

Erskine May, Chapter VI, pp. 405-417

Parliamentary Reform to 1830

Adverse Conditions for Reform

Again the question slept for many years. The early part of the present century was a period scarcely more favourable for the discussion of parliamentary reform, than the first years of the French revolution. The prodigious efforts of the country in carrying on the war,—victories and disasters,—loans, taxes, and subsidies,—engrossed the attention of Parliament, and the thoughts of the people. The restoration of peace was succeeded by other circumstances, almost equally unpropitious. The extreme pressure of the war upon the industrial resources of the country, had occasioned suffering and discontent amongst the working classes. The government were busy in repressing sedition; and the governing classes, trained under a succession of Tory administrations, had learned to scout every popular principle. Under [406] such discouragements, many of the old supporters of reform, either deserted the cause, or shrank from its assertion; while demagogues, of dubious character, and dangerous principles, espoused it. 'Hampden Clubs,' and other democratic associations,—chiefly composed of working men,—were demanding universal suffrage and annual Parliaments, which found as little favour with the advocates of reform, as with its opponents; and every moderate scheme was received with scorn, by ultra-reformers.

Burdett's Proposals

But notwithstanding these adverse conditions, the question of reform was occasionally discussed in Parliament. In 1809, it was revived, after the lapse of thirteen years. Mr. Pitt and Mr. Fox,—who had first fought together in support of the same principles, and afterwards on opposite sides,—were both no more: Mr. Grey and Mr. Erskine had been called to the House of Peers; and the cause was in other hands. Sir Francis Burdett was now its advocate,—less able and influential than his predecessors, and an eccentric politician,—but a thorough-bred English gentleman. His scheme, however, was such as to repel the support of the few remaining reformers. He proposed that every county should be divided into electoral districts; that each district should return one member; and that the franchise should be vested in the taxed male population. So startling a project found no more than fifteen supporters.

[407] In the following year, several petitions were presented, praying for a reform of Parliament; and on the 21st May, Mr. Brand moved for a committee of inquiry, which was refused by a large majority. On the 13th June, Earl Grey, in moving an address on the state of the nation, renewed his public connection with the cause of reform,—avowed his adherence to the sentiments he had always expressed,—and promised his future support to any temperate and judicious plan for the correction of abuses in the representation. He was followed by Lord Erskine, in the same honourable avowal.

In 1818, Sir F. Burdett, now the chairman of the Hampden Club of London, proposed resolutions in favour of universal male suffrage, equal electoral districts, vote by ballot, and annual Parliaments. His motion was seconded by Lord Cochrane: but found not another supporter in the House of Commons. At this time, there were numerous public meetings in favour of universal suffrage; and reform associations,—not only of men but of women,—were engaged in advancing the same cause. And as many of these were advocating female suffrage,

Sir F. Burdett, to avoid misconstruction, referred to male suffrage only.(1) In 1819, Sir F. Burdett again brought forward a motion on the subject. He proposed that the House [408] should, early in the next session, take into its consideration the state of the representation. In the debate, Lord John Russell, who had recently been admitted to Parliament, expressed his opinion in favour of disfranchising such boroughs as were notoriously corrupt. The motion was superseded by reading the orders of the day.

Lord John Russell

At the commencement of the following session, Lord John Russell,—whose name has ever since been honourably associated with the cause of reform,—proposed his first motion on the subject. In the preceding session, he had brought under the notice of the House the scandalous proceedings at Grampound. He now took broader ground, and embraced the general evils of the electoral system. The time was not favourable to moderate counsels. On one side were the intemperate advocates of universal suffrage: on the other the stubborn opponents of all change in the representation.(2) But such was the moderation of Lord John's scheme of reform, that it might have claimed the support of the wiser men of all parties. He showed, in a most promising speech, that in former times decayed boroughs had been discharged from sending members, and populous places summoned by writ to return them; he described the wonderful increase of the great [409] manufacturing towns, which were unrepresented; and the corruption of the smaller boroughs, which sold their franchise. He concluded by moving resolutions:— 1. That boroughs in which notorious bribery and corruption should be proved to prevail, should cease to return members—the electors not proved guilty being allowed to vote for the county: 2. That the right thus taken from corrupt boroughs, should be given to great towns with a population of not less than 15,000, or to some of the largest counties: 3. That further means should be taken to detect corruption; and lastly, that the borough of Grampound should cease to send members.

As the motion was met by the government in a conciliatory manner; and as Lord Castlereagh was ready to concur in the disfranchisement of Grampound; Lord John Russell consented to withdraw his resolutions, and gave notice of a bill for disfranchising Grampound. The progress of this bill was interrupted by the death of the king; but it was renewed in the following session, and reached the House of Lords, where, after evidence being taken at the bar, it dropped by reason of the prorogation. Again it was paused by the Commons, in 1821. That House had given the two vacant seats to the great town of Leeds; but the Lords still avoided the recognition of such a principle, by assigning two additional members to the county of York; in which form the bill was at length agreed to.(3)

[410] In 1821, two motions were made relating to parliamentary reform, the one by Mr. Lambton, and the other by Lord John Russell. On the 17th April, the former explained his scheme. In lieu of the borough representation, he proposed to divide counties into districts containing twenty-five thousand inhabitants, each returning a member,—to extend the franchise for such districts to all householders paying taxes,—to facilitate polling by means of numerous polling-booths, and by enabling overseers to receive votes,—and to charge the necessary expenses of every election upon the poor-rates. To the county constituencies he proposed to add copyholders, and leaseholders for terms of years. After a debate of two days, his motion was negatived by a majority of twelve. On the 9th of May, Lord John Russell moved resolutions with a view to the discovery of bribery, the disfranchisement of corrupt boroughs, and the transfer of the right of returning members, to places which had increased in wealth and population. His resolutions were superseded by the previous question, which was carried by a majority of thirty-one.

In 1822, Lord John Russell having, as he said, 'served an apprenticeship in the cause of reform,' again pressed the matter upon the notice of the House. The cry for universal suffrage

had now subsided,—tranquillity prevailed throughout [411] the country,—and no circumstance could be urged as unfavourable to its fair consideration. After showing the great increase of the wealth and intelligence of the country, he proposed the addition of sixty members to the counties, and forty to the great towns; and,—not to increase the total number of the House of Commons,—he suggested that one hundred of the smallest boroughs should each lose one of their two members. His motion, reduced to a modest resolution, 'that the present state of representation required serious consideration,' was rejected by a majority of one hundred and five.

In 1823, Lord John renewed his motion in the same terms. He was now supported by numerous petitions,—and amongst the number by one from seventeen thousand freeholders of the county of York; but after a short debate, was defeated by a majority of one hundred and eleven.

Again, in 1826, Lord John proposed the same resolution to the House; and pointed out forcibly, that the increasing wealth and intelligence of the people were daily aggravating the inequality of the representation. Nomination boroughs continued to return a large proportion of the members of the House of Commons, while places of enormous population and commercial prosperity were without representatives. After an interesting debate, his resolution was negatived by a majority of one hundred and twenty-four.

Tory Reformers

[412] In 1829, a proposal for reform proceeded from an unexpected quarter, and was based upon principles entirely novel. The measure of Catholic emancipation had recently been carried; and many of its opponents, of the old Tory party,—disgusted with their own leaders, by whom it had been forwarded,—were suddenly converted to the cause of parliamentary reform. On the 2nd June, Lord Blandford, who represented their opinions, submitted a motion on the subject. He apprehended that the Roman Catholics would now enter the borough-market, and purchase seats for their representatives, in such numbers as to endanger our Protestant constitution. His resolutions condemning close and corrupt boroughs, found only forty supporters, and were rejected by a majority of seventy-four. At the commencement of the next session, Lord Blandford repeated these views, in moving an amendment to the address, representing the necessity of improving the representation. Being seconded by Mr. O'Connell, his anomalous position as a reformer was manifest. Soon afterwards he moved for leave to bring in a bill to restore the constitutional influence of the Commons in the Parliament of England, which contained an elaborate machinery of reform, including the restoration of wages to members. His motion served no other purpose, than that of reviving discussions on the general question of reform.

But in the meantime, questions of no less general [413] application had been discussed, which eventually produced the most important results. The disclosures which followed the general election of 1826, and the conduct of the government, gave a considerable impulse to the cause of reform. The corporations of Northampton and Leicester were alleged to have applied large sums from the corporate funds, for the support of ministerial candidates. In the Northampton case, Sir Robert Peel went so far as to maintain the right of a corporation to apply its funds to election purposes: but the House could not be brought to concur in such a principle; and a committee of inquiry was appointed. In the Leicester case, all inquiry was successfully resisted. A bill to restrain such corporate abuses was passed by the Commons in the next session, but Lord Eldon secured its rejection by the Lords, on the third reading.

The Penryn and East Retford Cases

Next came two cases of gross and notorious bribery,—Penryn and East Retford. They were

not worse than those of Shoreham and Grampound, and might have been as easily disposed of, but,—treated without judgment by ministers,—they precipitated a contest, which ended in the triumph of reform.

Penryn had long been notorious for its corruption, which had been already twice exposed;(4) yet ministers resolved to deal tenderly with it. Instead of disfranchising so corrupt a borough, they followed [414] the precedent of Shoreham; and proposed to embrace the adjacent hundreds, in the privilege of returning members. But true to the principles he had already carried out in the case of Grampound, Lord John Russell succeeded in introducing an amendment in the bill, by which the borough was to be entirely disfranchised.

In the case of East Retford, a bill was brought in to disfranchise that borough, and to enable the town of Birmingham to return two representatives. And it was intended by the reformers to transfer the franchise from Penryn to Manchester. The session closed without the accomplishment of either of these objects. The Penryn disfranchisement bill, having passed the Commons, had dropped in the Lords; and the East Retford bill had not yet passed the Commons.

In the next session, two bills were introduced; one by Lord John Russell, for transferring the franchise from Penryn to Manchester. and another by Mr. Tennyson, for disfranchising East Retford, and giving representatives to Birmingham. The government proposed a compromise. If both boroughs were disfranchised, they offered, in one case to give two members to a populous town, and in the other to the adjoining hundreds. When the Penryn bill had already reached the House of Lords,—where its reception was extremely doubtful,—the East Retford Bill came on for discussion in the Commons. The government [415] now opposed the transference of the franchise to Birmingham. Mr. Huskisson, however, voted for it; and his proffered resignation being accepted by the Duke of Wellington, led to the withdrawal of Lord Palmerston, Lord Dudley, Mr. Lamb, and Mr. Grant,—the most liberal members of the government,—the friends and colleagues of the late Mr. Canning. The cabinet was now entirely Tory; and less disposed than ever to make concessions to the reformers. The Penryn bill was soon afterwards thrown out by the Lords on the second reading; and the East Retford bill,—having been amended so as to retain the franchise in the hundreds,—was abandoned in the Commons.

Continued Resistance to Reform

It was the opinion of many attentive observers of these times, that the concession of demands so reasonable would have arrested, or postponed for many years, the progress of reform. They were resisted; and further agitation was encouraged. In 1830, Lord John Russell,—no longer hoping to deal with Penryn and East Retford,—proposed at once to enfranchise Leeds, Birmingham, and Manchester; and to provide that the three next places proved guilty of corruption should be altogether disfranchised. His motion was opposed, mainly on the ground that if the franchise were given to these towns, the claims of other large towns could not afterwards be [416] resisted. Where, then were such concessions to stop? It is remarkable that on this occasion, Mr. Huskisson said of Lord Sandon, who had moved an amendment, that he 'was young, and would yet live to see the day when the representative franchise must be granted to the great manufacturing districts. He thought such a time fast approaching; and that one day or other, His Majesty's ministers would come down to that House, to propose such a measure, as necessary for the salvation of the country.' Within a year, this prediction had been verified; though the unfortunate statesman did not live to see its fulfilment. The motion was negatived by a majority of forty-eight; and thus another moderate proposal,—free from the objections which had been urged against disfranchisement, and not affecting any existing rights,—was sacrificed to a narrow and obstinate dread of innovation.

In this same session, other proposals were made of a widely different character. Mr.

O'Connell moved resolutions in favour of universal suffrage, triennial Parliaments, and vote by ballot. Lord John Russell moved to substitute other resolutions, providing for the enfranchisement of large towns, and giving additional members to populous counties; while any increase of the numbers of the House of Commons was avoided, by disfranchising some of the smaller boroughs, and restraining others from sending more than one member. Sir Robert Peel, in the course of the debate, [417] said: 'They had to consider whether there was not, on the whole, a general representation of the people in that House; and whether the popular voice was not sufficiently heard. For himself he thought that it was.' This opinion was but the prelude to a more memorable declaration, by the Duke of Wellington. Both the motion and the amendment failed: but discussions so frequent served to awaken public sympathy in the cause, which great events were soon to arouse into enthusiasm.

Footnotes.

1. See a learned and ingenious article in the *Edin. Rev.*, January, 1819, by Sir J. Mackintosh, on Universal Suffrage, Art. VIII.; Bamford's *Life of a Radical*, i. 164.
2. Notwithstanding the small encouragement given at this time to the cause of reform, it was making much progress in public opinion. Sydney Smith, writing in 1819, said, 'I think all wise men should begin to turn their minds reformwards. We shall do it better than Mr. Hunt or Mr. Cobbett. Done it must, and will be.'—*Mem.*, ii. 191.
3. 1 and 2 Geo. IV. c. 47.
4. In 1807 and 1819.

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