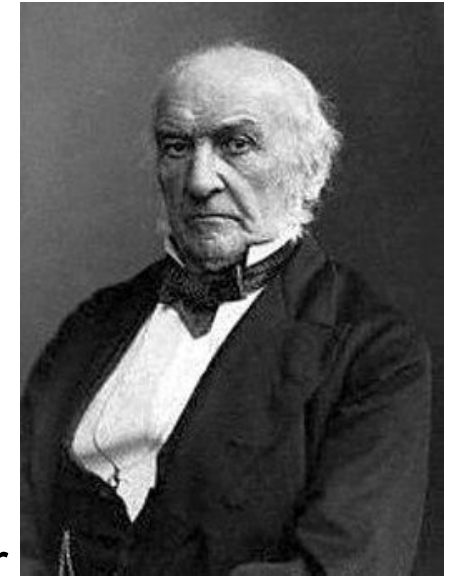
Benjamin Disraeli  
1804-1881

# 4. Reformists



## William Gladstone

- Liverpool-born to Scottish parents
- belonged to one of the largest slave-owning families in the world
- Liberal Prime Minister (1868-74; 1880-85; 1886; 1892-94)
- interest in introducing central offices for employment for dock workers
- interest in rescuing women from prostitution



William Gladstone  
1809-1898

# Further Reading and Listening



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*English Rural Communities: The Impact of a Specialised Economy*. Basingstoke:  
Macmillan, 1973. 195-219.  
Lee, Stephen J. *Aspects of British Political History, 1815-1914*. London: Routledge, 1994.  
Walton, John K. *The Second Reform Act*. London: Routledge, 1983.

Also: See ILIAS for optional listening – BBC Radio 4 *In Our Time* Broadcast on “The Poor Laws”

## Picture Credits

[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reform\\_Act\\_1832#/media/Datei:Detail\\_House\\_of\\_Commons.JPG](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reform_Act_1832#/media/Datei:Detail_House_of_Commons.JPG)

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