

History

Year 8 Lesson 15

# **The Whig story of political reform**

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# The 'Great' Reform Act

The 1832 'Great' Reform Act made Britain more democratic. More British people could now vote in elections to choose representatives in parliament (MPs). The Great Reform Act also made it fairer how MPs were chosen. New industrial cities like Manchester and Birmingham would now be represented in parliament.

Today, when people talk about 'democracy' they imagine a system of government where all adults can help choose who rules the country. Under many **constitutions** voting for representatives in parliament is the way this is done. As we know, the Great Reform Act did not give all adult Britons the vote. The right to vote (also known as the **franchise**) was not given to women and members of the working class. So, to be precise the Great Reform Act made Britain more democratic but did not turn Britain into a democracy.



# Whig History

Different stories can be told about how Britain eventually became democratic. The Great Reform Act would be part of these stories. You might remember that the **Whigs** were the political party that were in government at the time of the Great Reform Act. The name 'Whig' is also now used to describe one of the most famous stories about why Britain became a democracy. The historian who is most famous for telling this story was also a Whig politician. His name is Thomas Babington Macaulay.



# Britain's successful history

In his historical writing, Macaulay tries to tell the story of how Britain became a successful country. He claims that by the nineteenth century, Britain was the greatest country on earth. According to Macaulay, Britain's achievement is a consequence of having a stable constitutional monarchy which protects the liberties of Britons. Evidence of this success were the freedom of speech Britons enjoyed, Britain's wealth from trade and Britain's large empire. Macaulay, and other Whig historians suggest we need to look at Britain's past to understand how the country became so successful.



Whig historians tell a story which says that the English government gradually got better. Across time, the English people wanted freedoms and more of a say in government. This story could start in 1215 when King John was stopped from ruling like a **tyrant** and was forced to accept Magna Carta. After Magna Carta English Kings could not rule as tyrants. Then later on during the Civil War, parliament fought against Charles I to protect the liberties of the English. Macaulay thinks the Glorious Revolution of 1688 is an important part of the story as from then onwards monarchs accepted all new taxes and laws had to be agreed upon by parliament.

A key part of this Whig story is the idea of progress. English (and later British) history is gradually getting better and it moves closer to the goal of excellent government. The Great Reform Act would be part of this story. The middle class were included in the franchise because they were educated and helped Britain become wealthy. By giving the middle class the vote, the Great Reform helped make parliament better.



# Progress towards democracy

Macaulay was writing in the mid-nineteenth century, but later Whig historians could describe what happened next as a gradual progress too. In 1867 and 1884 parliament passed two more reform acts. Both of these increased the number of voters. The franchise was given to working class men who were seen to be 'respectable'. The poorest men were not given the right to vote because it was not believed they were yet ready to make important political decisions.

Between 1914 and 1918 Britain fought in the First World War. It was a time when men from all classes fought for their country. It was also a time when women hugely helped the war effort by working in munitions factories and working as nurses. In recognition of this, all men and some women were given the right to vote in 1918. Then in 1928 Britain became fully democratic as the franchise was extended to all adult women as well.



# Glossary

**Constitution:** the rules used to decide how a country should be governed

**Franchise:** the right to vote

**Munitions:** weapons or machines connected to warfare

**Tyrant:** a ruler who uses their power badly and often shows cruelty

**Whig/Whigs:** a political party that was in favour of reform / a historical approach which argues Britain is gradually making progress



# Comprehension Questions

1. Which reform allowed cities like Manchester and Birmingham to be represented in parliament?

Sentence starter: Manchester and Birmingham were represented in parliament after....

2. Which country does Macaulay believe became the greatest country on earth?
3. Which Kings might Whig historians see as examples of tyrants?
4. Why could Britain be called a democracy in 1928?
5. Challenge question: What are the key features of a Whig interpretation of history?





## Extension: extract from Macaulay's history

“I shall relate how the new settlement was, during many troubled years, successfully defended against foreign and domestic enemies; how, under that settlement, the authority of law and the security of property were found to be compatible with a liberty of discussion and of individual action never before known; how, from the auspicious union of order and freedom, sprang a prosperity of which the annals of human affairs had furnished no example; how our country, from a state of ignominious vassalage, rapidly rose to the place of umpire among European powers; how her opulence and her martial glory grew together; how, by wise and resolute good faith, was gradually established a public credit fruitful of marvels which to the statesmen of any former age would have seemed incredible; how a gigantic commerce gave birth to a maritime power, compared with which every other maritime power, ancient or modern, sinks into insignificance; how Scotland, after ages of enmity, was at length united to England, not merely by legal bonds, but by indissoluble ties of interest and affection; how, in America, the British colonies rapidly became far mightier and wealthier than the realms which Cortes and Pizarro had added to the dominions of Charles V; how in Asia, British adventurers founded an empire not less splendid and more durable than that of Alexander. ... [T]he history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement.”

**Thomas Babington Macaulay, (1848) *History of England from the Accession of James II***

# Extension Question

6. Why would a Whig historian see the 1832 Reform Act as 'Great'?

Use the sentence starters and key words below to answer this question

Sentence starters:	Key words
<i>The 1832 Reform Act doubled the number of voters in Britain. One reason why Whig historians might call this Reform Act 'Great' is....</i>	-Middle class -Revolution -Reform -Democracy -Progress
<i>Another reason why a Whig historian might see act as "great" is...</i>	-Stability -Wealth -Freedom -Constitutional monarchy

