

The People's Charter

Published in 1838 by the London Working Men's Association, the People's Charter set out a series of demands that would turn Britain and Ireland into a democratic country.

The Six Points of the Charter are well known:

- The right to vote for all adult men
- Vote by secret ballot
- No property qualification for MPs
- Equal constituencies
- The payment of MPs
- Annual Parliaments

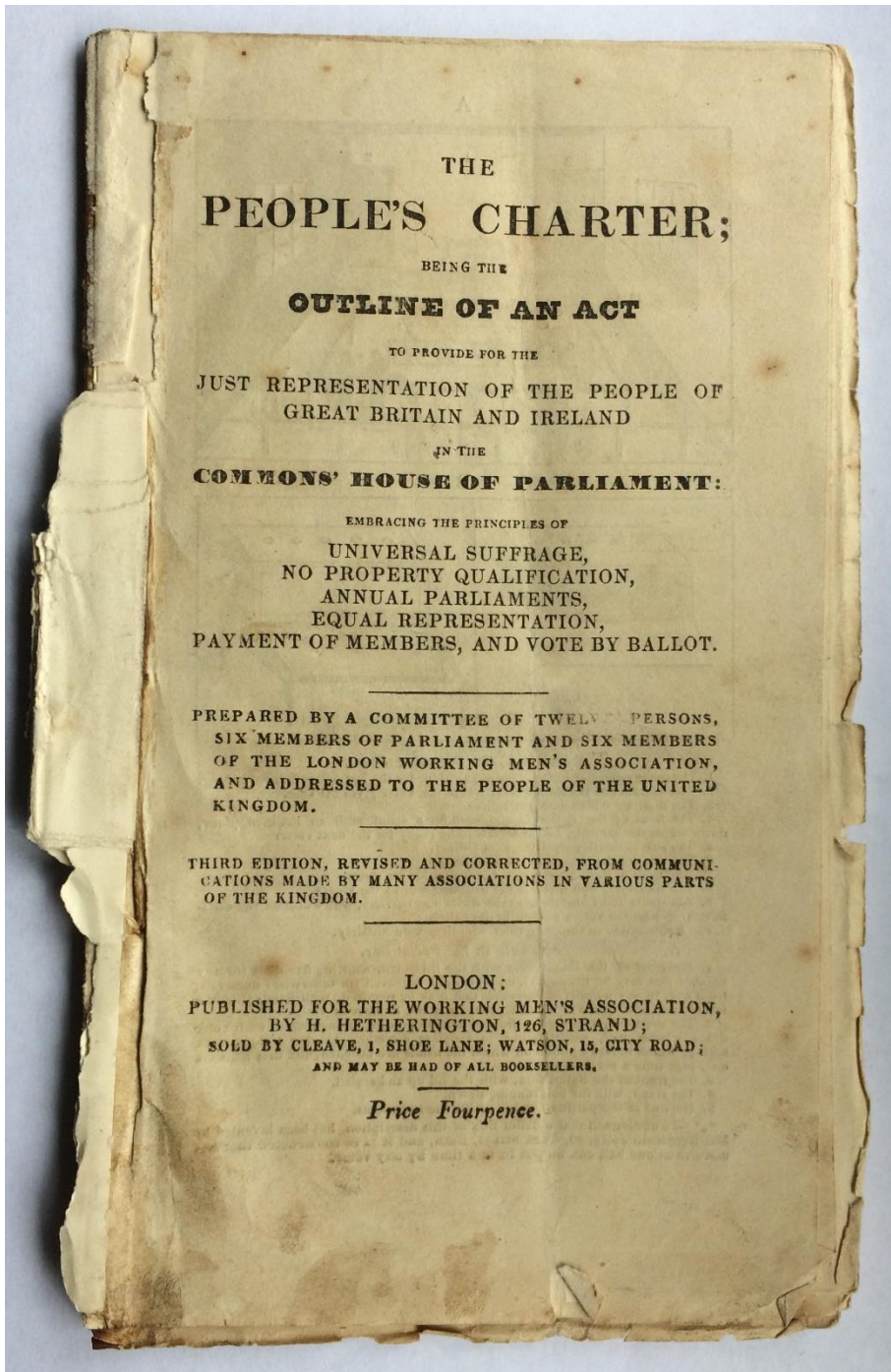
These demands were put to Parliament in a series of massive petitions between 1839 and 1848 and rejected each time.

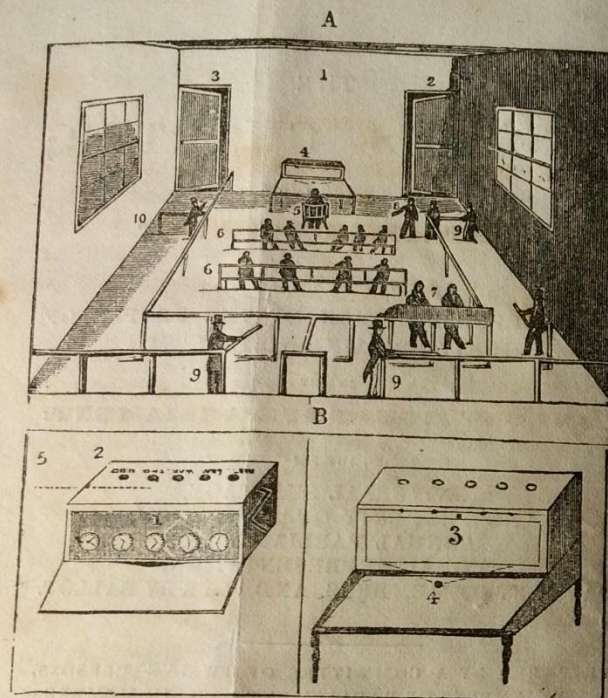
The document shown here set out the Chartist programme for the first time, sought the views of radical and working men's associations throughout the country, and provided the outline of an Act of Parliament to bring the reforms into effect.

The document is reproduced in full. It explains how and why the Chartists made their demands, and discusses the reasons they decided not to demand the right for women to vote.

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Schedule A, the Balloting Place.

1. The space separated off by a close partition, for the purposes of secret voting.
2. The entrance to the Ballot Box, where the voter gives his vote.
3. The door by which the voter retires.
4. The front of the Ballot Box, placed on a stand with an inclined plane, down which the balloting ball descends to be ready for the next voter.
5. The seat of the Deputy Returning Officer.
6. The seats of the Agents of the Candidates.
7. The desk of the Registration Clerk and his assistants.
8. The Assistant, who delivers the balloting ball to the voters.
9. Assistants and Constables at the doors and barriers, who examine the certificates, and let the voters pass on to the ballot.
10. A Constable to stop any voter who may vote unfairly.

Schedule B, the Ballot Box.

1. The front of the Ballot Box with the lid down, shewing five dials (or any number that may be necessary), on which are engraved (or otherwise) numerals, from one, to any number of thousands that may be required, with hands (like the minute and hour hands of a clock), to register the number of votes.
 2. The apertures, with the Candidates' names opposite, through which each voter drops a brass ball, which falling in a zig-zag direction, touches a clock-work spring, which moves a pinion on which the hands are fastened, and thus registers one, each time a person votes.
 3. The front of the Ballot Box, with the lid up and sealed.
 4. The stand, with the ball running down.
 5. The line of the partition which makes the two rooms.
- * * We understand that a Ballot Box of this description, has been invented by Mr. Benjamin Jolly, 19, York Street, Bath, and it is so constructed that not more than one ball can be put in at a time by any voter.

THE WORKING MEN'S ASSOCIATION, TO THE **RADICAL REFORMERS,** OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND.

FELLOW COUNTRYMEN,—Having frequently stated our reasons for zealously espousing the great principles of Reform, we have now endeavoured to set them forth practically. We need not reiterate the facts and unrefuted arguments which have so often been stated and urged in their support. Suffice it to say, that we hold it to be an axiom in politics, that self-government by representation is the only just foundation of political power—the only true basis of Constitutional Rights—the only legitimate parent of good laws:—and we hold it as an indubitable truth, that all government which is based on any other foundation, has a perpetual tendency to degenerate into anarchy or despotism, or to beget class and wealth idolatry on the one hand, poverty and misery on the other.

While, however, we contend for the principle of self-government, we admit that laws will only be just in proportion as the people are enlightened, on which, socially and politically, the happiness of all must depend; but as self-interest, unaccompanied by virtue, seeks its own exclusive benefit, so will the exclusive and privileged classes of society ever seek to perpetuate their power, and to proscribe the enlightenment of the people. Hence we are induced to believe that the enlightenment of all will sooner emanate from the exercise of political power by all

the people, than by their continuing to trust to the selfish government of the few.

A strong conviction of these truths, coupled, as that conviction is, with the belief that most of our political and social evils can be traced to *corrupt* and *exclusive* legislation—and that the remedy will be found in extending to the people at large, the exercise of those rights, now monopolized by a few, has induced us to make some exertions towards embodying our principles in the following Charter.

We are the more inclined to take some practicable step in favour of Reform, from the frequent disappointments the cause has experienced. We have heard eloquent effusions in favour of political equality, from the hustings and the senate-house, suddenly change into prudent reasonings on property privileges, at the winning smile of the minister. We have seen depicted, in glowing language, bright patriotic promises of the future, which have left impressions on us more lasting than the perfidy or apostacy of the writers. We have seen one zealous Reformer after another desert us, as his party was triumphant, or his interests served. We have perceived the tone of those whom we have held as champions of our cause, lowered to the accommodation of selfish electors, or restrained by the slavish fear of losing their seats. We have, therefore, resolved to test the sincerity of the remainder, by proposing that something shall be done in favour of those principles they profess to admire.

In June last, we called a general meeting of our members, and invited to attend that meeting

all those Members of Parliament who, by their speeches and writings, we were induced to believe were advocates of Universal Suffrage. Several did attend, and after some discussion, another meeting was proposed, at which several Members of Parliament pledged themselves by resolutions signed by their own hands, "*that they would bring in and support a Bill for Universal Suffrage, Equal Representation, Short Parliaments, the Ballot, &c.*" They also passed another resolution at that meeting, appointing persons to draw up such Bill.

Many circumstances transpired to cause the great delay that took place, but the following outline of an Act of Parliament is the result of our exertions. As a Bill in detail embracing all the legal technicalities required, would be very expensive in the printing, and but ill adapted for the general reader, the present outline has been preferred.

It has often been urged, that Universal Suffrage, as well as all the other essentials to the free exercise of that right, could not be reduced to practice. This is, therefore, an attempt to show the contrary; and we think it would be practically found to be a simpler, cheaper, and better mode of securing to the whole people their elective rights, than the present expensive machinery, by which the rich and ambitious few, are enabled to pauperize and enslave the industrious many.

Although this may be a new form of putting forward our claims, they are in themselves by no means new. In former times, Parliaments were only *sessional*, and the members received pay for their attendance. In the year 1780, the Duke of

Richmond introduced a Bill into the House of Lords, for the purpose of establishing *Annual Parliaments*, and giving the right of voting *to every man not contaminated by crime, nor incapacitated for want of reason*. Three years after this, in his celebrated letter to Col. Sharman, he says, "The subject of Parliamentary Reform is that which, of all others, most deserves the attention of the public, as I conceive it would include every other advantage which a nation can wish; and I have no hesitation in saying that from every consideration which I have been able to give to this great question, that for many years has occupied my mind, and from every day's experience to the present hour, I am more and more convinced that the *RESTORING the right of voting to every man universally, who is not incapacitated by nature for want of reason, or by law for the commission of crimes, together with annual elections, is the only Reform that can be effectual and permanent.*"

In 1780, the electors of Westminster, in public meeting, appointed a committee, out of which a sub-committee was appointed to take into consideration the election of Members of Parliament. Charles James Fox, the leader of the Whigs, and Thomas Brand Hollis, Esq., were the chairmen of these committees. In their report to the electors they recommended

1. Annual Parliaments.
2. Universal Suffrage.
3. Equal Voting Districts.
4. No Property Qualification.
5. Voting by Ballot.
6. Payment of Members.

The "Society of Friends of the People," was established in 1792, by Chas. Grey, Esq., (now Earl Grey,) the Hon. Thos. Erskine, Mr. (afterwards Sir James) Mackintosh, several noblemen and members of the House of Commons. In 1795, they resolved to publish a Declaration in which the right of voting should be so moderate *that there should be no condition in life in which it might not be acquired by labour, by industry, or talents.*

These are the doings of the Whigs of former times, persons, whose speeches *on every other subject*, our modern Whigs quote with ancestral reverence as texts from holy writ. Like every other irresponsible body, they have, however, degenerated. The only remedy for the evil, is to render Whig, Tory, and Radical legislators alike responsible to the people; and to instruct the people in a knowledge of their rights and duties.

We could wish it to be engraven on the memory of every Reformer, "that the people *must be free* in proportion as they Will it,"—not by foolishly lending themselves to bigotry or party to become the instruments of the conceited, or selfishly ambitious, as they have too often done—nor by *violently* overthrowing the empire of title, the folly of privilege, or the dominion of wealth; for the experience of the past has clearly written for our guidance, that a change of men is not always a reformation in principle; and when a knowledge of their rights and duties shall have taught the people that their own vices and ignorance are the chief instruments by which they are bowed to the dust, titles, privileges, and wealth will lose their potency to enslave them.

Fellow-countrymen, the object we contemplated in the drawing up of this Bill was to cause the Radicals of this kingdom to form, if possible, a concentration of their principles in a practical form, upon which they could be brought to unite, and to which they might point, as a CHARTER they are determined to obtain.

Copies of this outline were forwarded to most of the Working Men's Associations and Radical Associations in the kingdom, and it has met with general approbation. It has been adopted at several large public meetings in different parts of the country, and, among others, at the great Birmingham meeting of the 6th of August, 1838, where upwards of 200,000 persons were present. We also received very valuable suggestions for its improvement from a great number of societies, and this revision is made (as far as our judgment deems it reasonable) to accord with the wishes of the majority. We still court suggestions for its improvement, our object being to make the details as perfect as theory will enable us to do, especially as we have the history of the Reform Bill, and all its anomalies, fresh in our remembrance to profit by.

The next Session of Parliament, when the great NATIONAL PETITION is presented, individuals will be selected to introduce this CHARTER to the Legislature, and we anticipate that by that time a considerable number will be added to the Members *who are now pledged to support it*. In the interim, we hope that electors and non-electors will continue to make it the pledge of their candidates; will seek to extend its circulation; talk

over its principles; and resolve, that as public opinion forced the Whig Reform Bill, so in like manner shall this Bill eventually become the Law of England.

Indrawing it up we have found some difficulty in fixing the requisite qualification of electors, because of many of the barbarous and unjust laws, which corrupt and selfish legislators have enacted. While, for instance, we agree with most Reformers that felony should lead to the deprivation of political rights, we think the law which makes it felony for a boy to steal an apple, or to kill a wild animal which crosses his path, is as cruel as it is unjust.

We also think that the present alien laws, which had their origin in the bigoted and prejudiced feelings of other days, should be so modified as to permit the right of citizenship to those, who for some definite period, have taken up their abode among us, and are willing to declare their allegiance as citizens; and thus break down those barriers which kingcraft and priestcraft have erected to divide man from his brother man.

Among the suggestions we received for improving this Charter, is one for embracing women among the possessors of the franchise. Against this reasonable proposition we have no just argument to adduce, but only to express our fears of entertaining it, lest the false estimate man entertains for this half of the human family may cause his ignorance and prejudice to be enlisted to retard the progress of his own freedom.

And, therefore, we deem it far better to lay down just principles, and look forward to the rational

improvement of society, than to entertain propositions which may retard the measure we wish to promote.

In conclusion, we think that no unprejudiced man can reflect on the present unjust and exclusive state of the franchise—where property, however unjustly acquired, is possessed of rights, that knowledge the most extensive, and conduct the most exemplary, fail to attain—can witness the demoralizing influence of wealth in the legislature—the bribery, perjury, tumults, and disorders attendant on the present mode of elections—but must admit that the object contemplated is worthy of the task we have imposed upon ourselves, however we may have fallen short in providing an efficient remedy.

We remain, fellow-countrymen, your's respectfully, the Members of the Working Men's Association.

Signed, by the Committee, on their behalf,

JOHN JAFFRAY, Bookbinder.

WILLIAM SAVAGE, Warehouseman.

HENRY MITCHELL, Turner.

JOHN SKELTON, Shoemaker.

DANIEL BINYON, Labourer.

RICHARD CAMERON, Bracemaker.

JAMES LAWRENCE, Painter.

WILLIAM MOORE, Carver.

ARTHUR DYSON, Compositor.

JOHN ROGERS, Tailor.

WILLIAM ISAACS, Typefounder.

JAMES JENKINSON, Engraver.

EDWARD THOMAS, Warehouseman.

HENRY HETHERINGTON, Treasurer.

WILLIAM LOVETT, Secretary.

6, Upper North Place, Gray's Inn Road.
London, May 8th, 1838.

THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER.

An Act to provide for the just Representation of the People of Great Britain and Ireland, in the Commons' House of Parliament.

WHEREAS to insure, in as far as it is possible PREAMBLE. by human forethought and wisdom, the just government of the people, it is necessary to subject those who have the power of making the laws, to a wholesome and strict responsibility to those whose duty it is to obey them when made :

And, whereas, this responsibility is best enforced through the instrumentality of a body which emanates directly from, and is itself immediately subject to, the whole people, and which completely represents their feelings and their interests :

And, whereas, as the Commons' House of Parliament now exercises in the name and on the supposed behalf of the people, the power of making the laws, it ought, in order to fulfil with wisdom and with honesty the great duties imposed on it, to be made the faithful and accurate representation of the people's wishes, feelings, and interests.

BE IT THEREFORE ENACTED,

That from and after the passing of this Act, every male inhabitant of these realms be entitled to vote for the election of a Member of Parliament, subject however to the following conditions :—

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franchise.

1. That he be a native of these realms, or a foreigner who has lived in this country upwards of two years, and been naturalized.

2. That he be twenty-one years of age.

3. That he be not proved insane when the lists of voters are revised.

4. That he be not convicted of felony within six months from and after the passing of this Act.

5. That his electoral rights be not suspended for bribery at elections, or for personation, or for forgery of election certificates, according to the penalties of this Act.

ELECTORAL DISTRICTS.

The United
Kingdom, di-
vided into
electoral dis-
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equally divid-
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by the last
census,

named after
principal Ci-
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to return one
member,

I. Be it enacted, that for the purpose of obtaining an equal representation of the people in the Commons' House of Parliament, the United Kingdom be divided into 300 electoral districts.*

II. That each such district contain, as nearly as may be, an equal number of inhabitants.

III. That the number of inhabitants be taken from the last census, and as soon as possible after the next ensuing decennial census shall have been taken, the electoral districts be made to conform thereto.

IV. That each electoral district be named after the principal city or borough within its limits.

V. That each electoral district return one representative to sit in the Commons' House of Parliament, and no more.

* There are, say 6,000,000 of men, eligible to vote; this number divided by 300 gives 20,000 to each member.

VI. That the Secretary of State for the Home Department shall appoint three competent persons as commissioners, and as many sub-commissioners as may be necessary for settling the boundaries of each of the 300 electoral districts, and so on from time to time, whenever a new decennial census of the people be taken.

Sec. of State
to appoint
commission-
ers, &c.

VII. That the necessary expenses of the said commissioners, sub-commissioners, clerks, and other persons employed by them in the performance of their duties, be paid out of the public treasury.

Commis-
sioners' ex-
penses, how
paid.

REGISTRATION OFFICERS.

Be it enacted, that for the purpose of procuring an accurate registration of voters—for finally adjudicating in all cases of objections made against persons claiming to be registered—for receiving the nominations of Members of Parliament, and returning officers, and declaring their election—as well as for conducting and superintending all matters connected with registration, nomination, and elections, according to the provisions of this Act—the following officers be appointed.

Registration
officers.

1. Returning officers for each electoral district.

2. Deputy returning officers for each district.

3. A Registration clerk for every parish, containing number of inhabitants, or for every two or more parishes, if united for the purposes of this Act.

RETURNING OFFICER, AND HIS DUTIES.

I. Be it enacted, that at the first general

The returning
officer elected

every three years.

How elected,

How vacancies are to be filled up.

Returning officers to appoint deputies,

to appoint registration clerks.

to see proper balloting places and balloting boxes provided,

to receive lists of voters,

election after the passing of this Act, a returning officer be elected for every electoral district throughout the kingdom, and so in like manner at the end of every three years.

II. That at the end of every such period, the returning officer for each district be nominated in like manner, and elected at the same time as the Member of Parliament for the district—he shall be eligible to be re-elected.

III. That vacancies occasioned by the death, removal, or resignation of the returning officer, shall in like manner be filled up as vacancies for Members of Parliament, for the unexpired term of the three years.

IV. That every returning officer shall appoint a deputy returning officer for the day of election, for every balloting place within his district, and in all cases be responsible for the just fulfilment of the duties of such deputies.

V. That it be the duty of the returning officer to appoint a registration clerk for every parish within his district, containing number of inhabitants, or for every two or more parishes, if united for the purposes of this Act; and that in all cases he be responsible for the just fulfilment of the duties of such clerks.

VI. That he also see that proper balloting places, and such other erections as may be necessary, be provided by each parish (or any number that may be united), and that the balloting boxes be made and provided according to the provisions of this Act.

VII. That he receive the lists of voters from all the parishes in his district, in which lists shall be marked or specified the names of the persons who have been objected to by the registration clerks, or any other persons.

VIII. That between the first of April and the first of May, in each year, he shall hold *open* courts of adjudication, at such a number of places within his district as he may deem necessary, of which courts (place and time of meeting) he shall cause due notice to be given in each parish of the district, and at the same time invite all persons who have made objections, and who have been objected to. And after hearing the statements that may be made by both parties, he shall *finally adjudicate* whether the voter's name be placed on the register or not.

IX. That the returning officer shall then cause to be made out alphabetical lists of all the registered voters in all the parishes within his district; which list signed and attested by himself, shall be used at all elections for the district. Such lists to be sold to the public at reasonably low prices.

X. That the returning officer receive all nominations for the Member of his district, as well as for the returning officer of his district, and shall give public notice of the same according to the provisions of this Act: he shall also receive from the Speaker of the House of Commons, the orders for any new election in case of the death or resignation of the Member of the district, as well as the orders to superintend and conduct the election of any other district, in case of the death or resignation of the returning officer of such district.

XI. That the returning officer shall also receive the returns from all the parishes within his district on the day of the election, and on the day following the election he shall proclaim the state of the ballot as directed by this

to hold courts of adjudication and finally adjudicate respecting voters.

Lists to be made out for the use of electors.

Returning officer to receive nominations, &c.

to receive returns, and proclaim the state of the ballot.

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