

Tory cabinets were in power, but proved far too flighty and capricious as a responsible minister of the Crown.

Lord Grey was a man whom age had rendered cautious and moderate; he succeeded in carrying out the long-needed reforms, for which the nation had been waiting since 1815, with the minimum of friction and trouble. A less judicious leader might have provoked very serious political strife, for all the elements of discord were present in the situation. The Tory party commanded a great majority in the House of Lords, and controlled a large and unscrupulous minority in the Lower House: the seats of so many representatives of rotten boroughs were imperilled by the impending reform of the Commons, that they were naturally full of impotent and factious wrath. Lord Grey had announced, on accepting office, that he intended to make Parliamentary Reform the main feature of his administration, so his adversaries had fair notice of his intentions.

The condition of the House of Commons, considered as a representative body, had been growing more and more of a disgraceful anomaly for two hundred years. There had been practically no change in its constitution since the reign of Queen Elizabeth; scores of boroughs that had been flourishing market towns or seaports in the middle ages had sunk into decayed villages—some, like Gatton and Old Sarum, had dwindled down to a couple of houses. On the other hand, great industrial centres like Leeds or Birmingham had no representative whatever. In the shires things were almost as ridiculous—the great counties of Yorkshire and Lancashire, reckoning their inhabitants by the million, had the same two members as Rutland. It is hard to see how the survival of the antiquated system could have been seriously defended, save by the landowners who dominated “rotten boroughs” of the type of Old Sarum, or the capitalists who liked to buy a seat instead of facing troublesome masses of constituents. Pitt had