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Popular Agitation and British Parliamentary Reform, 1866-1867

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**POPULAR AGITATION AND BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY REFORM,
1866-1867.**

Michael D. Snell-Feikema (History)

Dr. Larry Witherell, Faculty Mentor (History)

This paper demonstrated that the force of public opinion as expressed by pro-reform agitations played a critical role in the attainment of working-class voting rights with the Reform Act of 1867. This Reform Act, which passed after more than a year of political disputes and public demands, gave most of the urban English working class the right to vote. In 1866 a modest reform bill sponsored by William Gladstone's Liberal government had been defeated by a combination of Conservative and conservative Liberal opposition. After months of popular demonstrations, Benjamin Disraeli's new Conservative government introduced another reform bill that initially was very restrictive. But after further public demonstrations and political conflict in parliament, the bill emerged as a radical measure that more than doubled the size of the electorate. The paper followed the course of the reform controversy and public agitations, and established that the working-class agitations in favor of parliamentary reform were a critical force in compelling parliament to enact comprehensive working class enfranchisement. The project used original source material, including the parliamentary debates, *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian*, working class and radical newspapers such as the *Beehive*, *Commonwealth* and the *National Reformer*, magazines such as *Blackwood's*, *Contemporary Review*, and *Quarterly Review*, trade union minutes, memoirs, speeches, and private letters.

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Popular Agitations and British Parliamentary Reform, 1866-1867.

By
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The Parliamentary Reform Act of 1867 was one of the most important events in British political history. Radical in its scope, it doubled the size of the electorate and for the first time brought large segments of the working class into the political process. Its passage was characterized by a sudden reversal on the part of the political classes. A year earlier, a modest reform bill sponsored by William Gladstone's Liberal government had been defeated by a combination of Conservative and conservative Liberal opposition, on the grounds that it was dangerously democratic. In early 1867, the new Conservative minority government, led by Benjamin Disraeli, belatedly initiated its own Reform bill. Initially, the bill was even more limited than Gladstone's, but by the time it became law it had been broadened into a radical measure which made the working class a majority among urban voters.

During the course of this reversal, there was a powerful working-class movement to attain the suffrage. Led for the most part by trade unionists, through an organization called the Reform League, this movement fought for a large extension of the vote to the English working class. The Reform League campaign featured numerous, frequent, and massive demonstrations throughout the country. These demonstrations were comparable in size to those of the Chartists, but were strengthened by better unity and organization and by a tactical alliance with a more moderate movement led by middle-class Liberals. The fact that a party which had previously opposed even modest Reform¹ would, after

¹ During the period in question, alteration of the electoral franchise was typically referred to simply as "Reform", usually capitalized.

many months of this agitation, produce a bill which the working-class movement found largely satisfactory, would seem to indicate that the agitations played a very large role in that reversal. Historians, however, have been divided as to what degree the agitations effected the eventual outcome of the controversy.

John Morley, in his 1903 biography, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, devotes a chapter to the events leading up to the 1867 Reform Act. In venturing an explanation for what he calls the “strange reversal”, he ascribes it to the popular agitations and change in public opinion. He notes that the same ruling class fear of the populace that made them dread reform made them easily frightened by the massive Reform demonstrations. His discussion of the agitations, however, is very brief, his main focus being the actions of Gladstone and Disraeli.² The 1920 biography, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, by William Monypenny and G.E. Buckle, devotes little space to the public demonstrations, but notes that Disraeli created his Reform bill as a response to public opinion and the agitations.³

Joseph H. Park’s 1920 book, *The English Reform Bill of 1867*, was the first historical study of the 1867 Reform Act. Park considers many factors in explaining the Act, but gives the agitations a significant role. He argues that the Reform demonstrations of 1866-1867, while largely peaceful, were a demonstration of organization and strength which implied the forces that could be unleashed if resolution was not forthcoming.⁴ He argues that public opinion forced parliament to enact a Reform bill, and one more sweeping than the 1866 bill, but is uncertain whether they forced Disraeli to go as far as he did.⁵ He also gives considerable weight to the effects of the competition between the parties and to Disraeli’s political machinations. He gives the major credit to Disraeli, who responded to public opinion and passed a bill, both for enlightened reasons and political gain.⁶ Park devotes greater space to the Reform agitations than most subsequent literature on the 1867 Reform Act, although he apparently made very little use of labor sources, relying instead primarily on mainstream periodicals.

The first work specifically focusing on the role of the trade unions in the Reform question was a 1925 essay by Carl F. Brand. It follows the movement of British labor away from the “no politics” policy of the 1850s, in which the trade unions avoided political concerns and focused entirely on organization and labor disputes, to involvement in politics by taking part in the Reform movement of 1866-1867. He argues that this took

² John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone, Volume II* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1903), 226-227.

³ William Monypenny and George E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield. Vol. IV, 1855-1868* (London: J. Murray, 1910-20), 487.

⁴ Joseph H. Park, *The English Reform Bill of 1867* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1920), 7-8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 123-125.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 232-237.

place partly due to the encouragement of Liberal politicians such as Gladstone and Bright and partly due to the legal difficulties labor faced at the time, which could only be remedied by parliamentary action. He concluded that the strength of the Reform agitations, and the danger of unrest if Reform demands were not met, persuaded parliament to enact a bill providing household suffrage. However, he spends relatively little space proving this, his main focus being the adoption of the Reform issue by the trade unionists.⁷

Frances E. Gillespie's 1927 book, *Labor and Politics in England, 1850-1867*, extensively discusses the issue of Reform, leading up to and including the agitations of 1866-1867, from the perspective of the trade unions. She credits the working-class Reform agitations and the force of public opinion, in the midst of a tense atmosphere accompanied by economic recession, with forcing both Liberals and Conservatives to enact a sweeping Reform bill. The main focus is on the movement itself, and little space is given to demonstrating the effect of the agitations on the climate of opinion.⁸

By contrast, Francis H. Herrick, in a 1934 essay, explained the Reform bill mainly in terms of party competition, the radical nature of the Bill being due to Disraeli's need to compensate for his party's minority status by allying with the Radicals. He attached relatively little importance to the agitations.⁹ A subsequent article by Herrick, in 1949, followed the debates about reform among the political class during the years leading up to the 1867 Act. According to Herrick, the issue remained alive during these years, in spite of public apathy, because it was pushed by Radical MPs and because some saw it as a way of ending the deadlock between the parties. Both of Herrick's articles largely ignore the role of public opinion and popular agitations.¹⁰

There was a flurry of new work on the 1867 Reform Act during the 1960s, much of it holding widely divergent views. A leftist perspective was taken by Royden Harrison in a 1962 essay concerning the relationship between revolution and Reform in 1867. Harrison argued that the working-class reform agitations forced the government to make concessions in the form of a radical reform bill. He places particular emphasis on the Hyde Park Reform demonstration of 6 May 1867, which he argues was a humiliation for the Conservative government and a demonstration of working-class power that played a major role in forcing parliament to capitulate on Reform. Behind the victory was the increasing strength, organization, and prosperity of the working class, which on the one hand made them too powerful to ignore but also made them sufficiently committed to the

⁷ Carl F. Brand, "The Conversion of the British Trade-Unions to Political Action", *The American Historical Review*, 30:2 (Jan. 1925), 251-270.

⁸ Frances E. Gillespie, *Labor and Politics in England, 1850-1867* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1927), 235-288.

⁹ Francis H. Herrick, "The Reform Bill of 1867 and the British Party System", *Pacific Historical Review*, 3 (June 1934), 216-233.

¹⁰ Francis H. Herrick, "The Second Reform Movement in Britain 1850-1865", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 9:2 (Apr. 1948), 174-192.

existing society that they could be trusted with the vote.¹¹ The governing classes, argues Harrison, chose to concede to the agitations rather than resisting them because the working classes had “attained precisely that level of development at which it was safe to concede its enfranchisement and dangerous to withhold it.”¹²

Since Harrison’s work, most writing on the 1867 Reform Act has given considerably less weight to the agitations. Instead, they have tended to follow the approach of Herrick, in assigning the greatest importance to party competition. Francis B. Smith’s 1966 book, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill*, accorded a significant role to the public agitations, but his primary focus was upon the activities of the politicians. For Smith, a major factor was Disraeli’s determination to carry a Reform bill, the form of which was less critical than its successfulness, in order to defeat Gladstone and consolidate his own leadership. Smith also emphasizes the role played by confusion, arguing that confusing laws and unreliable statistics made it difficult for MPs to control the level of enfranchisement. Most of the safeguards against democracy in Disraeli’s original bill were, he argues, flawed and unworkable, making their removal inevitable.

Although he spends less time discussing them, he also accords a significant if secondary role to the Reform agitations, which he credits with lending urgency to the Reform issue. He argues that the radicalization of the bill would have been impossible without the agitations, and that they in the end forced parliament to accept the bill in its radical form.¹³ However, he also argues that they “did not precipitate it and . . . had no direct influence in shaping it.” They achieved a wide extension of the franchise “more through the Government’s ill construction of its Bill than by their importunity”.¹⁴ Smith spends a relatively small portion of his book discussing the agitations, and even less to the role of the trade unions and the views of the working class.

Maurice Cowling’s 1967 book, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution: The Passing of the Second Reform Bill*, followed in more extensive fashion the approach of Herrick. The book focuses heavily on attempting to ascertain the motives of politicians, and sees the central concern as being the allocation of political power within the parliamentary realm. The level of the franchise is seen as being of secondary importance. In lowering it, the politicians were not making concessions to popular pressure, and were confident that doing so would not effect ruling class dominance. The parliamentary world is seen as insulated from outside pressures, and the connection between “external pressures” and “the closed world in which decisions were taken” is seen as so difficult to

¹¹ Royden Harrison, “The 10th April of Spencer Walpole: The Problem of Revolution in Relation to Reform, 1865-1867”, *International Review of Social History*, 7:3 (1962), 351-399; reprinted in Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists: Studies in Labour and Politics, 1861-1881* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1965), 78-136.

¹² *Ibid.*, 133.

¹³ Francis B. Smith, *The Making of the Second Reform Bill* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 234-235

determine that “no necessity can be predicated of the one in relation to the other”.¹⁵ He denies any “capitulation to popular pressure”.¹⁶ Instead, Disraeli was forced to accept a radical bill because of party conditions. The split in the Conservative cabinet in February, and the inability to cooperate with conservative Whigs, is claimed to have forced Disraeli to cooperate with the Radicals. Historians such as Harrison are seen as seriously exaggerating the importance of the agitations.¹⁷

Gertrude Himmelfarb, in a 1966 essay on the 1867 Reform Act, attempted to explain the issue in terms of conservative ideology, and was even more dismissive of the agitations. She argues that Disraeli and the Conservatives pursued radical suffrage reform not out of political expediency or fear of public protests, but for ideological reasons. The Conservatives, she argues, were not afraid of granting votes to the working class, because of their faith in the traditional order of British society. They believed that the working class would continue to defer to their “betters”, and that many working-class voters would vote for Conservatives due to their reverence for Britain’s traditional aristocracy. The Liberals, she argues, were the ones who were fearful of enfranchising the working class, because they saw society as made up of competing groups acting out of self-interest, and hence feared that a working class with a majority of votes would use that power against the upper classes. She attaches little significance to the Reform agitations, arguing that their importance has been exaggerated. She argues that the Hyde Park incident of July 1866 was a minor incident, and attacks Harrison’s assertion that the 6 May 1867 demonstration represented a major defeat for the Conservative government. She denies that the Reform agitations forced Parliament to accept radical Reform.¹⁸

Although Himmelfarb’s thesis has not been widely accepted, most writing on the Reform Act since then has accorded relatively little importance to the agitations. John Vincent touches upon the Reform question in his 1966 book, *The Formation of the Liberal Party, 1857-1868*. He emphasizes that most Liberals during this period were hostile to democracy and lukewarm about Reform, that many Liberals only acquiesced to it for political reasons, and that even Liberal Reform advocates wanted only a limited extension encompassing the wealthier artisans. He discounts the importance of the whole issue, as being over “whether Radical MPs in the towns should have more voters to manage”.¹⁹

Robert M. Stewart devotes the final chapter in his 1978 book, *The Foundation of the Conservative Party, 1830-1867*, to the 1867 Reform Act. He dismisses the arguments of both Harrison and Himmelfarb. While acknowledging that public opinion encouraged the Conservative government to act, he rejects the idea that radical reform was the result

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁷ Maurice Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution: The Passing of the Second Reform Bill* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

¹⁸ Gertrude Himmelfarb, “The Politics of Democracy: The English Reform Act of 1867”, *The Journal of British Studies*, 6:1 (Nov. 1966), 97-138.

¹⁹ John Russell Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party, 1857-1868* (London: Constable, 1966), 189-194, 250-256.

of fear of the agitations. Likewise, he argues that there is little evidence that the Conservatives believed it was desirable to enfranchise the working man prior to the Act. He gives greater credence to the idea that it was the result of a Conservative desire for victory after years of defeat. The agitations are mentioned only in passing.²⁰

A 1980 article by Thomas F. Gallagher covers much the same ground as Herrick's 1949 article. He sees the Reform Act as being the result of a 19-year struggle within the political classes, sustained by party disunity, pressure by Radicals, and pledges by moderates. He does credit the reform agitations with finally forcing parliament to deal with the issue, but he spends little time discussing them.²¹

Liberty, Retrenchment, and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880, Eugenio F. Biagini's 1992 study of popular Liberalism, also touches upon the Reform movement. Biagini emphasizes the "moral and emotional character" of the agitations. He emphasizes the role of the insulting rhetoric of Lowe and others, their defense against such charges by Gladstone and Bright, and the desire to assert the respectability of the working class, in arousing popular fervor and shaping the character of the demonstrations. He also discusses the ideological basis of the Reformers, emphasizing that their concept of manhood suffrage excluded paupers, criminals, and those lacking in moral character and independence. Biagini does not attempt to gauge the effects of the agitations on the Reform issue itself.²²

A recent addition to scholarship on the 1867 Reform Act has been made by Kristin Zimmerman in a 2003 essay about the role of "Palmerstonian delay". She argues that many Liberals in the period up to 1866 were privately lukewarm or unfriendly to Reform, but publicly expressed support of it in order to improve their electoral fortunes. These public expressions of support towards Reform made it difficult for them to oppose it when it became a pressing issue. Prior to 1866, they attempted to avoid Reform by evasion and delay, but in 1866 and 1867 the force of public opinion and the prodding of pro-Reform Liberals forced these reluctant individuals to acquiesce to Reform. Although devoting little space to the agitations themselves, Zimmerman's article does demonstrate the impact of public opinion in influencing reluctant Liberals in 1867.²³

The approach of historians such as Cowling and Smith, seeing the 1867 Reform Act as primarily the result of high politics within parliament, has become the dominant

²⁰ Robert M. Stewart, *The Foundation of the Conservative Party, 1830-1867* (London: Longman, 1978), 352-366.

²¹ Thomas F. Gallagher, "The Second Reform Movement, 1848-1867", *Albion*, 12:2 (1980), 147-163.

²² Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment, and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 257-288.

²³ Kristin Zimmerman, "Liberal Speech, Palmerstonian Delay, and the Passage of the Second Reform Act", *The English Historical Review*, 118:479 (Nov. 2003), 1176-1207.

one in recent times. The working-class agitations have been given a secondary role.²⁴ It is unfortunate that so much recent scholarship on the 1867 Reform Act has minimized or neglected the role of the agitations, because the passage of the Act is inexplicable without them.

During the period after the collapse of Chartism, opinion among the governing classes was so inimical to widespread enfranchisement that only extremely limited Reform bills were proposed, all of which met with failure. This state of affairs had changed little when Gladstone's bill was created, and it too met with failure. The fact that the same parliament that had found Gladstone's limited 1866 bill excessive was able to bring itself to enact household suffrage in 1867 can only be explained by a sweeping change in the political climate. And the only factor that can fully explain this transformation is the development of a large, well organized, highly motivated working-class movement for enfranchisement. While it is certainly true that Disraeli was eager to outmaneuver the Liberals and put an end to his party's minority status, the course he pursued in doing so was largely the product of the political climate that the agitations had created. The agitations created a widespread conviction that a final and definitive settlement of the Reform question must be enacted. The Conservatives were thus obliged to deal with the Reform question, and in a way that satisfied the working class enough to end the agitations.

The period leading up to 1866 had been largely characterized by relative political quiescence on the part of the working class. The Chartist movement, with its mass demonstrations and petitions, had fallen into eclipse with the failure of Feargus O'Connor's demonstration in 1848. Working-class agitation for the vote continued only in a much-diminished fashion.²⁵ The working class was more successful in organizing trade unions, which grew impressively during this period, but most of these had strict rules against involvement in politics.²⁶ The working class showed little enthusiasm for

²⁴ Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland, and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7; Paul Smith, "'Leap in the Dark': The 1867 Reform Act", *Modern History Review*, 2:1 (Sept. 1990), 27-29; Graham Goodlad, "Disraeli and the Mid-Victorian Conservative Party: Seeking a Way out of the Political Wilderness?", *Modern History Review*, 13:1 (Sept. 2001), 26-29.

²⁵ John Breuilly, Gottfried Niedhart and Antony Taylor, eds. *The Era of the Reform League: English Labour and Radical Politics 1857-1872. Documents Selected by Gustav Mayer* (Mannheim: Palatium Verlag im J & J. Verlag, 1995), 15.

²⁶ Brand, "Political Action", 251. Suffrage during this period was based upon the Reform Act of 1832, which had rationalized the archaic, confused electoral system then in place, and had increased the power of the middle class in relation to the aristocracy. Small and corrupt boroughs controlled by local aristocrats had been reduced in number, and new urban boroughs created in their place. In the boroughs all males who rented or owned a house worth more than £10 a year were given the vote. This enfranchised most of the middle class but largely excluded the working class, which had previously been able to vote in some localities. In the counties, in addition to the old 40 shilling freeholder

the parliamentary efforts at Reform during this period, which were invariably of a very limited nature. The Liberals tended to focus on small decreases of the rental qualification for the franchise, while the Conservatives tended to focus on creating “fancy franchises” that admitted favored groups in on the basis of education, wealth, or employment. Reform Bills had been introduced in 1852, 1854, 1859, and 1860, but nothing had come of them. These bills were mainly motivated by politicians seeking political advantage within a divided parliament, whether by attracting smaller groups such as the Radicals to their side, or by changing the electorate in such a way as to favor their own party.²⁷

The mid-1860s, however, saw the development of a new working-class movement for the vote. Where Chartism had failed, this movement would to a substantial degree succeed. Several factors explain this greater degree of success. The working class had achieved greater clout during the 1860s, due to its increasing prosperity and education, and its increasingly powerful trade unions, who had begun to take an interest in political issues. The pragmatic and moderate nature of the trade unionists, and the “labor aristocracy” they represented, enabled a limited cooperation with the radical wing of the Liberal party, who had come to support a limited enfranchisement of the working class. If their aims differed somewhat from that of the working-class Reformers, Liberal support did help them attain their goals. Unlike the Chartists, they had reason to expect that parliament might meet at least part of their demands.

The working class of the mid-1860s presented a different picture from the working class that had animated the Chartists in the 1830s and 40s. It was significantly more prosperous and increasingly better educated.²⁸ The trade union movement had progressed as well. The small, localized unions of the past were increasingly superceded by large, centralized “new model” unions.²⁹ These unions tended to be dominated by the prosperous “labor aristocracy” of skilled mechanics, rather than the mass of poorly paid unskilled workers, who remained largely non-unionized.³⁰ If the working class of this period was increasingly well-organized and prosperous, it was also less radical than in the past. The new unionists largely rejected the ideas of social reconstruction, and of political and social utopianism, which had characterized Chartism.³¹ They felt that conflict between labor and capital could be avoided through compromise,³² and defended

franchise, the vote was given to those who were copyholders or long-term leaseholders for £10 a year, and to short-term leaseholders and tenants-at-will at £50 a year.

²⁷ Herrick, “Second Reform Movement”, 184-190.

²⁸ Gillespie, *Labor and Politics*, 197-201.

²⁹ Irving Garbati, “British Trade Unionism in the Mid-Victorian Era”, *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, 20:1 (Oct. 1950), 69-70.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

³² *Ibid.*, 72.

trade unions within the terms of the dominant laissez-faire ideology,³³ although these arguments were generally not accepted by the upper classes.³⁴

The trade unions were increasingly powerful and were increasingly organized on a national scale.³⁵ This trend culminated with the formation of the London Trades Council in 1860.³⁶ The London Trades Council came to be dominated by a group of likeminded men who labor historians have labeled “the Junta”. These individuals- Robert Applegarth³⁷, George Odger³⁸, William Allan³⁹, and others- shared a belief in political agitation by trade unions that set them apart from the older unionists, who followed a rule of “no politics. As the Webbs put it, “they believed that a leveling down of all political privileges, and the opening out of educational and social opportunities to all classes of the community, would bring in its train a large measure of economic equality”. They pushed British unions towards involvement in numerous political issues, from education and mine regulation to full legalization of unions and the extension of the vote to working men.⁴⁰ Their leadership of British labor was challenged by George

³³ Ibid., 81.

³⁴ Ibid., 76-80.

³⁵ Henry Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1987), 47-48.

³⁶ Ibid., 52.

³⁷ Robert Applegarth (1834-1924). Secretary of Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (1862), member of London Trades Council, and strong advocate of political agitation by unions. Campaigned for the Master and Servant Act of 1867, testified for the 1867 Royal Commission on Trade Unions, and supported the Reform League.

³⁸ George Odger (1813-1877). Shoemaker, trade unionist, and onetime Chartist, became secretary of the London Trades Council in 1862. Noted for his eloquence and his impressive self-taught education, played important role in formation of International Working Men’s Association and the Reform League. In 1866, founded the weekly labor paper *The Commonwealth*, which styled itself “the Organ of the Reform Movement”.

³⁹ William Allan (1813-1874). Railroad mechanic, leading figure in formation of Amalgamated Society of Engineers (1851) and London Trades Council, and supporter of Reform League. Lead opposition to *Hornby vs. Close* court ruling and testified for the Royal Commission on Trade Unions in 1867.

⁴⁰ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920), 233-241.

Potter⁴¹, the editor of the leading labor weekly, *The Beehive*. While Potter and the Junta disagreed acrimoniously over issues such as strike policy, both shared an interest in political action.⁴² Their interest stemmed from several sources. In spite of their increasing strength, the legal position of unions remained highly insecure. If a union engaged in a strike, it was vulnerable to prosecution under the common law of conspiracy. Their very status as legal entities was uncertain, as it depended upon their falsifying their rules so as to qualify for protection under the Friendly Societies Act.⁴³ It was feared- not without good reason, as it turned out- that a hostile government controlled by the wealthy classes might try to ban strikes altogether, or declare unions to be illegal entities.⁴⁴

Another grievance of unions was the prevailing Master and Servant Law, which governed contracts between employers and their employees. As it stood, the law was patently biased in favor of the employer. If the latter violated his part of the contract, he was liable to civil charges. If the employee broke his contract, however, his employer could have him prosecuted criminally and sent to jail. The justices involved were often employers themselves, and the employee was not allowed to be a witness in their own defense. Thousands of workers were prosecuted under the law each year.⁴⁵

Aside from these directly pressing matters, there was a belief among trade unionists that the franchise might be a tool for improving the lot of the working classes in general. In 1862 *The Beehive*, the leading trade union newspaper, declared that the suffrage was desired “as a social necessity to combat the deteriorating influences of society, the diminishing earnings of the great body of the people, and their gradually increasing outlay on the necessities of existence.”⁴⁶ Odger later said, “give [the working-class] votes, and they would see that the poor man’s daughter, who was worked twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a-day, should have time to go abroad and view the face of nature. They would prevent the poor man’s child from going in early life into mines and workshops before it was educated. They would prevent the poor agricultural laborer from working for 8s. per week”.⁴⁷

⁴¹ George Potter (1832-1893). Chairman of small carpenter’s union, founded *The Beehive* in 1861. His support of an aggressive strike policy caused an ongoing feud with the “Junta”. Founded the London Working Men’s Association, a working class Reform organization, in 1866.

⁴² Gillespie, *Labor and Politics*, 210-211.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁴⁴ Brand, “Political Action”, 256.

⁴⁵ Webb, *Trade Unionism*, 249-252.

⁴⁶ *The Beehive*, Apr. 1862, quoted in Gillespie, *Labor and Politics*, 210.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Robert Cecil [Lord Cranborne, later Lord Salisbury], “The Coming Session”, *Quarterly Review*, vol. 119 (Jan. 1866), 264.

The aims of the working-class leaders were made manifest in 1863, with the creation of the Manhood Suffrage and Vote by Ballot Association by Applegarth, Odger, George Howell and others. Asserting that “all the evils under which we suffer have a common origin, namely, an excess of political power in the hands of those holding a higher social position”, it proposed to remedy that situation with trade union agitation. Although the association initially accomplished little, the movement for Reform by the trade unionists was now under way.⁴⁸

A further impetus for Reform was added by the development of a useful if at times strained relationship with advanced middle-class Liberals, mainly Radicals. The middle-class Reformers wanted an enfranchisement of the more prosperous portion of the working class, who they felt could be trusted with the vote. Possession of the vote, it was felt, would give them a stake in the nation and make them less likely to vent their grievances in the form of trade unions and strikes. Combined with a redistribution of parliamentary seats, it would also increase the power of urban industrial interests at the expense of the landed aristocratic element.⁴⁹ John Bright, their most prominent member, complained: “There is no greater fallacy than . . . that the middle classes are in possession of power. The working men are almost universally excluded from power . . . and the middle class, while they have the semblance of it, are defrauded of the reality.”⁵⁰ John Bright was perhaps an unlikely candidate for being an advocate of the working class. The great Manchester free trader had been vocal in his hostility to factory legislation and trade unions.⁵¹ He came, however, to see the working class as a potential ally in his opposition to the power of the landed aristocracy.⁵² He argued that the more working men felt that they had political and legal equality with their employers and all other classes, the less they would be inclined to struggle against “the greatest friends they had in the world- the capitalists”.⁵³ In 1860, he rather hesitantly defended the legitimacy and potential value of trade unions, while at the same time asserting that strikes were in most cases bad.⁵⁴ Later, he suggested that existing working-class organizations, including

⁴⁸ Gillespie, *Labor and Politics*, 211-212.

⁴⁹ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 21-27.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁵¹ Breuilley, *Reform League*, 113-114.

⁵² Vincent, *Liberal Party*, 170-173.

⁵³ *The Times*, 8 Dec. 1859, quoted in Brand, “Political Action”, 262.

⁵⁴ *Manchester Examiner and Times*, 13 Apr. 1860, quoted in Breuilley, *Reform League*, 113-114.

trade unions, be used to agitate for Reform.⁵⁵ In 1864 Bright⁵⁶ formed the Reform Union, an organization of middle-class Liberal Reformers, advocating household suffrage.⁵⁷

Both groups awaited an opportunity for fruitful action. Prospects seemed grim during the premiership of Lord Palmerston, a conservative Liberal who was both popular and staunchly anti-Reform. One encouraging development, however, came in 1864 with the conversion of Palmerston's Chancellor of the Exchequer, William Gladstone.⁵⁸ Early in that year, Odger met with Gladstone, and complained of the injustice suffered by the working class in being excluded from the franchise. Gladstone promised that something would be done.⁵⁹ Soon afterwards, in a debate in Commons concerning a Radical proposal to lower the borough suffrage, he announced that "every man who is not incapacitated by some consideration of moral unfitness or political danger, is morally entitled to come within the pale of the constitution." Gladstone hedged this broad statement with strong qualifications about the dangers of sudden change.⁶⁰ These qualifications, however, were generally ignored by the working-class Reformers, who

⁵⁵ Breuilly, *Reform League*, 113-114.

⁵⁶ John Bright (1811-1889). Devout Quaker, inherited family textile mills, Radical MP (1843-1889). Leading campaigner for Anti-Corn Law League, advocate of free trade, strongly opposed to inequality and privilege, saw his struggle in a religious light. A defender of manufacturers against landowners, he tended to oppose trade unions and factory legislation. Suffered a nervous breakdown due to his unsuccessful efforts at opposing the Crimean War, became leading advocate of parliamentary Reform after 1858, supported the North in the US Civil War, and founded the National Reform Union in 1864. Prominent in Reform controversy of 1866-1867. President of the Board of Trade under Gladstone after 1868.

⁵⁷ Brand, "Political Action", 260. Household suffrage granted the vote to all males who rented or owned a house. Essentially the same as the 1832 borough qualification, but with the £10 rental qualification eliminated. At the time it was considered radical.

⁵⁸ William Ewart Gladstone (1808-1898). Came from wealthy Liverpool merchant and slaveowning family. Originally a Conservative MP (1832), he was a member of Peel's government, and became a Peelite after the split in the Conservative party. Became a Liberal and served as Chancellor of the Exchequer under Palmerston (1859-1865) and Russell (1865-66), then served as Prime Minister (1868-1874, 1880-85, 1886, and 1892-94). Championed failed Reform bill of 1866, and Reform Act of 1884-85. An eloquent orator noted for impassioned moral appeals, he was popular among the working class and was known as "the People's William".

⁵⁹ *The Beehive*, 11 May 1864, quoted in Breuilly, *Reform League*, 123.

⁶⁰ Great Britain. *Parl[iamentary] Deb[ates]*, 3rd series, vol. 175, c. 324.

received the speech enthusiastically. *The Beehive* gladly hailed Gladstone's "entry on the radical reform road" and promised to "render him every assistance in [their] power."⁶¹

The formation of the Reform League was initially precipitated by the action of a group of Liberals. These included several Radical MPs, such as Bright, Richard Cobden, W.E. Forster,⁶² and P.A. Taylor,⁶³ as well as the radical barrister Edmund Beales⁶⁴ and the wealthy radical philanthropist Samuel Morley.⁶⁵ These individuals indicated that if working-class organizations such as the trade unions and friendly societies were willing to join in an agitation for the extension of the franchise, they would be willing to fund a new association for such a purpose, to be led by a Liberal MP. They sent a circular to about 250 working-class leaders to discuss the proposition.⁶⁶

The resulting meeting included, among numerous labor leaders, the entire Junta, as well as members of the First International and several small Reform organizations. Beales and Mason Jones represented the middle class radicals. Potter argued in favor of a new Reform organization to pursue a "vigorous agitation" in favor of manhood suffrage and the ballot. Those present, with "enthusiasm and unanimity", approved the creation of the Reform League. A deputation was appointed to meet with middle-class Radicals and seek their cooperation.⁶⁷

The results of this meeting, however, were not especially successful. Of the sixteen MPs who had promised to attend, only four were present, and of these only two would go along with the League's program. John Bright, who earlier had appeared to advocate manhood suffrage, greatly disappointed the delegates by failing to commit to

⁶¹ *The Beehive*, 14 May 1864, quoted in Breuilly, *Reform League*, 123-125.

⁶² William Edward Forster (1818-1886). A woollen manufacturer, former Quaker, and Radical MP for Bradford (1861-1886), he was a strong advocate of national education and parliamentary Reform.

⁶³ Peter Alfred Taylor (1819-91). Unitarian, partner in silk manufacturing firm, Radical MP for Leicester (1862-1884). A follower of the Manchester School, he supported manhood suffrage, female suffrage, and the Reform League.

⁶⁴ Edmund Beales (1803-1881). Barrister and political radical. Active in cause of Poland and anti-Russian campaigns, organized Garibaldi Reception Committee in 1864, and supported North in US Civil War. Advocate of parliamentary reform in early 1860s, president of Reform League 1865-69.

⁶⁵ Samuel Morley (1809-1886). Wealthy textile manufacturer, deeply religious Dissenter, political radical, and philanthropist. A supporter of Reform and financial contributor to the Reform League. Principal proprietor of the Liberal *Daily News*, later subsidized *The Beehive*.

⁶⁶ *The Times*, 21 Feb. 1865, quoted in Breuilly, *Reform League*, 131-132.

⁶⁷ *The Beehive*, 25 Feb. 1865, quoted in Breuilly, *Reform League*, 132-135.

the League's program while evasively admitting that it was justified. A resolution censuring Bright was rejected out of fear of alienating one of their few potential middle-class allies, but it was decided that the working class must "entirely depend upon themselves" if they were to obtain their objectives.⁶⁸ The Reform League hence became a largely working-class organization, independent of the middle-class Liberals. Beales, however, had accepted the working-class program, and was made president of the organization.⁶⁹ George Howell was made its secretary.⁷⁰

A political opening for the new Reform movement was soon provided by the death of Lord Palmerston in October 1865. The staunchly anti-Reform Whig prime minister was finally out of the way, to be replaced by Lord John Russell, a previous advocate of moderate Reform.⁷¹ Benjamin Disraeli commented, "If Johnny [Russell] is the man, there will be a Reform Bill . . . The truce of parties is over. I foresee tempestuous times, and great vicissitudes in public life."⁷² Beales and Odger met with the new prime minister in January, where he promised that his ministry would stand or fall on a Reform measure.⁷³ Gladstone soon began drafting a new Reform Bill, which he introduced to the House of Commons on 12 March 1866.

The bill, similar to its ill-fated predecessors, was a distinctly limited measure. In the boroughs, the annual household rental requirement for the vote was lowered from £10 to £7, while in the counties it fell from £50 to £14. It also introduced a £10 rental franchise for lodgers. The bill proposed to enfranchise about 400,000 new voters, only half of them working class, increasing the electorate to a total of 1.3 million out of England and Wales's 5.3 million adult males. To those who argued that the bill had not gone far enough, Gladstone responded that it would be a "dangerous temptation" for the working classes to be "invested with preponderating power". To those who thought it went too far, he argued that it would settle the question for a considerable period.⁷⁴

The Reform League was rather disappointed by the Liberal bill, and their support was initially rather tepid. Some in the League found it so inadequate that they wanted it

⁶⁸ *The Beehive*, 18 Mar. 1865, quoted in Breuilley, *Reform League*, 135-139.

⁶⁹ *Miner and Workman's Advocate*, 20 May 1865, quoted in Breuilley, *Reform League*, 139.

⁷⁰ George Howell (1833-1910). A bricklayer, elected to London Trades Council in 1861. Active in politics, member of International Working Men's Association (1864), secretary of the Reform League (1865-1869), and later Lib-Lab MP (1885-1895).

⁷¹ Herrick, "Second Reform Movement", 190-192.

⁷² Smith, *Reform Bill*, 55.

⁷³ "Reform League Deputation to Lord Russell", *The Beehive*, 20 Jan. 1866, 1.

⁷⁴ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 182, c.56-57. The lodger franchise gave the vote to those who occupied a rented room in another person's house.

opposed, but most believed that it was better than nothing and perhaps the best that could be expected to pass, given the expected resistance of Conservatives and “sham Liberals” in parliament. It was decided to support the bill, with reservations about its insufficiency.⁷⁵ Bright, who had suggested to Gladstone that he adopt either a £6 limit or household suffrage⁷⁶, lauded it as “an honest bill”. While it might be “the least the Government could offer”, it was perhaps “the greatest which the Government could carry through parliament”.⁷⁷

As limited as the bill was, the Conservatives largely disapproved of it. Partly, it was seen as an attack on the landed interest and on the electoral basis of the Conservative party. There was particular unease over measures that let Liberal-leaning urban voters spill into the Conservative strongholds in the counties.⁷⁸ Lord Cranborne⁷⁹ argued that the bill’s moderation was deceptive. He believed that it was designed to give the Liberals enough of an edge over the landed interest that they could push further innovations later on, and quoted John Bright as advocating moderate Reform for just that reason.⁸⁰ They were also largely opposed to granting more power to the working class. Lord Cranborne complained of “their power of combination, their ignorance of economic laws, their strong taste for the despotism of numbers”.⁸¹ More moderate commentators were less vitriolic but shared his resistance. The Conservative *Blackwood’s Magazine*, although ready to welcome those working men who qualified for the current franchise, argued that it was unwise to give them too much power- for some working men formed dangerous trade unions, while others were given to idleness and excess of food and drink.⁸²

⁷⁵ “The Government Reform Bill”, *The Beehive*, 24 Mar. 1866, 1. Includes minutes for a special meeting of the council of the Reform League.

⁷⁶ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 62.

⁷⁷ “Mr. Bright’s Letter on the Reform Bill”, *The Beehive*, 31 Mar. 1866, 1.

⁷⁸ G.R. Gleig, “The Political Crisis”, *Blackwood’s [Edinburgh Magazine]*, vol.99 (June 1866), 781-786.

⁷⁹ Robert Cecil, Viscount Cranborne (1830-1903). MP 1853-1868. Conservative ideologue, frequent political contributor in *Quarterly Review* and *Saturday Review*. India Secretary under Derby 1866-1867, resigned in protest to government reform bill. Succeeded father as Marquess of Salisbury, prime minister 1885-86, 1886-92, 1895-1902.

⁸⁰ Cecil, “The Change of Ministry”, *Quarterly Review*, vol. 120 (July 1866), 267-269.

⁸¹ Cecil, “The Reform Bill”, *Quarterly Review*, vol. 119 (Apr. 1866), 539.

⁸² Gleig, “The Condition of the Government,” *Blackwood’s*, vol. 99 (Apr. 1866), 534. George Robert Gleig (1796-1888) was *Blackwood’s* principal political writer 1866-1867. Veteran of Napoleonic Wars and American War of 1812, wounded several times in both. Early contributor to *Blackwood’s Magazine* and *Fraser’s Magazine*, also wrote in

As Lord Cranborne later put it, “the danger of lowering the franchise even to £6 or £7, because it would give to the working classes a preponderating power, was one on which the Conservative speakers constantly dwelt”.⁸³ Benjamin Disraeli⁸⁴ was relatively moderate in his words, but agreed that the bill excessive. He conceded that the working class might deserve a fairer representation in the Constitution, and needled Bright for his past opposition to factory legislation, but attacked Gladstone for advocating democratic principles, arguing that the House of Commons should “not become a House of the People, a House of a mere indiscriminate multitude”. Working-class predominance, he warned, would lead to mob rule and class war.⁸⁵

Opposition to the bill was not limited to the Conservatives. A portion of the Liberals opposed the bill as well. Soon dubbed “the Cave of Adullam”, it was dominated by aristocratic Whigs such as Lord Elcho and Lord Grosvenor.⁸⁶ The most outspoken “Adullamite”, however, was Robert Lowe,⁸⁷ who soon gained great notoriety for the force of his invective. He made little attempt to hide his true feelings about the working class, and the following words from one of his speeches were to become famous for their

Quarterly Review. Wrote prolifically, mainly historical and literary works, including a biography of Wellington, who he knew personally and served under. A “strong conservative in politics”, but took little part in it except in opposing 1832 Reform Act. Curate (1820), chaplain of Chelsea Hospital (1834), chaplain-general of the forces (1844-1875), Inspector-general of military schools (1846-1857), and Prebendary of Willesden in St. Paul’s Cathedral (1848-1888). *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol.7 (London: Oxford University Press, 1949-1950), 1303-1304.

⁸³ Cecil, “The Conservative Surrender”, *Quarterly Review*, vol. 123 (Oct. 1867), 538.

⁸⁴ Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881). Born Jewish, converted to Anglicanism (1817). Novelist and journalist, unsuccessfully ran for parliament as independent Radical, elected Conservative MP (1837). In his novels, and as member of “Young England” group of MPs, advocated vague, paternalistic ideas about an alliance between the aristocracy and working class, and declared sympathy for the Chartists while opposing their demands. Opposed repeal of Corn Laws and helped overthrow Peel’s government. Became leading Conservative in Commons, and was Chancellor of the Exchequer under Lord Derby (1852, 1858-59, and 1866-68). Leading role in failed Reform bill of 1859 and Reform Act of 1867, prime minister 1868 and 1874-1880. His second government passed several important social reforms, including legal rights for trade unions. Known for his deviousness and opportunism, dubbed “the mystery man” by Bright.

⁸⁵ *Parl. Deb*, vol. 183, c.102-103, 108-113.

⁸⁶ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 82, 88-90.

⁸⁷ Robert Lowe (1811-1892). A blind albino, Liberal MP (1852-1880), Benthamite intellectual, leading opponent of democracy, and noted member of the “Adullamite” anti-Reform faction (1866-1867). Education minister under Palmerston (1859-64) and Chancellor of the Exchequer under Gladstone (1868-73).

insulting vitriol: “If you want venality, if you want ignorance, if you want drunkenness, and facility for being intimidated; or if, on the other hand, you want impulsive, unreflecting, violent people, where do you look for them in the constituencies? Do you go to the top or to the bottom?”

Lowe went on to prophesize that the working class, backed by their trade unions, would soon use their voting rights against the upper classes.⁸⁸ *Blackwood’s* hailed Lowe’s “classic wit” and “sound reasoning”, agreeing that it was an “insane notion” to look for “integrity and honesty of purpose” among those the Bill would enfranchise.⁸⁹ The Conservative members “cheered till they were hoarse in honour of Mr. Lowe”.⁹⁰

Another Liberal, Samuel Laing, claimed that the franchise ought to be held only by those “whose ability to act upon solid sense and reflection rather than from inconsiderate impulse might be presumed upon”, and felt that the current £10 franchise “drew that line in a general way very clearly and very distinctly”. He argued that the £10 franchise was “a motive for good conduct and provident habits”, and that if it were lowered, those “of not so high a character would be admitted”.⁹¹ One well-known Liberal professor, arguing that the bill threatened to destroy the English constitution, counseled that “they must put some check on the democratic movement, or they must go to perdition”.⁹² Even among those Liberals who did not openly oppose the bill, there was said to be much hostility. One commentator complained that many nominal supporters of the government, elected on promises to support Reform, “were really quite as strongly opposed to any strong and vigorous measure . . . as the Conservatives . . . and were determined . . . to get rid of the question . . . or defer it”.⁹³ Much of the press was opposed. The leading Tory papers, the *Standard* and the *Herald*, thought the bill went too far in lowering the franchise, while *The Times*, in milder fashion, also expressed dissatisfaction with it.⁹⁴

Countering the bill’s opponents, Bright argued that attempting to exclude the working man from the franchise would only produce animosity, and cautioned that if moderate change were rejected, the governing classes might find themselves one day compelled to go further, and under threat of violence.⁹⁵ Gladstone’s appeals became

⁸⁸ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 182, c. 220.

⁸⁹ Gleig, “Condition of the Government”, 534.

⁹⁰ “The Last of the Tories”, *Saturday Review*, 25 May 1867, 645.

⁹¹ Gleig, “The Condition of the Government”, 534.

⁹² Gleig, “The Reform Bill”, *Blackwood’s*, vol. 99 (May 1866), 672.

⁹³ W.N. Molesworth, “The Reform Question from 1818 to 1866”, *Fortnightly Review*, vol.7 (June 1866), 746.

⁹⁴ “Summary of News”, *The National Reformer*, 18 Mar. 1866, 168.

⁹⁵ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 182, c.223-224.

increasingly emotional. “You cannot fight the future”, he thundered, “time is on our side. The great social forces which move onwards in their might and majesty . . . are against you”.⁹⁶ The working class, he said, were “our fellow-subjects, our fellow-Christians, our own flesh and blood”.⁹⁷ This rhetoric would greatly endear him to the working classes but did little to persuade his opponents in parliament. The combination of Conservative and Adullamite opposition proved too strong for the bill, and it was defeated by hostile amendments.

In the wake of this defeat, the Liberal government resigned on 26 June 1866. Although Gladstone wanted a dissolution, the cabinet as a whole opposed it.⁹⁸ There was some initial expectation of an anti-Reform coalition government consisting of Conservatives and conservative Liberals, but the two groups proved unable to work together, and so Lord Derby came to head a Conservative minority government. Benjamin Disraeli, the new Chancellor of the Exchequer, lead the party in Commons.⁹⁹ The new government avoided committing itself to any policy on Reform. One Conservative commentator noted that, while it might be tempting for the government to attempt a limited and illusory Reform bill in cooperation with conservative Liberals, the best course was to let the question sleep entirely.¹⁰⁰

The Reform League and Reform Union had not been idle during debates over the bill, and Gladstone could claim 100 public meetings and a half-million signatures in favor of it.¹⁰¹ One meeting in April, in St. Martin’s Hall, had been so popular that it had overflowed into the streets.¹⁰² In March, Potter had formed his own organization, the London Working Men’s Association, to agitate for Reform and other issues relevant to trade unions, and had staged a demonstration in April that included the heads of 16 unions.¹⁰³

Nonetheless, it was common for those who opposed Reform to claim the working class was indifferent about the issue.¹⁰⁴ In March, one commentator warned that the

⁹⁶ Ibid., vol. 183, c. 152.

⁹⁷ Ibid., vol. 183, c. 873.

⁹⁸ Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), 442-444.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 444-447.

¹⁰⁰ “The Conservatives and Reform”, *Saturday Review*, 7 July 1866, 4-5.

¹⁰¹ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 183, c. 144-145.

¹⁰² “Meeting of the Reform League in St. Martin’s Hall”, *The Beehive*, 14 Apr. 1866, 1.

¹⁰³ Gillespie, *Labor and Politics*, 258-259, 261.

¹⁰⁴ *Saturday Review*, 24 Mar. 1866 and *The Times*, 8 Feb. 1866, both quoted in Park, *Reform Bill*, 94.

absence of agitation by the working classes was not due to any indifference for it on their part. Rather, he argued, it was because they had “a perfect confidence that the carrying of a measure of Reform is but a question of time. Should anything occur to disturb that confidence, those who maintain the indifference of the people would find themselves unpleasantly startled from their fond belief.”¹⁰⁵

This prediction was soon to be proven correct. The day after Gladstone’s resignation, led by Benjamin Lucraft,¹⁰⁶ 10,000 people gathered in Trafalgar Square, to calls of “Gladstone and Liberty” and denunciations of the Tories. The crowd then marched to Gladstone’s house and, finding him not home, cheered his wife. They ended the evening by heckling the Conservative Carlton Club.¹⁰⁷ This, said *The Beehive*, gave the lie to assertions that the working classes were indifferent to Reform: “The lies and calumnies that have been heaped upon them in Parliament . . . have aroused them from their temporary apathy”. The “noble and chivalrous defence of those classes by Mr. Gladstone . . . have spurred them into vigorous action, and have evoked such a spirit in them that will not again be quieted without their being placed in possession of those political rights so long and unjustly withheld.”¹⁰⁸ With Gladstone’s bill defeated, advised Frederic Harrison, the Reformers were now free to demand radical Reform. “We now know”, he said, “that the extension of power to the working classes must be wrung from those who have it”. This was, he said, “the last chance of . . . a moderate measure. Compromise . . . is now over.”¹⁰⁹

The defeat of Gladstone’s bill coincided with a period of economic hardship for the working classes. A financial panic in May had affected the rest of the economy and caused widespread unemployment. At the same time, the price of food rose significantly due to poor crops. The result was significant hardship among both unskilled and skilled labor. It seems likely that this contributed to the combative mood among the English working classes.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ H.H. Lancaster, “Reform and Political Parties,” *North British Review*, vol. 44 (Mar. 1866), 232.

¹⁰⁶ Benjamin Lucraft (1809-1897). Furniture maker, Chartist during 1830s-1850s, member of International Working Men’s Association, joined Reform League in 1866. Said to be chiefly responsible for the League’s campaign of open-air meetings.

¹⁰⁷ “Reform Demonstration in Trafalgar Square,” *The Beehive*, 30 June 1866, 1.

¹⁰⁸ “Away with the Tories!”, *The Beehive*, 30 June 1866, 4.

¹⁰⁹ Frederic Harrison, “The Government Defeat”, *The Beehive*, 23 June 1866, 1. Harrison (1831-1923), a Positivist intellectual, was a supporter of the working class and the trade unions and frequently gave them advice. Defended trade unions as member of Royal Commission on Trade Unions (1867-9).

¹¹⁰ Gillespie, *Labor and Politics*, 265-266; Vincent, *Liberal Party*, 268-269.

A larger demonstration on 2 July brought some 60,000-80,000 people to Trafalgar Square, where Beales and other speakers denounced Lowe, praised Gladstone and Bright, and insisted that a much larger extension than that in the defeated bill would now be demanded.¹¹¹ Later that week, the Reform League decided to hold a demonstration of up to 100,000 individuals in Hyde Park later that month.¹¹² This alarmed the authorities, and five days before the demonstration was to be held, Sir Richard Mayne, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, notified Beales that the meeting was not to be permitted. Beales replied that he had no legal right to infringe upon the rights of public meeting in such a way.¹¹³ After much discussion the Reform League chose to defend the rights of public meeting and go ahead with the demonstration.¹¹⁴

As planned, a large procession of working men, led by Beales, marched to Hyde Park on the evening of the 23 July 1866. They were met by 1,600-1,800 policemen who had barred the gates. A large crowd had already gathered on the scene.¹¹⁵ Beales demanded entry to the park, and was refused by the police, who tore Beales's coat in the ensuing scuffle. Beales then gave up and tried to lead the crowd on to Trafalgar Square as planned. About 15,000 of the demonstrators followed him.¹¹⁶ The rest, perhaps numbering 50,000-100,000, quickly became embroiled in a riot.¹¹⁷ Accounts differ as to how it started. Some simply state that the crowd forced their way into the park, pulling down the rusty, flimsy railings that surrounded it.¹¹⁸ The labor papers insisted that at first,

¹¹¹ "The Demonstration in Trafalgar Square", *The Beehive*, 7 July 1866, 1. "Reform Demonstration", *The Times*, 3 July 1866, 12. Unfortunately, the *Times* account does not contain an estimate of the size of the crowd. An extremely hostile article in *Saturday Review* cites an estimate of 60,000 but was inclined not to believe it. "Gladstone and Liberty", *Saturday Review*, 7 July 1866, 9.

¹¹² "The Reform League. Intended Demonstration in Hyde Park", *The Beehive*, 7 July 1866, 1.

¹¹³ "The Hyde Park Meeting and the Police", *The Beehive*, 21 July 1866, 1.

¹¹⁴ "Decision of the Reform League", *The Beehive*, 21 July 1866, 1.

¹¹⁵ "The Reform Demonstration in Hyde Park", *The Times*, 24 July 1866, 9.

¹¹⁶ "The Hyde Park Demonstration", *The Beehive*, 28 July 1866, 1.

¹¹⁷ Estimates of the numbers present seem hard to come by and are probably very inexact. *The Spectator* says it was "a vast crowd, probably 50,000 strong, but said to number 100,000", a not implausible range considering that the League had predicted a similar turnout, while 60-80,000 had been present in Trafalgar Square on July 2. "News of the Week", *The Spectator*, 28 July 1866, 817. Lord Malmesbury, in his journal, estimated the rioters at 20,000. James Howard Harris, Third Earl of Malmesbury, *Memoirs of an ex-Minister: An Autobiography* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1885), 624.

¹¹⁸ "The Reform Demonstration in Hyde Park", *The Times*, 24 July 1866, 9.

the railings were pushed in accidentally by the pressure of the crowd. It was only after the police responded by attacking the involuntary infiltrators with truncheons that the angered crowd, crying “Down with the railings!”, proceeded to assault the rest of the park fences as well as the police.¹¹⁹ At any rate, the railings fell in places all around the park, and the outnumbered police proved totally unable to prevent the crowd from entering, in spite of the extensive use of their clubs. An extended brawl ensued as members of the crowd fought the police with sticks and paving stones, resulting in serious injuries on both sides. Soldiers were sent in to assist the police, but London’s West End remained in turmoil for the rest of the day.¹²⁰ While this was going on, members of the League and L.W.M.A., led by Baxter Langley and William Cremer,¹²¹ were able to hold a meeting inside the park, speaking to several thousand onlookers.¹²² Langley praised the crowd for defending their rights, and after the meeting the speakers led a procession of perhaps 20,000 to Trafalgar Square.¹²³ Other individuals held impromptu meetings elsewhere in the park,¹²⁴ including a female radical who spoke for three hours on Reform, being “carried in triumph from place to place” by the crowd.¹²⁵ Others expressed their opinions by smashing Lord Elcho’s window panes.¹²⁶ The disturbances continued the next day, as the police again failed to clear the park or restore order.¹²⁷

A deputation from the League met with the Home secretary, Spencer Walpole, and offered to restore order on condition that he withdraw the police and troops.¹²⁸

¹¹⁹ “The Hyde Park Demonstration”, *The Beehive*, 28 July 1866, 1; “The Reform Demonstration”, *The Commonwealth*, 28 July 1866, 8.

¹²⁰ “The Hyde Park Demonstration”, *The Beehive*, 28 July 1866, 1; “The Reform Demonstration in Hyde Park”, *The Times*, 24 July 1866, 9.

¹²¹ William Randal Cremer (1828-1908). Carpenter and coach builder. Founding member of London Trades Council. Helped create Manhood Suffrage and Vote by Ballot Association (1862). Organizer for Reform League. Lib-Lab MP (1885-1895), won Nobel Peace Prize in 1904.

¹²² “The Hyde Park Demonstration”, *The Beehive*, 28 July 1866, 1.

¹²³ “Another Meeting in the Park”, *The Commonwealth*, 28 July 1866, 8.

¹²⁴ “The Reform Demonstration in Hyde Park”, *The Times*, 24 July 1866, 9.

¹²⁵ “Mrs. Law in Hyde Park”, *The National Reformer*, 29 July 1866, 72.

¹²⁶ “The Demonstration in Hyde Park”, *The Times*, 26 July 1866, 12.

¹²⁷ “The Rioting in Hyde Park”, *The Times*, 25 July 1866, 9.

¹²⁸ “Wednesday. Deputation to the Home Secretary”, *The Beehive*, 28 July 1866, 1.

Walpole, becoming “overcome almost to tears, or quite to tears”, accepted the offer.¹²⁹ The next day, with a largely peaceful crowd of 40,000-50,000 people present, the leaders of the League delivered an address and asked those present to disperse peacefully.¹³⁰ Beales congratulated those present for their “great and glorious victory”. A large portion of the crowd followed Beales out of the park, with most of the rest departing soon afterwards.¹³¹ Beales later credited this agreement with Walpole with averting “the imminent certainty, of a struggle, which might have been both general and sanguinary, not only in the park, but throughout the metropolis”.¹³² It is an indication of impression created by the riots, that an international revolutionary would approach Odger and Cremer with plans for an armed insurrection, which however met with instant rejection.¹³³

The riots created a great deal of unease among the upper and middle classes. *The Times* denounced the “dangerous riot”, denigrated its participants as a “mass of the coarsest mob”, and accused the Reform League of desiring to “make a display of numbers which should overawe the legislature . . . and . . . the ‘ruling classes’”.¹³⁴ “The result”, it was lamented, “has gone beyond our apprehensions. The disorderly element in the crowd has been more lawless and more wantonly destructive than we could have expected”.¹³⁵ One commentator lamented the debacle of “our authorities derided, our public force defeated, and our metropolis given up for some hours to the brutal violence of an infuriated mob.”¹³⁶

The Conservative *Morning Post* worriedly declared it “revolutionary”, while Bright’s *Morning Star* lauded it as “an uprising of the people in their might”.¹³⁷ The *Saturday Review* called it “a more serious attempt at rioting than has occurred in London since the days which survive only in the fading memory of the contemporaries of BURDETT and Orator HUNT”. It accused the League of attempting to terrorize parliament, and emphasized the importance of preventing “the dangerous classes from combining to exert their strength”. It warned that “it is not clear that London might not . .

¹²⁹ “Mr. Walpole on His Trial”, *The Spectator*, 28 July 1866, 821.

¹³⁰ “Wednesday. Deputation to the Home Secretary”, *The Beehive*, 28 July 1866, 1.

¹³¹ “The Demonstration in Hyde Park”, *The Times*, 26 July 1866, 12.

¹³² “The Reform League Meeting in Hyde Park”, *The Commonwealth*, 4 May 1867, 4.

¹³³ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 131. The revolutionary was named General Cluseret.

¹³⁴ Leading article, *The Times*, 24 July 1866, 10.

¹³⁵ Leading article, *The Times*, 25 July 1866, 6.

¹³⁶ Charles Lever, “Our Garibaldi”, *Blackwood’s*, vol. 100 (Sept. 1866), 391.

¹³⁷ Both papers quoted in “English Mobs”, *The Spectator*, 28 July 1866, 828.

. be half ruined by a *coup de main* on the part of those who have everything to gain, and nothing to lose, by a combined attack on property and peace”.¹³⁸ It lamented that “a blow has been struck not only at the exercise, but even at the principle of authority in England, which cannot but shake . . . her influence in every nation of Europe. For the past week London has virtually been in the hands of the dregs of its population.”¹³⁹ Noting the alarm of the middle class, it said that “it was high time to be frightened”. It claimed that only the willingness of the middle class to defend itself by force had prevented the riots from going further.¹⁴⁰

Thinking that Walpole had assented, the League planned another meeting in Hyde Park, but Walpole denied having given any permission. Many of the Leaguers wanted the meeting anyway, but J.S. Mill dissuaded them, warning them that it would cause a collision with the military. They should only do so, he said, if they wanted a revolution and thought they could accomplish one.¹⁴¹ Instead, the League chose to hold an indoor meeting at the Agricultural Hall in Islington. The meeting was enthusiastic and was considered a great success. The hall was crammed with 25,000 individuals, and the major streets outside were blocked for a considerable distance by the thousands unable to fit in the hall. There was a certain glee evident at the impression the Reform movement was creating. Beales, calling the meeting proof that the working man was no longer indifferent to Reform, declared the week one of “much honour and of much triumph for the people” and joked about the fall of the railings. One speaker went so far as to “rejoice” that they were pulled down. The repressiveness of the government and the brutality of the police were roundly denounced. Two Radical MPs, P.A. Taylor and J.S. Mill, spoke briefly, and the latter was given a petition to present to parliament, criticizing the closure of Hyde Park and the “acts of gross and savage violence” by the police. On the same day, 10-12,000 working men, unconnected to the League, held a meeting in Victoria Park. One speaker there said that “if the Government had been the most ardent friends of Reform instead of its bitter enemies, they could not have adopted a line of conduct more favourable to the cause than that which they had taken.”

Another meeting the next day by the Potter’s L.W.M.A. drew 12,000 men. There were meetings throughout the country, including one in Bristol with 15,000 participants,¹⁴² and one in Sheffield not long after with 20,000.¹⁴³ One labor commentator noted that the events of the past several weeks had caused the working classes to shake off their apathy on Reform. The working-class enthusiasm for Reform

¹³⁸ “The Hyde Park Riots”, *Saturday Review*, 28 July 1866, 96.

¹³⁹ “The Right of Public Meeting”, *Saturday Review*, 28 July 1866, 109.

¹⁴⁰ “The League, the Roughts, and Their Abettors”, *Saturday Review*, 4 Aug. 1866, 126.

¹⁴¹ Harrison, *Socialists*, 83-84.

¹⁴² “The Demonstration at the Agricultural Hall”, *The Beehive*, 4 Aug. 1866, 1.

¹⁴³ “Reform Demonstration at Sheffield”, *The Beehive*, 11 Aug. 1866, 1.

had been ignited by the insults of Lowe and other parliamentarians and had been fanned by the despotism of the government and the brutality of the police with respect to Hyde Park, creating “such a feeling amongst the people” that only the moderation of the Reform leadership “saved the metropolis from riot and bloodshed, and the country possibly from a revolution”.¹⁴⁴ While this was perhaps something of an exaggeration, it is indicative of the prevailing mood. E.S. Beesly argued that, in the wake of Hyde Park, the movement had become a struggle not just for the right to vote, but for the political freedoms of the working class in general. The ruling classes, he said, seemed ready to stifle the rights of public meeting and use coercion against political opposition, and he urged the working class to defend their freedoms.¹⁴⁵

The Reform demonstrations that followed were some of the largest the country had seen in years. Those in the northern industrial cities seem to have been particularly massive. The first of these took place in Birmingham on 27 August 1866. For the first time, trade unions took a direct part in the demonstration. The trades of Birmingham and surrounding towns joined in procession alongside the local friendly and temperance societies. The local middle-class Liberals assisted, local employers letting their employees leave early to take part. Bright took part, as did the mayor. The demonstration was compared to the Birmingham demonstration of 1831 that had helped force the 1832 Reform Act. The participants were said to have numbered between 200,000 and 250,000.¹⁴⁶ Beales, echoing Gladstone, declared that “every man who was morally and intellectually qualified was entitled to vote”, and called it unjust that working men who paid taxes had no voice in how they were spent. There could not be equality of property, but “equality of political and civil rights there could be [and] ought to be”. Potter spoke at the meeting, calling on the people of England to agitate through the winter, to “let the people raise their sovereign voice and tell the opponents of reform and the opponents of the extension of their liberties that England was determined that her people should be enfranchised”. “Victory”, he said, “would now assuredly be with the people.”¹⁴⁷ Bright seemed inclined to ride the wave of popular enthusiasm. Speaking afterwards, he hailed the fact that the largest assemblies in a generation were gathering in favor of Reform, and declared that he had “no fear of manhood suffrage” or the ballot.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ “The Reform Demonstrations”, *The Beehive*, 4 Aug. 1866, 4.

¹⁴⁵ Edward Spencer Beesly, “The Trial of Mr. Eyre”, *The Beehive*, 18 Aug. 1866, 4. Beesly (1831-1915), a positivist intellectual, was closely associated with the London Trades Council and the Reform League, and was a contributor to *The Beehive* and *The Commonwealth*.

¹⁴⁶ “The Great Reform Demonstration in Birmingham”, *The Beehive*, 1 Sept. 1866, 6. *The Times* was inclined to consider 200,000 an exaggeration, but conceded that the numbers were massive. “The Reform Demonstration at Birmingham”, *The Times*, 28 Aug. 1866, 4.

¹⁴⁷ “The Great Reform Demonstration in Birmingham”, *The Beehive*, 1 Sept. 1866, 6.

¹⁴⁸ “The Great Reform Demonstration in Birmingham...The Evening Meeting in the Town Hall”, *The Beehive*, 1 Sept. 1866, 6.

According to one commentator, the lull in the Reform movement, which had characterized the past few years, was now past. “That time”, he lamented, “was allowed to slip away, to the regret of many advocates of moderate progress, and now the demands of the unenfranchised are increasing in proportion to the delay”. He advised the middle and upper classes that “by timely concessions they may lead a willing people; by endeavouring to monopolise power, they will lose their own position.”¹⁴⁹

The Reform League grew at an impressive rate. In September, a Northern Department of the League was created, headquartered in Manchester, and a Scottish Reform League was formed soon afterwards. Manchester held the next large demonstration, on 24 September.¹⁵⁰ It was a joint demonstration of the Reform Union and the Reform League, and 200,000 individuals took part.¹⁵¹ Nearly 30,000 met in Liverpool in the same week.¹⁵² This was followed on 8 October by a massive demonstration at Leeds. In this case the middle class was not as encouraging as at the Manchester and Birmingham demonstrations- the railway companies refused to provide excursion trains, and employers threatened to dismiss employees who participated.¹⁵³ In spite of this, the demonstration was attended by some 200,000-300,000 people, of which about 70,000 marched in a 4-5 mile long procession.¹⁵⁴

A demonstration by the Scotch Reform League in Glasgow on 16 October brought about 150,000 people, double the number that had appeared there in 1832. The trades procession stretched over four miles long. It included “nearly every branch of manufacturing industry carried on in Glasgow” and was said to number about 30,000 people.¹⁵⁵ In addition to these especially large gatherings, there were numerous smaller demonstrations throughout the country that are too numerous to list. For example, one week in October saw four demonstrations with between 5,000 and 10,000 participants.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁹ “Public Affairs”, *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 6 (15 Sept. 1866), 358.

¹⁵⁰ Gillespie, *Labor and Politics*, 271.

¹⁵¹ “The Manchester Reform Demonstration,” *The Beehive*, 29 Sept. 1866, 4; “Reform Demonstration at Manchester,” *The Times*, 25 Sept. 1866, 7. Both papers, and the *Daily News*, agreed on the numbers.

¹⁵² “The Reform Demonstration in Liverpool,” *The Beehive*, 29 Sept. 1866, 6.

¹⁵³ “The Reform League...Meeting in Pimlico”, *The Beehive*, 13 Oct. 1866, 1.

¹⁵⁴ “Great Meeting of the Working Classes at Leeds,” *The Times*, 9 Oct. 1866, 7; “The West Riding Demonstration”, *The Commonwealth*, 20 Oct. 1866, 5. 200,000 is the estimate in *The Times*. The organizers were adamant that 300,000 had attended.

¹⁵⁵ “Reform Demonstration at Glasgow”, *The Times*, 17 Oct. 1866, 7.

¹⁵⁶ “The Reform Movement”, *The Commonwealth*, 27 Oct. 1866, 5.

Each of these demonstrations followed much the same pattern, with a procession, a huge outdoor rally with multiple speaking platforms usually featuring Beales, Potter and others, followed by an indoor meeting in which Bright was usually the lead speaker.

Bright's speeches were filled with fiery populist invective, primarily against the aristocracy. He decried the fact that "the aristocracy of land and wealth usurp the power in both Houses of Parliament", and that the Lords effectively controlled half of the Commons. If the country had been better governed, and land had not been monopolized by a small class, there would have been fewer wars, lighter taxes, better education, freer trade, and a much larger middle class. He called the demonstrations "an exhibition of force of opinion now, and if that force of opinion be threatened, it may become an exhibition of another kind of force."¹⁵⁷ Many Liberals were appalled by his speeches,¹⁵⁸ and Gladstone privately remarked that he did not like what he saw of them.¹⁵⁹

Not everyone in the League was happy with Bright, and some attempted to split with him and the middle-class Reformers over their unwillingness to back manhood suffrage. He was defended by Odger and Peter Henriette, who viewed him as indispensable. Beales offered Bright leadership of the League if he would support manhood suffrage.¹⁶⁰

Meanwhile, Potter and his London Working Men's Association had been at work persuading the trade unions of London to stage their own Reform demonstration. In October he invited all the trade societies of London to discuss holding such a demonstration. A large number of the trades responded positively, and a demonstration was set to take place on 3 December.¹⁶¹ Several of the large trade unions, however, would not participate, possibly because of the feud between Potter and the Junta.¹⁶² Those trades that were involved had about 100,000 members¹⁶³, 70,000 of whom purchased tickets to march in the procession.¹⁶⁴ The trades, mainly of skilled artisans,

¹⁵⁷ "The Meeting in St. James's Hall", *The Beehive*, 8 Dec. 1866, 5-6.

¹⁵⁸ John Morley, "Public Affairs", *Fortnightly Review*, vol.7 (Jan. 1867), 106; J.G. Dodson, "Position and Prospects of Parties", *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 125, (Jan. 1867), 144.

¹⁵⁹ Morley, *Gladstone*, 222.

¹⁶⁰ "The Reform League. . .Meeting of the General Council", *The Beehive*, 13 Oct. 1866, 1.

¹⁶¹ "The Great Reform Demonstration...Introductory Remarks", *The Beehive*, 8 Dec. 1866, 5.

¹⁶² Gillespie, *Labor and Politics*, 274. See also *The Beehive*, 8 Dec. 1866, 4.

¹⁶³ Robert Hartwell, "To the Editor of the Times", *The Times*, 12 Dec. 1866, 12.

¹⁶⁴ "The Trades' Reform Demonstration...The Procession", *The Times*, 4 Dec. 1866, 10.

were eager to leave a good impression, and hence the procession was to be exclusively of union members rather than the general populace.¹⁶⁵ When none of the city parks were made available for a demonstration, the organizers avoided a confrontation by contenting themselves with the smaller private grounds of Lord Ranelagh.¹⁶⁶ Many large employers threatened to fire any employee who took part in the demonstration.¹⁶⁷ Some viewed the demonstration with great apprehension; one weekly complained that “the gentlemen whose logic is only the terrorism of numbers” have organized “a monster procession” to “take possession of London”.¹⁶⁸

The day of the procession turned out to be frigid and rainy, the roads being filled with several inches of slush and mud. The procession, consisting of between 25,000 and 35,000 working men from nearly fifty trades, wound its way through the London streets.¹⁶⁹ A vast crowd of half a million lined the route as it walked past.¹⁷⁰ The procession was smaller than expected, but the fact that such a large number of working men would miss a day’s pay and risk employee reprisals, and tramp for miles through the freezing slush and mud in order to demand the vote, was considered an impressive achievement.¹⁷¹

The Times, while noting what it considered to be lower than expected turnout, described the participants in uncharacteristically friendly tones: “any Englishman might feel proud of their bearing and demeanor”, braving the elements to “vindicate a principle on which they felt strongly”. It declared the demonstration “amply sufficient to show that a large portion of the artisan class desire the franchise, and that there is no reason to believe they will abuse it.”¹⁷² Lord Lennox, whom Disraeli had instructed to mingle with

¹⁶⁵ Hartwell, “To the Editor of the Times”.

¹⁶⁶ “The Trades’ Reform Demonstration in London”, *The Commonwealth*, 8 Dec. 1866, 7.

¹⁶⁷ *The Beehive*, 8 Dec. 1866, 4.

¹⁶⁸ *Saturday Review*, quoted in Abraham Hayward, “Ministerial Prospects”, *Fraser’s Magazine*, vol. 75 (Jan. 1867), 136.

¹⁶⁹ “The Trades’ Reform Demonstration”, *The Times*, 4 Dec. 1866, 8-9. Up to 70,000 persons had purchased tickets to march in the procession, and the *Commonwealth* was inclined to believe that 40-70,000 had showed up. The estimates of the papers, however, ranged between 25,000 or less and 40,000. “The Trades Reform Demonstration in London”, *The Commonwealth*, 8 Dec. 1866, 7.

¹⁷⁰ “The Great Reform Demonstration”, *The Beehive*, 8 Dec. 1866, 5.

¹⁷¹ *The Beehive*, 8 Dec. 1866, 4.

¹⁷² “The Trades’ Reform Demonstration”, *The Times*, 4 Dec. 1866, 8-9.

the crowds, reported that it was “certainly a formidable demonstration”, concluding that “the drilling and organization . . . have been a complete success.”¹⁷³

The involvement of trade unions in the Reform movement only increased as it progressed. The London Trades Council, some of whose members already had a prominent role in the Reform League, now took a direct part in the agitations. William Allan, supported by Applegarth, George Edgar, and Edwin Coulson, declared the Council’s adherence to the principles of the Reform League, and declared it an absolute necessity that all trade unionists of Britain and Ireland join in assisting the agitations for the franchise.¹⁷⁴ The Council also pledged itself to support a demonstration on 11 February, to coincide with the opening of the next session of parliament.¹⁷⁵

The role of trade unions in the agitations had already been impressive, but several factors served both to increase their participation in those agitations and add to the atmosphere of increasing tension that was developing in early 1867. The trade unions found themselves increasingly threatened. The behavior of a few small unions in Sheffield, who used violence and threats against workmen who failed to contribute funds or follow union rules, had become widely publicized. These “Sheffield outrages” attained national notoriety, and in spite of their being denounced by the other unions, they caused a reaction against trade unions in general. In February 1867, it was announced that a Royal Commission of Inquiry would be created to investigate not only criminal behavior by unions, but the effects of trade unionism in general.¹⁷⁶

A further threat to the trade unions came from a crushing legal defeat handed down by the Court of Queen’s Bench in the case of *Hornby vs. Close*. A union had attempted to sue one of its treasurers, but the court had ruled that it had no right to do so. Unions, it ruled, were illegal organizations in restraint of trade, and hence had no right to legal protection. They now had no legal recourse to prevent their funds from being embezzled.¹⁷⁷ *The Beehive* commented, “Every day proves more and more the absolute necessity there is for trades’ unions, if they desire to exist much longer, taking a stronger and sterner part in obtaining a radical Parliamentary reform . . . Trades’ unions exist now but on sufferance.”¹⁷⁸ Thus, as 1867 began, the trade unions were feeling both encouraged on the issue of Reform, and increasingly threatened on issues crucial to their survival.

The prominence of the trade unionists in the Reform movement added to the unease of the wealthier classes. *The Times* found the alliance between “extreme

¹⁷³ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 143.

¹⁷⁴ London Trades Council, *Minutes*, 19 Dec. 1866.

¹⁷⁵ “The Reform League...Meeting of the General Council”, *The Beehive*, 5 Jan. 1867, 1.

¹⁷⁶ Webb, *Trade Unionism*, 256-261.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 261-262.

¹⁷⁸ Leading article, *The Beehive*, 13 Apr. 1867, 4.

Reformers and the Trades' Unions" to be an "ominous threat".¹⁷⁹ It harshly criticized Bright for allying with them, fearing that they might "acquire political strength, and become the masters alike of men and capital".¹⁸⁰ *Blackwood's* deplored the transformation of trade unions into "a political party in the State"; it was this that made the Reform League truly dangerous.¹⁸¹

As might be expected, such an impressive array of demonstrations had a very significant impact on the national political debate. As one sympathetic commentator put it, "that puzzle . . . which in August so greatly perplexed the House, whether workmen do or do not desire to enter the Constitution, will be found to have become clear [during the recess] . . . the workmen do care, care so much that their foes have changed their tone, and instead of charging them with indifference, accuse them of revolutionary fervor and oppressiveness". Delay was impossible: "if the kettle is not taken off the fire, the water will express its own opinion by coming out of the spout". Most of the constituents, while not earnest about the matter, were inclined to support Reform, while the leftmost 20 percent of them would punish any hesitancy. If a dissolution were to take place, the Radicals would gain significantly.¹⁸² *The Times* agreed that a dissolution would lead to a parliament "deeper pledged than ever to Reform".¹⁸³

Another writer, analyzing the "curious process" by which "the extension of our franchise has come to be accepted as one of the necessities of the day", noted that "the demand for reform is more deeply rooted than was at first hastily supposed . . . the battle is now in earnest".¹⁸⁴ Another said, "the apathy [on Reform] for which the mass of the nation was formerly mocked has given place to an excitement far too intense to be allayed by palliatives". Although deploring the vehement language of the demonstrations, it saw them as an understandable reaction: "The agitation that now convulses England . . . are the legitimate fruits of the conduct and speeches in which the dominant class has indulged."¹⁸⁵ It continued, "the country is thoroughly aroused; procrastination has ceased to be a possible policy. . . it is the unanimous opinion of the thinking public that reform must be immediate and thorough".¹⁸⁶ It regretted that popular demonstrations had been

¹⁷⁹ Leading article, *The Times*, 29 Jan. 1867, 6.

¹⁸⁰ Leading article, *The Times*, 6 Dec. 1866, 8.

¹⁸¹ Gleig, "Who are the Reformers, and What do They Want?", *Blackwood's*, vol. 101 (Jan. 1867), 116-132.

¹⁸² "The Political Profits of the Recess", *The Spectator*, 2 Feb. 1867, 118.

¹⁸³ Leading article, *The Times*, 29 Jan. 1867, 6.

¹⁸⁴ Leslie Stephen, "Reform", *Macmillan's Magazine*, vol. 15 (Apr. 1867), 529.

¹⁸⁵ W.F. Rae, "Reform and Reformers", *Westminster Review*, vol. 87 old series, vol. 31 new series (Jan. 1867), 185.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

necessary to make reform inevitable, and warned of their dangers: “those who take part in these demonstrations are on our side today, but they may use the same means to attain ends which would be obnoxious to every far-seeing Liberal”.¹⁸⁷

Another, while criticizing the “violent” language of Beales and Potter, called the demonstrations “a noble display by the workmen of England”, and said that “the argument can never be again used that the working classes do not care about Reform”.¹⁸⁸ *Fraser’s* argued against any attempt at delaying Reform, as it would only intensify the agitations: “If there was a fair chance of these demonstrations dying out, then . . . we might venture to wait; but there would be small prudence in provoking another year of them, at the obvious risk of their becoming more threatening in demeanor and more peremptory in tone”.¹⁸⁹ The old Whig quarterly *Edinburgh Review* felt that the “circumstances attending the demonstrations . . . should suffice to convince all thinking men” that it would be desirable to settle the Reform question, although it was also determined not to be threatened by “Chartists” or “mobs”.¹⁹⁰

The Times was of the opinion that “if the House of Commons could have the needful protection, and did not consist of gentlemen bound to tell how they vote, it would probably shelve the subject very soon”. It felt that, however, “delays are now dangerous . . . because the mischiefs of the movement are growing . . . They may not form a very serious danger, but they prove the turn things are taking while we put off the question, the palpable rights of which press for an early settlement. It is the middle class . . . that is menaced by these delays and by the agitations they keep up.”¹⁹¹

Gladstone was both impressed and concerned: “The reform movement is by degrees complicating the question . . . it may become too strong for us; or at least too strong to be stayed with our bill of last year. I do not envy Lord Derby and his friends.”¹⁹² Samuel Laing, a Liberal who during the spring had argued, to Conservative cheers, that it would be dangerous to lower the franchise, now attempted to tell his constituents that he had wanted “not to defeat Reform, but to enlarge it”. Unsurprisingly, he was attacked for his glaring inconsistency.¹⁹³

In spite of the fact that the demonstrations had been, aside from Hyde Park, overwhelmingly peaceful, Conservative commentators tended to see the agitations in a

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁸⁸ Morley, “Public Affairs”, *Fortnightly Review*, vol.7 (Jan. 1867), 104-105.

¹⁸⁹ Hayward, “Ministerial Prospects”, 132.

¹⁹⁰ Dodson, “Position and Prospects of Parties”, 145-147.

¹⁹¹ Leading article, *The Times*, 5 Feb. 1867, 8.

¹⁹² Morley, *Gladstone*, 222.

¹⁹³ “Birmingham and the Wick Burghs”, *The Spectator*, 1 Sept. 1866, 960.

highly threatening light. In *Blackwood's*, the same commentator who had earlier praised the words of Robert Lowe and found the working classes unfit for the vote, had by December considerably changed his tone. About the demonstrations, he said, "far be it from us to underrate their importance or their significance . . . [they] speak to us of power, moral as well as physical". Before, the author had opposed a Reform bill. But recently, "matters have a great deal changed their aspect. The feelings of the multitude are easily worked upon by such eloquence as has of late been addressed to them". While some of the working men might perceive that what they were told was false, "still a residue abides of power enough to stir them into that state of dogged determination that leads to violence." If it were to be a choice between making concessions to the agitations, and putting them down by force, the former was to be preferred: "Let us not be misunderstood. With Parliamentary Reform, Derby . . . must deal, and deal decisively". Delay on the issue was considered preferable, but not necessarily possible.¹⁹⁴

By contrast, the *Quarterly Review* was opposed to concessions. It decried the "designing demagogues" who had incited multitudes to coerce parliament, and looked with dread at the "menacing exhibitions of force" that would try to scare it into "an ignoble concession" if it refused to meet the Reformers demands. But if the demands were submitted to, the results would be the dominance of the poor over the rich, and the supremacy of trade unions.¹⁹⁵ It hoped that Bright and his friends would flinch from violence. "May we never see such a collision as the mob-leaders are labouring to bring about! If it be forced upon us, the country will recollect who began it, and why its authors were punished".¹⁹⁶

To another commentator, the situation presented opportunities for Disraeli to champion a Reform bill. While the moderate Liberals, alienated by Bright, might accept a bill from the Conservatives, the Conservatives might be frightened enough by the agitations to allow Disraeli to create one. "Notwithstanding", he said, "the total absence of argument, and the contemptible character of all but one of the traveling agitators, the demand of many thousands of artisans for revolutionary change cannot be regarded as wholly insignificant . . . Conservative obstinacy may be pliable under the menace of revolutionary disturbance."¹⁹⁷

The Conservative government had also been affected by the agitations. The change came slowly. In September, Lord Derby had written Disraeli that he was "reluctantly coming to the conclusion that we shall have to deal with the question of Reform", but Disraeli had remained unconvinced.¹⁹⁸ A major push came from the

¹⁹⁴ Gleig, "What is, and What May Be", *Blackwood's*, vol.101 (Dec. 1866), 783-787.

¹⁹⁵ C.J. Bayley, "English Democracy and Irish Fenianism", *Quarterly Review*, vol. 122 (Jan. 1867), 238-244.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 257-258.

¹⁹⁷ "The Leeds Meeting", *Saturday Review*, 13 Oct. 1866, 437.

¹⁹⁸ Monypenny and Buckle, *Disraeli*, 453-454.

Queen. She became greatly concerned about the agitations, and on 28 October, her views were made known to Lord Derby. She had become “convinced that, if the question of Reform be not taken up in earnest by her Ministers, with a view to its settlement, very serious consequences may ensue”. She offered to appeal to Gladstone and Russell to meet with the government, to settle a question that, “while it continues to be made a subject of agitation, must act injuriously upon the best interests of the country, and may even threaten the disturbance of its peace and tranquility”.¹⁹⁹ At his next cabinet meeting, Derby brought the question under consideration, and the ministers unanimously decided that the problem “could not be ignored, but must be resolutely grappled with.”²⁰⁰

Disraeli initially wanted to delay acting on the issue, and toyed with the idea of setting up a Royal Commission to deal with the question. As he told Lord Cranborne, “The Whigs are very unanimous in wishing the question ‘settled’- but you and I are not Whigs”.²⁰¹ However, by January Disraeli began to conclude that it would be best to deal with the question immediately. He wrote to Derby on 3 January 1867 that they must come to a decision on how to proceed with Reform. “Otherwise”, he said, “I see anarchy ahead. There are many other great matters pressing, but this is paramount.”²⁰² Later, in a conversation with Bright, Disraeli acknowledged the effect of the agitations: “The working-class question was the real question, and that was the thing that demanded to be settled”.²⁰³

Many other Conservatives seem to have come to similar conclusions. One Liverpool Tory told Disraeli that there was “only one opinion out of doors: settlement of the question.”²⁰⁴ One of his ministers opined that “men . . . are really anxious for a popular measure and early legislation . . . others who . . . would gladly see it postponed, may nevertheless be apprehensive of the consequences of another year of agitation, and may wish the question settled”.²⁰⁵ Another Conservative said that, while he did not want Reform, he “would much rather see a moderate Bill from our Side than an immoderate one from Gladstone, Bright & Co. [It was] better . . . to be wise in time, and do with a good grace what will have to be submitted to.”²⁰⁶

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 457-458.

²⁰⁰ George E. Buckle, ed., *Letters of Queen Victoria. Vol. 1. 1862-1869* (London: John Murray, 1926), 371-372.

²⁰¹ Monypenny and Buckle, *Disraeli*, 460-463.

²⁰² Ibid., 486.

²⁰³ George M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (London: Constable, 1913), 370-71.

²⁰⁴ Monypenny and Buckle, *Disraeli*, 490.

²⁰⁵ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 143-144.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 144.

The general feeling seems to have been that Reform was now inevitable. If the Conservative government did nothing, not only was there the danger of unfortunate unrest, but the likelihood that Gladstone would replace Derby and Disraeli and enact something more damaging to the Conservatives. One commentator feared that if the Conservative government fell, Gladstone would inevitably head the Liberals, and being dependent on Bright and the Reform League for support, would enact a dangerously radical Reform bill. Perhaps the Conservatives and Adullamites could prevent Reform in parliament, but this would most unwise: “To postpone legislation . . . on the subject of Parliamentary Reform, would be tantamount to challenging the masses to do their worst; and although we entertain no doubts respecting the results of a collision . . . there is nothing we would more deprecate”.²⁰⁷

According to one commentator, a radical Reform bill was now necessary: “Events have greatly changed the position of things . . . to bring in a small bill now is quite useless . . . it will seem to be passed by those who hate it, in the sole hope of staving off a greater measure . . . it therefore cannot earn gratitude, give satisfaction, or still the effort for a greater change”. If, as seemed likely, adequate Reform were opposed, it would result in “a deep and perhaps incurable schism [between classes], in which aristocratical influence must ever sink, and real democracy will loom in the distance”.²⁰⁸

As Lord Cranborne later put it, “there can be no doubt that . . . the one dominant feeling of the present year has been a feverish anxiety to ‘settle the question’ . . . the meetings in the manufacturing towns, and the riots in Hyde Park, had had their effect.”²⁰⁹ Thus, by early 1867, it was widely believed among both Liberals and Conservatives that the Reform issue could no longer be avoided, but had to be solved, and soon. This was in no small part due to the impression made by the agitations. The political actions that resulted in the Reform Act of 1867 are best understood in this context.

The Conservative government’s path to a Reform bill proved to be a rocky one. The day parliament opened, on 11 February, it was met by another demonstration. It included a procession 25,000 strong and huge masses of spectators, believed to be three times as numerous as those on 3 December.²¹⁰ The government proposed a set of resolutions on the possible shape of a reform bill, but they were criticized as vague and were largely a failure in the House.²¹¹ One commentator harshly criticized the ministry for attempting a delaying tactic: “Surely they should have seen that it was neither honourable nor safe to trifle with the country in this matter: that there never was a period when national confidence in public men was more needed to check the menacing progress of popular discontent.” If nothing were accomplished, “we want no prophet to

²⁰⁷ Gleig, “The Ministerial Resolutions”, *Blackwood’s*, vol.101 (Mar. 1867), 387-388.

²⁰⁸ “Why we want a Reform Bill”, *Fraser’s Magazine*, vol. 74 (Nov. 1866), 559-560.

²⁰⁹ Cecil, “Conservative Surrender”, 555.

²¹⁰ “The Reform League Demonstration”, *The Beehive*, 16 Feb. 1867, 6.

²¹¹ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 146-148.

foretell that Mr. Bright's next autumn campaign will be more successful than his last, or that Mr. Beales and the Reform League will be looking up".²¹²

Three days later, Disraeli abruptly announced he would create a bill as soon as possible.²¹³ Disraeli favored a measure of household suffrage, hedged by limitations to prevent working-class numerical dominance. He had difficulty with some of the ministers, however, who found even restricted household suffrage unpalatable.²¹⁴ One was described as "very placable, except on the phrase 'household suffrage', when his eye lights up with insanity".²¹⁵ In order to keep them on board, Disraeli was forced to propose a limited measure, called the "Ten Minutes Bill" because it was only decided upon ten minutes before it was read to the house.²¹⁶

The Conservative ministry's stumbling took place within an atmosphere of continuing tension. It was, said one Liberal commentator, "a very severe and perilous crisis", which in other countries might mean revolution. One side was bent on being admitted to power, while the other was only half committed to conceding it. The demonstrations might be moderate now, but if the political class fails to resolve the issue, then the "demonstrations will assume very different proportions, and the demands of which they are the expression grow to very different dimensions from those which they have at present". The only thing that kept the ministry in its place was "the realized conviction that the situation is critical".²¹⁷ *Blackwood's* was even more concerned. "Not within the memory of living men", he said, "nor long before it, has England stood in a position of greater danger or difficulty than that in which she stands at this moment". A weak government and a divided opposition, threatened and libeled by well-organized groups out of doors; a large portion of the working class misled by demagogues: It all added up to the danger of revolution.²¹⁸ Frederic Harrison pessimistically predicted that "Reform Bills and Reform agitations will go on now for many a long year". He predicted that "the contest is undoubtedly deepening; it may possibly be acute—it will probably be

²¹² Hayward, "Ministerial Prospects and Reform", *Fraser's Magazine*, vol.75 (Mar. 1867), 416.

²¹³ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 149-150.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 152-154.

²¹⁵ Monypenny and Buckle, *Disraeli*, 492.

²¹⁶ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 155-157. The bill provided a £6 rating borough franchise, combined with four "fancy franchises" for the upper classes, and a small redistribution of seats.

²¹⁷ Morley, "Public Affairs", *Fortnightly Review*, vol.7 (Mar. 1867), 372.

²¹⁸ Gleig, "Ministerial Resolutions", 380-381.

protracted”. If the upper classes would reform the constitution, they could avoid subjection by the working men, but “if not— then not”.²¹⁹

The League was suspicious of the actions of the Conservative government. The ten minutes bill was called “an insult to the working classes”, and it was feared that there would be “‘a nice little arrangement’ for admitting as few as possible”. Suspicion extended to both parties: It was not merely the Tories that they had to fight against, but the House itself. At the behest of Lucraft, the League decided to hold weekly meetings in Trafalgar Square, and they discussed holding a meeting in Hyde Park, the scene of the previous year’s riots. Cremer suggested they “consider the propriety of . . . a universal cession from labor until their political rights are conceded”.²²⁰ Potter soon afterwards made a similar proposal, of “a week’s cessation from business”,²²¹ a suggestion that sent one Liberal MP into transits of anxiety over the possible damage to the economy.²²² Potter’s language was heated: “If the Tory government continued their opposition, they would incur results which they did not then anticipate, but for which they would be held responsible. I do not advocate physical force; but . . . sacrifices [had] been made without their demands being conceded. This could not be continued without sad results.”²²³

The ten minutes bill was regarded as a failure. A meeting of 150 Conservative backbenchers urged the government to go back to its earlier plan of household suffrage with safeguards. They believed that the ten minutes bill “was not equal to the occasion”; it was strongly felt that “the question must be settled”.²²⁴ On 2 March Derby and Disraeli reverted to the plan of household suffrage. Lord Cranborne, Lord Carnarvon and General Peel promptly resigned from the cabinet in protest.²²⁵ Potter viewed these developments as encouraging: “If rumour be relied upon, the Tories are actually going to outbid the Whigs upon Reform”. However, he had little faith in either faction. Both parties must be watched carefully or the working class would be “humbled and betrayed”.²²⁶

Disraeli introduced his new bill, based upon household suffrage, on 18 March 1867. In his speech to parliament, he said that it put the franchise on “a broad popular

²¹⁹ F. Harrison, “Our Venetian Constitution”, *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 7 (Mar. 1867), 283.

²²⁰ “The Reform League”[meeting of delegates from trades and metropolitan branches of League], *The Beehive*, 2 Mar. 1867, 1.

²²¹ “The Reform Demonstration in Trafalgar-Square”, *The Times*, 4 Mar. 1867, 6.

²²² Smith, *Reform Bill*, 175-176.

²²³ “Reform Meeting in Trafalgar Square”, *The Beehive*, 9 Mar. 1867, 1.

²²⁴ Buckle, *Letters*, 403.

²²⁵ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 160-161.

²²⁶ “London Working Men’s Association”, *The Beehive*, 16 Mar. 1867, 1.

basis”, establishing new “popular privileges” while avoiding democracy.²²⁷ The bill would give all householders in the boroughs the ability to vote, provided that, as a test of “regularity of life and general trustworthiness of conduct”, they paid their poor rates personally and could prove two years residency. The bill, he stated, would immediately enfranchise 237,000 working-class borough voters. There remained 486,000 householders who would not automatically qualify because, due to local law, they paid their rates through their landlord rather than personally. These “compound householders” would be allowed to vote by opting out of the Act and paying their rates personally. Those who felt that they would not go through the mild inconvenience, Disraeli argued, were underestimating the working man’s desire for the vote.²²⁸ To compensate for the new working-class voters, Disraeli proposed a series of “fancy franchises”, which granted the vote to individuals who met requirements based on education, direct taxation, or bank deposits. Individuals meeting these qualifications, who already possessed the vote, were to be granted an extra vote. Altogether, this would add 305,000 votes, mainly for the more affluent.²²⁹

The bill had the superficial appearance of being a grand concession to the working class, but its actual effect promised to be much more limited. The requirement for two years residency excluded many working men, who often had to move frequently for employment reasons.²³⁰ The requirement for personal rate-payment effectively excluded even more. While Disraeli did allow the compound householders to opt out of compounding, this would be a highly inconvenient process and would result in them paying higher rates.²³¹ Disraeli privately told another Conservative that probably only 115,000 working men would actually obtain the vote immediately, while no more than

²²⁷ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 186, c.6.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, c.10-13. Compound householders, under the provisions of the Small Tenements Act, and similar local acts, paid their rates and assessed taxes through their landlord as part of the rent. The landlord was responsible for paying the collector. The rates paid by compounders were typically discounted, usually by 25 percent. The decision to adopt the Small Tenements Act was made by the individual parish vestry.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, c.19.

²³⁰ “Deputation to the Chancellor of the Exchequer”, *The Beehive*, 7 Apr. 1867, 6. See Beales’ comments.

²³¹ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 171; “The Conservative Reform Bill”, *The Spectator*, 23 March 1867, 317; *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 186, c. 33-34. To opt out of compounding, the tenant would have to make a claim to a parish officer, discover and pay any arrears, and then possibly months later appear before the revising barrister to support the claim. The claim would have to be repeated annually. Upon opting out, the tenant would have to pay the full rate rather than the discounted rate. Even then, the landlord might refuse to lower the rent to compensate for the rates he was no longer paying.

50,000 compound householders would likely take the trouble to be added. The bill, Disraeli assured him, was a conservative one, and had “really no spice of democracy”.²³²

The measure appeared messier and more unfair the more closely it was examined. It was the local parish that determined whether or not the local tenants were compounders. Thus, in some districts, Disraeli’s bill would result in immediate household suffrage, while in others, very few would in practical terms be able to vote. Local officials could exploit this fact to arbitrarily alter the number of local voters.²³³ Compound householders tended to be disproportionately from the larger urban boroughs, where the literate, politically aware, unionized artisans were more prevalent.²³⁴

The working-class Reformers reacted skeptically to Disraeli’s bill. Although the household suffrage provision was viewed positively, the bill as a whole was seen as a “confused, deceptive, and contradictory measure”.²³⁵ In the words of one Rochdale working man, it was a bill “full of trickery, and nothing but a sham to deceive working men”.²³⁶ Potter described it as a “gigantic fraud” and “an errant piece of political trickery intended to deceive”.²³⁷ Another called it “a remarkable display of clever Tory claptrap”.²³⁸ To Beales, the acceptance of the principle of household suffrage was considered a step forward; if the dishonest limitations on it were thrown away, and it were combined with a franchise for lodgers, it would be a considerable step in the direction of residential manhood suffrage. However, the effective disfranchisement of the compound householders, as well as the fancy franchises and dual votes, were unacceptable, and the agitations should continue until these were swept away. If Disraeli would not do it, he must give way to someone who would.²³⁹

On 7 April, a Reform League deputation met with Disraeli to discuss their difficulties with his bill and ask for a compromise. Although their ultimate goal remained manhood suffrage, they were willing to accept authentic household suffrage

²³² Buckle, *Letters*, 407-409.

²³³ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 169, 171-172.

²³⁴ “The Hitch in the Government’, *The Spectator*, 4 May 1867, 488.

²³⁵ “Meeting in Trafalgar Square”, *The Beehive*, 30 Mar. 1867, 1.

²³⁶ “The Country and the Bill”, *The Beehive*, 27 Apr. 1867, 7. The comment was at a meeting of Rochdale working men to discuss the pros and cons of the bill, most opinions being of the latter variety.

²³⁷ “Meetings in Trafalgar Square...The Working Men’s Association”, *The Beehive*, 23 Mar. 1867, 1.

²³⁸ “The Bill, Bribery, and the Ballot”, *The Commonwealth*, 25 May 1867, 4.

²³⁹ “The Reform League...Meeting of General Council and Delegates”, *The Beehive*, 23 Mar. 1867, 1.

combined with a lodger franchise, and they concentrated on criticizing those parts of the Tory bill that stood in the way of such a measure. George Mantle²⁴⁰ said that they could not support the bill as it stood, because “while in principle it professed to give deserving citizens the franchise, in its details it rendered it almost impossible for them to avail themselves of the right accorded them.” They declared the limitations on the compound householder unacceptable, denounced the fancy franchises and the two-year residency requirement, and requested a lodger franchise. Disraeli urged the need for compromise and insisted that his bill was based on “very popular principles”. The Leaguers vigorously disagreed, and became “rather free and easy in their manner”.²⁴¹ Beales complained that nothing from the deputation was “calculated to save the Reform League from further labour and agitation”. Fearing that the House would compromise on a modest measure, he argued that there should be “no more trifling” until an honest measure was produced.²⁴²

Gladstone wanted the Conservative bill utterly transformed in committee, in order to produce “a liberal enfranchisement . . . and thus put an end to the agitation of the question”.²⁴³ Most of his proposed alterations were in accord with what the working-class Reformers wanted: Removal of the restrictions on the compound householder, a franchise for lodgers, abolition of the dual vote and fancy franchises, and reduction of the residency requirement. If these were conceded, said *The Beehive*, the result would be a bill that “the country can accept with honour”.²⁴⁴ But in place of household suffrage, Gladstone supported a lower limit of £5 rating on the borough suffrage.²⁴⁵ As Gladstone put it, “if Parliament wants to limit the franchise, let it limit the franchise openly and manfully. Let it not send forth a two-faced bill, with a face of Toryism on one side and a face of democracy on the other”.²⁴⁶

The Liberals in general were not happy with Disraeli’s bill, for a variety of reasons. Not only did its unfair restrictions seem certain to provoke further agitation, but if the restrictions were removed, it would go farther than many wanted to go, and many

²⁴⁰ George Mantle (N.A-N.A). Active in Chartist movement beginning 1839, during which he was imprisoned twice (for inflammatory speeches, and for conspiracy). A radical voice in the Reform League.

²⁴¹ “Deputation to the Chancellor of the Exchequer”, *The Beehive*, 7 Apr. 1867, 6; “The Fox at Bay”, *The Beehive*, 7 Apr. 1867, 4.

²⁴² “The Reform League. . . Meeting of General Council and Delegates”, *The Beehive*, 7 Apr. 1867, 1.

²⁴³ “Meeting of the Liberal Party”, *The Times*, 6 Apr. 1867, 5.

²⁴⁴ “The Position of the Reform Question”, *The Beehive*, 30 Mar. 1867, 4.

²⁴⁵ Park, *Reform Bill*, 207.

²⁴⁶ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 186, c.1524.

Liberal manufacturers, it was said, did not wish to be “too completely at the mercy of the employed”.²⁴⁷ Bright supported Gladstone’s actions, ostensibly for pragmatic reasons,²⁴⁸ and seemingly vacillated between calling true household suffrage the “most solid and ancient basis” for the franchise, and expressing a desire for the exclusion of the “residuum”, “a small class at the very bottom of the scale”, consisting of persons of “almost hopeless poverty and dependence”.²⁴⁹

The working-class Reformers were disappointed with Gladstone. *The Beehive* lamented that Gladstone’s £5 line “falls short of that which, in the public mind, is rapidly rising up to the dimensions of a *sine qua non*”.²⁵⁰ Privately, Howell noted to Beales, “Gladstone seems trimming. We must keep him up to the mark”.²⁵¹ Others were more outspoken. Benjamin Lucraft called the £5 line was “as reprehensible as the Tory dodge” and said that it “ought not to satisfy the people”. He argued that “Whigs and Tories should be equally regarded with distrust”.²⁵² There was, however, an inclination to give Gladstone the benefit of the doubt, out of a “full belief in his honesty”²⁵³ and a desire to take control of the Reform question away from the untrustworthy Tories.²⁵⁴

Gladstone, however, proved no more successful at controlling the Liberals than he had the previous year. Some Radicals, believing that Disraeli’s bill could be modified into real household suffrage, refused to cooperate on establishing Gladstone’s £5 line. Disraeli, said a Liberal commentator, pursued a double-faced course, reassuring the Conservatives with restrictions while vaguely encouraging the Radicals to think that these restrictions could be removed: “Conservatives who support Disraeli, support him because they think he offers to exclude more than Mr. Gladstone; the Radicals who support him, support him because his proposed barriers will be far easier to throw down than Mr. Gladstone’s”.²⁵⁵

There was also an a fear that Gladstone would bring down the Conservative ministry, and an anxious desire for a rapid resolution of the controversy. The question, said one Radical dissident, must be settled before “a catastrophe or revolution occurred”,

²⁴⁷ “The Position of the Parties”, *Saturday Review*, 6 Apr. 1867, 417.

²⁴⁸ “Meeting of the Liberal Party”, *The Times*, 6 Apr. 1867, 5.

²⁴⁹ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 186, c. 636-637.

²⁵⁰ “The Tea-Room”, *The Beehive*, 13 Apr. 1867, 4.

²⁵¹ Gillespie, *Labor and Politics*, 278, citing letter.

²⁵² “Meeting in Trafalgar Square”, *The Beehive*, 20 Apr. 1867, 1.

²⁵³ “The Position of the Reform Question”, *The Beehive*, 30 Mar. 1867, 4.

²⁵⁴ “The Tea-Room”, *The Beehive*, 13 Apr. 1867, 4.

²⁵⁵ “The Last Battle”, *The Spectator*, 13 Apr. 1867, 405.

destroying the chance for moderate change.²⁵⁶ One Liberal commentator viewed the possible downfall of the government, and the resulting dissolution of parliament, as a potential disaster. The electors would be “subjected to a reign of terror, by the inflaming of the temper of the masses to fever heat . . . the multitude would openly avow the policy of terrifying them into compliance”.²⁵⁷

On the other hand, Disraeli was largely successful in keeping the Conservative rank-and-file on his side. A speech by an East Cornwall Tory squire perhaps indicates some reasons for this. In the past, he said, he had been hard set against Reform, and had even opposed Disraeli’s 1859 bill. But now, thanks to Gladstone’s bill, the Reform League, and Hyde Park, “a new state of circumstances had arisen, and he found himself placed in a situation of some embarrassment”. Many “hard-headed Conservatives” who had opposed Reform before, now argued that, “as there was a deep-rooted feeling of discontent planted in the minds of men, it was desirable that a large measure of Reform should be introduced”, and he was inclined to find them persuasive. He blamed Gladstone and Bright for provoking the agitations, but if the ministry felt it necessary to make concessions, he felt that their plan provided as good a resting place as any.²⁵⁸

On 12 April Gladstone attempted to move an amendment that would abolish the disabilities on the compound householder. It was believed that the amendment would be followed with another that would establish a £5 line, as the only remaining way of limiting the franchise. Disraeli portrayed the amendment as a “wrecking amendment” and threatened to drop the bill and dissolve parliament if it were carried. The amendment was defeated, with the assistance of former Adullamites and other Liberals, as well as a small number of Radicals. Gladstone, in his diary, called it “a smash . . . perhaps without example”.²⁵⁹

Beales argued that Gladstone had made a great mistake in advocating a £5 franchise, and said that “if Gladstone had taken up the position of insisting . . . upon a household suffrage, pure and unlimited . . . he would have had to a large extent the mind of the public with him”. He did not understand, however, why advanced Liberals should have opposed an amendment that had no direct relation to the £5 line, and was inclined to consider it treachery.²⁶⁰ *The Beehive* saw the amendment in the same light, as one establishing real household suffrage, and now had little optimism that the bill could be improved in committee. Fuming that “the House of Commons has proved itself rotten to the core”, and that “the Liberal party have betrayed the people”, it argued that “renewed agitation, on a more extensive scale than before, must now be the order of the day”.²⁶¹

²⁵⁶ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 176.

²⁵⁷ Morley, “Public Affairs”, *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 7 (May 1867), 632.

²⁵⁸ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 186, 1539-1541.

²⁵⁹ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 176-183.

²⁶⁰ “The Reform League...Meeting of General Council and Delegates”, *The Beehive*, Apr. 20 1867, 1.

²⁶¹ “The Reform Bill and the Liberal Party”, *The Beehive*, 20 Apr. 1867, 4.

While parliament wrangled over the bill, the Reform League and its allies continued their demonstrations. A demonstration at Birmingham on 22 April featured a procession by 40,000 local unionists and Leaguers and culminated in a meeting that nearly filled a mile-long field with between 150,000 and 500,000 people. The meeting's resolutions featured stern language. The checks and restrictions in Disraeli's bill were called "an injustice and an insult to the people". While the meeting wished to maintain peace, law, and order, "the continued obstructions to reform, and the base treachery of the House of Commons . . . will tend to exasperate a loyal and industrious people; and if persevered in, may ultimately lead to anarchy and revolution".²⁶² The crowd is said to have been less enthusiastic than usual at the mention of Gladstone, whose £5 line was not popular.²⁶³ This was soon followed by another League demonstration at Leeds, in which 100,000 took part. Potter, Beales, and Ernest Jones²⁶⁴ were the leading speakers. Resolutions were passed rejoicing at the progress that the principle of household suffrage had made in parliament, and calling for all sincere reformers to oppose the restrictions that prevented its full expression. Said one speaker, "The words household suffrage, once uttered, however insincerely, by a political party, could not be recalled". The implication was that the nothing short of household suffrage would be accepted from either party, and a Liberal MP who spoke in favor of the £5 line was booed by the crowd.²⁶⁵

When it began to seem as if Disraeli's bill might pass without sufficient alteration, some Reformers began to advocate a more radical approach that put civil disobedience and threats of force on the table. Even in the previous year, some had complained that the movement had "slightly overdone 'moral force'", and argued for the value of threats.²⁶⁶ With the frustrations of March and April, the radical voices within the League became more vocal. At one tempestuous meeting, a League speaker said that the passage of Disraeli's bill "would be the signal for an agitation more extensive and embittered and more powerful than had yet taken place". Arguing that it would be time for stronger measures than mere meetings and processions, he proposed that the working class refuse to pay taxes. George Mantle denounced the bill as an "insult to the nation" and said that parliament had forfeited the people's respect. The English, he said, seeing "the flowers of liberty growing up in every soil, watered by the blood of patriots and martyrs . . . had

²⁶² "Great Demonstration at Birmingham". *The Beehive*, 27 Apr. 1867, 1. The Beehive estimated between 200,000 and 250,000 participants.

²⁶³ "News of the Week", *The Spectator*, 27 Apr. 1867, 457.

²⁶⁴ Ernest Jones (1819-1869). Of aristocratic German background, he became a Chartist during the 1840s and became a leading figure in the movement during the 1850s. He was active in the Reform League during the 1866-67 agitations.

²⁶⁵ "The West Riding Demonstration", *The Beehive*, 27 Apr. 1867, 1.

²⁶⁶ "Physical Force!", *The Commonwealth*, 15 Dec. 1866, 4.

stuff enough in them to fight their own battle of liberty.” The people, he urged, must make their voices heard, and make Parliament feel that they must concede to the working classes or “for ever cease to exist”.²⁶⁷

There had for some time been discussion of a return to Hyde Park, the scene of the previous year’s riots. At one point, a Reform League promenade through the park had been planned, but Gladstone and Lord Shaftesbury had persuaded the League to abandon the scheme.²⁶⁸ Now, however, there seems to have been a strong desire for a showdown. Amid a tumultuous meeting, which became so heated that Beales at one point threatened to leave, the League chose to hold a meeting at Hyde Park on 6 May. It was felt that “the Reformers should show to the Government and their enemies in general that they were no longer to be trifled with”.²⁶⁹ Odger, Cremer, and Lucraft backed the motion against the wishes of the more moderate Beales and Howell.²⁷⁰

The radical language continued at the next council meeting. Charles Bradlaugh²⁷¹ declared that the people were determined to refuse to pay taxes and rates if an honest Reform measure were not passed. He said they would meet at Hyde Park whether the Government attempted to stop it or not, and that they “would not only demand admittance to the park, but enforce that admittance if refused”. Beales, the voice of moderation, argued against strong language and said they must not assume the government would interfere. The meeting resolved to hold the demonstration whether or not the government attempted to prevent it.²⁷² The *Commonwealth* was in a combative mood: “Whoever lives to write the history of the Reform Movement of 1866-7 will, if we mistake not, have the occasion to write the word blood ere he has concluded his task. The people are in no mood to be trifled with.” The Reform leaders had tried hard to do things peacefully, but they had received nothing but trickery from Disraeli. The working class was unlikely to tolerate such treatment, and revolution was the probable outcome. An alliance with Fenianism would be regrettable but not unlikely. “Let [the aristocracy] be wise in time,” it warned, “for delays are more than dangerous”.²⁷³

²⁶⁷ “Meeting in Trafalgar Square”, *The Beehive*, 20 Apr. 1867, 1.

²⁶⁸ *The Working Man*, 6 Apr. 1867, quoted in Breuille, *Reform League*, 217-218.

²⁶⁹ “Reform League...Meeting of General Council and Delegates”, *The Beehive*, 20 Apr. 1867, 1.

²⁷⁰ F.M. Leventhal, *Respectable Radical: George Howell and Victorian Working Class Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 89. Citing the Reform League Executive Committee Minutes for 18 Apr. 1867.

²⁷¹ Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891). Radical secularist, freethinker, and republican. Active in radical politics, a noted speaker, and member of Reform League executive 1866-67. Owned and edited the weekly *National Reformer* (1862-1891), which mainly focused on atheism but also covered radical politics.

²⁷² “The Reform League”, *The Beehive*, 27 Apr. 1867, 1.

²⁷³ “Words of Warning”, *The Commonwealth*, 27 Apr. 1867, 4.

The government attempted to stop the demonstration, and on 1 May sent a delegation of police officials to a meeting of the League council to announce that it would not be permitted. Beales responded that the government had no legal right to do so, and said that “if there were any riot or disturbance the fault would rest with the government”. Bradlaugh was considerably more forceful. Propheying that the Government would call out the military, he said that he would not be deterred from attending, and if violence were used he would be among the first to meet that violence. The League council enthusiastically chose to go ahead with the meeting.²⁷⁴

The atmosphere preceding the meeting was tense. *The Beehive*, believing that the government would attempt to arrest the speakers as they attempted to hold the meeting, implored the demonstrators not to attempt a rescue, and “give an excuse to the government for shedding the blood of the people”, of which “the consequences no one can foretell, in the present temper of the working men”.²⁷⁵ *The Commonwealth* was considerably less restrained. Of the government, it speculated, “Will it, dare it cause the people to be slaughtered in cold blood?”. It warned: “Let but a single drop of blood shed on Monday next, and, if we are not mistaken, the word will go forth, that such blood must be avenged. We at least shall be prepared to admit that the reign of terror has commenced and must be played out.”²⁷⁶ *The Times*, scolding the League for trying to provoke a collision between the government and the crowd, predicted riots and disturbance, and advised the curious to stay well away.²⁷⁷ In parliament, Gladstone earnestly entreated the League to obey the government.²⁷⁸

Thousands of police, including much of the mounted constabulary, were to be moved to the park. Thousands of special constables were sworn in and armed with staves, and the military, planning to assist the police if needed, moved sizable reinforcements to the capital. There was even a rumor that Armstrong guns would be deployed. At the last minute, however, the government caved in and decided to let the meeting take place.²⁷⁹ The park, lamented *The Times*, was “to be surrendered to King Mob”. It continued: “It is now a comfort to think that we have reached . . . the very bottom of this question, and cannot fall lower. MR. BEALES and his colleagues will

²⁷⁴ “The Reform League...Meeting of the General Council and Delegates- The Hyde Park Meeting”, *The Beehive*, 4 May 1867, 1.

²⁷⁵ “The Government, the League, and the Hyde Park Meeting”, *The Beehive*, 4 May 1867, 4.

²⁷⁶ “The Reform League and the Government...The Hyde Park Meeting”, *The Commonwealth*, 4 May 1867, 4.

²⁷⁷ Leading article, *The Times*, 4 May 1867, 9.

²⁷⁸ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 186, c. 1761.

²⁷⁹ “The Hyde Park Demonstration”, *The Times*, 6 May 1867, 9.

reign in Hyde Park this evening, and may be considered the actual government of the country . . . For our part, we must confess to a relief not of the most heroic kind". If the government had been implicated in bloodshed, it said, the Conservatives might have been "ostracized from all power and place till the end of the century".²⁸⁰

Although 10,000 police and soldiers were ready nearby in the event of any disorder, the meeting that had "kept the metropolis in a state of chronic alarm and agitation for the last month" took place without incident, and there appears to have been a very large turnout.²⁸¹ Probably between 150,000 and 200,000 attended.²⁸² Beales congratulated the crowd on their meeting, and told them that if they were firm and resolved, they would "soon have the Reform they required". Another called upon the Commons to make the bill "a full and honest measure". Bradlaugh reminded the crowd of the Peterloo massacre, and explained that the "better educated classes" did not repeat it this time "because they dared not, for there is now a power in the people, which would strike the mightiest in the land". Mantle, for his part, called for and received three cheers for the Queen.²⁸³ *The Beehive* called it "a great moral victory" for the people,²⁸⁴ while *The Times* called it "a humiliation on the government such as has seldom been suffered by men in office."²⁸⁵ The luckless Walpole, serving as a scapegoat, soon resigned as Home Secretary.²⁸⁶ The demonstration attracted international admiration. Guiseppe Garibaldi, the great Italian revolutionary, called it "the most important manifestation which has for a long time conferred honour on the human family" and exhorted all who could to "imitate . . . the glorious example of the people of England".²⁸⁷

Bradlaugh's *National Reformer* remarked that "to behold 200,000 working men surrounding ten platforms for the purpose of denouncing the political manoeuvres and unjust acts of the present government, should convince the most obstinate Tory that the present so-called Reform Bill has but little chance of satisfying the just demands of the

²⁸⁰ Leading article, *The Times*, 6 May 1867, 8.

²⁸¹ "The Hyde Park Reform Demonstration", *The Times*, 7 May 1867, 9.

²⁸² Some estimates: *The Times*: at least 40,000-50,000 ("The Hyde Park Reform Demonstration", *The Times*, 7 May 1867, 9.). *The Beehive*: 250,000 ("The Walpole Blunder", *The Beehive*, 11 May 1867, 4). *The Liberal Daily News*: 100,000-150,000 (cited in R. Harrison, *Socialists*, 94). *The Conservative Morning Post*: 200,000 (quoted in "Our Great Demonstration", *The National Reformer*, 12 May 1867, 289).

²⁸³ "The Hyde Park Demonstration", *The Beehive*, 11 May 1867, 6.

²⁸⁴ "The League in Hyde Park", *The Beehive*, 11 May 1867, 4.

²⁸⁵ Leading article, *The Times*, 7 May 1867, 8.

²⁸⁶ "A Humble Government", *The Spectator*, 11 May 1867, 517.

²⁸⁷ "Garibaldi on the Hyde Park Meeting", *The Beehive*, 1 June 1867, 1.

people”.²⁸⁸ Thus, the 6 May meeting demonstrated in unmistakable fashion what was already becoming evident- that Disraeli’s bill would not “settle the question”. Shortly before the great meeting, the *Saturday Review* had commented: “if the country were apathetic, and the House of Commons were left to itself, there is probably a good working majority in favour of making a Reform Bill as much of a sham as possible. But we do not see that the country is apathetic”. Rather, the people wanted “an honest measure of Reform”, and thus, if the bill were passed unaltered, it would neither bring peace, nor be a settlement.²⁸⁹

The increasingly radical statements of the working-class Reformers, the success of the Hyde Park demonstration of 6 May, and the promises of even greater agitations to come, had demonstrated that Disraeli’s bill, as it stood, was unlikely to “settle the question”. Since the need to quiet the agitations and “settle the question” had been perhaps the most compelling motive for introducing the bill in the first place, it seems likely that this fact had some influence over the course legislation would take. Whatever the reason, the rest of May saw the total transformation of Disraeli’s bill in the House of Commons.

The League had demonstrated in convincing fashion that Disraeli’s bill, as it stood, served only to intensify the agitations. The middle-class Radicals at the Reform Union promised to redouble their efforts as well. Samuel Morley urged that the middle class and working class unite their efforts in seeking real and substantial Reform, and called for fresh agitations if this were not achieved. P.A. Taylor declared the £5 line a mistake, because the people could not be rallied under it, and argued that Gladstone could rally both classes under a call for unrestricted household suffrage.²⁹⁰

Gladstone began to move closer to the Radicals. At a meeting with the Reform Union, he declared that, while he still held reservations about the merits of enfranchising the poorer householders, his proposal of a £5 line was “dead and gone”. He promised to concentrate all his efforts on removing the unjust restrictions in Disraeli’s bill. He was, in effect, now pushing for the bill to be amended into full household suffrage. If that failed and the bill became law anyway, he promised to oppose it with all legal means possible. If the bill were passed unaltered, he warned, it would be “but the commencement of a fresh conflict, and the signal for entering on a new strife”.²⁹¹ A Conservative commentator, arguing that the bill was already very extensive and the disabilities on the compounders minor, denounced Gladstone for needlessly threatening a “fierce and turbulent popular agitation”.²⁹²

²⁸⁸ Charles Watts, “The Reform Demonstration in Hyde Park”, *The National Reformer*, 12 May 1867, 297.

²⁸⁹ “Recent Speeches on Reform”, *Saturday Review*, 27 Apr. 1867, 516-517.

²⁹⁰ *The Times*, 11 May 1867, quoted in Breuilly, *Reform League*, 235.

²⁹¹ “Mr. Gladstone and the National Reform Union”, *The Times*, 13 May 1867, 6.

²⁹² “Mr. Gladstone and Saturday’s Deputation”, *Saturday Review*, 18 May 1867, 621.

A series of amendments from the Liberal side virtually turned Disraeli's bill inside out. For the most part, Disraeli made little effort to oppose them. The first of the alterations had come in late April, with the reduction in the residency requirement from two years to one year. Early May saw the creation of a £10 franchise for lodgers, at the behest of a Radical, W.T. Torrens, but with Disraeli's approval.²⁹³

The largest unresolved question remained that of the compound householder. A Radical, J.T. Hibbert, proposed an amendment that partially remedied the problem. Disraeli had been inclined to accept it, and had promised some Radicals that he would do so. However, more Conservative members of the Cabinet threatened to resign if he accepted it. Disraeli was forced to oppose it, and it was defeated.²⁹⁴ It was soon followed by new schemes to enfranchise the compound householder. One was devised by a Liberal, H.C.E. Childers, at the behest of Gladstone and Bright. It allowed compounding only if the tenant requested it. Meanwhile, Grosvenor Hodgkinson, an obscure "advanced Liberal" backbencher, concocted his own simple if drastic solution to the problem—abolish the compound householder altogether by repealing the Small Tenements Acts.²⁹⁵

On 17 May, Hodgkinson brought his measure before the House. Gladstone delivered an impassioned speech in favor of it, or better, Childers's foreshadowed motion. The government, he said, could hardly oppose such an amendment, for it left intact Disraeli's "great principal" of personal rate-payment. He had no intention, he said, of proposing any limitations on the bill's household suffrage provisions, but he was obliged to oppose the bill as it stood, with its unjust restrictions, which were "of a nature most unjust, most vexatious, and most certain to lead to that which we all desire to avoid—prolonged agitation until they are swept away". He supported the amendment, in spite of his regret for the abolition of compounding, because it would provide "an immediate, real, and liberal enfranchisement", creating an "immediate settlement" and preventing further agitations. "When on any great question," he said, "there is popular agitation and thousands meeting in the country, protesting against the proceedings of Parliament, and declaring that . . . they cannot be acquiesced in . . . I can only say that it causes me great apprehension". He threatened to appeal to public opinion, and called the amendment an opportunity, possibly the last, for a settlement that would secure peace, concord, and general assent both inside and outside the House.²⁹⁶ Essentially, he warned that an unaltered bill would bring on fresh agitations—ones which he would support.

Disraeli's response, apparently much to everyone's surprise, was to announce his unconditional approval for Hodgkinson's proposal. Having all along claimed to be championing a popular bill, he acted as if no great concession had been made. The proposal was not, he said, inconsistent with his bill, but would in fact strengthen it and "give completeness" to it. He claimed he had been in favor of something similar all

²⁹³ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 193-194.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 178-179, 192-193.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 196-198.

²⁹⁶ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 187, c.713-719.

along, but had not wanted to overburden the legislation,²⁹⁷ and denied that he had been influenced by “the terrors which have been depicted, and the agitation with which we have been threatened”.²⁹⁸

Disraeli had, at a stroke, removed the largest of the restrictions, and thereby quadrupled the number of new working-class voters.²⁹⁹ As one observer put it, “the character of the bill was so materially altered that for all practical purposes it became a new measure”.³⁰⁰ The Radicals seemed delighted. J.S. Mill called it “a great and splendid concession”.³⁰¹ W.E. Forster, who would shortly be seen dancing for joy down the lobby,³⁰² “hailed with the greatest delight the concessions” of Disraeli, which he believed “would prove satisfactory to the country, which was anything but satisfied with the Bill in its present shape”.³⁰³

When the debate continued on 20 May, Robert Lowe, horrified by the sudden expansion of the enfranchisement, vehemently attacked the bill and the democratic evils it would bring.³⁰⁴ J.W. Henley, a Tory squire from Oxfordshire, who in 1865 had opposed any reduction of the borough franchise,³⁰⁵ replied that the bill was the most Conservative now possible. In light of the agitations, he felt it a more Conservative policy to “settle the question” rather than “to let the pot go on boiling till it overflows and brings us to a much worse state of things”. If nothing were done, “the question would have gone on from agitation to agitation until it had introduced into the country a state of things which all of us would be sorry to see”. “No man in the House”, except Lowe,

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, c.720, c.724-725.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, c.726.

²⁹⁹ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 202.

³⁰⁰ Homersham Cox, *A History of the Reform Bills of 1866 and 1867* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1868), 201.

³⁰¹ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 187, c.738.

³⁰² Trevelyan, *Bright*, 377.

³⁰³ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 187, c.753.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, c.781-800.

³⁰⁵ Hayward, “The Conservative Transformation”, *Fraser’s Magazine*, vol.76 (Nov. 1867), 657. Henley was sometimes misquoted as having been in favor of household suffrage in 1865. He is described as an “unimpeachable old Tory” (Monypenny and Buckle, *Disraeli*, 542).

“would say that we could safely stand still”.³⁰⁶ Another Conservative, while feeling that the agitations had been manufactured by Gladstone and Bright, acknowledged that “it was owing to the popular excitement out of doors . . . that [Disraeli] and his Colleagues had been compelled to take the step they had now taken”, and reluctantly supported the bill as it stood.³⁰⁷

Disraeli explained his motives for accepting Hodgkinson’s amendment in a letter to the Home Secretary, Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy. Forced to respond to Gladstone’s “meditated coup”, he had made the decision on the spot: “Having revolved everything in my mind, I felt that the critical moment had arrived when, without in the least degree receding from our principle and position of rating and residential suffrage, we might take a step which would destroy the present agitation and extinguish Gladstone & Co.”³⁰⁸ Thus, it would seem that the threat of continued agitations, and the continued attacks made by Gladstone and the Liberals on the bill’s restrictions, were perhaps the greatest factors in Disraeli’s decision. This was undoubtedly based on a realistic view of the situation. The restrictions were becoming politically untenable. The bill as it had stood had completely failed to mollify the working-class Reformers. Rather than quieting the agitations, it had made them take a more radical, confrontational approach. As one Radical put it, “there was no denying the fact that there was throughout the country a very strong feeling against the Bill as it stood”,³⁰⁹ and Gladstone and the Liberals promised to exploit this fact to the fullest against the Conservatives. Rather than “settling the question”, the bill had seemed destined to spark further, and perhaps more heated, political conflict. Disraeli seized upon Hodgkinson’s amendment because it gave him an opportunity to make concessions while minimizing the political damage. It nominally preserved Disraeli’s much-vaunted “principle” of personal rate-payment, while the fact that it came from an obscure backbencher made it look less damaging than if it had come directly from Gladstone or one closely connected to him.

The rest of the modifications came rapidly and easily. Disraeli quickly allowed the county franchise to be lowered from £15 to £12, and accepted the abolition of the “fancy franchises” with barely a murmur.³¹⁰ In early April, Gladstone had planned to replace Disraeli’s restrictions with his own; now he made no attempt to do so. When one Liberal, Paulette Scrope, attempted to put a lower limit of £4 rating on the franchise, he

³⁰⁶ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 187, c.800-802. This speech was often quoted. Lord Cranborne remarked that Henley had, with “cynical candour”, “betrayed the ignoble secret” behind the government’s conversion. Cecil, “Conservative Surrender”, 555.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, c.808-809, c.811.

³⁰⁸ Monypenny and Buckle, *Disraeli*, 540.

³⁰⁹ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 187, 734.

³¹⁰ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 206-207.

received little support, and both Disraeli and Gladstone opposed it.³¹¹ Disraeli was more successful in resisting changes when it came to the redistribution of seats. Much to Radical displeasure, the extent of the redistribution was relatively minor compared to the massive changes made in the franchise, and was considered favorable to the landed interest.³¹² This was perhaps a reflection of the fact that the agitations had focused so heavily on lowering the franchise.

The bill in its final form was, at least with regards to the franchise, a radical, sweeping measure. Household suffrage, which only a small collection of Radicals had advocated a short time before, was now incorporated into the bill of a Conservative ministry. The result was a 138% increase in the borough electorate, plus a 38% increase in the counties.³¹³ The working class now had unquestionably attained considerable voting power. If it was not manhood suffrage, it was a considerable step in that direction.

The radical nature of the bill created some misgivings on the part of parliament. Lord Shaftesbury was of the opinion that “with the exception of a few advanced Democrats, they all detest and fear the measure”. Lord Grey similarly claimed that most of the Commons disapproved of what they were passing.³¹⁴ Said one Liberal commentator, “if the truth were known, those [MPs] who do not feel more or less uncomfortable at the thought of the future are very few indeed”.³¹⁵ Nonetheless, the bill passed easily in the Commons. One Liberal later commented that aside from a few Radicals, there was “no considerable party in Parliament which thoroughly approved . . . the House accepted the position simply because it was inevitable”.³¹⁶ One writer, himself aghast at the scale of the enfranchisement and infuriated at those who had supported it, noted that many Conservatives who disliked the bill and deeply regretted its necessity, “believed it was the best that could be done under the circumstances, and that to pass it would be a less evil than to reject it and prolong the agitation, with all the hazardous possibilities of future discomfiture”.³¹⁷ The House of Lords, after some abortive attempts at mischief, allowed it to pass with only minor alterations.³¹⁸

³¹¹ Leading article, *The Times*, 29 May 1867, 8; Parliamentary proceedings, *The Times*, 29 May 1867, 8.

³¹² Rae, “The Future of Reform”, *Westminster Review*, vol.88 o.s., 32 n.s.(July 1867), 186.

³¹³ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 236.

³¹⁴ Park, *Reform Bill*, 233.

³¹⁵ Morley, “Public Affairs”, *Fortnightly Review*, vol.7 (June 1867), 754.

³¹⁶ Cox, *Reform Bills*, 204.

³¹⁷ William Rathbone Greg, “The Achievements and the Moral of 1867”, *North British Review*, vol. 47 (Sept. 1867), 218.

³¹⁸ Smith, *Reform Bill*, 209-212.

The working-class Reformers were largely satisfied with the bill. Beales gave Disraeli credit for what he did, but felt that true credit belonged to the agitations. “The Reform League”, he said, “were the real authors of the bill”.³¹⁹ *The Beehive* said that “every wise man must be thankful for the course that things are taking . . . with reference to Reform . . . After exhausting his large ingenuity to blindfold his followers, and to circumvent his opponents, Mr. DISRAELI has at last bowed to the demand of the popular voice”.³²⁰

Looking to the future, *The Beehive* hoped the new voting rights would improve the condition of the working class. They did not envy the rich, it said, or covet their wealth. Rather, what they wanted was “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s wage”. It continued, “we demand the right to organize our labour . . . we look to educate ourselves and our children . . . we look for the curtailment of taxation . . . and the more equitable distribution of those which are inevitable . . . and we shall not be content until we secure for all the people of these kingdoms justice and equality.” Suspicion was expressed at both Liberals and Conservatives, whose interests, it was felt, had “little in common with the interests of the people”. With respect to both parties, it said, “so long as they shall honestly serve the people, but not one hour beyond, we are their friends”.³²¹ The Conservatives by and large won few converts by their actions. Lucraft did, in July, declare that he did not trust Gladstone and Bright and would “much sooner depend on a Tory government than upon the Manchester party”, but he was vigorously denounced by Howell³²² and censured by Odger.³²³ *The Beehive*, while distrusting the Liberals in general, felt its aspirations more closely identified with certain members of it, the “deep sincerity of Mr. Gladstone” and the “vigorous bluntness of Mr. Bright” being more esteemed than “the wondrous dexterity of Mr. Disraeli”.³²⁴ The agitations were over; one more demonstration was held in Hyde Park in August, mainly to defend the right of public meeting. The Reform League assisted the Liberal party in the election of 1868, but it disbanded a year later.

There are really two possible explanations one can make for the wide divergence between the original and final versions of Disraeli’s bill. One could argue that Disraeli had, with his original bill, tried to placate the demands for Reform, and head off Gladstone and Bright, with a measure that had the surface appearance of liberality, but that was in fact quite limited in actual effect. Once it became clear that the bill only aggravated the working class, and gave Gladstone and the Liberals continued grounds for

³¹⁹ “The Reform League...Meeting of the General Council”, *The Beehive*, 1 June 1867, 1.

³²⁰ “All’s well that ends well”, *The Beehive*, 1 June 1867, 4.

³²¹ “The Future”, *The Beehive*, 10 Aug. 1867, 4.

³²² “The Reform League and the Manchester Party”, *The Times*, 4 July 1867, 9.

³²³ “The Reform League . . . Meeting of the Council”, *The Beehive*, 14 July 1867, 1.

³²⁴ “The Future”, *The Beehive*, 10 Aug. 1867, 4.

attacking the Tories as obstructers, it became evident that only a truly extensive bill would both put an end to the agitation and cut the ground from under the Liberal assault.

The other, less provable possibility is that Disraeli had been inclined towards a wide enfranchisement from the beginning of the session, as the best way resolving the controversy. The “safeguards” in his original bill, then, had been there to placate the more conservative members of his cabinet and party, as well as the Adullamites, and he had planned all along to give them up. There were some at the time who believed this had been the case. Afterwards, Lord Cranborne accused Disraeli of having wanted a radical bill all along; all the safeguards had been merely to lure the Conservatives into accepting it.³²⁵ He was not alone in thinking this. In early April, a Liberal commentator had warned that the safeguards and limitations in Disraeli’s bill were there merely to mollify his cabinet and his party, and that he intended to have them fall away and leave a radical bill. If this happened, he warned, there would be little the Liberals could do, for they could hardly afford to be seen as being more conservative than the Conservatives. The only thing that might hold Disraeli back was the resistance of his colleagues.³²⁶ According to another Liberal, Disraeli had planned a radical bill from the start, but realizing that it would scare his party if revealed all at once, had only revealed its full magnitude by degrees, and had thus by subterfuge turned his “great omnibus full of stupid, heavy country gentlemen” into “Radical Reformers”.³²⁷

There is a certain plausibility to this scenario, given Disraeli’s rather unconventional Toryism, and it would explain why Disraeli’s original bill was such a ramshackle, poorly designed measure. If Disraeli did envision a radical bill at the beginning of the session, however, it was probably because of the changed conditions created by the agitations, which demanded an extensive settlement. There is no evidence that Disraeli would have supported anything like household suffrage prior to the agitations, and in fact he had in the recent past vigorously argued that *any* lowering of the borough franchise was dangerous.³²⁸ At any rate, in the absence of hard evidence, all this must remain speculation.

Whatever Disraeli’s thinking, it seems likely that a radical bill was the only successful way out of the crisis for his government. The agitations, as both Liberals and Conservatives acknowledged, had made the resolution of the Reform issue inevitable. A restrictive bill, as was made evident during April and May, neither “settled the question” nor ended the agitations, and allowed the Liberals to attack it. Perhaps the Conservatives and conservative Liberals could have mustered enough votes to pass a restrictive measure, but judging by the temper of the working-class Reformers, it would only have

³²⁵ Cecil, “Conservative Surrender”, 539-541.

³²⁶ “Mr. Disraeli’s Strategy and its Results”, *The Spectator*, 6 Apr. 1867, 376.

³²⁷ *Parl. Deb.*, vol. 187, c.747-748.

³²⁸ Hayward, “Conservative Transformation”, 656-657. The article quotes Disraeli’s speeches in opposition to Baines’s £6 borough franchise proposal in 1865.

lead to further agitation, which the Liberals could have exploited to attack the Conservatives. The only way out was a bill that outbid the Liberals.

Both Conservatives who had supported Disraeli's bill, and those who had opposed it, admitted that the agitations had been a major influence in bringing it about. Writing in *Quarterly Review*, Lord Cranborne asked the question, "Why did the household suffrage that was so hateful, so dangerous in 1866, become in 1867 the fitting and proper settlement of the question?" Why had the Conservatives, so vocally opposed to giving the working class power in 1866, reversed course so drastically?

"A transfer of power which last year was generally denounced as revolutionary, has this year been passed . . . hurriedly and with little debate. Such a sudden change cannot be attributed to calm conviction . . . the classes in this country, whose interest is opposed to democracy, have no heart to fight³²⁹ . . . the apostles of Reform who have the real credit of their conversion are the mobs who beat down the palings of Hyde Park, or went marching with bands and banners in the towns of the North."³³⁰

Cranborne was furious at such a display of weakness, which to him set terrible precedents for the future.³³¹ Regretting the fact that the Tories had, in comparison to 1832, put up so little resistance, he exclaimed, "is it in truth so great an evil, when the dearest interests and the most sincere convictions are at stake, to go within twenty-four hours of revolution?"³³² Instead, to his disgust, the ruling classes had capitulated:

"The comfortable classes had no stomach for a real struggle . . . they saw in it ugly visions of the future- labor giving laws to capital, Trades' Unions rules supreme . . . they had beguiled themselves with the belief that it was possible to hold their rights without a struggle, and under that impression they had talked bravely for a time. But when they discovered their mistake, they took their overthrow meekly and gave up at once. All they entreated was that the agitation should be got rid of, and the question settled without delay".³³³

Blackwood's, which supported Disraeli's bill, acknowledged the role of popular demands in calmer fashion. The new bill was not, it admitted, a Conservative one in the strictest sense. It was in fact a great innovation. However, "the multitude had, for better or worse, acquired a far greater and more immediate influence on what is called public opinion than they had ever before possessed." It had therefore become necessary for the Conservative government to adjust the constitution to this fact. They had pursued reform in order to placate the masses, not because they favored it themselves. "Certainly we must all agree that a constant agitation for Reform is a great social mischief"; if that agitation can be ended by a measure that will satisfy the populace while preserving "the

³²⁹ Cecil, "Conservative Surrender", 542.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 556.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 556-557.

³³² *Ibid.*, 543.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 555-556.

balance of our commonwealth”, then it ought to be done.³³⁴ As a Liberal account concludes, “the proceedings of [the Reform League] had, beyond all question, a considerable influence upon the conduct of the Conservative Ministry . . . and by forcing the subject of Reform upon their attention promoted in a material degree” the enactment of the Reform Act.³³⁵

Cowling says that “parliament . . . was not afraid of public agitation, nor was its action determined by it”.³³⁶ This rather misses the point. To say that the agitations, and the strength of working class desires that they demonstrated, had a strong effect on the thinking of parliamentarians, is not to say that they were literally coerced, or that they made their decisions out of fear for their own safety. There does seem to have been noticeable anxiety about the coercive potential of the large gatherings, especially among Conservatives. The threat of “King Mob” was nothing to be sneered at, in a day when crowd control was rudimentary and the masses often disgruntled. Nonetheless, individuals such as Beales and Potter were not revolutionaries, and while some of the Leaguers seemed to find violence not unthinkable as a means of gaining their objectives, the object of the League was not to overturn the social order, but to secure the working class a better place within it. Nor were they likely a significant immediate threat to a state backed by large armed forces.

However, it was hardly necessary for parliament to have actually physically feared the agitations, for it to have been effected by them. The fact seems to be that, while there was a reluctance to concede the franchise to the working class, there was a greater reluctance to risk serious unrest and usher in a period of markedly increased class antagonism. The upper classes were, as Lord Cranborne complained, inclined to make concessions rather than risk a really serious confrontation. This is demonstrated not only by the concessions on Reform, but in the approach to the Hyde Park demonstrations. In both cases the government made a show of opposition, but then gave way rather than face further disorder. In the first case, this was belated. In the second case, it was preemptive. Such behavior would have been unthinkable in the days of the Chartists or Peterloo. Those against concessions, such as Cranborne, did not deny the gravity of the agitations; they merely advocated a policy of intransigence and confrontation that their Conservative compatriots evidently had no stomach for. The fact that the agitations of 1866-1867 never reached the level of danger attained by those of 1831-1832 was due less to any lesser degree of strength or enthusiasm on the part of the working classes, than it was to the fact that concessions were made with relatively minor resistance.

The inclination towards concession was probably encouraged by the moderation and pragmatism of those making the demands. Unlike the Chartists, the trade unionists and radicals who led the agitations of 1866-67 had very practical and limited ends in mind. They wanted social reform and legal rights for trade unions, not a radical reconstruction of society. The prosperous, literate members of the “new model” unions

³³⁴ Gleig, “The Reform Bill”, *Blackwood's*, vol. 101 (June 1867), 762-763.

³³⁵ Cox, *Reform Bills*, 88.

³³⁶ Cowling, *Reform*, 3.

were in their own way as concerned with social stability as those wealthier than them. The governing classes might not want to concede voting rights to a working class led by such individuals, but their resistance would only go so far.

The nature of the “artisan elite” was in fact such that it allowed them to attract support from the left wing of the middle-class Liberals. While the Chartists had attracted notoriously little support in parliament, and had had extremely hostile relations with John Bright’s Anti-Corn Law League, the Leaguers could count on a large section in parliament that wanted to go at least a partial way towards giving them what they wanted. While an alliance between trade unionists and ardent advocates of laissez-faire was bound to have limitations, it was not without fruits. It at least meant that the governing classes could not pose a united front in deciding how far to go with enfranchisement. Instead, the result was, as Lowe complained, “two parties of competition, who, like Cleon and the sausage seller in Aristophanes, are both bidding for the support of Demos”.³³⁷

Cowling says that there was nothing inevitable about what happened.³³⁸ It is very difficult, with any complex event, to say with certainty whether a particular outcome was inevitable. What is clear is that the working-class agitations played a very influential role in the course of events. Between the spring of 1866 and the beginning of 1867, they changed the face of the national debate on Reform. During the debate on Gladstone’s bill, MPs had felt free to demean the working classes without restraint, and much of the House had applauded such language. A paltry enfranchisement had been widely denounced as excessive. Months of agitations put an end to such an attitude, and replaced it with a widespread conviction that the issue must be resolved in a definitive way. A government that had gained power thanks to the anti-Reform sentiment in parliament now felt that it was necessary to deal with the issue.

The bill was shaped and took its final form in a political climate in which, thanks to the agitations, there was a strong desire to “settle the question”. If, at the beginning of the session, there had been any belief that the working class might be satisfied with half-measures, the continued strength and increased militancy of the agitations dispelled them. A measure wider than either side of the House really preferred was accepted, rather than provoking further agitations, or angering the people who, in some form, were now certain to join the electorate.

Some credit must be given to Disraeli, whose parliamentary dexterity probably helped considerably in ensuring that the question was resolved quickly and painlessly, and to Gladstone, who raised the issue in 1866 and helped keep Disraeli honest in 1867. But it must be remembered that the Reform Act of 1867 went much further than either of them had contemplated earlier. While the competitions for political gain between Liberals, Conservatives, Radicals and Whigs, were important in their own right, the controversy that brought household democracy cannot be understood without seeing that it was to a great degree the story of popular demands and how they were dealt with. In a country with class divisions as wide as Victorian Britain’s, the enfranchisement of “the dangerous classes” could hardly have come about any other way.

³³⁷ Cox, *Reform Bills*, 205.

³³⁸ Cowling, *Reform*, 310.

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