Benjamin Disraeli, the eldest son and second of five children of Isaac D'Israeli and his wife, Maria Basevi Disraeli, was born at 6 King’s Road, Bedford Row, London, on 21st December 1804. His father was a historian and literary critic. In 1816 he inherited a large fortune of the death of his father, Benjamin D'Israeli, a successful businessman.

Disraeli was brought up in the Jewish faith but was baptized into the Christian faith on 31st July 1817. He attended Higham Hall in Epping Forest, a school run by the Unitarian minister Eli Cogan, until 1819, after which he was taught at home. (1)

In November 1821 Disraeli was articled at his father’s arrangement to a solicitor’s firm in the Old Jewry. His name was entered at Lincoln’s Inn, but rejected the idea of a career at the bar because he had a strong dislike of the mundane lifestyle of the English middle classes, who he claimed the “only adventure of life” was marriage. (2)

An ardent admirer of Lord Byron, he dreamed instead of literary fame. “From the early 1820s he had adopted an appropriately eye-catching and narcissistic style of dress, with ruffled shirts, velvet trousers, coloured waistcoats, and jewellery, and he wore his hair in cascades of ringlets... He reflected self-consciously, in Romantic fashion, on the sublime natural creations that he observed on his travels.” (3)

Benjamin Disraeli - Novelist

Disraeli’s first novel, Vivian Grey was published anonymously in two volumes in April 1826. It was a portrayal of the unscrupulous ambition of a clever young man. It was also highly critical of London society. It received some very bad reviews and when the identity of the author was revealed, it did his reputation a great deal of harm. However, the book sold very well and it made it possible for him to become a full-time author. (4)

The literary abuse he received “contributed to the onset of a major nervous crisis that affected him for much of the next four years... he had always been moody, sensitive, and solitary by nature, but now became seriously depressed and lethargic.” (5) Disraeli continued to write and his first success was followed by The Young Duke (1831), Contarini Fleming (1832), Alroy (1833), Henrietta Temple (1837) and Venetia (1837).

Elected to Parliament

Benjamin Disraeli took a strong interest in politics and was advocate of parliamentary reform. He refused to support the Tories or the Whigs. “Toryism is worn out & I cannot condescend to be a Whig.” In the 1832 General Election he stood as a Radical at High Wycombe. Despite having the support of the two leading progressives, Francis Burdett and Daniel O’Connell, he was defeated, by the Whig candidate. (6)

In 1833, Disraeli published a pamphlet where he argued for a Tory–Radical coalition against the Whigs. When he stood in the High Wycombe seat in the 1835 General Election he stood as an Independent Radical, he was supplied with £500 from Tory funds. This was the first time that the Tories had used money in this way and the historian, Robert Blake, has suggested that this marks the start of the modern Conservative Party. Again he was heavily defeated and later that year he fought the Taunton by-election as a Tory. Once again he was defeated but over the next few months he concentrated on producing Tory propaganda. (7)
Benjamin Disraeli’s change in political affiliations upset the Radicals and his old friend, Daniel O’Connell, launched a bitter attack: “After being twice discarded by the people, to become a Conservative. He possesses all the necessary requisites of perfidy, selfishness, depravity, want of principle, etc., which would qualify him for the change. His name shows that he is of Jewish origin. I do not use it as a term of reproach; there are many most respectable Jews. But there are, as in every other people, some of the lowest and most disgusting grade of moral turpitude; and of those I look upon Mr. Disraeli as the worst.” (8)

Benjamin Disraeli responded by attacking O’Connell in The Times newspaper. This included a demand for a duel with O’Connell’s son. As a result of this Disraeli was arrested. This dispute helped to promote Disraeli’s political career and he was offered the safe Tory seat of Maidstone. Disraeli easily beat his Whig opponent in the 1837 General Election. (9)

Moral Force Chartism

Disraeli’s maiden speech in the House of Commons was poorly received and after enduring a great deal of barracking ended with the words: “though I sit down now, the time will come when you will hear me.” Disraeli advocated triennial parliaments and the secret ballot. In one speech argued that the “rights of labour were as sacred as the rights of property”. In another he spoke against the Poor Law Amendment Act, something that he described as the “more odious than any other new Bill since the Conquest”.

Disraeli advocated parliamentary reform and joined those such as Thomas Attwood, Thomas Wakely, Thomas Duncombe, John Fielden and Joseph Hume, who supported Moral Force Chartism. Disraeli believed that peaceful methods of persuasion such as the holding of public meetings, the publication of newspapers and pamphlets and the presentation of petitions to Parliament would finally convince the government to reform the parliamentary system. (10)

Disraeli argued that moderate reform would undermine people like Fergus O’Connor, James Rayner Stephens and George Julian Harney, who were the leaders of the Physical Force Chartists. O’Connor began making speeches where he spoke of being willing “to die for the cause” and promising to “lead people to death or glory”. O’Connor argued that the concessions the chartists demanded would not be conceded without a fight, so there had to be a fight. In July 1839, Disraeli spoke up persuasively for the arguments in the Chartist petition - and then joined the 235 MPs who voted to reject it. (11)

On 28th August 1839, Benjamin Disraeli married Mary Anne Lewis, the widow of Wyndham Lewis, the Tory MP who had died the previous year. Aged 47 she was extremely wealthy. On one occasion Disraeli remarked that he had married for money, and his wife replied, “Ah! but if you had to do it again, you would do it for love.”

According to Jonathan Parry: “She was coquettish, impulsive, not well educated, and extremely talkative, but also warm, loyal, and sensible. She shared something of Disraeli’s love of striking clothes and social glitter while feeling, like him, an outsider in very high social circles. Her money, house, and solid position were undoubtedly attractive to him... But so also were her vivacity and her childless motherliness. All his life older women appealed to Disraeli, apparently in search of a mother-substitute more appreciative of his genius than his own stolid parent had been... She provided the domestic stability and constant admiration that he sorely needed. She also paid off many of his debts: she had spent £13,000 on these and his elections.” (12)

Young England Movement

After the Conservative victory in the 1841 General Election, Disraeli suggested to Sir Robert Peel, the new Prime Minister, that he would make a good government minister. Peel disagreed and Disraeli had to
Rothschild was several times elected but had to wait another eleven years to be allowed into Parliament.

The bill did get through the House of Commons but was defeated in the House of Lords.

The speech was badly received by his own party. The Irish crop failed, therefore depriving the people of their staple food. Peel was informed that three million poor people in Ireland who had previously lived on potatoes would require cheap imported corn. Peel realised that they only way to avert starvation was to remove the duties on imported corn.

An alliance of free-trade Conservatives (Peelites), Radicals, and Whigs assured the repeal of the Corn Laws. However, it caused a rift in the Conservative Party. "It was not a straight division of landed gentry against the rest. It was a division between those who considered that the retention of the corn laws was an essential bulwark of the order of society in which they believed and those who considered that the Irish famine and the Anti-Corn Law League had made retention even more dangerous to that order than abandonment." (19)

Sir Robert Peel resigned as Prime Minister in June 1846. The Tories were so divided that they were unable to form a government. Queen Victoria sent for Lord John Russell, the Whig leader. In the 1847 General Election, Disraeli stood, successfully, for the Buckinghamshire constituency. The new House of Commons had more Conservatives (325) than Whigs (292), but the depth of the Tory schism enabled Russell to continue to govern.

Peel attempted to overcome the religious conflict in Ireland by setting up the Devon Commission to inquire into the "state of the law and practice in respect to the occupation of land in Ireland." However, Peel's attempts to improve the situation in Ireland was severely damaged by the 1845 potato blight. The Irish crop failed, therefore depriving the people of their staple food. Peel was informed that three million poor people in Ireland who had previously lived on potatoes would require cheap imported corn. Peel realised that they only way to avert starvation was to remove the duties on imported corn.

The first months of 1846 were dominated by a battle in Parliament between the free traders and the protectionists over the repeal of the Corn Laws. Disraeli became the leader of the group that opposed Peel. He was accused of using this difficult situation to undermine the Prime Minister. However, he later told a fellow MP that he did this "because, from my earliest years, my sympathies had been with the landed interest of England". (17) Disraeli made a stinging attack on Peel when he accusing him of betraying "the independence of party" and thus "the integrity of public men, and the power and influence of Parliament itself". (18)

The Conservatives were now officially led by George Bentinck in the Commons but Disraeli was seen as the rising star. He began to change his image in Parliament: "The colourful attire had by now given way to the black frock coat (sometimes blue in summer), grey trousers, plush waistcoat, and sober neckerchief which was to be his Commons uniform for the next thirty years. He worked hard on his oratory, mugging up blue books and spending all day memorizing figures... He capitalized on his clear voice, great command of language, and extraordinarily retentive memory, and now began to learn the art of managing parliamentary debates tactically". (21) One observer stated that because of the damage caused by the split in the Tory Party, Disraeli "was like a subaltern in a great battle where every superior officer was killed or wounded". (22)

In 1847, Lionel de Rothschild had been returned as the MP for the City of London. As a practising Jew he could not take the oath of allegiance in the prescribed Christian form, and therefore could not take his seat. Lord John Russell proposed in the Commons that the oath should be amended to permit Jews to enter Parliament. Disraeli spoke in favour of the measure, arguing that Christianity was "completed Judaism". (23)

The speech was badly received by his own party. The Anglican establishment disagreed with the proposal and Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, suggested that Lord Russell was paying off the Jews for helping elect him. The bill did get through the House of Commons but was defeated in the House of Lords. Rothschild was several times elected but had to wait another eleven years to be allowed into Parliament.
On 4th February, 1852, Lord John Russell, the leader of the Whig government, resigned. Edward Smith-Stanley, 14th Earl of Derby, the new Prime Minister, appointed Disraeli as his Chancellor of the Exchequer. It has been claimed that Disraeli was attracted to the office by the £5,000 per year salary, which helped pay his debts. (25)

Disraeli recognized that a return to the Corn Laws was politically impossible as he feared it would result in social unrest. He therefore attempted to help the landed interests in other ways. Disraeli proposed various fiscal remedies, principally rate relief for agriculture, but also malt tax reduction and income tax differentiation in favour of tenant farmers. This period of power only lasted a few months and Derby was soon replaced as Prime Minister by George Hamilton-Gordon, 4th Earl of Aberdeen. (26)

Lord Derby became Prime Minister again in 1858 and once again Disraeli was appointed as Chancellor of the Exchequer. He also became leader of the House of Commons and was responsible for the introduction of measures to reform parliament. In February, 1858, Disraeli proposed the equalization of the town and county franchise. This would have resulted in some men in towns losing the vote and was opposed by the Liberals. An amendment proposed by Lord John Russell "condemning this disfranchisement" was passed by 330 to 291. (27)

1867 Reform Act

Derby dissolved Parliament, and the ensuing 1859 General Election resulted in modest Tory gains, but not enough to control the House of Commons. Derby resigned, and Lord Palmerston, became Prime Minister, and Disraeli once more lost his position in the government. In March 1860 Lord John Russell attempted to introduce a new Parliamentary Reform Act that would reduce the qualification for the franchise to £10 in the counties and £6 in towns, and effecting a redistribution of seats. Palmerson was opposed to parliamentary reform, and with his lack of support, the measure did not become law. (28)

William Gladstone, the new leader of the Liberal Party, made it clear that like Lord Russell, he was also in favour of increasing the number of people who could vote. Although the Conservative Party had opposed previous attempts to introduce parliamentary reform, Lord Derby's new government were now sympathetic to the idea. The Conservatives knew that if the Liberals returned to power, Gladstone was certain to try again. Disraeli "feared that merely negative and confrontational responses to the new forces in the political nation would drive them into the arms of the Liberals and promote further radicalism" and decided that the Conservative Party had to change its policy on parliamentary reform. (29)

Benjamin Disraeli argued that the Conservatives were in danger of being seen as an anti-reform party. In 1867 Disraeli proposed a new Reform Act. Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, (later 3rd Marquess of Salisbury) resigned in protest against this extension of democracy. However, as he explained this had nothing to do with democracy: "We do not live - and I trust it will never be the fate of this country to live - under a democracy." (30)
On 21st March, 1867, William Gladstone made a two hour speech in the House of Commons, exposing in detail the inconsistencies of the bill. On 11th April Gladstone proposed an amendment which would allow a tenant to vote whether or not he paid his own rates. Forty-three members of his own party voted with the Conservatives and the amendment was defeated. Gladstone was so angry that apparently he contemplated retirement to the backbenches. (31)

However, Disraeli did accept an amendment from Grosvenor Hodgkinson, which added nearly half a million voters to the electoral rolls, therefore doubling the effect of the bill. Gladstone commented: "Never have I undergone a stronger emotion of surprise than when, as I was entering the House, our Whip met me and stated that Disraeli was about to support Hodgkinson’s motion." (32)

On 20th May 1867, John Stuart Mill, the Radical MP for Westminster, and the leading male supporter in favour of women’s suffrage, proposed that women should be granted the same rights as men. "We talk of political revolutions, but we do not sufficiently attend to the fact that there has taken place around us a silent domestic revolution: women and men are, for the first time in history, really each other’s companions... when men and women are really companions, if women are frivolous men will be frivolous... the two sexes must rise or sink together." (33)

During the debate on the issue, Edward Kent Karslake, the Conservative MP for Colchester, said in the debate that the main reason he opposed the measure was that he had not met one woman in Essex who agreed with women's suffrage. Lydia Becker, Helen Taylor and Frances Power Cobbe, decided to take up this challenge and devised the idea of collecting signatures in Colchester for a petition that Karslake could then present to parliament. They found 129 women resident in the town willing to sign the petition and on 25th July, 1867, Karslake presented the list to parliament. Despite this petition the Mill amendment was defeated by 196 votes to 73. Gladstone voted against the amendment. (34)

Other amendments were accepted: Out went the “dual vote” which allowed people with property to vote in town and country. The clause that would give extra votes for people with savings or education. So did the requirement that ratepayers would need to show two years’ residence - the condition was reduced to one year. Robert Cecil, 3rd Marquis of Salisbury, complained that “all the precautions, guarantees, and securities in the Bill” had disappeared. He told Disraeli: “You are afraid of the pot boiling over. At the first threat of battle you throw your standard in the mud”. (35)

Benjamin Disraeli dismissed these points by right-wing members of his party, by claiming that this reform will guarantee peace in the years to come: “England is safe in the race of men who inhabit her, safe in something much more precious than her accumulated capital - her accumulated experience. She is safe in her national character, in her fame and in that glorious future which I believe awaits her." (36)
William Gladstone decided not to take part in the debate on the third reading of the bill as he feared it would have a negative reaction: "A remarkable night. Determined at the last moment not to take part in the debate: for fear of doing mischief on our own side." (37) Without provocation from Gladstone the bill was passed without division. The House of Lords also agreed to pass the 1867 Reform Act. (38)

The 1867 Reform Act gave the vote to every male adult householder living in a borough constituency. Male lodgers paying £10 for unfurnished rooms were also granted the vote. This gave the vote to about 1,500,000 men. The Reform Act also dealt with constituencies and boroughs with less than 10,000 inhabitants losing one of their MPs. The forty-five seats left available were distributed by: (i) giving fifteen to towns which had never had an MP; (ii) giving one extra seat to some larger towns - Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds; (iii) creating a seat for the University of London; (iv) giving twenty-five seats to counties whose population had increased since 1832. (39)

Prime Minister

On 27th February, Edward Smith-Stanley, 14th Earl of Derby, retired as prime minister on medical advice, and was replaced by Benjamin Disraeli. A few days later William Gladstone, the leader of the Liberal Party, moved and carried a bill to abolish compulsory church rates, an issue which united radicals, libertarians, nonconformists and those Anglicans unwilling to defend the status-quo. Gladstone followed this by carrying with a majority of sixty-five votes the first of three resolutions to abolish the Anglican establishment in Ireland. By taking this action Gladstone was able to heal the divisions in the Liberal Party, that had been divided over the issue of parliamentary reform. (40)

Gladstone later argued that the decision publicly to advocate Irish disestablishment was an example of “a striking gift” endowed on him by Providence, which enabled him to identify a question whose moment for public discussion and action had come. Henry Labouchere, a fellow Liberal MP, responded by saying that he “did not object to the old man always having a card up his sleeve, but he did object to his insinuating that the Almighty had placed it there.” (41)

More than a million votes were cast in the 1868 General Election. This was nearly three times the number of people who voted in the previous election. The Liberals won 387 seats against the 271 of the Conservatives. Robert Blake believes the Irish issue was an important factor in Gladstone’s victory. “Gladstone could not have selected a better issue on which to unify his own party and divide his opponents”. The Liberals did especially well in the cities because of the “existence of a large Irish immigrant population”. (42)

William Gladstone’s Government

Out of office Disraeli resumed his career as a novelist. As Duncan Watts has pointed out: “Generally he was content to sit back and allow his arch enemy to make mistakes, and there was some dissatisfaction within the Party at his lack of positive leadership. Attempts were made to replace him with the Earl of Derby, son of the old Prime Minister, but he withstood the challenge.” (43)

When the Conservatives were in power they had established a Royal Commission on Trade Unions. Three members of the commission, Frederic Harrison, Thomas Hughes and Thomas Anson, 2nd Earl of Lichfield, refused to sign the Majority Report as they considered it hostile to trade unions. They therefore published a Minority Report where he argued that trade unions should be given privileged legal status.

The Trade Union Congress campaigned to have the Minority Report accepted by the new Liberal government. Gladstone eventually agreed and the 1871 Trade Union Act was based largely on the Minority Report. This act secured the legal status of trade unions. As a result of this legislation no trade union could be regarded as criminal because “in restraint of trade”: trade union funds were protected.
Union could be regarded as criminal because “in restraint of trade”; trade union funds were protected. Although trade unions were pleased with this act, they were less happy with the Criminal Law Amendment Act passed the same day that made picketing illegal. (44)

Working class males now formed the majority in most borough constituencies. However, employers were still able to use their influence in some constituencies because of the open system of voting. In parliamentary elections people still had to mount a platform and announce their choice of candidate to the officer who then recorded it in the poll book. Employers and local landlords therefore knew how people voted and could punish them if they did not support their preferred candidate.

In 1872 William Gladstone removed this intimidation when his government brought in the Ballot Act which introduced a secret system of voting. Paul Foot points out: “At once, the hooliganism, drunkenness and blatant bribery which had marred all previous elections vanished. employers’ and landlords’ influence was still brought to bear on elections, but politely, lawfully, beneath the surface.” (45)

Gladstone became very unpopular with the working-classes when his government passed the 1872 Licensing Act. This restricted the closing times in public houses to midnight in towns and 11 o’clock in country areas. Local authorities now had the power to control opening times or to become completely “dry” (banning all alcohol in the area). This led to near riots in some towns as people complained that the legislation interfered with their personal liberty.

Benjamin Disraeli made constant attacks on Gladstone and his government. In one speech in Manchester that lasted three and quarter hours he said that the government was losing its energy. He was suggesting that Gladstone, now aged 62, was too old for the job. “As I sat opposite the ministers reminded me of one of those marine landscapes not very uncommon on the coasts of South America. You behold a row of exhausted volcanoes. Not a flame flickers from a single pallid crest”. (46)

On 9th August 1873, Gladstone replaced Robert Lowe and became his own chancellor of the exchequer. Gladstone sought to regain the political initiative by a daring and dramatic financial plan: “abolition of Income Tax and Sugar Duties with partial compensation from Spirits and Death Duties”. To balance the books he also needed some defence savings. However, the army and navy cabinet ministers refused. (47)

Gladstone became very disillusioned with politics and considered resigning. Gladstone wrote in his diary on 18th January, 1874: “On this day I thought of dissolution”. He told some of his senior ministers, John Bright, George Leveson-Gower and George Carr Glyn of his decision. “They all seemed to approve. My first thought of it was an escape from a difficulty. I soon saw on reflection that it was the best thing in itself.” (48)

Prime Minister: 1874-1880

As the prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli now had the opportunity to develop the ideas that he had expressed when he was leader of the Young England group in the 1840s. Social reforms passed by the Disraeli government included: the Factory Act (1874) and the Climbing Boys Act (1875), Artisans Dwellings Act (1875), the Public Health Act (1875), the Pure Food and Drugs Act (1875). Disraeli also kept his promise to improve the legal position of trade unions, The Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act (1875).
to improve the legal position of trade unions. The *Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act* (1875) allowed peaceful picketing and the *Employers and Workmen Act* (1878) enabled workers to sue employers in the civil courts if they broke legally agreed contracts. (49)

Early in his career Disraeli was not a strong enthusiast for building up the British Empire and had described colonies as "millstones around our neck" and had argued that the Canadians should "defend themselves" and that British troops should be withdrawn from Africa. However, once he became prime minister he changed his view on the subject. He was especially interested in India, with its population of over 170 million. It was also an outlet for British goods and a source of valuable imports such as raw cotton, tea and wheat. It is possible that he saw the Empire as an "issue on which to damage his opponents by impugning their patriotism". (50)

In one speech Disraeli attacked Liberals as being people who were not committed to the British Empire: "Gentlemen, there is another and second great object of the Tory party. If the first is to maintain the institutions of the country, the second is, in my opinion, to uphold the empire of England. If you look to the history of this country since the advent of Liberalism - forty years ago - you will find that there has been no effort so continuous, so subtle, supported by so much energy, and carried on with so much ability and acumen, as the attempts of Liberalism to effect the disintegration of the empire of England." (51)

Disraeli got on very well with Queen Victoria. She approved of Disraeli's imperialist views and his desire to make Britain the most powerful nation in the world. In May, 1876 Victoria agreed to his suggestion that she should accept the title of Empress of India. The title was said to be un-English and the proposal of the measure also seemed to suggest an unhealthily close political relationship between Disraeli and the Queen. The idea was rejected by Gladstone and other leading figures in the Liberal Party. (52)

In May 1876 it was reported that Turkish troops had murdered up to 7,000, Orthodox Christians in the Balkans. Gladstone was appalled by these events and on 6th September he published *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* (1876). He sent a copy to Benjamin Disraeli who described the pamphlet as "vindictive and ill-written... indeed in that respect of all the Bulgarian horrors perhaps the greatest." (53)

The initial print run of 2,000 sold out in two days. Several reprints took place and eventually over 200,000 copies of the pamphlet were sold. On 9th September, Gladstone addressed an audience of 10,000 at Blackheath on the subject and became the leader of the "popular front of moral outrage". Gladstone stated that "never again shall the hand of violence be raised by you, never again shall the flood-gates of lust be open to you, never again shall the dire refinements of cruelty be devised by you for the sake of making mankind miserable." (54)

William Gladstone’s approach was in stark contrast to what has been called “Disraeli’s sardonic cynicism”. Robert Blake has argued that the conflict between Gladstone and Disraeli "injected a bitterness into British politics which had not been seen since the Corn Law debates". (55) It has been claimed that "Gladstone developed a new form of evangelical mass politics" over this issue. (56)
Benjamin Disraeli (1876)

Benjamin Disraeli believed William Gladstone was using the massacre to further his political career. He told a friend: "Posterity will do justice to that unprincipled maniac Gladstone - extraordinary mixture of envy, vindictiveness, hypocrisy and superstition; and with one commanding characteristic - whether preaching, praying, speechifying, or scribbling - never a gentleman!" (57)

Disraeli suffered from increasingly bad health and endured periods of gout, asthma, and bronchitis. "He perceived that his physical powers were not sufficient to continue to lead the Commons effectively". Disraeli volunteered to resign the premiership. Queen Victoria rejected the idea and in August 1876 she made him earl of Beaconsfield. Disraeli now left the House of Commons but continued as Prime Minister and now used the House of Lords to explain his government's policies. (58)

Gladstone began to attack the foreign policy of the Conservative government. He attacked imperialism and warned of the dangers of a bloated empire with worldwide responsibilities which in the long run would become unsustainable. He pointed out that military spending had turned an inherited surplus of £6 million into a deficit of £8 million. As a result of these views, Prince George, Duke of Cambridge (the commander-in-chief) refused to shake Gladstone's hand when he met him. When his house was attacked by a Jingo mob on a Sunday evening, Gladstone wrote in his diary: "This is not very sabbatical". (59)

In the 1880 General Election the Liberal Party won 352 seats with 54.7% of the vote. Benjamin Disraeli resigned and Queen Victoria invited Spencer Cavendish, Lord Hartington, the official leader of the party, to become her new prime minister. He replied that the Liberal majority appeared to the nation as being a "Gladstone-created one" and that Gladstone had already told other senior figures in the party he was unwilling to serve under anybody else.

Victoria explained to Hartington that "there was one great difficulty, which was that I could not give Mr. Gladstone my confidence." She told her private secretary, Sir Henry Frederick Ponsonby: "She will sooner abdicate than send for or have any communication with that half mad firebrand who would soon ruin everything and be a dictator. Others but herself may submit to his democratic rule but not the Queen." (60)

Victoria now asked to see Granville Leveson-Gower, 2nd Earl Granville. He also refused to be prime minister, explaining that Gladstone had a "great amount of popularity at the present moment amongst the people". He also suggested that Gladstone, now aged 70, would probably retire by 1881. Victoria now agreed to appoint Gladstone as her prime minister. That night he recorded in his diary that the Queen received him "with the perfect courtesy from which she never deviates". (61)

Benjamin Disraeli decided to retire from politics. Disraeli hoped to spend his retirement writing novels but soon after the publication of Endymion (1880) he became very ill with severe bronchitis. Queen Victoria wanted to visit Disraeli but he rejected the idea. He is said to have remarked: "No it is better not. She would wish to take a message to Prince Albert". (62)
Benjamin Disraeli died aged 76 on 19th April, 1881.

By John Simkin (john@spartacus-educational.com) © September 1997 (updated January 2020).

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(1) Paul Foot. The Vote (2005)

The best speech in support of the Chartists came from the novelist and young Tory MP for Maidstone, Benjamin Disraeli. Disraeli mocked his colleagues’ suggestion that the Chartists were motivated solely by a desire for sedition. He referred to Chartist as “this great movement” and to the Poor Law Amendment Act as “a very great blunder”. He ridiculed the traditional Tory argument, much favoured by the Tory leader Sir Robert Peel, that the disturbances were all the fault of the Reform Bill that had let into office a class of people who took the power without the duties. He sympathized with the Chartists, he said, and asked sarcastically whether “the noble Lord (Prime Minister Melbourne) had his colonies in a condition so satisfactory... and his monetary system was in so healthy a state that he could afford to treat with such noncalance a social insurrection at his very threshold”. He concluded with a warning that “seeds were sown, which would grow up to the trouble and dishonour of the realm”.

A few years later, Benjamin Disraeli wrote a novel about the Chartists. It was called Sybil, or the Two Nations (1845), a deeply sympathetic and beautifully written account of the rise of Chartist and of its appeal to the suffering masses. The central theme of the novel is the distinction between “moral force” Chartist, espoused by the unblemished heroine, Sybil, and “physical force” Chartist, described with obvious distaste. The theme of the novel was that the conflict between the good on the “moral force” side and the evil on the “physical force” side became so bitter that it could not be solved by mere working people. The solution had to come from outside, from on high, from a brilliant, sensitive and eloquent Tory MP, Charles Egremont. Sybil’s disillusionment with her rougher supporters, who include her beloved father, begins when she reads an account of an emotional speech in Parliament by Egremont, who then conveniently arrives in the midst of “physical force” chaos to carry off her beloved and make a lady of her. The inspiration for this banal ending to what starts as a furious polemic is only too obvious. In the end, however intractable the social problems, they can best be solved by the Good Tory arriving in the nick of time on his charger. As we shall see, Disraeli returned to this theme later - as Chancellor of the Exchequer and later as Prime Minister. In July 1839, he spoke up persuasively for the arguments in the Chartist petition - and then voted to reject it.

The debate was ended, inevitably and as usual at insufferable length, by Lord John Russell. Cut out the repetitive bombast which passed for parliamentary eloquence, and Russell was saying that to concede a demand made by the threat of force would imperil the whole future of authority. The real argument against the Chartists was that the established order, military authority, colonial authority, fiscal authority, the very essence of law and order itself was threatened by their revolt. Worst of all, these new, revolutionaries threatened to strike at the root of all those authorities: the inalienable right of the rich minority periodically to plunge the majority into penury.

Even Lord John Russell might have been embarrassed in ordinary peacetime conditions to commit himself to such a crude version of the old rulers’ motto: “The poor are always with us, so let us thank God we are rich.” What forced this out of him was the concentration, even by wealthy MPs like Attwood and Fielden, on the economic arguments for the vote. The Six Points of the Chartist petition seemed mild enough. On their own, they might well have gone on to a Commons committee for further deliberation. But coming as they did from enraged and poverty-stricken masses whose representatives were calling for an armed uprising, the proposals could not even be contemplated. Russell did not need any more support. When the vote was taken, only 46 MPs voted to consider the petition further; 235, including Disraeli, voted against.


On 6 May 1867 a large-scale meeting was held in Hyde Park to demand reform. Despite back-up support from at least 10,000 police and military, the government was forced to abandon its efforts to ban the meeting on the grounds that it would be impossible to disperse a crowd of 100,000. It was a serious humiliation for the government in that they were seen to have permitted a blatant defiance of the law and to have encouraged working-class solidarity. The fact that significant concessions were made to the proposed reform bill shortly thereafter certainly suggests that external pressures were instrumental in affecting government opinion.

The other factor frequently analysed is the precise role of Disraeli during the debates. Why did he resist amendments proposed by Gladstone, which would have limited the franchise, but accept, often with little debate, other, more extreme amendments? It appeared that he was determined to thwart Gladstone and to retain the initiative within the Commons at all costs. Was this the action of a pure opportunist, manipulating the Commons for his own political gain, or was he swayed by the external agitation?
Maurice Cowling claimed that Disraeli permitted such a large expansion of the electorate because he was engaged in a cynical game of political manoeuvring, designed to retain office and `dish Gladstone'.


Traditionalist Conservatives like Disraeli and Salisbury feared that merely negative and confrontational responses to the new forces in the political nation would drive them into the arms of the Liberals and promote further radicalism. Prudent Tories should provide their own version of "democratic" policies to prevent worse.

(4) Benjamin Disraeli, speech at Crystal Palace (24th June, 1872)

Gentlemen, there is another and second great object of the Tory party. If the first is to maintain the institutions of the country, the second is, in my opinion, to uphold the empire of England. If you look to the history of this country since the advent of Liberalism - forty years ago - you will find that there has been no effort so continuous, so subtle, supported by so much energy, and carried on with so much ability and acumen, as the attempts of Liberalism to effect the disintegration of the empire of England.

And, gentlemen, of all its efforts, this is the one which has been the nearest to success. Statesmen of the highest character, writers of the most distinguished ability, the most organized and efficient means, have been employed in this endeavor. It has been proved to all of us that we have lost money by our colonies. It has been shown with precise, mathematical demonstration that there never was a jewel in the crown of England that was so truly costly as the possession of India. How often has it been suggested that we should at once emancipate ourselves from this incubus. Well, that result was nearly accomplished. When those subtle views were adopted by the country under the plausible plea of granting self-government to the colonies, I confess that I myself thought that the tie was broken. Not that I for one object to self-government. I cannot conceive how our distant colonies can have their affairs administered except by self-government. But self-government, in my opinion, when it was conceded, ought to have been conceded as a part of a great policy of imperial consolidation. It ought to have been accompanied by an imperial tariff, by securities for the people of England for the enjoyment of unappropriated lands which belonged to the sovereign as their trustee, and by a military code which should have precisely defined the means and the responsibilities by which the colonies should be defended, and by which, if necessary, this country should call for aid from the colonies themselves. It ought, further, to have been accompanied by the institution of some representative council in the metropolis, which would have brought the colonies into constant and continuous relations with the home government. All this, however, was omitted because those who advised that policy - and I believe their convictions were sincere - looked upon the colonies of England, looked upon our connection with India, as a burden upon this country, viewing everything in a financial aspect, and totally passing by those moral and political considerations which make nations great, and by the influence of which alone men are distinguished from animals.

Well, what has been the result of this attempt during the reign of Liberalism for the disintegration of empire? It has entirely failed. But how has it failed? Through the sympathy of the colonies with the mother country. They have decided that the empire shall not be destroyed, and in my opinion no minister in this country will do his duty who neglects any opportunity of reconstructing as much as possible our colonial empire, and of responding to those distant sympathies which may become the source of incalculable strength and happiness to this land. Therefore, gentlemen, with respect to the second great object of the Tory party also - the maintenance of the Empire - public opinion appears to be in favour of our principles - that public opinion which, I am bound to say, thirty years ago, was not favourable to our principles, and which, during a long interval of controversy, in the interval had been doubtful...

When you return to your homes, when you return to your counties and your cities, you must tell to all those whom you can influence that the time is at hand, that, at least, it cannot be far distant, when England will have to decide between national and cosmopolitan principles. The issue is not a mean one. It is whether you will be content to be a comfortable England, modelled and moulded upon continental principles and meeting in due course an inevitable fate, or whether you will be a great country, - an imperial country - a country where your sons, when they rise, rise to paramount positions, and obtain not merely the esteem of their countrymen, but command the respect of the world...

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**Student Activities**

Child Labour Simulation (Teacher Notes)

1832 Reform Act and the House of Lords (Answer Commentary)

The Chartists (Answer Commentary)

Women and the Chartist Movement (Answer Commentary)

Benjamin Disraeli and the 1867 Reform Act (Answer Commentary)

William Gladstone and the 1884 Reform Act (Answer Commentary)
References

(2) Paul Smith, *Disraelian Conservatism and Social Reform* (1967) page 69
(6) Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (1967) page 87
(9) Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (1967) page 85
(17) Benjamin Disraeli, letter to Sir William Miles (11th June 1860)
(18) Benjamin Disraeli, speech in the House of Commons (22nd January, 1846)
(20) Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (1967) page 97
(22) Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (1967) page 247
(23) Benjamin Disraeli, speech in the House of Commons (16th December 1847)
(30) Benjamin Disraeli, speech in the House of Commons (18th March, 1867)
(32) William Ewart Gladstone, *diary entry* (May, 1867)
Benjamin ‘Dizzy’ Disraeli was the son of Isaac, a Jewish Italian writer, and had an Anglican upbringing after the age of 12. With Jews excluded from Parliament until 1858, this enabled Disraeli to follow a career that would otherwise have been denied him. He was Britain’s first, and so far only, Jewish Prime Minister. Aged 20 he lost money by gambling on the Stock Exchange, and helped to launch The Representative, a newspaper intended to usurp The Times, but it soon failed. Benjamin Disraeli responded by attacking O’Connell in The Times newspaper. This included a demand for a duel with O’Connell’s son. As a result of this Disraeli was arrested. This dispute helped to promote Disraeli’s political career and he was offered the safe Tory seat of Maidstone. Disraeli easily beat his Whig opponent in the 1837 General Election. (9). Moral Force Chartism. Benjamin Disraeli is a British politician and writer who twice served as the Prime Minister of the country. This biography of Benjamin Disraeli provides detailed information about his childhood, life, achievements, works & timeline. Benjamin Disraeli is one of the most prominent names in the history of British politics. He was one of the few who paved the way for a great political revolution in his nation and increased the outreach of ‘The Conservative’ party’s visions and objectives.