

Erskine May, Chapter VI, pp. 390-405

Parliamentary Reform: the 18th Century

Popular Principles Kept Alive

Having viewed the imperfections of the representative system, and the various forms of corruption by which the constitution was formerly disfigured, we pause to inquire how popular principles, statesmanship, and public [391] virtue were kept alive, amid such adverse influences?(1) The country was great and glorious; and its history,—though stained with many blots,—is such as Englishmen may justly contemplate with pride. The people, if enjoying less freedom than in later times, were yet the freest people in the world. Their laws, if inferior to modern jurisprudence, did not fall short of the enlightenment of the age, in which Parliament designed them. How are these contrasts to be explained and reconciled? How were the people saved from misgovernment? What were the antidotes to the baneful abuses which prevailed? In the first place, parliamentary government attracted the ablest men to the service of the state. Whether they owed their seats to the patronage of a peer, to the purchase of a borough, or to the suffrages of their fellow-countrymen, they equally enlightened Parliament by their eloquence, and guided the national councils by their statesmanship. In the next place, the representation, limited and anomalous as it was,—comprised some popular elements; and the House of Commons, in the worst times, still professed its responsibility to the people, and was not insensible to public opinion. Nor can it be denied that the small class, by whom the majority of the House of Commons was returned, were the most instructed and enlightened in the country; and as Englishmen, were generally true to principles of freedom.

[392] Two other causes, which exercised a wholesome restraint upon Parliament and the governing class, are to be found in the divisions of party,—finely called by Sir Bulwer Lytton 'the sinews of freedom,'—and the growing influence of the press. However prone the ruling party may sometimes have been to repress liberty, the party in opposition were forced to rely upon popular principles; and pledged to maintain them, at least for a time, when they succeeded to power. Party again supplied, in some degree, the place of intelligent public opinion. As yet the great body of the people had neither knowledge nor influence: but those who enjoyed political power, were encouraged by their rivalries and ambition, not less than by their patriotism, to embrace those principles of good government, which steadily made their way in our laws and institutions. Had all parties combined against popular rights, nothing short of another revolution could have overthrown them. But as they were divided and opposed, the people obtained extended liberties, before they were in a position to wrest them from their rulers, by means of a free representation.

Meanwhile the press was gradually creating a more elevated public opinion, to which all parties were obliged to defer. It was long, however, before that great political agent performed its office worthily. Before the press can be instructive, there must be enlightenment, and public spirit among the people: it takes its colour from society, and reflects its prevailing vices. Hence, while flagrant abuses in the government were tolerated by a corrupt society, the [393] press was venal,—teeming with scurrilous libels and factious falsehoods, in the interests of rival parties,—and disfigured by all the faults of a depraved political morality. Let us be thankful that principles of liberty and public virtue were so strong, as constantly to advance in society, in the press, and in the government of the country.

Arguments for Parliamentary Reform

The glaring defects and vices of the representative system, which have now been exposed,—the restricted and unequal franchise, the bribery of a limited electoral body, and the corruption of the representatives themselves,—formed the strongest arguments for parliamentary reform. Some of them had been partially corrected; and some had been ineffectually exposed and denounced; but the chief evil of all demanded a bolder and more hazardous remedy. The theory of an equal representation,—at no time very perfect, had, in the course of ages, been entirely subverted. Decayed boroughs, without inhabitants,—the absolute property of noblemen,—and populous towns without electors, returned members to the House of Commons: but great manufacturing cities, distinguished by their industry, wealth, and intelligence, were without representatives.

Proposals before 1782

Schemes for partially rectifying these inequalities were proposed at various times, by statesmen of very different opinions. Lord Chatham was the first to advocate reform. Speaking, in 1766, of the borough representation, he called it 'the rotten part of our constitution;' and said 'it cannot continue a century. If it does [394] not drop, it must be amputated.' In 1770, he suggested that a third member should be added to every county, 'in order to counterbalance the weight of corrupt and venal boroughs.'⁽²⁾ Such was his opinion of the necessity of a measure of this character, that he said: 'Before the end of this century, either the Parliament will reform itself from within, or be reformed with a vengeance from without.'

The next scheme was that of a very notable politician, Mr. Wilkes. More comprehensive than Lord Chatham's,—it was framed to meet, more directly, the evils complained of. In 1776, he moved for a bill to give additional members to the metropolis, and to Middlesex, Yorkshire, and other large counties: to disfranchise the rotten boroughs, and add the electors to the county constituency: and lastly, to enfranchise Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Birmingham, and 'other rich populous trading towns.'⁽³⁾ His scheme, indeed, comprised all the leading principles of parliamentary reform, which were advocated for the next fifty years without success, and have been sanctioned within our own time.

The next measure for reforming the Commons, was brought forward by a peer. On the 3rd June, 1780, in the midst of Lord George [395] Gordon's riots, the Duke of Richmond presented a bill for establishing annual parliaments, universal suffrage, and equal electoral districts. A scheme so wild and inopportune was rejected without a division.

Nor was the duke's extravagant proposal an isolated suggestion of his own. Extreme changes were at this time popular,—embracing annual parliaments, the extinction of rotten boroughs, and universal suffrage. The graver statesmen, who were favourable to improved representation, discountenanced all such proposals, as likely to endanger the more practicable schemes of economic reform by which they were then endeavouring,—with every prospect of success,—to purify Parliament, and reduce the influence of the crown. The petitioners by whom they were supported, prayed also for a more equal representation of the people: but it was deemed prudent to postpone, for a time, the agitation of that question.

The disgraceful riots of Lord George Gordon rendered this time unfavourable for the discussion of any political changes. The Whig party were charged with instigating and abetting these riots, just as, at a later period, they became obnoxious to imputations of Jacobinism. The occasion of the king's speech, at the end of the session of 1780, was not lost by the tottering government of Lord North. His Majesty warned the people against 'the hazard of innovation;' and artfully connected this warning [396] with a reference to 'rebellious insurrections to resist or to *reform* the laws.'

Among the more moderate schemes discussed at this period, by the temperate supporters of

parliamentary reform, was the addition of one hundred county members to the House of Commons. It was objected to, however, by some of the leading Whigs, 'as being prejudicial to the democratical part of the constitution, by throwing too great a weight into the scale of the aristocracy.'

Pitt and Reform

Mr. Pitt was now commencing his great career; and his early youth is memorable for the advocacy of a measure, which his father had approved. His first motion on this subject was made in 1782, during the Rockingham administration. The time was well chosen, as that ministry was honourably distinguished by its exertions for the purification of Parliament: while the people, dissatisfied with their rulers, scandalised by the abuses which had lately been exposed, and disgusted by the disastrous issue of the American war, were ripe for constitutional changes. After a call of the House, he introduced the subject in a speech,(4) as wise and temperate as it was able. In analysing the state of the representation, he described the Treasury and other nomination boroughs, without property, population, or trade; and the boroughs which had no property or stake in the country but their votes, which they sold to the highest bidder. The Nabob of Arcot, he said, had seven or eight [397] members in that House; and might not a foreign state in enmity with this country, by means of such boroughs, have a party there? He concluded by moving for a committee of inquiry. He seems to have been induced to adopt this course, in consequence of the difficulties he had experienced in obtaining the agreement of the friends of reform to any specific proposal. This motion was superseded by reading the order of the day, by a majority of twenty only.(5)

Again, in 1783, while in opposition to the coalition ministry, Mr. Pitt renewed his exertions in the same cause. His position had, in the meantime, been strengthened by numerous petitions, with 20,000 signatures.(6) He no longer proposed a committee of inquiry, but came forward with three distinct resolutions:—1st, That effectual measures ought to be taken for preventing bribery and expense at elections; 2nd, That when the majority of voters for any borough should be convicted of corruption, before an election committee, the borough should be disfranchised, and the unbribed minority entitled to vote for the county: 3rd, That an addition should be made to the knights of the shire, and members for the metropolis. In support of his resolutions, he attributed the disasters of the American war to the corrupt state of the [398] House of Commons, and the secret influence of the crown, which, he said, 'was sapping the very foundation of liberty, by corruption.' Universal suffrage he condemned; and the disfranchisement of 'rotten boroughs' he as yet shrank from proposing. A great change, however, had now come over the spirit of the Commons. The people, once more enjoying the blessings of peace, were contented with the moderate reforms effected by Lord Rockingham; and their representatives rejected Mr. Pitt's resolutions by a majority of one hundred and forty-four.

Pitt as Minister

Before Mr. Pitt had occasion again to express his sentiments, he had been called to the head of affairs, and was carrying on his memorable contest with the coalition. On the 16th January, 1784, Mr. Duncombe presented a petition from the freeholders of Yorkshire, praying the House to take into serious consideration the inadequate state of the representation of the people. Mr. Pitt supported it, saying, that he had been confirmed in his opinions in favour of reform, by the recent conduct of the opposition. 'A temperate and moderate reform,' he said, 'temperately and moderately pursued, he would at all times, and in all situations, be ready to promote to the utmost of his power.' At the same time, he avowed that his cabinet were not united in favour of any such measure; and that he despaired of seeing any cabinet unanimous in the cause. In this opinion Mr. Fox signified his concurrence; but added, that Mr. Pitt had

scarcely [399] introduced one person into his cabinet, who would support his views in regard to parliamentary reform.

The sincerity of Mr. Pitt's assurances was soon to be tested. In the new Parliament he found himself supported by a powerful majority; and he enjoyed at once the confidence of the king, and the favour of the people. Upon one question only, was he powerless. To his measure of parliamentary reform, the king was adverse,(7)—his cabinet were indifferent or unfriendly; and his followers in the House of Commons, could not be brought to vote in its favour. The Tories were generally opposed to it; and even a large portion of the Whigs, including the Duke of Portland and Lord Fitzwilliam, failed to lend it their support. Public feeling had not yet been awakened to the necessity of reform; and the legislature was so constituted, that any effective scheme was hopeless.

In the first session of the new Parliament he was not prepared with any measure of his own: but he spoke and voted in favour of a motion of Mr. Alderman Sawbridge; and promised that, in the next session, he should be ready to bring the question forward himself. He redeemed this pledge, and on the 18th April, 1786, moved for leave to introduce a Bill 'to amend the representation of the people of England, in Parliament.' Having proved, by numerous references to history, that the representation had frequently been changed, according to the varying circumstances of the country: that many decayed [400] boroughs had ceased to return members to Parliament, while other boroughs had been raised or restored to that privilege; he proposed that seventy-two members, then returned by thirty-six decayed boroughs, should be distributed among the counties and the metropolis. But this part of his scheme was accompanied by the startling proposal, that the condemned boroughs should not be disfranchised, except with the consent of their proprietors, who were to receive compensation from the state, amounting to a million sterling! He further proposed to purchase the exclusive rights of ten corporations, for the benefit of their fellow-citizens; and to obtain by the same means, the surrender of the right of returning members from four small boroughs, whose members could be transferred to populous towns. By these several means, a hundred seats were to be re-distributed. The enlargement of the county constituency, by the addition of copyholders to the freeholders, formed another part of his plan. It was estimated that by this change, and by the enfranchisement of great towns, a total addition of ninety-nine thousand would be made to the electoral body. The portion of this scheme most open to objection was that of compensating the proprietors of boroughs; and he admitted that it 'was a tender part; but at the same time it had become a necessary evil, if any reform was to take place.' It seems, indeed, that not hoping to convince those interested in the existing state of the representation, of the expediency of reform, he had sought to purchase their support. The boroughs which were always in [401] the market, he proposed to buy, on behalf of the state; and thus to secure purity, through the instruments of corruption. Such a sacrifice of principle to expediency may have been necessary; but it did not save his scheme of reform from utter failure. His motion for leave to bring in the bill, was negatived by a majority of seventy-four.(8)

Reasons for Pitt's Failure

As this was the last occasion on which Mr. Pitt advocated the cause of parliamentary reform, his sincerity, even at that time, has been called in question. He could scarcely have hoped to carry this measure: but its failure was due to causes beyond his control. The king and Parliament were adverse, and popular support was wanting. To have staked his power as a minister, upon the issue of a measure fifty years in advance of the public opinion of his day,—and which he had no power to force upon Parliament,—would have been the act of an enthusiast, rather than a statesman. The blame of his subsequent inaction in the cause was shared by the Whigs, who, for several years, consented to its entire oblivion.

In the five ensuing years of Mr. Pitt's prosperous administration, the word 'reform' was

scarcely whispered in Parliament. At length, in 1790, Mr. Flood moved for a bill to amend the representation of the people. His plan was to add one hundred members to the House of Commons, to be elected by the resident householders of every county. Mr. Pitt, on this occasion, [402] professed himself to be as firm and zealous a friend as ever to parliamentary reform; but could not assent to Mr. Flood's motion, which was superseded by the adjournment of the House.

Grey's Proposals

Meanwhile, the cause of parliamentary reform had been advocated by several political associations, and more particularly by the 'Friends of the People.' This society embraced many gentlemen eminent in politics and literature; and twenty-eight members of Parliament, of whom Mr. Grey and Mr. Erskine took the lead. It was agreed amongst them, that the subject should again be pressed upon the attention of Parliament. And, accordingly, on the 30th of April, 1792, Mr. Grey gave notice of a motion, in the ensuing session, for an inquiry into the representative system.⁽⁹⁾ A few years earlier, the cause of reform,—honestly supported by moderate men of all parties,—might have prevailed: but the perils of the time had now become too great to admit of its fair discussion. That ghastly revolution had burst forth in France, which for two generations was destined to repress the liberties of England. Mr. Pitt avowed that he still retained his opinion of the propriety of parliamentary reform: but was persuaded that it could not then be safely tried. He saw no prospect of success, and great danger of anarchy and confusion in the attempt. 'This is not a time,' said he, 'to make hazardous [403] experiments.' He had taken his stand against revolutionary principles, and every question with which they could be associated. Mr. Burke, the honoured reformer of an earlier period, and in another cause,⁽¹⁰⁾ and many respected members of his party, henceforth supported the minister, and ranged themselves with the opponents of reform. A period was commencing, not only hostile to all change, but repressive of freedom of opinion; and the power of Mr. Pitt, as the champion of order against democracy, was absolute.

On the 6th of May, 1793, Mr. Grey brought forward the motion, of which he had given notice in the previous session. First he presented a long and elaborate petition from the society of the Friends of the People, exposing the abuses of the electoral system, and alleging various grounds for parliamentary reform. This petition having been read, Mr. Grey proceeded to move that it be referred to the consideration of a committee. Like Mr. Pitt, on a former occasion,—and probably for the same reasons,—he made no specific proposal; but contented himself with arguments against the existing system. A more unsuitable time for such a motion could not have been found. The horrors of the French revolution had lately reached their climax in the execution of the king: many British subjects had avowed their sympathy with revolutionary principles: the country was at war with the French republic: the Whig party had been broken up; and the great body of the people were alarmed [404] for the safety of their institutions. At such a time, the most moderate proposals were discountenanced; and after two nights' debate, Mr. Grey's motion found only forty-one supporters.⁽¹¹⁾

After such discouragement, and under circumstances so adverse, Mr. Grey did not attempt to renew the discussion of parliamentary reform, until 1797. He now had a definite plan; and on the 26th May, he moved for leave to bring in a bill for carrying it into effect. He proposed to increase the county members from ninety-two to one hundred and thirteen, by giving two members to each of the three ridings of the county of York, instead of two for the whole county, and by similar additions to other large counties; and to admit copyholders and leaseholders for terms of years, as well as freeholders, to the county franchise. As regards the boroughs, he proposed to substitute for the numerous rights of election, one uniform household franchise. And in order to diminish the expense of elections, he suggested that the poll should be taken, throughout the whole kingdom, at one time. His scheme comprised, in fact, an outline of the great measure, which this eminent statesman was ultimately destined to

mature, as the consummation of his labours during half a century. His motion was seconded by Mr. Erskine, in a speech which went far to contradict the assertion,—so often made,—that in the House of Commons this great forensic orator was wholly unequal to his reputation. [405] At once eloquent, impassioned, and argumentative, it displayed those rare qualities, which have never been equalled at the British bar, and not often in the senate. The motion was also supported, in an admirable speech, by Mr. Fox. But vain were moderate and well-considered plans,—vain were eloquence and argument. The feelings, fears, and prejudices of the people were adverse to the cause: reform being now confounded with revolution, and reformers with Jacobins. Whatever was proposed,—more was said to be intended; and Paine and the 'Rights of Man' were perversely held up, as the true exponents of the reformer's creed. The motion was rejected by a large majority.(12)

Footnotes.

1. 'Of all ingenious instruments of despotism,' said Sydney Smith, 'I most commend a popular assembly where the majority are paid and hired, and a few bold and able men, by their brave speeches, make the people believe they are free.'—Mem., ii. 214.
2. Walp. Mem., iv. 58; Chatham Corr., iv, 157, where he supports his views by the precedent of a Scotch act at the Revolution. Strangers were excluded during this debate, which is not reported in the Parliamentary History.
3. 21st March, 1776, Parl. Hist., xviii, 1287. The motion was negatived without a division.
4. 7th May 1782.
5. 161 to 141; Parl. Hist., xxii. 1416; Fox's Mem., i.321-2 ; Lord Stanhope's Life of Pitt, i. 72-76.
6. All the petitions which had been presented for the last month, had been brought into the House by the Clerk, and laid on the floor near the table.
7. See supra, [p. 91](#).
8. Ayes, 174; Noes, 248.
9. Mr. Speaker Addington permitted a debate to arise on this occasion, which, according to the stricter practice of later times, would have been wholly inadmissible.—Lord Sidmouth's Life, i. 88.
10. Mr. Burke had never supported parliamentary reform.
11. Parl. Hist., xxx. 787-925; Ayes, 41; Noes, 232.
12. Parl. Hist., xxxiii. 644. Ayes, 91; Noes 256.

[Next](#)

[Contents](#)

[Previous](#)