

**THE PRACTICAL  
RESULTS OF THE  
REFORM ACT OF 1832**

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The Practical Results of the Reform Act of 1832 by Sir John Walsh

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**SIR JOHN WALSH**

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OF THE  
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BY SIR JOHN WALSH, BART., M.P.,  
AUTHOR OF 'CHAPTERS OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY.'

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CHAPTER I.

Introduction — Temporary character of the Settlement of 1832 — Its effects have not yet been impartially considered — They fairly arise on the question of its reconstruction.

THE Constitution of 1832 has lasted upwards of a quarter of a century, a very large portion of the life of a man, a very short moment in the history of a nation. Nevertheless its duration has considerably exceeded the prognostics of its opponents. Their anticipations that it would be the immediate precursor of social revolution have been delayed at least, although not disproved.

The expectations of its authors that it would be a final settlement of a great constitutional question have been still more mistaken, even in that limited and qualified sense in which the term final can be applied to human institutions. An organic change in the governing power of a country, which does not last thirty years, cannot be considered as entitled to the appellation of a final, or of a permanent and stable system. A scheme of representative



government, which during a brief existence of twenty-seven years has been exposed to incessant attacks, which has been altered and modified repeatedly, which is on the point of being entirely remodelled, but which, after having been submitted to this process, will most unquestionably not satisfy powerful parties, clamorous for farther changes, has no semblance of fixedness in it.

The most limited range of political foresight must perceive that there is no reasonable prospect of any permanent settlement of our representative system. Constant change in its forms, and in its operation upon society, is henceforward to be regarded as its normal state.

The practical problem to be resolved is, not the creation of a permanent system, which may be abandoned as hopeless, but the effects of continual changes in this vital organ of the body politic, of constant encroachments of the democratic power upon the laws, institutions, and form of society existing in this empire.

The occurrence of frequent changes, or, to speak in more precise language, the periodical agitation for Parliamentary Reform, more or less successful in its objects, may be assumed as certain; and because the law of 1832 has lasted twenty-seven years, we have no right to infer that the next will endure half as long. It is the tendency of all intermittent disorders, as the intensity of the disease becomes aggravated, for the intervals of rest to grow briefer. But there is a far more difficult question behind this.

What will be the form which our political and social relations will take under these new combinations? When we look at our highly complicated and artificial civilisation, the ramifications and deep-rooted strength of our institutions, the influences which silently pervade our people, it is impossible to foretell what may be the results of these innovations. Our representative system, anomalous and irregular in its forms, has hitherto been in harmony in its spirit with our social state. There can be little doubt that more democratic powers will be in antagonism with much that exists.

What may be the result of the struggle, what curve the body politic may describe, when subject to these conflicting forces, a Babbage would find it difficult to calculate.

There is another element which must be taken into the account, the effect of foreign influences and sympathies. The popular mind is always reluctant to admit the existence of these influences, but they nevertheless produce the most direct and powerful effect on the march of our domestic affairs.

The proximate cause of the Reform Bill was the Paris Revolution of 1830. The Russian war turned Mr. Bright and Mr. Cobden out of Parliament. The Refugee Bill overthrew Lord Palmerston's Administration, when it seemed the strongest; and the state of Europe is now transforming us into a nation of riflemen.

The Continent of Europe, acting so powerfully upon ourselves, is itself in a state of transition. A

new force has been evolved out of its throes and struggles, the direction of which we can scarcely estimate. The sceptre of the greatest of earthly conquerors, like the talisman in the Eastern tale, which found its way back to its master through rocks of adamant, has almost miraculously been restored to the grasp of the heir of that mighty name—heir to his name—heir to his genius—heir to his profound policy, his intuitive perception of the spirit of his age, his iron will, his ascendancy over mankind. No servile copyist of that immortal uncle, no mere follower in the exact track of his footsteps, but fertile in resource, original in design, “varying the means, to secure the unity of the end”—that end being the grandeur of the French empire.

Where this new star may lead Europe, or what direct or indirect influences it may exert upon ourselves, must be one of the secrets of the future. All that we can perceive now is, that the two nations are moving in two totally opposite directions, England extending and strengthening the democratic and republican element, France consolidating a brilliant absolute empire, resting upon a vast army

It is under these circumstances that we are drifting into a new Reform Bill, and it is curious to remark the contrast which they offer to those under which the Act of 1832 was passed. An ambitious political party, long estranged from power, and bent on converting the precarious tenure