

KS3 History

Worksheet

The Great Reform Act

What did the French Revolution mean in Britain?

Mr Arscott



Aftermath of Peterloo

After the Peterloo Massacre there continued to be a debate about whether Britain's political system needed to change. Middle class people still thought it was unfair that even though they were wealthy and well-educated, many of them could not vote. People in the working class wanted the vote so that governments might better look after the poor. At the time of the Peterloo massacre Britain's rulers had been so scared of radical ideas from the French Revolution that they were willing to use violence rather than give more people the vote.



Political Parties

However, by 1831, some of Britain's ruling class started to agree that the voting system was unfair. Up until 1830, a **political party** that opposed change had been the most powerful group in parliament. This political party was called the **Tories**. However, in 1831 an election was held and another party won which was called the Whigs. The **Whigs** wanted to **reform** the voting system.



The Lords Block Reform

The Whig reforms aimed to make two main changes to the voting system. Firstly, they wanted to increase the number of middle class men who could vote. Secondly, they wanted to make sure the new industrial towns and cities were represented in parliament. Both these ideas were popular in the country and a majority of the **MPs** in parliament supported the ideas. So, the Whig government tried to pass a new law which was known as the Reform Act. In the House of Commons, the Reform Act was accepted. However, when the Reform Act was debated by the House of Lords, the Tories who sat there were able to reject the changes. The House of Lords contained the wealthiest landowners in Britain. These landowners did not want to have their power and influence decreased by allowing more people to vote in elections.



Threat of Revolution

Riots started spreading all over Britain. People could not believe the unelected House of Lords was blocking the Reform Act which had been accepted by the elected House of Commons. The riots often led to violence and like in 1819 troops were used to break up crowds. It looked like Britain might be at risk of a revolution.



Threat of Revolution

A man from Birmingham called Thomas Attwood had an idea about how to put pressure on the Lords to accept the Reform Act. He suggested people should stop paying taxes until the Reform Act passed. Protests were then planned so that people from all the major industrial cities would march on London. Rumours then started spreading that Atwood's supporters were persuading soldiers in Birmingham to march with them.

The Tory Lords were now scared. Even though they did not like the Reform Act they thought it might be the only way to stop a revolution. So in 1832, they voted in favour of the Whig reforms. The new law became known as 'the Great Reform Act'. After the Act about one in five adult men could now vote in elections. The change had been brought about because working class and middle class men and women had worked together. But the act did not give the working class the vote and it did not allow women to vote.



Glossary

MPs: Members of parliament. The people who were elected to represent a small area of the country.

Political Party: a group of politicians who share similar views and work together to try to form governments.

Reform: trying to change something in order to improve it.

Tory/Tories: a political party that opposed reform.

Whig/Whigs: a political party that was in favour of reform.



Comprehension Questions

1. Which political party had been in power before 1830?

Sentence starter: The political party that had been in power before 1830 were called....

2. In what ways did the Whigs want to change the voting system?
3. What happened when the House of Lords refused to accept the Reform Act in 1831?
4. Why did the House of Lords eventually accept the Great Reform Act?
5. Challenge question: Why might some people have been disappointed by the Great Reform Act?



Extension sources

One more day will finish the concern in the Lords, and that this should have been accomplished as it has against a great majority of peers [Lords], and without making a single new one, must always remain one of the greatest miracles in English history..... This (the Reform Act) has saved the country from confusion, and perhaps the monarch and monarchy from destruction.

**Thomas Creevey, letter to Miss Ord
(May 1832)**

We hear the radicals are determined to make a riot. The King gets quantities of letters every day telling him he will be murdered. The King is very much frightened and the Queen cries half the day with fright.

The Duke [the Tory leader] ... feels that beginning reform is beginning revolution, and therefore he must endeavour to stem the tide as long as possible....

**Harriet Arbuthnot, diary entry (7th
November, 1830)**

Extension Question

6. Why did Britons disagree about whether the 1832 Reform Act was 'Great'?

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

Paragraph starters:	Key words
<i>One reason why Britons disagreed about the 1832 Reform Act was because the changes affected differences classes in different ways. For example....</i>	-Working class -Middle class -Upper class / aristocracy -House of Lords -Revolution
<i>Another reason why Britons disagreed about the 1832 Act was because of different attitudes to political change. For example....</i>	-Riots -Rebellion -Radical -Women

