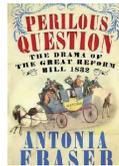


Reviews

Perilous Question: The Drama of the Great Reform Bill 1832

By Antonia Fraser, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £20

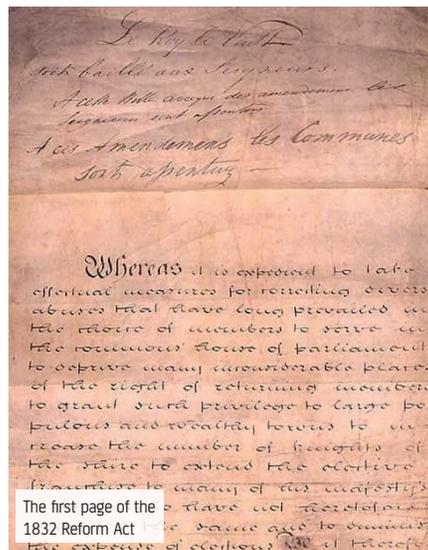


Glorious quotations abound in Antonia Fraser's wonderful new book. "Mamma, are Tories born wicked, or do they grow wicked afterwards?" To which the mother replied, "They are born wicked and grow worse." The mother was of course an ardent, uncritical supporter of the Whig party. Tories in their turn were equally scathing about their opponents with whom they had been locked in political conflict (though no significant ideological differences divided them) since the late seventeenth century. It was a matter of ingrained political habit that they would always quarrel.

The Tories were beginning to describe themselves differently. Daniel O'Connell, the Irish Nationalist leader, referred in 1832 to the appearance of the word Conservative as "the new-fangled phrase now used in polite society" from which he was firmly excluded. A little later the Whigs would start to take their place on the right of the new Liberal party. But the old mould had not yet been broken. It is recalled here in all its distinctive vividness.

Insults abounded during the prolonged and bitter crisis that surrounded the great

Reform Bill which brought the Whigs their first serious political victory for some decades (Byron had written that: "Nought's permanent among the human race / Except the Whigs not getting into place.") The violent abuse reflected the intensity of feeling aroused by the crisis. A very disagreeable fate awaited General Isaac Gascoyne (a forebear of the current Lord Salisbury), Tory MP for Liverpool, whose successful amendment to the legislation in April 1831 halted its progress for a time. At the ensuing general election in which the Tories were trounced for the first time in living memory, an eyewitness in his constituency recorded: "When I saw



The first page of the 1832 Reform Act

him, his face, his hair and his clothes were covered with filth and spittle...not from a mob of the lower sort, but from men his own equals."

No one was safe from insult. The King's brother, the reactionary Duke of Cumberland, "was pelted with mud which totally covered his body". The King's wife, the sweet-natured Queen Adelaide, was hounded on account of her sympathy with the Tory opponents of reform. The Whigs put it about that she was having an affair with her handsome Court Chamberlain, the first Earl Howe, ancestor of Freddie Howe, the popular and dedicated Health Minister in the Lords today. In 1831 the 38-year-old Queen was rumoured to be pregnant.

“It was a rude, rough political world which makes our own look tepid and mild-mannered by comparison”

"Howe miraculous!" said the wags in the Whig party.

It was a rude, rough political world which makes our own look tepid and mild-mannered by comparison. Antonia Fraser recreates it brilliantly by weaving into her beautifully written text thousands of the words which the Whigs and Tories used about each other and the controversial issue of reform in their memoirs, diaries, letters and speeches. All the central figures in the intense drama at Westminster and the country at large re-emerge as they were seen at the time by friends and foes.

Everyone in both parties had a great deal to say about one person in particular: the dazzling, unstable, first Lord Brougham and Vaux ("the latter addition, ascribed to descent from the Vaux family, was considered pretentious, even dubious") who had made a fortune at the bar. He systematically leaked cabinet secrets to *The Times*. As the Whigs' Lord Chancellor he



An 1833 painting by George Hayter to mark the passing of the Great Reform Act. The titanic struggle to get the Reform Bill through Parliament is wonderfully illuminated by Fraser's book, says Lord Lexden

battled furiously against the Tory majority in the Lords, who regularly defeated the bill. On 7 October 1831 he spoke for over three hours sustained by “three immense soda water bottles full of hot negus (sweetened wine and water) at one point getting agitated when he thought his refreshment was in danger from Lord Bathurst”. Swaying visibly and at one point falling on to the woolsack, he nevertheless delivered a speech described by a Whig MP as “the most splendid conceivable – flaming with wit and irony and eloquence”. This is a book which provides a ring-side seat as one of the most remarkable dramas in British political history unfolds.

Antonia Fraser gives no encouragement to those like Nick Clegg who view the Great Reform Bill as a tremendous victory for democracy which would carry everything steadily before it over the next hundred years. Only one member of

the Whig cabinet lacked a title. The aim was to strengthen traditional aristocratic government – and their place in it – by purging the electoral system of the worst rotten boroughs (quite a number were left uncultured) which had brought it into grave

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disrepute. They also showed themselves to be on the side of the future by giving seats to the great industrial centres for the first time. Macaulay, a rising young star in the Whig firmament who was to become the greatest of all Whig historians, expressed it well: “Reform, that you may preserve”.

The franchise was put on a systematic, nationwide basis for the first time with high property qualifications that confined the right to vote largely to the innate supporters of aristocratic government.

Under the great Reform Bill the electorate increased from 440,000 to 650,000 – up from 3.2% to 4.7% of the population. The supporters of democracy demonstrated and rioted (400 people were killed in Bristol) as the Whig legislation progressed slowly and with many setbacks through Parliament. They made no impact on it.

The bill was finally passed after a titanic two-year struggle. Antonia Fraser's work transforms our understanding of it. This is the best history book I have read so far this year. 🏰

Lord Lexden is a Conservative Peer and political historian