THE GROWTH OF DEMOCRACY 1832 – 1928

Cults Academy History Department

Higher History

THE GROWTH OF DEMOCRACY

1832 – 1928

Gladstone & Disraeli
Introduction

Today, we live in a democratic society where most people enjoy fundamental freedoms of speech, press, movement and worship and the right to vote in fair and free elections. In the early 1800’s, such ideas were alien to most people in Britain. Parliament had been established in the 13th Century as a way of helping the King govern more effectively. Gradually, it became an accepted institution of the State.

The history of the British Parliament is long and complex. Here are some of the key events:

- In 1295, the first proper Parliament was established under Edward I. It evolved into two chambers, one for the nobility, the other for knights and burgesses
- In 1603, the kingdoms of England and Scotland were united under James VI: James believed in the absolute power of the Monarchy
- James’ son, Charles I attempted to rule without Parliament. This led in 1642 to the start of a long, drawn-out civil war between supporters of the Monarchy and supporters of Parliament, led by Oliver Cromwell
- In 1699, the Bill of Rights was passed, stating that laws could not be made without the consent of Parliament – the powers of the Monarchy were greatly reduced
- In 1707, the Act of Union joined the Scottish and English Parliaments together
- In 1721 Sir Robert Walpole became the first recognised Prime Minister
Problems with the old Parliamentary System

The Parliamentary system of the early 1800’s had changed little in over a century. Though the powers of the Monarchy had been weakened, Parliament was still dominated by rich landowners who saw it as their god-given right to rule without reference to the masses. Voting was ‘a privilege, not a right’. Few people had the right to vote - only about 4% of the adult population. Women were excluded altogether. MP's were not paid, had to be property owners and until 1829, Catholics could not stand for Parliament.

There was an uneven distribution of seats: only the counties (rural constituencies) and Royal Boroughs (towns that had been granted the King’s Charter) were represented. The problem of ‘Rotten Boroughs’ illustrated how ridiculous the system could be: the ‘Old Sarum’ Constituency returned two MP’s to Parliament but had virtually no population. Prime Minister William Pitt was elected here. Another constituency, ‘Dunwich’ had fallen into the sea due to coastal erosion but was still represented by two MP’s in the Commons! Meanwhile, the growing industrial cities of Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow had no representation!

Bribery and corruption were commonplace, almost an accepted part of the system. MP’s thought nothing of spending thousands of pounds in bribing the electorate.
Most notorious were the ‘pocket boroughs’ where the local landowner controlled the entire constituency; through a combination of bribery and intimidation, voters were ‘persuaded’ to support the landowner or his nominated candidate. In the majority of these constituencies, the election was never contested. When it was, the practise of ‘open voting’ did little to ensure a fair outcome.

‘Here they are – all good votes, ready to vote for my coach-horse if I order them. Give me the money and I’ll secure you the seat.’

“Well, here’s the cash. As for the votes, I’ll leave them to you.’

A cartoon from 1830 illustrates the corrupt nature of the voting system

Neither of the two main political parties, the Whigs and the Tories, were enthusiastic about reform. The main argument against extending the franchise was that the ‘illiterate’ lower classes had neither the wit nor the education to understand the complexities of politics (the same argument applied to women). Any attempts to pass reform bills through Parliament were almost certainly doomed, if not by the Commons, then by the Tory-dominated House of Lords whose powers of veto meant they could reject any Bill out of hand.

Forces for Change

Historians Pearce and Stearn identify 3 key factors which gradually brought about change – Pressures, Politicians and Principles. This section deals with the first of the ‘3 P’s’ – Pressure.

The American Revolution (1776-83) had seen British rule of the American Colonies overturned. One of the revolutionaries’ biggest demands was the right to be represented in the British Parliament. The slogan of the Revolution was ‘no taxation without representation!’
The French Revolution (1789) was one of the most significant events in European History. The Monarchy of Louis XVI was overthrown and his government replaced by an elected assembly of the people. Ideas of ‘liberalism’ were spread across Europe. The concept of ‘Liberty, Equality and Fraternity’ (the slogan of the Revolutionaries) was still a long way off in Britain but events in Paris shook the British aristocracy to its very core.

As Industrialisation gathered pace after 1750, the social and economic pattern of Britain was changing. Industrialisation created a growing middle class of industrialists, businessmen and entrepreneurs as well as a huge influx of people into the cities. Gradually, the working class became more politically aware, particularly after the growth of trade unions, the spread of newspapers and improved education.

The Corn Laws imposed in 1815 to keep bread prices high during the Napoleonic Wars caused great resentment and showed how out of touch Parliament was with the people. The Corn laws benefited rich Tory landowners but caused great hardship for much of the population. Opposition to the Corn Laws divided Parliament; many Whigs were strongly opposed.

Discontent over the Corn Laws and other issues led to the emergence of movements such as the Radicals and Chartists who campaigned for universal male suffrage. The government were fearful of radicalism leading to the infamous Peterloo and Bonnymuir incidents. Although the Radicals were suppressed, demonstrations continued, notably the Hyde Park Riots of 1866. Reform Leagues, Trade Unions and later the female suffrage movements also brought pressure on the government.

Task

1. Draw a spider diagram illustrating the main problems with the old system.
2. How did ‘Old Sarum’ and Dunwich illustrate the out-of-date voting methods?
3. What were ‘rotten’ and ‘pocket’ boroughs?
4. What was the main argument against universal suffrage?
5. Why were the American and French Revolutions significant?
6. What was the social impact of the industrial revolution?
7. Why did the Corn Laws lead to public discontent?
8. What reform movements emerged during the 1800’s?
The 1832 Reform Act

Complacency weakened the Tories: they became increasingly out of touch with the mood of the country as shown by the failure to repeal the Corn Laws. From 1827 - 1830, the Duke of Wellington, hero of Waterloo, was Tory Prime Minister. He had once called the massed ranks of his army ‘the scum of the earth’ and stated in a Parliamentary speech that ‘he had never read or heard of any measure which could satisfy in his mind that the state of the representation could be improved’. In 1830, rioting broke out once again in the countryside with the Captain Swing Riots. The Tory Party split over the issue of reform and Wellington resigned.

The 1832 Act was hand-written on a huge scroll of parchment paper which is still kept in the Parliamentary vaults today.

The Whig leader, Earl Grey, formed a new government. He brought forward a reform Bill aimed more at political survival than a genuine desire to improve the status of the middle and lower classes. Grey wanted to ‘buy off’ the middle class by granting them the vote, while ignoring the working class. This was a dangerous policy. The reform Bill was introduced to the Commons by a prominent Whig Minister (and later Prime Minister) Lord John Russell in March 1831.

Lord John Russell, one of the earliest Parliamentary reformers who was instrumental in the passing of the 1832 Act and would later champion the 1866 reform bill despite his nickname ‘Finality Jack’.

It provoked much heated debate in Parliament. The Tories strongly opposed the Bill and it fell at the first Committee Stage. The Whigs called another General Election and increased their majority to 130 but two further attempts to pass the Bill were rejected by the House of Lords. This led to Early Grey’s resignation and provoked rioting and damage to public property in some parts of the country. Grey returned after the King, William IV, agreed to create 50 Whig Peers in the Lords to enable the Bill to pass through. The Tories had to accept defeat and in June 1832 the Bill became law.
The 1832 Act standardised the franchise (right to vote) and extended the electorate to about 1/7 adult males. It modernised the distribution of seats (rotten boroughs were disenfranchised, new industrial towns were represented).

The Act was the beginning of the end for the landowners' domination of Parliament. From now on, the middle class would become increasingly important. The landowners still held significant power, however, as the act failed to abolish pocket boroughs and bribery and corruption continued. Although the middle class were now able to vote, the working-class were dissatisfied. They felt they had been betrayed.

Discontent over the 1832 Act led to the growth of the Chartist movement, with its 6 key demands:

- Universal male suffrage
- Secret Ballot
- Payment for MP's
- Abolition of Property Qualification for MP’s
- Equal electoral constituencies
- Annual Elections

Chartism proved largely ineffective due to divisions within the movement and a failure to attract much support from the middle classes. Its demands were considered 'too extreme' although most would eventually be adopted in later reform acts. Overall, though, the Act was seen as 'a triumph of reform over reaction'. The Whigs believed they had pulled off a successful coup, winning over the middle class while discrediting the Tories. Lord John Russell ‘Finality Jack’ claimed there would be no further need for reform in the future! He was, of course, to be proved wrong.

Task

1. Why did the Tories become increasingly unpopular and disjointed?
2. What was Earl Grey’s main motivation for bringing forward the reform bill of 1831?
3. Who was Lord John Rusell?
4. What happened when the bill was rejected?
5. What was the significance of the 1832 Act?
6. Which sections of society were disappointed with the act and why?
7. For what reasons did the Chartists fail to mount a successful campaign?

EXTENSION: Write an article for a Chartist newspaper condemning the 1832 Act
Gladstone, Disraeli & The 1867 Reform Act

The pace of Parliamentary reform was very slow after 1832. The government had more pressing matters such as the ongoing debate over the Corn Laws, the Irish potato famine and the Crimean War to deal with. Many important politicians, both Whig and Tories, agreed with Russell that there was no need for further reform of the system. Lord Palmerston, a key opponent of reform, claimed that democracy would ‘bring the scum to the top.’ He believed that the working classes were too ignorant to understand politics and that it would be dangerous to give them some measure of power. Palmerston was the dominant political figure of the 1850’s, twice serving as Prime Minister. His death in 1865 helped to open the door for a new breed of politicians such as William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli.

Lord Palmerston, who twice served as Prime Minister in the 1850’s, was perhaps the strongest opponent of Parliamentary reform

A growing number of MP’s now believed reform was inevitable on the grounds of principle. Gladstone, like Russell, had at one time opposed reform but now believed it to be ‘a moral right’. He stated that ‘every man is entitled to come under the pale of the constitution.’ The skilled working class was now regarded as ‘respectable’ and worthy of the vote just as the middle class had been in 1832. Palmerston’s death coincided with another wave of public discontent over a bad harvest in 1865 and an economic slump that led to mass unemployment and misery for many people. This culminated in the Hyde Park Riot. The Reform Union and Reform League called for change and MP’s would have been foolish not to listen.

Lord Palmerston (as Starter): ‘Hey Gladstone! Democracy! Too soon! Too soon! You mustn’t go yet!’

Punch Cartoon, 1864
William Gladstone was born in Liverpool in 1809. Educated at Oxford University, he established a reputation as a brilliant debater. He became a Tory MP in 1832 and held several key government posts. In 1859, he defected from the Tories to the Liberals; Prime Minister Lord John Russell appointed Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer and in 1866 he introduced the controversial Reform Bill. The Bill’s failure forced Gladstone’s resignation though he supported Disraeli’s amended version which became the 1867 Act. In 1870, Gladstone won the General Election for the Liberals and served the first of his record four terms as Prime Minister during which time many important reform bills were passed through Parliament. Home Rule for Ireland split the Liberals and in 1894 Gladstone resigned from office. He died in 1898 having spent over 60 years as an MP.

Benjamin Disraeli was born in London in 1804. He made his name as an author before becoming an MP in 1837. His maiden speech was not well received: amid jeers and heckling, he famously stated ‘though I sit down now, the time will come when you will hear me.’ Disraeli was not a typical Tory; sympathetic to the plight of the poor. He argued that the Tories were in danger of losing touch with the people due to their anti-reform stance. His political skills were recognised by Lord Derby, the Prime Minister, who appointed him Chancellor of the Exchequer. In 1867, Disraeli proposed a new Reform Bill which became the 1867 Reform Act. The following year, he became Prime Minister for the first time after Derby’s resignation and continued his ongoing battle with Gladstone in the Commons. His government passed several important reforms such as the Factory Act of 1874. He retired from politics in 1880 and died a year later.

Gladstone’s Reform Bill of 1866 was aimed at the artisans (skilled workers) who he believed would support the Liberals if given the vote. This clearly alarmed the Tories, who rejected the Bill with the help of some right-wing Liberals – the Adullamites led by Robert Lowe - who disliked the idea of further reform. Lord John Russell and Gladstone resigned, leaving the Tories to form a new government under Lord Derby and Disraeli. Disraeli was a political opportunist: he argued that the new voters would support the Tories rather than the Liberals if they passed a new, watered-down version of the Reform Bill. It was a political gamble: three Tory cabinet ministers resigned in protest. Lord Derby famously called the Bill ‘a leap in the dark.’ Disraeli won the day, and the 1867 Reform Act was born.
The electorate was increased to approximately 1/3 adult males. In the boroughs, all property owners and those who paid £10 per year in rent could vote. In the counties, the vote was given to most ratepayers and those who leased land valued at £5 per year.

There was a limited redistribution of seats, with some rural constituencies being disenfranchised. More seats were given to the counties and boroughs. Scotland and Wales gained extra seats.

The 1867 Act was significant in many ways. It greatly increased the electorate, giving many working class men the right to vote for the first time. It made political parties more accountable to the electorate. Parties became better organised with more clearly defined policies. Gone were the days when MP’s would switch parties at the drop of a hat. It paved the way for social reforms such as the Education Act of 1870 and the Factory Act of 1874. On the downside, the right to vote was still based on property qualification: the majority of working class men along with women were still excluded. The Act failed to tackle the problems of bribery and corruption. The north was still under-represented compared to the south. Critics suggested that the redistribution of seats was merely a political ploy designed to favour the Conservatives. Disraeli’s gamble failed, however, as the Liberals swept back into power in 1868.

There are three schools of thought about the 1867 Reform Act:

- The Whig School claims that political reform was inevitable due to the social and economic changes taking place in Britain at this time.
- The Tory School claims that party competition (vote-winning) and the rivalry between Gladstone and Disraeli was the real motivation for reform.
- The Socialist School claims that the widespread discontent of the 1860’s and pressure from the Reform League was the main factor in bringing about reform.

Task

1. Why was little progress made on reform after 1832?
2. Why was Lord Palmerston so opposed to extending the franchise?
3. What did Gladstone believe about the right to vote?
4. Why was Disraeli ‘not a typical Tory’?
5. Why would it have been dangerous not to introduce some measure of reform in the 1860’s?
6. Who were the Adullamites?
7. What happened as a result of the failure of Gladstone’s Bill?
8. Why did Lord Derby refer to Disraeli’s bill as ‘a leap in the dark’?
9. Who was given the vote in 1867? What else did it achieve?
10. What were the limitations of the 1867 act?

EXTENSION: Script a Commons debate between Gladstone and Disraeli over the 1866 reform bill or write a speech by Lord Palmerston outlining why he is so opposed to Parliamentary reform.
Reducing Corruption and Bribery

Radicals had been calling for secret ballots long before even the 1832 Act; they believed that only a secret vote could be a free vote. Landowners and employers could evict or sack those who voted against their wishes. Many politicians, however, took the view that a secret ballot was cowardly and that electors were likely to misuse their vote. It took three attempts to get a bill through Parliament, but in 1872 the Ballot Act came into force. This tightened up the voting procedure; all elections had a returning officer to preside over proceedings. Proper polling booths and ballot boxes were provided.

‘JUST THE MAN’ Please, sir, do you want anyone to keep order on these here hustings on polling day? A Punch cartoon from 1842

Intimidation declined after the Ballot Act, but corruption and bribery were deeply ingrained in the system. Pocket boroughs remained a problem - traditionally, many MP’s had ‘bought’ their parliamentary seats, often for thousands of pounds. The Duke of Devonshire, who owned land in different constituencies, had the power to nominate seven MP’s while the Duke of Bedford sold one of his seats for £60,000.

**BALLOT ACT 1872**

- Voters no longer had to declare their chosen candidate
- Votes were placed in sealed ballot boxes at official polling stations
- A presiding officer was appointed for each constituency to ensure a fair election

**CORRUPT AND ILLEGAL PRACTICES ACT 1883**

- Limits were placed on how much candidates could spend on an election campaign
- Bribing voters was strictly prohibited
- Any breach of this act would result in a heavy fine or prison sentence

With the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883, pocket boroughs were eliminated. MP’s were limited in how much they could spend on election campaigns and forbidden from bribing voters. To do so carried stiff penalties including prison sentences. Total expenditure in the 1885 election was reduced by 75%! Candidates now had to rely on clear policies and party organisation to win an election. Together, the Ballot Act and the Corrupt and Illegal Practises Act proved successful and made Britain a more democratic country. MP’s were now fully accountable and the public came to expect higher standards from its politicians.
The Acts of 1884/85

By the 1880’s, the leading figure for Parliamentary reform was the young and dynamic Joseph Chamberlain, who pushed the reluctant Gladstone towards further reform. Having presided over the Ballot Act and Corrupt and Illegal Practises Act, Gladstone was worried that any further reform would be a step too far, alienating more Liberals within his own party. Chamberlain drew up a programme which included a reduced tax burden on the poor and a more democratic system of electing local government. He also introduced a Bill aimed at increasing the electorate still further by granting equal voting rights to males in the counties and boroughs. Again, there were clear political motivations: Gladstone hoped to break the power of the Tory landowners in the countryside. Predictably, the bill was rejected by the Lords. Lord Salisbury, the Conservative leader following the death of Disraeli, then did a deal with Gladstone, agreeing to support the bill in return for a redistribution of seats in favour of the Conservatives.

Joseph Chamberlain became the leading campaigner for Parliamentary Reform in the House of Commons after the death of Disraeli, despite the reluctance of Gladstone to commit to further reform

The third reform act came in two parts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representation of the People Act 1884</th>
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<tr>
<td>• This gave the majority of working class men the vote. The electorate was increased to 2 / 3 adult males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There was equal voting rights in the towns and counties: all householders and lodgers paying £10 per annum were entitled to vote</td>
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<tr>
<th>Redistribution of Seats Act 1885</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Boundaries were redrawn and constituencies became roughly equal in size of population – about 50,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Most constituencies now only had one MP</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Increased representation for the industrial cities (eg Glasgow now had 7 MP’s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Scotland and Wales were given more MP’s (Scotland had 72 in total)</td>
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The redistribution of seats created ‘safe’ Conservative seats in suburban areas but the 1885 election was another Liberal triumph. Gladstone had once again managed to pass a controversial bill through Parliament while staying ahead of the Conservatives. For the first time, landowners were outnumbered by businessmen.
(manufacturers and industrialists) in the House of Commons. The balance of power now lay with the middle classes. The franchise had ceased to be a class privilege.

Critics of the 1884 Act point out that many people were still excluded: women were again ignored, leading to an upsurge in female suffrage movements and the formation of the NUWSS (Suffragists) under Millicent Fawcett. Many men – soldiers, male servants, sons who lived at home, poor lodgers, many of the unemployed, those with no fixed abode – were also unable to vote. Plural voting still existed (men with property in different constituencies could vote more than once) while many Universities still elected their own MP’s (this was not abolished until 1950).

**Task**

1. What was the main argument against a secret ballot?
2. What does the cartoon on page 11 suggest about the nature of the voting procedure?
3. How did the Ballot Act make the system fairer?
4. Why was the Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act so effective?
5. Who was Joseph Chamberlain?
6. Why was Gladstone at first reluctant to commit to further reform?
7. Why did the deal between Gladstone and Lord Salisbury?
8. What were the main implications of the 1884 and 1885 Acts?
9. What criticisms could be made of the Acts?

**EXTENSION:** Draw a cartoon or write a short script illustrating the need for action against intimidation, bribery and corruption in the voting system before 1872.

**Reforming the House of Lords**

Throughout the 1800’s, the House of Lords was a formidable barrier to reform. The Lords was an unelected chamber, dominated by Tory landowners with the right to veto any legislation they did not approve of. The Liberals were repeatedly frustrated by the Lords’ rejection of bills. The confrontation between the Liberals and the Lords came to a head in 1909 after the Chancellor David Lloyd-George’s ‘People’s Budget’ was rejected – this was almost unheard of as traditionally budgets were passed unopposed. Lloyd-George, who proposed to tax the rich to raise money for Old Age Pensions, was furious. Parliament was dissolved and a general election called; the Liberals won with a reduced majority and attempted to pass a bill through Parliament that would reduce the power of the Lords. This led to a Constitutional Crisis, which was only resolved after yet another general election and the threat of creating new Liberal peers. In 1911, the Parliament Act became law.
THE GROWTH OF DEMOCRACY 1832 - 1928

Parliament Act 1911

- The Lords could no longer reject bills; it could only amend or delay them for two Parliamentary sessions
- Elections were to be held every 5 years
- Payment for MP’s was introduced (£400 per annum)

The Parliament Act was very significant; it was a triumph of the middle class over the landowners who had for so long dominated proceedings at Westminster. Significantly, the Conservatives replaced their aristocratic leader Lord Balfour with the middle class Bonar Law. The Act marked an important shift of power from the Lords to the elected House of Commons. Regular elections and payment of MP’s also helped contribute to a more democratic system.

The Emergence of the Labour Party

Although there was still no payment of MP’s, trade unions now organised funds to enable working class men to take their place as MP’s. Among them was Keir Hardie, who was a founding member of the Scottish Labour Party in 1888. In 1892, he was elected to the House of Commons to serve an East End of London constituency. He refused to conform to the standard Parliamentary dress code and made controversial speeches (such as calling for the abolition of the House of Lords) that provoked outrage in Parliament. In 1900 he helped formed the Labour Party and became one of its first MP’s. Although Labour at first returned only two MP’s, the emergence of a new political party with potentially huge support among the working classes alarmed both Liberals and Conservatives. This was born out in 1906, when 29 Labour MP’s were elected to Parliament. Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, the Liberal Prime Ministers between 1906 - 1916, were worried that increasing the electorate would result in a further surge in Labour support at the expense of the Liberals.

Keir Hardie, one of the first Labour Party MP’s elected to the House of Commons

Female Suffrage

The issue of women’s suffrage was also on the political agenda with the persistent lobbying of the suffragists and the formation of the Suffragette Movement in 1903. Every year, private members bills were introduced in an attempt to gain women the vote. In 1910, the first attempt to pass the Conciliation (Parliamentary Franchise) Bill failed miserably. MP’s opposed to female suffrage used tactics known as ‘filibustering’ to waste Parliamentary time so the issue could not be debated. The
hundred or so Irish MP’s in the Commons point-blank refused to discuss the bill as they believed there were far more pressing matters. Many Liberals feared that granting only upper class women the vote would play into opposition hands as they would naturally vote Conservative. At the same time, they rejected the idea of allowing all women to vote as this would create a larger female electorate than the men! By 1912, the Conciliation Bill was finally shelved, resulting in the Suffragette ‘Wild Period’. In 1918, however, some women were given the vote as reward for their war efforts. It would have been unthinkable to grant all men the vote, even those who were illiterate, while denying women, many of whom were by now well educated and enjoying successful careers in the professions. Only 55 MP’s dared vote against the bill! It was not until 1928, however, that full equality between men and women was achieved and Britain could at last be considered a true Parliamentary democracy.

**REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE ACT 1918**
- Women over 30 who were property owners or were married to property owners could vote
- All men over the age of 21 could vote

**EQUAL FRANCHISE ACT 1928**
- All men and women over the age of 21 could vote (reduced to 18 in 1916)

**Task**
1. Why did many people think the power of the House of Lords should be reduced?
2. Why did the confrontation between the Liberals and the Lords come to a head in 1909?
3. How were the Liberals able to force the Parliament Bill through?
4. In what ways did the 1911 Act make Britain a much more democratic country?
5. Who was Keir Hardie?
6. How did the Liberals and Conservatives view the emergence of the Labour Party after 1900?
7. Why were the Liberals worried about extending the franchise to all men?
8. Why did the Liberals fear granting a) a small number of upper-class women the vote? b) all women the vote?
9. Why was it so difficult to pass bills on female enfranchisement through the House of Commons?
10. Why would it have been unthinkable to deny women the vote after 1918?
11. When was full equal voting rights between men and women finally achieved?

**Extension:** Write a Parliamentary speech by David Lloyd George condemning the Lords’ rejection of his People’s Budget
Conclusion

Democratisation was a slow process. The Great Reform Act of 1832 was the first major step forward but it was almost a century later before all men and women were able to vote on equal terms. Political reforms reflected the changing social and economic development of the country. Historians such as Annette Mayer point to better education as an important factor, particularly after compulsory education was introduced in 1870. People became more aware of the social and political injustices of society which included discrimination due to class and gender. Public agitation as demonstrated by the protests and riots of the 1830’s and 1860’s alarmed politicians and emphasised the need for some concessions to be made. The new breed of enlightened politicians such as Gladstone and Disraeli were important in persuading their contemporaries of the need for change on the grounds of principles.

Clearly, there was also a measure of political gain involved. Most of the reforms were introduced cautiously, with careful consideration of how the respective fortunes of each party might be effected if the electorate was increased. Historian Cowling writes that ‘Disraeli’s was a policy of consistent (political) opportunism.’ By 1928, Britain had a democratic system that is similar to the one we still have today. Minor changes were still to be made: in 1949 an amendment to the Parliament Act meant that the Lords could only delay bills for one Parliamentary session; in 1969 the voting age was lowered to 18.

Democracy is never perfect. Even today, there is ongoing debate on many aspects of the Parliamentary system. The ‘first past the post’ method of voting usually produces a clear parliamentary majority but critics argue that it does not reflect the popularity of the parties with the general public. The alternative system of Proportional Representation is used in the Scottish Parliament quite successfully, but can lead to minority ‘coalition’ governments. Using referendums to decide on major issues such as devolution and the European Union arguably makes for greater democracy, but some people suggest that once we have elected our representatives, we should leave them to make the decisions. Statistically, women are still under-represented in Parliament despite Margaret Thatcher becoming the first female Prime Minister in 1979 but this is not due to any discriminatory law. The two chambers, the Commons and the Lords, generally work well together; the Parliament Act rarely has to be used to pass legislation although this did happen in 2004 over the fox-hunting bill. Some people still feel the House of Lords should be abolished altogether but tradition will probably dictate otherwise.