



Will Of The People

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The day before 52 per cent of Britons voted to exit the European Union, Jean-Claude Juncker declared that he was ‘not a big fan of referendums’. His colleague Donald Tusk, clearly not a member of the referendum fan club either, defiantly stating after Brexit that ‘whatever doesn’t kill us, makes us stronger’. Juncker and Tusk’s complete and utter disregard for the will of the people is shared by a cabal of politicians, journalists and academics, who sincerely believe that the majority of their fellow citizens are simply ill equipped to play any sort of political role. Since Brexit, this powerful intelligentsia has openly advocated a kind of soft tyranny by a ruling elite—of which they clearly believe they are a part— rather than popular democracy. These anti-democratic arguments were employed nearly 200 years ago in Britain when the public began to make their presence felt though the radical political reform movement of Chartism. The Chartists were essentially a loose association of 19th century working class democrats, whose aim was the enfranchisement of British men through parliamentary reform. Then, as now, the political elite

presented the idea of allowing the masses a voice as equivalent to setting society on a destructive path to revolution and anarchy.



Former Chartist Mural at Newport City Council

DEMOCRACY IN A TIME OF CHANGE

Chartism emerged during a century of rapid change. The industrial revolution dramatically altered Britain's physical and social landscape. The population of England had almost doubled, growing from 8.6 million in 1801, to 17 million in 1831. The rural poor had moved *en mass* to cities and towns. Sheffield for example, had multiplied nearly threefold to 110,000 people, while Manchester grew from 94,000 to 310,000 inhabitants. Within these densely populated cities, the working classes benefited from improved living conditions and new freedoms. 'In my opinion,' commented a carpenter from Wiltshire, 'the working classes... was (sic) never so well off'.

By the early 1800s, it had become generally accepted that parliamentary reform was necessary in Britain, and the electoral system fell under intense scrutiny. Until the 1830s, Britain's elections were neither representative nor balanced as a range of factors determined voting eligibility. All men were able to vote, but only in only a few places, and in the majority of locations it depended on whether they were property owners or paid certain taxes. Whilst the new urban working classes might have been financially better off, they were certainly not well represented in parliament. Some boroughs, such as those in the rapidly growing industrial towns of Birmingham and Manchester, had no MPs to represent them at all. At the same time, there were notorious 'rotten' boroughs, such as Old Sarum at Salisbury, which had MPs but comprised just seven voters, some stones and a field. There were also 'pocket' boroughs owned by major landowners who could choose their own MPs. Moreover, the absence of the secret ballot meant that voters were easily bribed or intimidated.

By the 1830s, demand for reform was becoming impossible to ignore, and it entered the hallowed halls of Westminster Palace in the form of a proposed bill. And in the face this bill, the Tory Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, promptly resigned. He declared that the state of representation

of the people had been designed by providence and believed that 'it could not be improved'. 'It had,' he stated 'the full and entire confidence of the country'. The passing of a reform bill, even one as moderate as this would, in his opinion, constitute a 'greater political crime than any committed in history'.

Lord Grey, a moderate reformer and Whig, whose most notable reform was to abolish slavery throughout the British Empire, replaced the Duke of Wellington. In 1831, Grey introduced the 'Representation of the People Act' or Great Reform Act, which he thought would prevent a full-scale revolution. The Act proposed the abolition of the worst of the rotten boroughs and demanded representation for the largest of the industrial towns, with a reduction in property qualification for voters in some boroughs.

The opposition to the bill was significant. Unlike Lord Grey, the Tories believed that the slightest measure of reform would precipitate, rather than prevent, a full-scale English revolution and that it would lead to the destruction of property, the monarchy and ultimately the entire country. Despite the opposition however, the Great Reform Act was finally passed in 1832 amid much popular unrest and agitation.

In its final form, the Great Reform Act was not exactly 'great' for the majority of the population. It increased the electorate from around 366,000 to 650,000, which was about 18 per cent of the total adult male population in England and Wales. Before 1832, the electorate had been 11% of the total population. The existence of property qualifications still excluded most men. The act also failed to introduce the secret ballot. The working classes felt betrayed, proposing that the changes were simply not enough.

OUT OF THE HANDS OF PARLIAMENT

The failure of the act sparked new action by William Lovett, a Cornish cabinetmaker, and Frances Place, a radical tailor. Lovett and Place were thoroughly disillusioned with Parliament. 'Instead of RE-forming, it has DEformed,' they quipped following the passing of the act. Convinced that both national and local government elected by a small proportion of society had become hostile and unjust, they sought to change the democratic landscape. In 1838, the pair wrote the *People's Charter*, setting down the ideological basis of the movement, as well a six key points that they considered imperative to electoral reform. They wanted:

- Universal male suffrage.
- A Secret ballot.
- Annual general elections.
- Equal constituencies.
- Payment of MPs.
- No property qualification for sitting in parliament.

The *People's Charter* was launched in Glasgow in May 1838 at a meeting attended by an estimated 150,000 people. Presented as a popular-style *Magna Carta*, it rapidly gained support across the country and its supporters became known as the Chartists.

A year later, a petition passed from one Chartist meeting to another across Britain was brought to London. This was the largest petition ever to be presented to Parliament, numbering 1.2 million signatures. But when the vast reams of paper were rolled out in front of the Commons, it was greeted with mocking laughter and derision. It was finally proposed by a radical liberal MP Thomas Attwood, but was roundly defeated 235 to 46 votes.

Despite their defeat, the Chartists continued to campaign, keeping up momentum by organising lectures, dances, sports, sermons, poetry readings and plays. They started their own newspapers, using the print media to spread their message to the masses. The most successful was the *Northern Star*, which at its peak sold around 48,000 copies per week in 1839.

In 1842, a second petition was signed by over 3 million people and once again presented to Parliament and once again it was roundly rejected, 287 to 49. In the summer of that year, a series of riots broke out. Despite the vast number of signatories, MP Thomas Babington Macaulay had refused to believe that the second petition represented the will of the people. Rather, the poor had been led astray and manipulated by the Chartists who were professional 'agitators' and 'tempters'. 'Is it strange that the poor man should be deluded, and should eagerly sign such as petition as this?' Macaulay asked.

In 1848, the Chartists presented a third petition to Parliament, this one purportedly bearing some 6 million signatures. In April, a crowd of approximately 15,000 people gathered on Kennington Common. It was hoped that they would carry the petition in a triumphant procession to Westminster, where the sheer weight of the document would finally convince the political elite that the people had spoken. The government, however, had other plans. Fearing anarchy and revolution, the authorities stationed 100,000 police on the common, sent Queen Victoria to the Isle of White and in the event that the angry mob might decide to indulge in a little plundering, ordered workmen to partially saw through the stair case which led to the precious coin collection in the British Museum.

The charismatic leader of the Chartists and Irish MP Feargus O'Connor agreed to meet with the Assistant Commissioner of the Police, and they arranged for a smaller deputation to present the petition to Parliament. This third and final petition was rejected. The Chartists' insisted it had been signed by 6 million people, but the parliamentary clerks counted just 1.9 million names, including questionable signatures apparently belonging to Queen Victoria, the Duke of Wellington and Sir Robert Peel, drastically lowering the credibility of the Chartists' cause. In 1850, the Scottish philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle wrote with a certain element of satisfaction that 'it is the everlasting privilege of the foolish to be governed by the wise; to be guided in the right path by those who know it better than they'.

CHARTISM IN AUSTRALIA

Whilst the failure of the third petition essentially signified an end of the Chartist movement in Britain, it was to find new life, and with it, success in Australia. During the 1840s, an increase in violent Chartist activity in Britain, with some Chartists even organising themselves into military

units, resulted in a government crackdown. A number of Chartists found themselves on ships being transported to Australia, while others chose to emigrate. They brought with them the same ideas, directly influencing the development of democracy in Australia.

In 1854, Welsh Chartist and gold miner John Basson Humffray founded the Ballarat Reform League. He and his fellow miners sought to counter the injustice of the miners' licence as well as official corruption on the goldfields. But they also wanted representation. To that end, they presented the government with a list of demands that were taken directly from the *People's Charter*. 'It is,' stated the Ballarat reformers, 'an inalienable right of every citizen to have a voice in making the laws he is called upon to obey—that taxation without representation is tyranny.'

The Ballarat Reform League demanded universal male suffrage, abolition of the property qualifications for members of parliament, payment for members of parliament, voting by secret ballot, short-term parliaments and equal electoral districts. All very familiar demands, and nearly all of which were eventually granted. The secret ballot was introduced in Victoria's 1856 general election, followed swiftly by legislation giving all men aged over 21 the right to vote.

Things however took a little longer in Britain, where Chartism had been born. The 1867 Reform Act enfranchised a further 1.5 million men, doubling the electorate. The act also redistributed 52 seats from small towns to the growing industrial towns or counties. Later, the 1884 Reform Act gave the counties the same voting rights as the boroughs. The electorate after this act stood at 5.5 million, though an estimated 40 per cent of all men still did not have the right to vote as a result of their status within society.



Chartist demonstration, illustration from 'The Life and Times of Queen Victoria' (1900)

The Chartists' legacy should not be underestimated. Although it took nearly 80 years, all five of the Chartists' six demands were finally met in 1918, when all men over 21, and all women over 30



years of age were finally given the right to vote in Britain.

But from the very moment that the movement presented its first, signature-laden petition to Parliament in 1839, members of the political elite fought tooth and nail to prevent their demands from being heard. They believed that granting democratic rights to the masses was ill advised because the masses were too ignorant and uneducated, and their enfranchisement would constitute a dangerous threat to national stability. The reaction to Brexit has revealed that the same anti-democratic sentiments are alive and well, and that at a certain level of society, there resides a deep and disturbing contempt for democracy. These elite are now openly denouncing democracy. We must ensure that the remarkable victory made by the Chartists for democracy is passed down to future generations.