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The Victorian Age: Chartism and the Rise of Parliamentary Democracy

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Content

1. Introduction

1. The Old Parliamentary System in Britain

A. Limited Suffrage

B. Rotten and Pocket Boroughs

C. No Secret Ballot

D. No Payment of MPS

E. Spread of Corruption

2. Social Discontent

(Peterloo Massacre, Swing Riots, and Hyde

Park Riots, movements)

3. Chartism

- Origin

- Demands

4. Reform Acts



What is the Victorian Age?

The Victorian Age

- The Victorian Age refers to the period in British history during the reign of Queen Victoria, which lasted from **June 1837**, until her death in **January 1901**. This era is closely associated with significant social, political, economic, and cultural changes that shaped modern Britain.





**What are the Key Features of
the Victorian Age?**

1. Industrialization and technological advancement



2. Growth of cities with urbanization but also widespread poverty and slum conditions



3. The Growth of the British Empire



4. Rise of the middle class and changes in social structure



5. Scientific discoveries challenging traditional religious beliefs



6. Strong emphasis on morality, family values, and personal conduct



7. Gender roles defined by the doctrine of separate spheres (men in public, women in the private/domestic sphere)



8. Flourishing of Victorian literature reflecting social issues and realism (authors like Dickens, Hardy)



9. Development of leisure activities and cultural institutions (museums, parks, theater)



10. Social reforms addressing labor conditions, education, and political rights



11. Expansion of political participation with gradual extension of the franchise



**Was the British Parliamentary
System Democratic during
the 17 and 18 centuries?**

Problems in the Old Parliamentary System: Limited Suffrage

In 1800, voting was still a privilege not a right, and only 4% of the population could vote.

This excluded of course women, Catholics and slaves. Furthermore, the 4% of the population who were allowed to vote were chosen according to some property qualifications which imposed a minimum amount of wealth to enjoy voting rights.



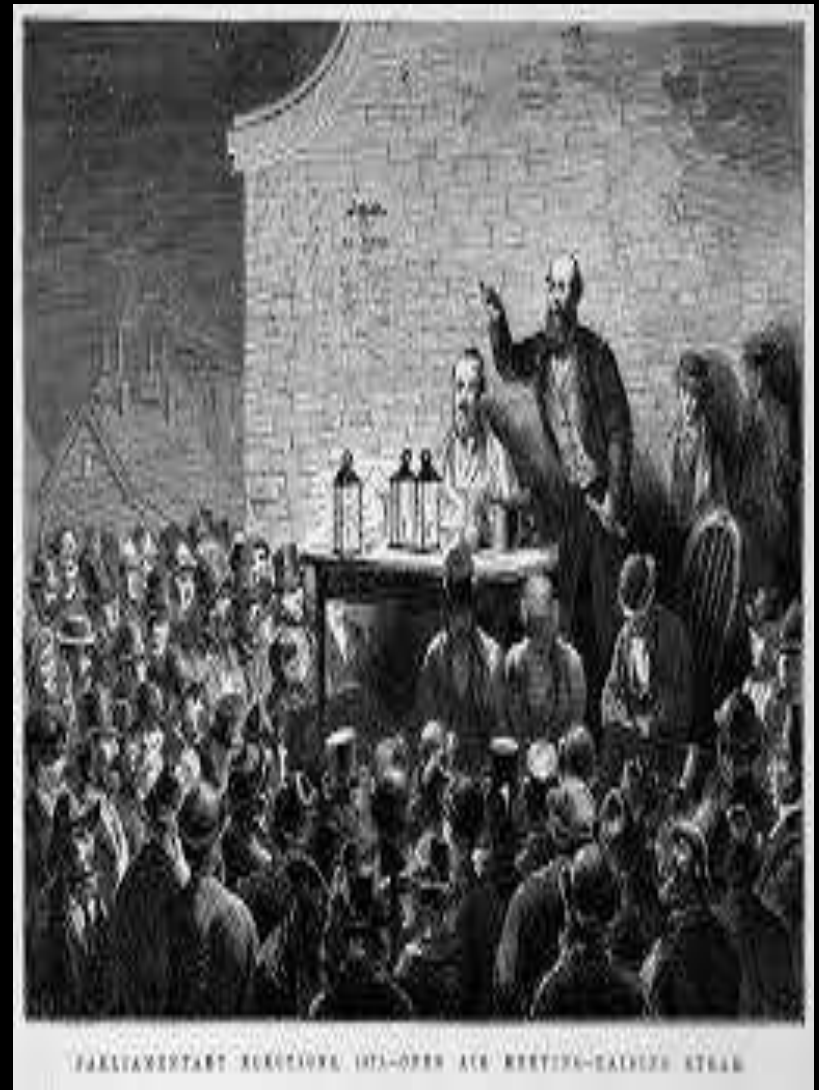
Problems in the Old Parliamentary System: Rotten and Pocket Boroughs

- The term “rotten” was used in the eighteenth century to mean that the borough had a small electorate. The word rotten has the connotation of corruption and decline. The problem was that rotten boroughs worked well in the beginning when cities flourished, but its boundaries were not updated when they became depopulated or even deserted. While the rotten borough has the connotation of corruption, pocket borough has the connotation of money and wealth.
- It was controlled by owners who possessed at least half of the town. A wealthy patron, for example, would simply buy as many houses as possible and install in them his own loyal tenants to vote for the man they agreed on. This was made easy because there was no secret ballot which meant that those who refused to vote for the man agreed on were simply dismissed from their jobs or forced out of the rented houses.



Problems in the Old Parliamentary System: No Secret Ballot

- the fact of having no secret ballot threatened the working class's very livings as they were intimidated by their employers who usually used their position to threaten them to lose their jobs if they chose to vote for other candidates. Those employers usually checked this through sending spies during the open elections.



PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, 1874-1875. THE WORKING-CLASS STRIKE

Problems in the Old Parliamentary System: No Payment of MPs

- In addition to the previous obstacles, lower classes, who were preoccupied in struggling to sustain their poor families, found it unattractive to waste their time on parliamentary elections, especially that Members of Parliaments were not paid for representing people in parliament.



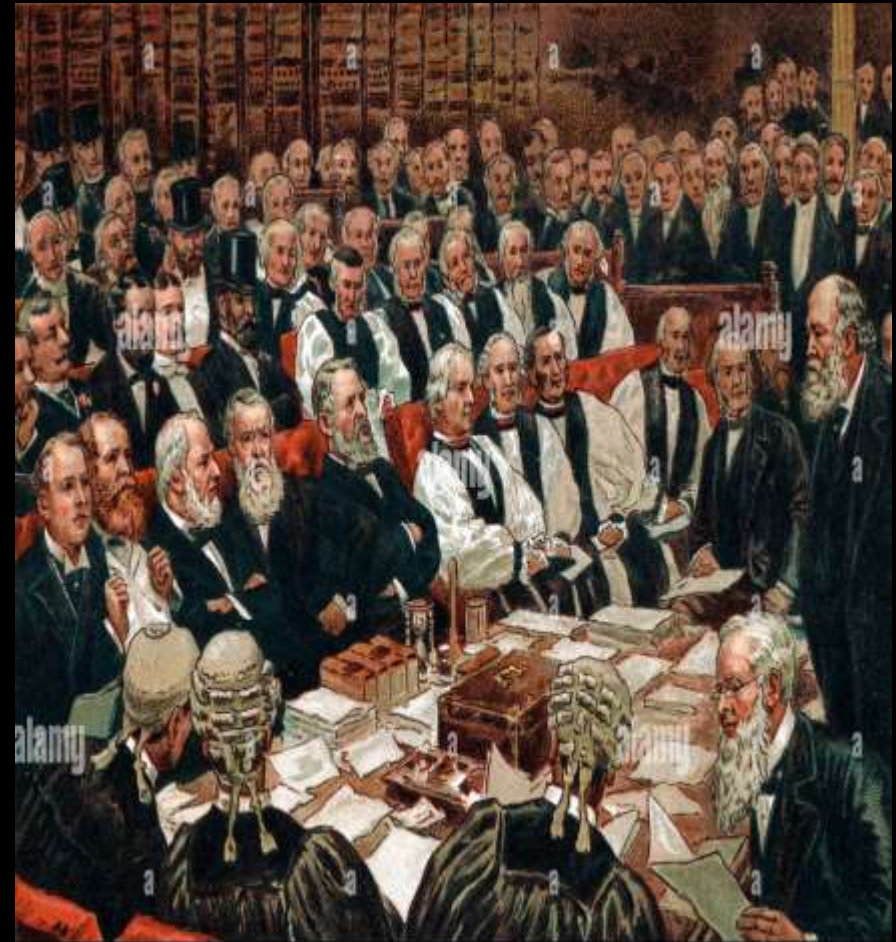
Problems in the Old Parliamentary System: Spread of Corruption

- Wealthy individuals often "bought" seats in Parliament through "rotten boroughs," where very few voters controlled elections. Votes were frequently secured by bribing electors and manipulating small unrepresentative constituencies.



Problems in the Old Parliamentary System: Veto of H of Lords

- The House of Lords' veto was a significant obstacle to extending suffrage in Britain. Before the Parliament Act of 1911, the Lords had the power to block or reject reform bills passed by the elected House of Commons.



Social Unrest as a Result of the Limited Suffrage

- Limited suffrage in Britain led to widespread social discontent, as many people, especially the working class, were excluded from political representation. This frustration sparked various protests, rallies, and marches throughout the 19th century. Notable events include the **Peterloo Massacre of 1819**, where peaceful pro-reform protesters demanding the vote were violently dispersed; ; and the **Hyde Park Riots of 1866**, large-scale demonstrations pushing for expanded voting rights. These protests highlighted public demand for reform and pressured the government to implement changes in the electoral system

Chartism

- Chartism was a working-class political movement in Britain that emerged in 1838 and lasted until about 1857. It grew strongest in the years 1839, 1842, and 1848, advocating for democratic reforms to the electoral system. The movement took its name from the **People's Charter of 1838**, which listed six key demands aimed at making the political system fairer for working people.
- Despite **three mass petitions** to Parliament with millions of signatures, the Chartists' demands were repeatedly rejected. The movement is significant as the first major working-class effort for political rights in Britain, laying groundwork for future reforms and greater democracy.

The Six Demands of the Chartist Movement

1. Universal male suffrage: the right to vote for all men aged 21 and over.
2. Secret ballot: voting should be private to prevent intimidation.
3. No property qualification for Members of Parliament (MPs): allowing any man to stand for election regardless of wealth.
4. Payment of MPs: enabling working-class representatives to serve in Parliament.
5. Equal electoral districts: fairer distribution of seats for proper representation.
6. Annual Parliaments: yearly elections to hold MPs accountable.

The Six Points OF THE **PEOPLE'S** **CHARTER.**

1. A VOTE for every man twenty-one years of age, of sound mind, and not undergoing punishment for crime.
2. THE BALLOT.—To protect the elector in the exercise of his vote.
3. NO PROPERTY QUALIFICATION for Members of Parliament —thus enabling the constituencies to return the man of their choice, be he rich or poor.
4. PAYMENT OF MEMBERS, thus enabling an honest tradesman, working man, or other person, to serve a constituency, when taken from his business to attend to the interests of the country.
5. EQUAL CONSTITUENCIES, securing the same amount of representation for the same number of electors, instead of allowing small constituencies to swamp the votes of large ones.
6. ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS, thus presenting the most effectual check to bribery and intimidation, since though a constituency might be bought once in seven years (even with the ballot), no purse could buy a constituency (under a system of universal suffrage) in each ensuing twelvemonth; and since members, when elected for a year only, would not be able to defy and betray their constituents as now.

Reform Acts

- **Reform Act 1832 (Great Reform Act):** Abolished many "rotten boroughs," redistributed parliamentary seats to growing industrial towns, and extended voting rights to men owning property worth £10 or more, increasing electorate size significantly.
- **Reform Act 1867 (Second Reform Act):** Extended the vote to many urban working-class men by lowering property requirements, nearly doubling the electorate.
- **Reform Act 1884 (Third Reform Act):** Expanded voting rights in rural areas to match those in towns, further increasing the electorate and making voting more uniform
- **The Secret Ballot Act 1872:** It was an act which was introduced to make parliamentary and local government elections in the United Kingdom held by secret ballot, which helped in reducing corruption, bribery and Tory intimidation.
- **Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act (1883):** It criminalized attempts to bribe voters and limiting the amount that could be spent on political campaigns.

Exercise 1

- Listen to the video and answer the following questions (<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/CZymAKs1ddY>):
- 1. How was the Chartist movement introduced by the video?
- 2. Did the government accept the petition?
- 3. Was the Chartist movement successful? justify your answer
- 4. Did Reform Acts address the Chartist movement's demands?

Exercise 2

- Q1: Describe what you can see in this political cartoon.
- Q2: Suggest a title to it.
- Q3: Interpret it, referring to the seize of the scroll, the six men pushing it, the three men standing in the entrance, and the man watching outside.



Thank You

