

Democracy and the Vote in British politics, 1848-1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act

Review Number:

1131

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 September, 2011

Author:

Robert Saunders

ISBN:

9781409417941

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£65.00

Pages:

312pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Place of Publication:

Aldershot

Reviewer:

Henry Miller

If British governments in the later 20th century have often been ambivalent or hostile towards electoral reform, the same could not be said of their 19th-century predecessors. As Robert Saunders shows in this new book, which builds on a series of important articles, the 1867 Representation of the People Act (also known as the Second Reform Act) was the culmination of a 20-year debate during which Liberal and Conservative governments proposed various measures to extend the franchise and reform the representative system.⁽¹⁾

The Second Reform Act essentially enacted household male suffrage for parliamentary elections in urban areas in England and Wales, and is an important landmark in British political and constitutional development (Acts for Ireland and Scotland were passed in 1868). It has, however, received less attention than the First (or Great) Reform Act of 1832, which disenfranchised rotten boroughs, enfranchised new industrial towns and altered the franchise.⁽²⁾ The two classic studies of the passing of the Second Reform Act, by Barry Smith and Maurice Cowling, were published over 40 years ago.⁽³⁾ Since then, although the issue of parliamentary reform has loomed large in studies of popular liberalism by Eugenio Biagini and Patrick Joyce among others, the only further book-length study has been *Defining the Victorian Nation* by Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendell.⁽⁴⁾ Hall *et al* argued that the debates surrounding the question of reform in the mid-1860s were heavily shaped by class, race and gender. The respectable working man was admitted into the political nation, but this was set against the exclusion of 'the Other', whether women, the Irish and colonial peoples or other working men deemed unfit to possess the franchise. In his critique, Saunders notes that Hall *et al* do not link these cultural and social ideas to the parliamentary debates, and tend to assume

that the former shaped the latter (pp. 19–21). Furthermore, although the moral character of working men was a persistent theme of the reform debates, both inside and outside Parliament, it was far from being the only, or even predominant, element of a complex debate.

The Second Reform Act is therefore a topic ripe for historical reappraisal. Saunders offers a new narrative, which is essentially organised chronologically. He focuses mainly on the parliamentary arena and gives particular weight to the actions and ideas of the leading politicians on the question of reform and democracy. The book is punctuated by short, valuable and incisive discussions of the ideas of Lord John Russell (pp. 38–48), Benjamin Disraeli (pp. 68–73) and William Gladstone (pp. 173–84), among others. The research draws on parliamentary debates and the private correspondence of these politicians, as well as the metropolitan press, periodical and pamphlet literature and contemporary books. The value of this narrative, chronological approach is that it places the debates of 1867 in a much longer context, and shows the importance of reform in politics throughout the period. It also helps to provide an accessible account of the issue for non-specialists and students baffled by the spate of reform bills in the period and the often very technical discussions surrounding the franchise.

Saunders's central argument is, to this reviewer's mind, a convincing one. Throughout the period covered by this book there were numerous attempts to extend the franchise for parliamentary elections and alter the representative system through redistribution (disenfranchising and enfranchising constituencies). Liberal governments introduced bills in 1852, 1854, 1860 and 1866, and the Conservatives in 1859 and 1867. Radical MPs, including John Bright, regularly proposed their own schemes of reform, and in articles, pamphlets and books numerous other ideas were floated. Why then was no measure passed until 1867? The answer, Saunders argues, is that MPs and party leaders could not agree on the nature and extent of reform (p. 9). Unlike in 1831–2 there was no significant body of opinion entirely opposed to political change. The difficulty was that different schemes of reform could produce very different electorates and representative systems, and, consequently, very different political outcomes. In part, these differences of opinion were motivated by party considerations. For example, Liberal MPs opposed the Conservative reform bill of 1859, partly because it would have disenfranchised urban freeholders from the county electorate. It was generally assumed that this would have strengthened the Conservatives in the counties at the expense of the Liberals.

However, as Saunders makes clear, just as important in holding up the passage of reform were the philosophical objections of MPs. Although there was no great opposition to extending the franchise, politicians did not see reform as the first instalment of democracy. The question was how to 'popularise' the constitution (p. 13) without producing a democratic system, which would destroy the representative character of English parliamentary government, which was generally thought to be the envy of the world. This sense was only reinforced by contemporary comparisons with democratic political systems such as the USA and France, as an intriguing discussion in chapter six shows (pp. 131–59). As one Liberal MP breezily put it in 1866 'all, then, that was proposed was to admit a few of the best of the working men, and thereby to place our representative system on a broader basis and surer foundation'.⁽⁵⁾

Any extension of the franchise needed to be accompanied by safeguards to reassure MPs. Liberals, in particular, were keen to preserve a balance in the representation. They feared that too great and indiscriminate addition of working men to the electorate would swamp other interests and classes and produce a political system dominated by a single class (pp. 168–9, 198–200). This explains the contemporary interest in various schemes, such as plural voting and proportional representation, to secure minority representation, which were proposed at the time by the Liberal intellectual John Stuart Mill (who was also MP for Westminster 1865–8) and others (pp. 170–3). A second major concern was to secure a 'resting place' for the franchise. That is, MPs wanted any extension to be based upon a justifiable principle which could be defended against calls for further extensions in the future. Reform was therefore envisaged as a way of preventing, rather than a first step to, democracy.

Russell and Gladstone's bill of 1866 paid insufficient attention to these concerns, which accounted for its failure. Gladstone saw extending the franchise and bringing working men within the 'pale of the constitution' as a way of dissolving class, and so was largely deaf to the anxieties of those Liberals who

sought to maintain a balance of classes in the representation (pp. 182, 208–9). The result was that a faction of dissident Liberals (the Adullamites), helped to defeat the bill of their own government, which resigned and was replaced by the Conservatives. The Conservative bill of 1867 sought to provide a resting place by making the borough franchise dependent upon the personal payment of local rates. Compounders, those who paid rates through their landlords, were to be excluded. As Gladstone showed in debate, such a distinction was unworkable, arbitrary and in many cases illusory, but to MPs and contemporary opinion the difference was between the moral character of personal ratepayers and compounders (pp. 244–7). The former were deemed to be independent, frugal and financially responsible and so deserving of the franchise, while the latter were not (p. 249).

Although compounders were eventually included, Saunders still sees the Second Reform Act as something of a triumph for Disraeli, who piloted it through the Commons. Although he denies that Disraeli was simply motivated by opportunism, Saunders recognises that the Conservative leader's flexibility was an asset (p. 273). Disraeli seized the chance to reposition the Conservatives as the national and popular party after a long period during which they had either been in opposition or (briefly) in office as minority governments (pp. 271–8). In doing so, Saunders follows other historians such as Angus Hawkins and Geoff Hicks who have sought to rehabilitate the leadership of the mid-Victorian Conservative party and rescue them from the relative neglect they have suffered in comparison with their counterparts in the early and late Victorian periods and their Liberal rivals.⁽⁶⁾

While Saunders offers an authoritative narrative and analysis of high politics, the book could have perhaps made more connections between parliamentary and popular and electoral politics. Given that the 1860s was the golden age of the provincial press, the opinions of the leading newspapers outside of London also might have received more consideration. To be fair, Saunders anticipates such criticisms in the introduction (pp. 22–3), and argues that as this issue was essentially determined in the parliamentary arena, he understandably focuses his attention there. Such a view has much to commend it, but he might have made more of the contrast with the 1832 Reform Act, which, Philip Salmon has recently suggested, was the product of a negotiated and consultative process between centre and locality, Parliament and the public.⁽⁷⁾ Why was this not the case in the 1860s? What was different? Having said all this, Saunders provides a useful survey of parliamentary candidates' views on reform at the 1859 and 1865 general elections (pp. 117–8, 184–7) and also touches upon the extra-parliamentary agitation for reform (pp. 226–9). He argues that the campaign of the working-class Reform League and others helped to keep reform on the agenda in 1867 and meant that it could not be delayed any longer. However, it did not determine the nature and extent of the measure, which was ultimately decided by Parliament (p. 229). The book therefore offers a valuable starting point, but not the last word, upon the popular and electoral dimensions of reform in this period, which other historians will no doubt pursue.

Much of the analysis of parliamentary politics is seen through the prism of party and the positioning of the party leaders. However, MPs not only represented their party, but also their constituencies, electors and non-electors, as well as other interests. Saunders is extremely good on the views of the leading protagonists, including the Adullamites, but it would have added another layer of sophistication to the analysis to have subjected some backbench and middle-ranking MPs to a similar treatment. Without going too far down the route of the quantitative analysis of parliamentary divisions (pioneered by American political scientists like William Aydelotte and Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey) it would have been illuminating to have some sense of the other factors which shaped MPs attitudes on the issue. How far was party the main determinant of one's position? To what extent did other factors, such as social, economic and family background, religion, and the type of constituency, region and nation they represented, influence MPs, if at all? Why did members of some Whig dynasties become Adullamites but not others? To give another example, during the debates on the English reform bills, Scottish and Irish MPs did, at times, pursue a distinctive agenda, pressing for increased representation for their nations at the expense of English small boroughs.

The Conservatives' adoption of reform for essentially tactical reasons in the late 1850s, and their successful passing of the 1867 bill are the subject of considerable reflection throughout the book, particularly in the concluding chapter. Derby and Disraeli are given credit for being able to seize their opportunity to pass a

measure of reform by keeping their party united and their opponents divided. As a minority government they had no choice but to compromise on many points, but they were willing to do so to keep overall control of the process and claim credit for the reform (pp. 272–3). Disraeli may have been motivated by a desire to effectively rebrand the party as a national and popular party, as Saunders argues in the conclusion, but whether he succeeded, in the short term at least, is debatable. In the first parliamentary elections under the new system in 1868 the Liberals won a decisive majority.

Like other recent work which seeks to rehabilitate the mid-Victorian Conservative party, Saunders focuses on its parliamentary leadership. It is worth pointing out that a different perspective would be opened up by studying the issue from the constituency level. It is notable that from the late 1850s many Conservative candidates, often styling themselves as ‘Liberal Conservatives’, sought to impress electors with their moderation and progressive credentials. In part this was a cynical attempt to blur party labels and appeal to disgruntled Liberals. However, these Conservatives were also attempting to detoxify their party’s brand and shake off its protectionist image which had proved to be such an electoral millstone in urban areas. Declaring support for parliamentary reform and denying the Liberals exclusive ownership of the issue, was an essential factor in establishing a new urban, forward-looking Conservatism in the 1860s. To some extent, then, the Conservatives’ gradual shift from hostility to reform in the early 1850s to passing the 1867 bill reflected changes within the party’s grassroots as well as the tactics and strategy of its leadership.

Saunders’s well-written and accessible book will be essential reading for scholars and students of mid-Victorian politics. Given its coverage of the Liberal and Conservative parties, leading politicians and Parliament, it will surely find a place on many undergraduate and postgraduate reading lists. Saunders’s attention to the ideas of politicians and to the wider intellectual debate, and the comparisons with America and France, will ensure this book is highly relevant to scholars of political and constitutional thought in the long 19th century. Historians of popular and electoral politics will also find much to build on.

Notes

1. R. Saunders, ‘Lord John Russell and parliamentary reform, 1848-67’, *English Historical Review*, 120 (2005), 1289-1315; idem, ‘The politics of reform and the making of the Second Reform Act, 1848-1867’, *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), 571-91; idem, ‘Chartism from above: British elites and the interpretation of Chartism’, *Historical Research*, 81 (2008), 463-84. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. M. Brock, *The Great Reform Act* (London, 1973); N. LoPatin, *Political Unions, Popular Politics and the Great Reform Act of 1832* (Basingstoke, 1999); E. Pearce, *Reform! The Fight for the 1832 Reform Act* (2003); P. Salmon, ‘The English Reform Legislation, 1831-1832’, in D.R. Fisher (ed.), *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1820-1832* (7 vols., Cambridge, 2009), i, pp. 374-412. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. F.B. Smith, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge, 1966); M. Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution: The Passing of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge, 1967). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. E.F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 257-77; P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 47-55; C. Hall, K. McClelland and J. Rendell, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race and Gender and the British Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge, 2000). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Hansard*, 26 Apr. 1866, vol. 182, c. 2135. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. A. Hawkins, *The Forgotten Prime Minister: the 14th Earl of Derby*, (2 vols., Oxford, 2007-8); G. Hicks, *Peace, War and Party Politics: The Conservatives and Europe, 1846-59* (Manchester, 2007). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Salmon, ‘English Reform Legislation’, p. 411. [Back to \(7\)](#)

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1131>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7771>