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Secrets of the ballot box: 150 years of voting in private

Seldom can a major constitutional reform have aroused so little enthusiasm. No public meetings were held to demand it; no great demonstrations were organised in its support. After much parliamentary dithering and delay, the Ballot Act finally became law in the second half of 1872, exactly 150 years ago.

William Gladstone, the Liberal prime minister in power at the time, had introduced it in a hesitant fashion, having earlier in his career denounced it as “trash”. He spoke of his “lingering reluctance” as the bill went slowly through the Commons while legislation regarded as far more important raced ahead. In the end Gladstone decided that the secret ballot was unavoidable, and his party might as well get the credit for it.

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His predecessor as Liberal leader disagreed strongly. Earl Russell had in his younger days, as Lord John Russell, got the Great Reform Act of 1832 on to the statute book. Now he told the House of Lords that “the Englishman’s privilege of public voting should be sacredly respected. Our whole progress for the last century and a half has been in favour of publicity. In whatever light secret voting is viewed, it seems a bad system.”

The Tories applauded him. Benjamin Disraeli, their combative leader, “hated the ballot”. His colleagues, dominant in the Lords, threw out the legislation when it first reached them in 1871. On its second appearance the following year, they voted in favour of “optional secrecy”, backing down only to avoid a constitutional crisis that

Gladstone would have turned to his advantage.

The Tories swiftly discovered that the unwanted reform had a large silver lining. After the first by-election with secret voting produced a Tory gain in 1873, Lord Salisbury noted that “the ballot has evidently covered a large number of Liberal desertions”.

By this, he meant that working-class voters in urban areas were now able to defy their Liberal employers without fear of the sack.

The ballot did not put an end to electoral corruption, which was rampant in the 19th century. In 1880 parliamentary commissioners reported that “it did not appear that the mode of taking votes by ballot had the slightest effect in checking bribery. On the contrary, it enabled many voters to take bribes on both sides.” The one hope of securing improvement was that “the briber had no proof that his money was not being wasted”.

The arrival of secret voting did have a fundamental effect on politics in one part of the United Kingdom: Ireland. The ballot enabled a brilliant young critic of the union to launch his career. Charles Stewart Parnell told his restive fellow countrymen: “An independent Irish party, free from the touch of English influence, was the thing wanted, and this party could be elected under the Ballot Act.”

At the next general election, in 1874, voters in many Irish constituencies defied the wishes of powerful landowners by whom they had hitherto been guided. In total, 58 Home Rule MPs were elected. The long campaign to secure Irish self-government had begun. 🇮🇪

