Why did the electoral system change through the nineteenth century?

Between 1832 and 1918 the British electoral system was transformed. Each electoral reform, by itself, may seem an undemocratic change, no more than an evolutionary addition to the existing system; but the cumulative effect of the series of reforms passed during the period was surely revolutionary. By 1918 three-quarters of the adult population could vote, and vote freely, for a range of candidates. once a breach had been made in the unreformed system in 1832, no electoral arrangements had remained fixed for very long. One reform led to another: the 1867 Reform Act for instance, which gave the vote to householders in the boroughs, led to demands for similar provisions in the counties, which were accepted in 1884. Disraeli was correct in his judgements of 1853 that once reform was begun 'you could not find any point to stop short of the absolute sovereignty of the people' By 1918 this sovereignty had indeed been recognised. It is very tempting , therefore, to judge that the Whig historians had been correct, and to see democratic progress in this period as a glorious process which was infinitely preferable to the violent upheavals seen elsewhere and which was also somehow 'natural' and indeed 'inevitable'. Perhaps the Whigs were correct.

The development of democracy in Britain can indeed be seen as essentially a success story. But it should not be assumed that, by 19 1 8, the electoral system had reached a state of perfection. Undoubtedly Britain had become more democratic.
What of the process by which change came about? Was that a glorious chapter in Britain's history? Without doubt, reform was slow and intermittent between 1832 and 1918, and those who regard the unfolding of a democratic system as somehow 'inevitable' would do well to remember that some people struggled very hard to foster, and others to prevent, change. Perhaps, as one historian has remarked, 'nothing is inevitable until it happens'. Certainly other countries, while experiencing similar social and economic changes in the nineteenth century, developed very different political systems. The Whig interpretation therefore does less than justice to the complexity of the process by which Britain was democratised.

We have seen that electoral change arose from a background of socio-economic development which altered the demographic map of Britain and, specifically, from a series of separate legislative measures, each of which had its own particular, and often very complicated, causes. But it is possible to identify three overall factors of major importance: pressures, politicians and principles.

Pressures came from the mass of unenfranchised people, men and women, demanding the vote, and from the radicals who organised and spoke for them. The degree of force they could muster at particular junctures is a highly controversial issue. Admittedly it is difficult to generalise about the importance of pressures over the period 1815-1918 as a whole; but several things can be said with some confidence.

First, that without mass pressure British political life would not have assumed the democratic shape that it did. It also seems likely that, as the nineteenth century proceeded, mass agitation for reform declined significantly, at least in the campaign for men's votes. Britain may have been on the verge of revolution in 1832 - the issue is hotly disputed - but few have argued that revolution was possible at any time thereafter, even during the suffragettes' campaigning before 1914. However, it should not be assumed that such influences ceased to be important. Rather, they changed their form. Perhaps victory in 1832 led to the conviction that reform could be achieved peacefully: certainly, as politics became more representative, people saw less and less need to riot on the streets. Pressures could be applied

more subtly, through 'public opinion', as expressed through meetings, the ballot box and the media.

Public pressure is a factor that should never be ignored in any analysis of political reform. Yet the masses and the radicals did not decide the actual terms of the reform legislation. However strong the pressure from the reform movement, governments remained in control and made the detailed decisions. Not Hunt or Attwood but Grey, not Bright but Disraeli, not Chamberlain but Salisbury and Gladstone, not Pankhurst but Lloyd George designed the reform acts; and as politicians they designed them to benefit their own interests and, in general, their own parties. Whichever party initiated reform did so, at least in part, in order to gain from it. Electoral reform was undoubtedly part of the long-term party-political struggle for power.

Was it a principled struggle, as the Whig historians implied? Perhaps not. Consider, for example, Disraeli's volte-face over reform in 1867. It is very tempting to see politicians as unscrupulous and unprincipled power-seekers adopting the language of democracy merely to remain in office. Perhaps reforms were judicious concessions by the ruling elite to perpetuate its dominance for as long as possible and to avoid the truly democratic demands of the radicals. Were reforms initiated to prevent more extensive reforms? Were electoral reforms, in fact, merely cynical attempts to buy votes? The overall effect of the series of reforms between 1832 and 1918 may have been to bring Britain within measurable distance of democracy, but this was not the intention of the policy-makers, except at the very end of the period. On the contrary, many of the reforms of the period were specifically designed to avoid, rather than to hasten, democracy. The evolution of democracy was therefore largely unintended and, in this sense, accidental, a view which makes Whig interpretations seem naive, if not indeed wildly idealistic. Clearly many politicians paid only lip-service to democratic ideals. Even after 19 1 8 there were those who longed, secretly, for a return to the good old days when it had not been necessary to beg the votes of the masses; and before this date 'democracy' remained, for the majority of politicians, a dirty word. Very few MPs wanted universal suffrage, and not many wanted even universal manhood suffrage. The idea that all men, even those receiving poor relief, should be able to vote was hotly repudiated by every government in the nineteenth century. But, even so, many politicians did take ideals seriously: they may not, generally, have believed in full democracy, but they did sincerely advocate 'liberty' and 'representative government'. 'Me conviction that governments derived their legitimacy from the consent of the people - or at least from a large proportion of them - was becoming more and more firmly rooted as the twentieth century approached. To this extent, political principles were transformed during the nineteenth century. Whereas, at the start of the century, the onus had been on reformers to make out a convincing case for extending the vote, towards the end of the century the onus was on a small embattled minority to justify the status quo. Most politicians began to take for granted that the franchise should be widened. Gradually Tom Paine's view that people have a 'natural right' to vote had come to be accepted. It is therefore probably true to say that, if the Whig interpretation of history is unconvincingly idealistic, the notion that democracy resulted solely from the selfish manoeuvres of undemocratic politicians is unduly cynical.