

The Advance of Democracy in Great Britain, France, and Italy

TIME LINE

- 1851 Louis Napoleon Bonaparte becomes French president for life
- 1852 Louis Napoleon Bonaparte establishes the Second Empire
- 1867 The British Parliament passes the Reform Bill of 1867
- 1868-1874 British Prime Minister William E. Gladstone heads his “Great Ministry”
- 1870 The French Third Republic is established
- 1871 The Paris Commune is suppressed
- 1874-1880 Benjamin Disraeli serves as British prime minister
- 1875 The French adopt constitutional laws for the Third Republic
- 1884 British farm workers win the right to vote
- 1886 The British Parliament rejects Irish home rule
- 1889 General Georges Boulanger challenges the French Third Republic
- 1894 A French army court-martial convicts Captain Alfred Dreyfus of treason
- 1900 The British Labor party is established
- 1903-1914 Giovanni Giolitti dominates Italian politics
- 1905 A Liberal government takes office in Great Britain
- 1911 The British Parliament Act of 1911 is adopted
- 1912 Italy adopts universal manhood suffrage

In the late nineteenth century, the cause of democracy advanced in Great Britain, France, and Italy.

In Great Britain, reform bills passed in 1867 and 1884 established close to universal manhood suffrage, while the Parliament Act of 1911 reduced the power of the aristocratic House of Lords. In addition to

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expanding voting rights, the reform programs of British governments during this period laid the foundations of the welfare state. The controversial issue of home rule for Ireland remained unresolved, however.

Great Britain

The Reform Bill of 1867

During the generation after the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832, demands for further parliamentary reform mounted.

In the mid-1860s, Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), the Conservative Party leader in the House of Commons, decided that the Conservatives should push for the adoption of a new reform bill before their opponents, the Liberals, did.

A Conservative-dominated Parliament passed the Reform Bill of 1867. Some seats in the House of Commons were redistributed. More important, however, was the extension of the right to vote to most of Great Britain's urban workers.

Although Disraeli served briefly as prime minister in 1868, the parliamentary elections that year resulted in a Liberal victory.

Gladstone's "Great Ministry"

From 1868 to 1874, William E. Gladstone (1809-1898), the Liberals' leader, served as prime minister, heading his "Great Ministry."

Reform Program

The British Parliament enacted an extensive reform program. In 1870, competitive examinations were introduced for the civil service. The Education Bill of 1870 provided financial support to local school boards to operate free nonsectarian elementary schools. In addition, church-operated and other voluntary elementary schools continued to receive assistance from the state. The expansion of elementary education helped create a literate electorate.

In 1871, the workers' right to organize unions and to strike gained legal recognition, although the ban on picketing remained.

The Ballot Act of 1872 introduced the secret ballot in British elections, while a reform of the judiciary was enacted in 1873.

Despite this reform program, Gladstone maintained the *laissez-faire* tradition of the Liberals and opposed state intervention in economic affairs.

Disraeli as Prime Minister

In 1874, the Conservatives won control of the House of Commons, and Disraeli became prime minister, holding office until 1880. He promoted a program known as Tory Democracy, designed to benefit the working classes and to win increased popular support for the Conservative party. The Conservatives were less committed to *laissez-faire* doctrine than were their Liberal opponents.

Labor and Housing Reforms

A series of laws passed in 1875 expanded the government's role in economic affairs. The Factory Act extended earlier legislation regulating working conditions, while the Public Health Act expanded the role of the state in urban sanitation. The Artisans' Dwellings Act authorized local authorities to carry out slum clearance programs and to construct public housing. Another law gave additional rights to labor unions and legalized picketing by striking workers.

The Reform Bill of 1884

During his second administration, from 1881 to 1885, Gladstone won the adoption of the Reform Bill of 1884, which extended the right to vote to most farm workers.

The Irish Question

The Irish question most concerned Gladstone during his second administration and his third (1886) and fourth (1892-1894) administrations, as well.

Home Rule

Since the adoption of the Act of Union in 1801, Ireland had been united with Great Britain and was governed by the British

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Parliament. Following the enactment of Catholic Emancipation in 1829, the number of Irish Catholics in the House of Commons grew considerably. These members became more outspoken in their demand for home rule under which Ireland would acquire its own parliament, although the British government would retain control over foreign policy. Irish home rule faced the strong opposition of the six predominantly Protestant counties of northern Ireland (Ulster) and many in Great Britain.

In 1886, Gladstone introduced a home-rule bill, but a coalition of Conservatives and anti-home-rule Liberals defeated it. A second home-rule bill, also sponsored by Gladstone, went down to defeat in 1893.

Conflict Between Ulster and Nationalists

In 1914, the Liberals finally succeeded in pushing an Irish home-rule bill through Parliament. It could not be enforced, however, because of opposition in Ulster, where the Protestants organized an illegal militia. In response, the Irish nationalists organized a militia of their own. By the summer of 1914, Ireland stood on the brink of civil war.

The Development of the Labor Party

During the late nineteenth century, Britain's labor unions grew in membership and began to have an impact on politics. In 1900, the unions joined with the Fabian Society and other groups to form the Labor Party.

The Fabian Society

Formed in 1883, the Fabian Society advocated a gradual approach to socialism, with the ultimate objective of establishing public ownership of the means of production and distribution. Among the major leaders of the Fabian Society were Sidney (1859-1947) and Beatrice Webb (1858-1943), the playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), and the writer H. G. Wells (1866-1946).

Growth of the Labor Party

In 1906, twenty-nine Laborites won seats in the House of

Commons. As its popular support grew, the Labor Party ultimately replaced the Liberals as one of the two major political parties in Great Britain.

The Liberal Government

In the years after 1905, the Liberals dominated the government. Under the leadership of Prime Ministers Henry Campbell-Bannerman (1836-1908) and Herbert Asquith (1852-1928) the Liberals enacted an extensive reform program.

Economic Reforms

In an effort to retain the support of industrial workers, the Liberals enacted the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1906, expanding programs of aid to workers injured on the job. The Old Age Pensions Act of 1909 provided state-supported pensions for low-income citizens over the age of seventy.

The Parliament Act of 1911

In 1909, Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George (1863-1945) presented a budget calling for tax increases to support the new programs of social insurance and naval expansion. This "People's Budget" provided for higher income-tax rates for the wealthy and increases in inheritance taxes, as well as new taxes on the unearned increase in the value of land.

The refusal of the House of Lords to pass the budget led to a political crisis. Responding to the government's appeal, King George V (r. 1910-1936) agreed to create enough new Liberal lords to insure the passage of the Parliament Act of 1911. Faced with this threat, the Lords passed the bill.

Under the provisions of the Parliament Act of 1911, the House of Lords could no longer refuse to pass a money bill. Furthermore, the act provided that the House of Lords could not prevent the adoption of other legislation if the House of Commons passed it three times in a period of not less than two years. By weakening the power of the aristocratic House of Lords, the Parliament Act marked another step toward the creation of full political democracy in Great Britain.

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Other Reforms

In 1911, the Liberal government won parliamentary approval for a bill providing for the payment of salaries to members of the House of Commons. The National Insurance Act, adopted the same year, established a system of health and unemployment insurance, financed by contributions from employers, workers, and the state. In 1912, a minimum wage law was passed.

The reform program of the Liberal government brought economic benefits to Britain's working people and helped move the country in the direction of a welfare state.

In the late nineteenth century, Great Britain continued its reformist tradition, developing a more fully democratic political system and laying the foundations of the modern welfare state. While the new Labor party remained relatively weak in the years before 1914, its base of popular support gradually increased. The Irish question remained as Great Britain's most serious unresolved problem. The failure to enact Irish home rule left a legacy of hostility to trouble future generations.