
Britain

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain and France enjoyed economic prosperity, experienced periods of jingoistic nationalism, and were confronted with demands for an expanding democracy. Britain, under the leadership of Lord Palmerston, William Gladstone, and Benjamin Disraeli, represented a dichotomy of values and political agendas. On one hand, Britain led Europe into a new age of imperialism and almost unbridled capitalism: on the other, Gladstone and the Liberal Party advocated democratic reforms, an anti-imperialist stance, and a program to eliminate or restrict unacceptable working and social conditions. In France, the evolution of a more democratic order came into question with the collapse of the Second French Republic and the development of the Second Empire. However, in 1871, the Third Republic was established, and the French moved closer to realizing democracy.

The Age of Palmerston

From 1850 to 1865, Lord Palmerston dominated politics in Great Britain in a range of positions, including foreign secretary, home secretary, and prime minister. In foreign affairs, Palmerston was preoccupied with colonial problems such as the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, troubles in China, and British interests in the American Civil War; he tended to express little interest in domestic affairs. This period witnessed the realignment of parties within British politics; the Tory Party was transformed into the Conservative Party under Disraeli, and the Whigs became the Liberal Party, with Gladstone serving as its leader. It should be noted that John Bright, a manufacturer, anti-Corn Law advocate, and leader of the Manchester School (the English school of industrial capitalism), contributed significantly to the development of the Liberal Party. These changes in party organization involved more than appellations. The new structure more clearly represented distinct ideological positions on many substantive issues. The new political structure was facilitated by Palmerston's (Whig) lack of interest in domestic issues and Lord Derby's (Tory) indifference to politics; he was preoccupied with his study of the classics and horse racing.

Until 1858, the British East India Company managed India for the government. During the 1850s, a new rifle, the Enfield, was introduced. The procedure for loading the Enfield required that cartridge covers be removed with the teeth prior to inserting them in the rifle. Rumors circulated that the

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covering was made from the fat of cows and swine: these rumors of taboo grease alarmed the Hindu and Muslim troops. Troops mutinied in Calcutta in 1857 and within months over a third of India was in the hands of rebels and Europeans were being killed. A British-led force of about three thousand troops under Sir Hugh Rose suppressed the mutiny, which lacked cohesion in its aims, organization, and leadership. By January 1858, Britain had reestablished its control of India; the East India Company was dissolved and replaced by the direct authority of the government.

During the 1850s and 1860s, Palmerston sought to clarify British commercial access to China. In 1858, with the support of French troops, the British army took forts on the Peiko River and, in 1860, captured Peking. As a result, China agreed to open Tientsin and other ports to the European powers.

The American Civil War (1861-1865) curtailed the supply of unprocessed cotton to British mills. This adversely affected the British economy, resulting in significant unemployment and factory closings. The American war also led to a discussion within Britain on fundamental issues of liberty, slavery, and democracy. A crisis between Britain and the United States developed over the Trent Affair (1861), during which a British ship was boarded by American sailors. In the end, the British government and people supported the Union cause because of ideological considerations: even those in the areas affected by the shortage of cotton supported the North.

Disraeli, Gladstone, and the Era of Democratic Reforms

After Palmerston's death in 1865, significant domestic developments occurred that expanded democracy in Great Britain. The leaders of this period were William Gladstone (1809-1898) and Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881). Gladstone, initially a Conservative, emerged as a severe critic of the Corn Laws and, as budgetary expert, became chancellor of the exchequer under Palmerston. As leader of the Liberal Party (to 1895), Gladstone supported Irish Home Rule, fiscal responsibility, free trade, and the extension of democratic principles. He was opposed to imperialism, the involvement of Britain in European affairs, and the further centralization of the British government. Disraeli argued for an aggressive foreign policy, the expansion of the British Empire, and, after opposing democratic reforms, the extension of the franchise.

After defeating Gladstone's effort to extend the vote in 1866, Disraeli advanced the Reform Bill of 1867 as a clever move to "steal the thunder" of the Liberals, that is, beat them at their own game and win more votes for Conservatives. This bill, based on the Reform Bill of 1832, was enacted with two reforms:

1. There would be a redistribution (similar to reapportionment) of seats that would provide a more equitable representation in the House of Commons; the industrial cities and boroughs gained seats at the expense of some depopulated areas in the North and West.

2. The right to vote was extended to include all adult male citizens of the counties who paid twelve pounds or more rent annually or who earned five pounds or more annually as leaseholders.

The consequence of this act was that almost all men over twenty-one years of age who resided in urban centers were granted the right to vote. In 1868, the newly extended electorate provided the Liberals with a victory, and Gladstone commenced his first of four terms as prime minister. So Disraeli's gambit backfired – in the short run.

Gladstone's first ministry (1868-1874) was characterized by a wave of domestic legislation reflecting the movement toward democracy. Among the measures that were enacted were five acts:

1. **The Ballot Act (1872)** provided for the secret ballot; this act realized a major chartist demand of the 1830s (see chapter 6).
2. **Civil Services Reform (1870)** introduced the system of competitive examination for government positions.
3. **The Education Act (1870)** established a system of school districts throughout the country, and provided assistance in the organization of school boards, and for the establishment of schools in poverty stricken regions. Free elementary education in Britain would not be realized until 1891, however.
4. **The Land Act (1870)** was an attempt to resolve economic and social inequities in Ireland. However, it did not succeed in providing Irish tenants with reasonable safeguards against arbitrary eviction or the imposition of drastic increases in rent.
5. **The University Act (1870)** eliminated the use of religious tests that provided a quota of seats in universities for members of the Anglican Church.

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Between 1874 and 1880, Disraeli served as prime minister, and while he was concerned with foreign issues, he did succeed in extending the new “Tory Democracy” to domestic issues. Tory Democracy represented Disraeli’s views on how the Conservative Party would support necessary domestic action on behalf of the common good. It seems now an extension of the aristocratic sense of *noblesse oblige* (“nobility obliges its own to engage in charitable behavior”) to the political arena.

In 1875, through Disraeli’s support, the following measures were passed: (1) laws that lessened the regulation of trade unions; (2) the Food and Drug Act regulating the sale of these items; (3) the Public Health Act, which specified government requirements and standards for sanitation; and (4) the Artisan’s Dwelling Act, which provided subsidies for public housing. These measures represented a degree of government interference in the private sphere that Old Liberals found abhorrent; but eventually these Tory acts were proven to be wise, and this helped the Labour Party to rise at the expense of the hidebound Liberals.

While a few Conservatives, such as Lord Randolph Churchill, attempted to extend Tory Democracy and incorporate it permanently within the Conservative program, most of the Conservative Party abandoned this approach after Disraeli’s death in 1881.

During his remaining ministries (1880-1885, 1886, and 1892-1895). Gladstone was preoccupied with Ireland. However, a further extension of the franchise occurred in 1884 with the passage of the Representation of the People Act granting the vote to adult males in the counties on the same basis as in the boroughs. In 1885, another redistribution of seats in the House of Commons was approved on the ratio of one seat for every fifty thousand citizens.