Teachers’ Notes
Information and activities for teachers

These notes provide a guide to looking at *The House of Commons, 1833* by Sir George Hayter. They can also be used as a tool through which to help understand and teach the issues and changes brought by the 1832 Reform Act. They *examine figures* within the fight for and against the extension of the franchise, and *explain key words and terms*. The *notes can be used on a self-guided visit* to the Regency Galleries at the National Portrait Gallery, where the painting is displayed, or within the classroom. Ideas to aid a visit to the National Portrait Gallery and related classroom activities are also given.
Introduction

The 1832 Reform Act (or the Great Reform Act) is one of the most important events in parliamentary history. The Act brought major changes to the electoral system in Britain. However, although these changes were representative of the social, industrial and work-related changes in Britain, the Act was essentially a set of compromises that caused discontent (and has been seen as inconclusive). Sir George Hayter’s painting *The House of Commons, 1833* commemorates the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832 and shows some of the newly elected Members of Parliament at their first session on 5 February 1833.

Schemes of Work

**KS3**  History: QCA Schemes of Work Unit 16
‘The Franchise: why did it take so much longer for women to get the vote?’

**KS3**  Citizenship: QCA Schemes of Work Unit 6 ‘Government, elections and voting’.

**KS4**  OCR Entry Level Certificate in Citizenship Studies (Entry 3) The Democratic System

Activities and questions

These notes provide the stimulus for some suggested questions and activities. The ‘Questions’ are aimed at enabling pupils to process and think about the historical facts, while the ‘Talking Points’ are aimed at stimulating debate and drawing out opinions.

Bibliography/Websites

- Edward Pearce, Reform! The Fight for the 1832 Reform Act (Pimlico, 2004);
- Asa Briggs, The Age of Improvement, 1783 – 1867 (Longman, 1999);
- Sean Lang, Parliamentary Reform 1785 – 1928 (Routledge, 2004);

The web site for the Parliamentary Education Unit provides booklets on the work of parliament. You can download it at: www.parliament.uk/directories/educationunit.cfm

The BBC news web site provides a comprehensive A–Z of parliament: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/a-z_of_parliament/default.stm

Groups at the Gallery

Learning Services books group visits from schools, colleges and adult organisations. We require a minimum of two weeks’ notice for visits. Groups are defined as 10 adults/children or more. Contact us at:

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The number of people who could vote increased from 478,000 to 813,000, in a total population of 24 million (about 4 men in every 100).

Industrial towns, such as Manchester, Liverpool and Sheffield, got their own MPs.

The number of MPs for southern England was still disproportionately high.

- Half of the rotten boroughs lost their MPs, but 73 remained after the Reform Act.
- There was no secret ballot and MPs still bribed voters.
- No women were allowed to vote.
- The ability to vote relied on ownership of land.

The 1832 Reform Act: Key Facts

- Charles Grey, Second Earl Grey (1764−1845) Prime Minister
- Daniel O'Connell (1775−1847) Irish Politician
- William Cobbett (1763−1835) Politician, Writer, Agriculturalist
- Arthur Wellesley, First Duke of Wellington (1769−1852) Field Marshall and Prime Minister
The *House of Commons, 1833* took the portrait artist George Hayter 10 years to complete. Hayter began work on the painting in 1833 – a year later the palace at Westminster including the Commons Chamber, was destroyed by fire so this painting records the original Commons' chamber building. Hayter spent 15 years trying to sell the painting since people were no longer interested in the Reform Act and the painting was very large. It was bought for the National Portrait Gallery in 1858.

**Questions**

- Why are there only 372 Members of Parliament pictured from the total of 658? (Space, time, even more crowded. St Stephen’s Chapel also only had 427 seats)
- What is going on in the picture? (A debate) Does the House of Commons look like an easy place to debate? (Uncomfortable, crowded, old fashioned, no desks, very open) What kind of space would you want to debate in?
- What do you notice about the Members of Parliament and the people in the public gallery? Do you think they would represent you? (Costume, dress, age of people, all men, all white)
- Why/Who are some of the figures in the foreground? (Wellington, Grey, etc. Discuss importance of figures – political power, status among other Members of Parliament, involvement in Reform Act.)
- Why do you think no one was interested in buying the painting? Would you want this painting in your house? (The 1832 Reform Act was inconclusive; discontent prevailed as those without the vote looked to Trade Unionism and Chartism to address their needs. By 1843 the fashion for large-scale paintings commemorating an event had decreased, also too large for a ‘normal’ house and needed to be hung in an institution)

**Key Words:**

**Constituency**

Area of Britain that has a Member of Parliament. Currently there are 659 constituencies (in 1832 there were 658), which have an average of 67,300 voters each. The average population for a constituency in 1832 ranged from between 300 to 11,300 voters.

**Members of Parliament**

A person elected by a constituency to serve in parliament.

**Electorate**

People who are entitled to vote in an election

**Rotten borough**

A parliamentary constituency that had very few voters but could elect MPs for parliament. They were often controlled by a patron (usually a rich landowner), e.g. before 1832, Old Sarum had only 3 houses and 11 voters but sent 2 MPs to Parliament and was under the control of the Earl of Caledon.

**Secret ballot**

A voting method in which the voter’s choices remain confidential. In Britain a secret ballot was not law until the Ballot Act in 1872

**Vote**

An individual’s act of voting or decision making in which they can express support for a particular view/person/party.
The House of Commons

The House of Commons consists of Members of Parliament (MPs) who are democratically elected by voters to represent a constituency and is known as ‘the lower chamber’. The House of Commons makes laws, controls the nation’s finances, debates proposals and protects petitions for individuals. It is the most important political institution in Britain. The government traditionally sits to the right of the Speaker’s Chair, while the opposition sits on the left. The Speaker is a senior MP who presides over parliament, s/he is impartial and protects the rights of all MPs to speak. The Mace on the table in the gangway between the two sides represents royal authority and the house cannot sit without it in place. The gangway or ‘floor of the house’ is two sword lengths apart. The House of Commons, 1833 depicts the old St Stephen’s Chapel, which had been in use since the 15th century. The new House was rebuilt in 1834 but re-used the traditions of the old chamber. The house was destroyed by German bombs in 1941 and rebuilt again using many of the original design features.
Charles Grey, 2nd Earl Grey (1764-1845)

Leader of the Whigs from 1806 to 1834, Grey was Prime Minister from 1830 to 1834. Grey entered the House of Commons in 1786 and joined the House of Lords in 1807. He had argued for constitutional reform since the 1780s, despite being a wealthy aristocrat, but felt that more radical measures made reform less rather than more likely. Grey formed a government in 1830 and promised to act on electoral reform. After a difficult 18 months, which involved the rejection of the Reform Bill by the House of Lords, a general election and an attempt by the opposition leader Wellington to form a government, the Reform Act was passed in June 1832. It was his ‘supreme achievement’; a year later Grey also presided over the act to abolish slavery in all British-controlled territories.

Whigs

A term for the Liberal Party and originally an insult.

Constitution

A set of rules and principles that, in the case of a nation state, define the power and limits of government and rights of people.

House of Lords

The unelected ‘upper chamber’ of parliament. At the time of the 1832 Reform Act, the House of Lords was mainly made up of Lords who inherited their seats (hereditary peers) and succeeded in blocking the first attempts to reform parliament.

Prime Minister

Head of Government and effectively leader of the country.

Questions

- (In the Gallery) Find another portrait of Charles Grey. Looking at the portrait, describe what kind of man you think he was. Do you think he was pleased with the Reform Act? Why?

Talking Point

- What do you consider more important the changes made by the 1832 Reform Act or the Abolition of Slavery in 1833? Which do you think Grey would have been most proud of?
Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington (1769 - 1852)

Wellington was a successful Field Marshall. He is most famous for being Commander in Chief of the British army during the Napoleonic Wars and for his victory against Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. He was Leader of the Tory party and Prime Minister 1828-1830. Wellington reluctantly oversaw the 1829 Act that allowed Catholics to sit in parliament but was fundamentally against the Reform Act. Wellington thought that the Act would ruin the British constitution and considered it to be a prelude to revolution. He also thought that the majority of people did not support reform, saying in the Lords in 1832 that the best part of the public were not desirous of the Bill, but were, on the contrary, apprehensive of its effects'.

Tories

A political party that sought to preserve the traditional political structures. Originally an insult meaning rural bandits in Ireland – from 1834 they preferred to be called Conservative.

Apprehensive

Worried

Questions

- Why do you think Wellington thought the Reform Act was ‘revolutionary’? If it was, why would people be apprehensive about its effects?
- (In the Gallery) Find Wellington’s portrait – clue it is not in this Gallery but room 17. Why do you think his portrait is not displayed with the other politicians?

Talking Point

- Wellington had been a commanding soldier accustomed to giving orders – do you think this would affect his style of leadership as a politician or in debates?
Daniel O’Connell (1775-1847)
Daniel O’Connell was an Irish nationalist leader also known as the ‘Liberator’. In the 1800s what is now the Republic of Ireland was part of the United Kingdom and Ireland had MPs in the House of Commons. O’Connell’s election in County Clare in 1828 forced the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829, since O’Connell could not sit in Parliament because he was Catholic. O’Connell worked for Catholic emancipation, reform of the electoral system and for greater independence for Ireland. O’Connell also worked for the rights of those such as Jews, black slaves and Australian Aborigines, who had little or no political representation. He was considered by many to have radical politics and believed in universal suffrage.

Universal Suffrage
The extension of the right to vote to all adults, regardless of social class, race, gender and belief.

England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland at Parliament before Reform:
- Most English constituencies had 2 MPs whereas those in Scotland, Ireland and Wales were only allowed 1. The House of Commons had a disproportionate number of MPs from England.
- The majority of Irish people were catholic, but were ruled by a protestant government.

Catholics could not sit in Parliament until 1829.
- The representative system in Scotland was supposed to be particularly bad: Edinburgh and Glasgow had 33 voters each, while Invernesshire had 90 voters for its 95,000 inhabitants (nicknamed the ‘whisky electorate’).

After Reform:
- Scotland had 8 more MPs and Ireland 5 more.
- 1 in 7 adult males had the vote over Britain as a whole, but in England it was 1 in 5, Scotland 1 in 8 and Ireland 1 in 20.

Questions
- Which country (England, Scotland, etc.) had most power and representation in the House of Commons? How?
- Why do you think the Scottish and, in particular, the Irish were angry about this?
- Do you think the situation was improved after reform? Was it improved enough to stop the anger?

Talking Point
- If you were Catholic and Irish, like O’Connell, how would you feel about the way the voting system worked? What would you do about it?
- Why do you think O’Connell worked for those who had no or few rights?
William Cobbett (1763-1835)

William Cobbett was a political writer and farmer who was also a Radical. After living in France and America, Cobbett returned to Britain in 1800 and edited the influential Cobbett’s Weekly Political Register from 1802 – 1835. Cobbett used the Register to demand social and political reform and was threatened with imprisonment twice for his political opinions. He wrote on the conditions of poor labourers in the English countryside. Cobbett felt that the Reform Act did not enlarge the electorate enough, but was willing to work for it in order that some reform took place. In 1832, Cobbett won a seat in the reformed House of Commons.

Radicals

A Parliamentary group in the early 1800s who were part of the Whig Party and who were middle-class rather than aristocratic (upper-class) and who continued to fight for further reform.

Questions

- Why do you think that Whigs, like Charles Grey, would be worried about Cobbett and his influence?
- How could a newspaper or journal, such as the one Cobbett edited, be influential? Is that still the case today?
- What further reforms do you think Cobbett would have liked to see to the way in which people are elected?

Talking Point

- If you believed in full voting rights for everyone, would you work for the Reform Act when it only offered a limited extension of rights to a few people? Why do you think Cobbett did?
Suggested Activities:

Suggested Gallery Activities:

- Use these notes as a discussion point with *The House of Commons, 1833* and ask pupils to answer the questions on a worksheet.

- Split the class into groups and ask them (in turn) to find and look at the portraits of Charles Grey (to the right of the House as you look at it), William Cobbett (to the left of the House), Wellington (in Gallery 17) and to use the Portrait Explorer PCs to find out more about the main characters and the Reform Act. Ask them to describe the characters and/or draw them.

- Compare and contrast Benjamin Robert Haydon’s *Anti-Slavery Society Convention, 1840* (NPG599) picture on the wall opposite (which includes Daniel O’Connell). Ask pupils to describe/list the similarities and differences between them.

Suggested Classroom Activities:

- Split the class into groups of four and ask one in each to be Grey, Wellington, Cobbett and O’Connell. Get them to write a few lines putting forward their arguments for or against the Reform Act and present them to each other and/or class.

- After a role play (such as above) or a general discussion, ask the class to list the shortcomings of the voting system prior to 1832 and after reform. Follow this up by looking at differences between voting in 1832 and today (you could use two columns 1832 and today).

- Print out this page from the Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics website which lists all the female MPs in the House of Commons in 2005 www.qub.ac.uk/cawp/Observatory%20docs/MPs%202012005.doc Ask the class how this is different from 1832 and why the jibe ‘Blair’s babes’ may have been used about the number of female Labour MPs elected in 1997?

- Understanding voting: ask the class how people can vote for contestants in *Big Brother* or *I’m a Celebrity Get Me out of Here* (or another reality show) – internet, phone, texting, digital red button etc. Why do people vote for contestants? Ask the class why they would vote for particular people? Do they think it would be fair if only people living in a 5 bedroom house or with a certain amount of money in the bank could vote? More people voted on Big Brother in 2005 than in the General Election – why was this the case?

- In Big Brother you are allowed to vote multiple times, Ask the class how this might affect an election and whether this is a good thing?

- If the four politicians mentioned in these notes were in a Big Brother House, ask the class to write down which one they would vote for and why?

- Ask the class to find out the different ways of voting today in elections and for a reality show for homework. Ask them to list ways in which they would improve voting in political elections by thinking about the reality TV polls.

- See http://www.bigbrothermobile.co.uk/big-brother-vote.htm or www.itv-celebrity.com/