

Erskine May, Vol. II, Chapter X, pp. 383-393

Political Unions and the Reform Bill

The freedom of the press was fully assured before the passing of the Reform Act; and political organisation,—more potent than the press,—was now about to advance suddenly to its extreme development. The agitation for Parliamentary Reform in 1831-32 exceeded that of any previous time, in its wide-spread organisation, in [384] the numbers associated, in earnestness, and faith in the cause. In this agitation there were also notable circumstances, wholly unprecedented. The middle and the working classes were, for the first time, cordially united in a common cause: they were led by a great constitutional party; and,—more remarkable still,—instead of opposing the government, they were the ardent supporters of the king's ministers. To these circumstances is mainly due the safe passage of the country through a most perilous crisis. The violence of the masses was moderated by their more instructed associates,—who, again, were admitted to the friendly counsels of many eminent members of the ministerial party. Popular combination assumed the form of 'Political Unions,' which were established in the metropolis, and in all the large towns throughout the country. Of the provincial unions, that of Birmingham took the lead. Founded for another purpose so early as January, 1830,(1) it became the type of most other unions throughout the country. Its original design was 'to form a general political union between the lower and middle classes of the people;'(2) and it 'called, with confidence, upon the ancient aristocracy of the land to come forward, and take their proper station at the head of the people, in this great crisis of the national affairs.'(3) In this spirit, when the Reform agitation [385] commenced, the council thought it prudent not to 'claim universal suffrage, vote by ballot, or annual parliaments, because all the upper classes of the community, and the great majority of the middle classes, deem them dangerous, and the council cannot find that they have the sanction of experience to prove them safe.' And throughout the resolutions and speeches of the society, the same desire was shown to propitiate the aristocracy, and to unite the middle and working classes.(4)

Before the fate of the first Reform Bill was ascertained, the political unions confined their exertions to debates and resolutions in favour of reform, and the preparation of numerous petitions to Parliament. Already, indeed, they boasted of their numbers and physical force. The chairman of the Birmingham Union vaunted that they could find two armies,—each as numerous and brave as that which conquered at Waterloo,—if the king and his ministers required them. But however strong the language sometimes used, discussion and popular association were, as yet, the sole objects of these unions. No sooner, however, was the bill lost, and Parliament dissolved, than they were aroused to a more formidable activity. Their first object was to influence the elections, and to secure the return of a majority of reformers. Electors and [386] non-electors, co-operating in these unions, were equally eager in the cause of reform: but with the restricted franchises of that time, the former would have been unequal to contend against the great territorial interests opposed to them. The unions, however, threw themselves hotly into the contest; and their demonstrations, exceeding the license of electioneering, and too often amounting to intimidation, overpowered the dispirited anti-reformers. There were election riots at Wigan, at Lanark, at Ayr, and at Edinburgh. The interposition of the unions, and the popular excitement which they encouraged, brought some discredit upon the cause of reform: but contributed to the ministerial majority in the new Parliament.

As the parliamentary struggle proceeded, upon the second Reform Bill, the demonstrations of the political unions became more threatening. Meetings were held and petitions presented,

which, in expressing the excited feelings of vast bodies of men, were, at the same time, alarming demonstrations of physical force. When the measure was about to be discussed in the House of Lords, a meeting of 150,000 men assembled at Birmingham, declared by acclamation that if all other constitutional means of ensuring the success of the Reform Bill should fail, they would refuse the payment of taxes, as John Hampden had refused to pay ship-money, except by a levy upon their goods.

Conflict Between the Nobles and the People

[387] It was the first time, in our history, that the aristocracy had singly confronted the people. Hitherto the people had contended with the crown,—supported by the aristocracy and large classes of the community: now the aristocracy stood alone, in presence of a popular force, almost revolutionary. If they continued the contest too long for the safety of the state, they at least met its dangers with the high courage which befits a noble race. Unawed by numbers, clamour, and threats, the Lords rejected the second Reform Bill. The excitement of the time now led to disorders disgraceful to the popular cause. Mobs paraded the streets of London, hooting, pelting, and even assaulting distinguished peers, and breaking their windows. There were riots at Derby—when, some rioters being seized, the mob stormed the gaol and set the prisoners free. At Nottingham, the Castle was burned by the populace, as an act of vengeance against the Duke of Newcastle. In both these places, the riots were not repressed without the aid of a military force. For two nights and days, Bristol was the prey of a turbulent and drunken rabble. They broke into the prisons, and having let loose the prisoners, deliberately set on fire the buildings. They rifled and burned down the Mansion House, the Bishop's Palace, the Custom House, the Excise [388] Office, and many private houses. The irresolution and incapacity of magistrates and military commanders left a populous and wealthy city, at the mercy of thieves and incendiaries: nor was order at length restored without military force and loss of life, which a more timely and vigorous interposition might have averted.(5) These painful events were deplored by reformers, as a disgrace and hindrance to their cause; and watched by their opponents, as probable inducements to reaction.

Hitherto the political unions had been locally organised, and independent of one another, while forwarding an object common to all. They were daily growing more dangerous; and the scheme of an armed national guard was even projected. But however threatening their demonstrations, they had been conducted within the bounds of law. In November, 1831, however, they assumed a different character. A National Union was formed in London, to which the several provincial unions throughout the country were invited to send delegates. From that time, the limits of lawful agitation were exceeded; and the entire organisation became illegal.(6) At the same time, meetings assembled in connection with the unions, were assuming a character more violent and unlawful. The Metropolitan Union,—an association independent of the London Political Union, and advocating extreme [389] measures of democratic reform,—gave notice, in a seditious advertisement, of a meeting for the 7th of November, at White Conduit House. The magistrates of Hatton Garden issued a notice declaring the proposed meeting seditious and illegal and enjoining loyal and well-disposed persons not to attend it. Whereupon a deputation of working men waited upon Lord Melbourne, at the Home Office, and were convinced by his lordship, of the illegality of their proceedings. The meeting was at once abandoned. Danger to the public peace was averted, by confidence in the government. Some exception was taken to an act of official courtesy towards men compromised by sedition: but who can doubt the wisdom of preventing, rather than punishing, a breach of the law?

The Government Acts to Deter the Unions

Lawful agitation could not be stayed: but when associations, otherwise dangerous, had begun

to transgress the law, Ministers were constrained to interfere; and accordingly, on the 22nd of November, 1831, a proclamation was issued for the repression of political unions. It pointed out that such associations, 'composed of separate bodies, with various divisions and subdivisions, under leaders with a gradation of ranks and authority, and distinguished by certain badges, and subject to the general control and direction of a superior council,' were 'unconstitutional and illegal,' and commanded all loyal subjects to refrain from joining them. The 'National Political Union' denied that this proclamation applied to itself, or to [390] the majority of existing unions. But the Birmingham Union modified an extensive organisation of unions, in the Midland Counties, which had been projected; and the system of delegation, correspondence, and affiliation was generally checked and discouraged.

On the meeting of Parliament on the 6th of December, political unions were further discountenanced in the speech from the throne, in which His Majesty declared that such combinations were incompatible with regular government, and signified his determination to repress all illegal proceedings.

More Threatening Than Ever

But an organisation directed to the attainment of Parliamentary Reform, could not be abandoned until that object was accomplished. The unions continued in full activity; their numbers were increased by a more general adhesion of the middle classes; and if ostensibly conforming to the law, in their rules and regulations, their proceedings were characterised, more than ever, by menace and intimidation. When the third Reform Bill was awaiting the committee in the Lords, immense meetings were assembled at Birmingham, Manchester, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and other populous places, which by their numbers, combination, and resolute purpose, as well as by the speeches made and petitions agreed to, proclaimed a determination to overawe the Peers, who were still opposed to the bill. The withholding of taxes was again threatened, [391] and even the extinction of the peerage itself, if the bill should be rejected. On the 7th of May, 1832, all the unions of the counties of Warwick, Worcester, and Stafford, assembled at Newhall Hill, Birmingham, to the number of nearly 150,000. A petition to the Commons was there agreed to, praying them to withhold the supplies, in order to ensure the safety of the Reform Bill; and declaring that the people would think it necessary to have arms for their defence. Other petitions from Manchester and elsewhere, praying that the supplies might be withheld, were brought to London by excited deputations.

The adverse vote of the Lords in Committee, and the resignation of the Reform ministry, was succeeded by demonstrations of still greater violence. Revolutionary sentiments, appeals to force and coercion, succeeded to reasoning and political agitation. The immediate creation of peers was demanded. 'More lords, or none:' to this had it come, said the clamorous leaders of the unions. A general refusal of taxes was counselled. The Commons having declared themselves not to be the representatives of the people, had no right to vote taxes. Then why should the people pay them? The National Political Union called upon the Commons to withhold supplies from the Treasury, and entrust them to commissioners named by themselves. The metropolis was covered with placards inviting [392] the people to union, and a general resistance to the payment of taxes. A run upon the Bank for gold was counselled, 'to stop the Duke.' The extinction of the privileged orders,—and even of the monarchy itself,—general confusion and anarchy, were threatened. Prodigious crowds of people marched to open-air meetings, with banners and revolutionary mottoes, to listen to the frantic addresses of demagogues, by whom these sentiments were delivered. The refusal to pay taxes was even encouraged by men of station and influence,—by Lord Milton, Mr. Duncombe, and Mr. William Brougham. The press also, responding to the prevailing excitement, preached resistance and force.

Considerations Upon These Events

The limits of constitutional agitation and pressure had long been exceeded; and the country seemed to be on the very verge of revolution, when the political tempest was calmed, by the final surrender of the Lords to the popular will. An imminent danger was averted: but the triumph of an agitation conducted with so much violence, and marked by so many of the characteristics of revolution, portended serious perils to the even course of constitutional government. The Lords alone had now been coerced: but might not the executive, and the entire legislature, at some future period, be forced to submit to the like coercion? Such apprehensions were not without [393] justification from the immediate aspect of the times: but further experience has proved that the success of this popular measure was due, not only to the dangerous pressure of democracy, but to other causes not less material to successful agitation,—the inherent justice of the measure itself,—the union of the middle and working classes, under the guidance of their natural leaders,—and the support of a strong parliamentary party, embracing the majority of one house, and a considerable minority in the other.

Footnotes.

1. Curiously enough, it was founded by Mr. Thomas Attwood, a Tory, to advance his currency doctrines, and to denounce the resumption of cash payments in 1819.—Report of Proceedings, Jan. 25th, 1830 (Hodgett's Birmingham).
2. Requisition to High Bailiff of Birmingham, Jan., 1830.
3. Report of Proceedings, Jun. 25th, 1830, p. 12.
4. Proceedings of Union, *passim*. 'You have the flower of the nobility with you; you have the sons of the heroes of Runnymede with you: the best and the noblest blood of England is on your side.'—Birmingham Journal, May 14th, 1832.
5. Ann. Reg., 1831, p. 291. Twelve persons were killed, and ninety-four wounded and injured.
6. 39 Geo. III. c. 79; 57 Geo. III. c. 19; [supra](#), p. 329, 343.

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