

# Chartism

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## **Focus**

The term Chartism emerged early in 1839 as a descriptor for the largest parliamentary pressure movement in British history. *The People's Charter* (published May 1838) had quickly become the focal point for a mass agitation that sought to complete the work that Magna Carta (1215) had begun, namely the transfer of political power down the social scale. There was nothing new in the Charter's famous six points (a vote for all men aged over 21, no property qualification to become an MP, salaries for all MPs, voting in secret, equal-sized constituencies and annual general elections).

These demands were an established part of radical campaigning. What was new about Chartism? It dwarfed all earlier campaigns in size and vitality. The eye-catching title was a

THE  
**PEOPLE'S CHARTER;**

BEING THE

**OUTLINE OF AN ACT**

TO PROVIDE FOR THE

JUST REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE OF  
GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

IN THE

**COMMONS' HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT:**

EMBRACING THE PRINCIPLES OF

UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE,  
NO PROPERTY QUALIFICATION,  
ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS,  
EQUAL REPRESENTATION,  
PAYMENT OF MEMBERS, AND VOTE BY BALLOT.

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PREPARED BY A COMMITTEE OF TWELVE PERSONS,  
SIX MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT AND SIX MEMBERS  
OF THE LONDON WORKING MEN'S ASSOCIATION,  
AND ADDRESSED TO THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED  
KINGDOM.

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THIRD EDITION, REVISED AND CORRECTED, FROM COMMUNI-  
CATIONS MADE BY MANY ASSOCIATIONS IN VARIOUS PARTS  
OF THE KINGDOM.

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LONDON:

PUBLISHED FOR THE WORKING MEN'S ASSOCIATION,  
BY H. HETHERINGTON, 126, STRAND;  
SOLD BY CLEAVE, 1, SHOE LANE; WATSON, 15, CITY ROAD;  
AND MAY BE HAD OF ALL BOOKSELLERS.

*Price Fourpence.*

factor here, but so too was the particular context from which it emerged. The 1832 Reform Act had exploded the conceit that the British constitution was beyond improvement. It was widely believed that the Act was only an initial instalment of parliamentary reform. However, its primary beneficiaries, the Whig Party, were resolute in proclaiming its finality and this strengthened a popular perception that Parliament acted only in the interests of its (largely land-owning) members. Added to this was growing support for the reform of factory working conditions and hours of labour, resentment at recent reforms to the Poor Law, and widespread concern about government handling of trade unionism and of political unrest in the colonies. Over-arching all these factors was a deepening economic recession.

There had been earlier popular campaigns for parliamentary reform but Chartism was different for four principal reasons. First, it was genuinely national, reaching from north east Scotland to west Cornwall. Its mutual dependence with one of the first and most innovative mass-circulation newspapers, the *Northern Star*, was a decisive factor here. Second, it was integrally linked with industrial workers' grievances, to the extent that it has often been characterised as the earliest political expression of mass class-consciousness. Third, it took the well-established tactic of mass-petitioning Parliament to new heights. Fourth, it broadened the repertoire of political campaigning in Britain, through the development of a nationwide popular press, the employment of a professional staff to promote the cause, and by encouraging many of its supporters to get involved in local politics (where qualifications to vote were more generously defined than they were for Parliament).

### **Contention**

Chartism emerged rapidly out of impatience with the 1832 political settlement and existing campaigns for factory reform and against the Poor Law and Whig foreign and trade union policy. From the end of 1837, when *Northern Star* was founded, there was effectively a national movement, though it had as yet neither a central co-ordinating body nor a name. *The People's Charter*

itself was the work of the London Working Men's Association and more specifically its secretary William Lovett, a cabinet maker and socialist. The Association gave serious thought to demanding the vote for women but concluded that this would alienate support and delay universal male suffrage. That, however, did not prevent large numbers of women from lending their support to Chartism, and specifically female associations were a conspicuous feature of the movement in its early years.

Though Chartism did not lack middle-class or rural support, it was primarily a movement of industrial workers. Their perceptions of social and economic injustice increasingly came to the fore in the movement. The Charter was essentially a means to a far wider end: a parliament that would legislate in the interests of the majority of the population. These interests were never conceptualised as confined to regulating working conditions and humanising poor relief. So by 1842 the formal demands of the movement had broadened to include home rule for Ireland, complete religious freedom and an end to all legislative links between the State and the Church of England, abolition of the national debt, the standing army and the civil list, and an end to class bias in the administration of justice.

The 1842 demands were embodied in a petition (Chartism's second) to Parliament signed by more than 3.3 million people (approximately one in three of the adult population). To be a Chartist need mean no more than being in favour of the *People's Charter* and most signatories probably saw themselves as simply demanding the Charter. Detailed discussion of the policies expected of a reformed parliament was the preoccupation of smaller activist core, the size of which is impossible to define. *Northern Star* sold around 50,000 copies weekly at its peak: the widely documented practice of reading the paper aloud in workplaces, and at formal and informal meetings, suggests a core support several times greater than the paper's circulation. (The paper's own estimate in April 1839 was 400,000.)

An organising body to direct the movement's efforts, the National Charter Association (NCA), was not established until the autumn of 1840. Before then systematic coordination was attempted only

between February and September 1839, the duration of a national convention, mainly convened to manage Chartism's first national petition, which was presented that June with 1.3 million signatures. The NCA itself required no more commitment than assent to the six points of the Charter and the payment of a small annual subscription. This subscription base peaked in 1842 at 50,000 but there were numerous localities which only loosely affiliated to the NCA, while organisation in Scotland was largely independent of it.

This looseness was actually a source of great strength: a wide range of opinions existed and even flourished under the Chartist umbrella, notably education reform, temperance, religious radicalism, rural resettlement and land redistribution, the assertion of women's right to the vote, and international solidarity. Chartism also commanded the support of virtually all who belonged to the contemporary socialist movement (commonly called Owenites after its leader Robert Owen). But Chartists were wary of becoming too closely identified with Owenism, primarily because of the latter's atheistic character. The idea that Jesus Christ was in effect the first Chartist, or that a small-producer economy would best achieve economic justice, did not sit comfortably alongside Owenism. Furthermore, Owen's progressive stance on gender roles and, even, sexual relations was seen as inimical to family values and the male breadwinner ideal that were close to the heart of Chartism.

Yet Chartism was anything but socially and politically conservative. The audacity of its demands are difficult to comprehend in 21st-century Britain. We take parliamentary democracy for granted, while until very recent flurries around the Scottish referendum and Labour Party leadership, participation in the political process has been steadily diminishing (as evidenced in electoral turnouts, party activism and membership). However, the challenge Chartism posed to Britain's political, social, and economic elites was fundamental. The French Revolution of 1789 had left the British political establishment profoundly cautious about all concessions to popular opinion. The 1832 Reform Act had been conceded only after two years of strenuous extra-parliamentary agitation, including major breakdowns in civil order

in Bristol and Nottingham. The newly enfranchised middle class in turn showed little appetite for Chartist demands. Though a minority were prepared to support calls for the ballot, for a suffrage based on household headship, and triennial parliaments, the Whig cabinet minister Thomas Macaulay, articulated the more typical view when he argued in the Commons that 'Universal suffrage would be fatal to all purposes for which government exists' and 'utterly incompatible with the very existence of civilisation'. If Parliament were to be elected on the principles of the People's Charter, 'how is it possible to doubt that famine and pestilence would come before long to wind up the effects of such a state of things?'

Central to opposition to Chartism was the belief that working men were at best unfit to exercise political judgment and, at worst, intent upon the spoliation of property. It was a commonplace that a government answering to a mass electorate would not long be prepared or able to defend the principles of private property. It is worth noting, therefore, what Chartism did not demand. Though there were Chartists (like Lovett) who regarded themselves as socialists, public ownership of the means of production was not part of the movement's agenda. Indeed, an important adjunct movement, the Chartist Land Plan (1846-51), aimed to instate its members on smallholdings purchased on the open market with their savings. Chartists demanded a reduction in the tax burden but not a socially progressive tax system. Although the cost of the monarchy was one of the targets of the 1842 petition, criticism of the Crown was never at the forefront of Chartism's demands. Nor was reform of the House of Lords.

It was to be 1851 before a much shrunken NCA added taxation of land and accumulated wealth, plus 'gradual land nationalisation by government purchase' to a range of other social democratic measures. These included free education, a universal old-age pension, state support for producer co-operatives and a reform of employment law. 'The Charter and something more' as this programme was usually called, envisaged a modicum of government regulation of industry, but no more.



The Great Chartist Meeting on Kennington Common, organised by O'Connor 1848.

## Methods

It must be stressed, though, that the Chartism of 1851 was not the Chartism of 1839 or 1842. Support for the movement had ebbed during the economic recovery of the mid-1840s, and although it surged forward again during a further economic crisis in 1847-48, the presentation of a third mass petition in April 1848 was premature. The NCA's authority over the national movement had been only partly restored when the petition was presented and the national network of Chartist localities was not fully rebuilt. Amidst leadership claims that 5 or even 6 million had signed, the petition was exposed as having only 2 million signatories. This was hardly desultory, given that the British population itself numbered only around 17 million, but allegations of bluster and wild exaggeration were impossible to shake off.

Critically Parliament, which had at least received the 1842 petition with courtesy, was in no mood to make any sympathetic gestures to radical reformers when continental Europe was in the throes of revolution. In November 1839 Chartism had impressively withstood the impact on its reputation of an attempted rising in South Wales – indeed in 1840 more people petitioned for the leaders of that insurrection to be pardoned than had signed the 1839 petition for the Charter. In 1848 the humiliation of April was followed by the exposure in August of sufficient evidence of a revolutionary conspiracy to tarnish Chartism almost fatally. Petitioning campaigns in 1849 and 1852 yielded only 54,000 and 12,000 signatures respectively. The NCA struggled on until 1858, a minority pressure group for social democratic reform, and it never revived the tactic of petitioning Parliament.

However, this does not detract from Chartism's achievement during its first decade in mobilising an unprecedented level of criticism against the undemocratic nature of the British state. This was in effect Britain's civil rights movement and it had moved society closer to recognising that humanity and dignity are promoted and protected only when government answers to all people and not merely to the propertied. Petitioning was at the heart of movement's approach to campaigning. It is important to emphasise



that these were canvassed petitions: they were not laid down to await the signatures of the already converted as had been, for example, the petitions of the anti-slavery movement. Chartism stood on the cusp of a largely oral popular political culture and the predominantly written culture that emerged during the Victorian period. Canvassing signatures was therefore a multi-layered action, about much more than getting names on a page. Petitions 'parade Chartism in open day', to quote the movement's greatest national leader Feargus O'Connor, 'and bring us under the eye of the heretofore blind'.

Petitioning was a powerful recruitment tool. In every contributing locality – there were almost 1,000 of them in 1839 – canvassing was a major intervention in political life. The petitions made a particular rhetorical claim for legitimacy. Signing constructed the movement, that was 'banded together in one solemn and holy league' but excluded from economic and political power. The subscriptional community created by its petitions were 'the people', a term that clearly included not only men but also women and children. This was a different and wider meaning of the term 'the people' from that used by Chartism's opponents and it was a profound departure.

The Chartists were also the first movement to collect all their local efforts in order to create a single monster petition, whose presentation to Parliament would become a headline-grabbing event. In 1842 all the sheets of signatures were stitched into a single roll of paper, six miles long and weighing over 300kg. Carried by relays of building workers through London's streets, accompanied by an elaborate mass procession, the petition was a powerful visual statement about the iniquities of the electoral system. And it proved too large to fit through doors into the House of Commons. After attempts to dismantle the doorframe failed, the petition had to be disassembled and the sheets heaped onto the floor of the House where it towered above the clerks' table on which, theoretically, it was supposed to be laid. It was a powerful moment of political theatre.

Paradoxically it is doubtful that any Chartist expected petitioning to succeed. There was no lack of commitment to the

strategy, but rejection was widely predicted since one of the central premises of Chartism was that Parliament acted exclusively in the selfish interests of its members and those able to vote for them. So why do it? First, constitutional and legal propriety: extra-parliamentary agitations were hedged around by legal restrictions but meeting to organise a petition evaded most of the prohibitions. These petitions tested Westminster opinion: each was presented to a new parliament (following a general election). What should happen after rejection was a vexed question: but that petitioning was the prerequisite was never contested. Moral suasion, boycotts of taxed goods, general strike, open revolt and sheer pressure of numbers all featured in the various scenarios for which Chartists argued after petitioning failed. But every strategy depended on the mobilisation of mass support. And here the petitions were indispensable.

There were both radical and moderate campaigning factions within Chartism, especially after the events of 1839. Co-operation between those who adhered to at least the principle of direct action (the majority of Chartists) and those who favoured moral persuasion dwindled, although mass petitioning and the People's Charter itself remained powerful unifying forces. This was most vividly demonstrated in 1842 when O'Connor and Lovett (leading figures in these so-called 'physical force' and 'moral force' strands) jointly opposed co-operating with an organisation of middle-class reformers, because the latter insisted on the terminology 'Chartism' and 'People's Charter' being dropped.

Complementing the national petitions (and the micro-political processes that made them possible) was a wide range of lower-level political interventions, designed to maintain support and press Chartism's claims on local and regional elites. Mass occupations of Anglican churches were held in 1839. Meetings of middle-class reformers, notably the Anti-Corn Law League (which promoted free trade as the panacea for economic injustice) were subjected to boisterous disturbance. No less boisterously, Chartists gathered en masse at parliamentary election hustings (the open air meetings, required by law, where candidates were

formally nominated ahead of polling). Here they often proposed their own candidates who would then be elected by a show of hands; and on more than 60 occasions between 1839 and 1859, Chartist candidates actually stood at the poll (Feargus O'Connor sat as Chartist MP for Nottingham, 1847-52).

The most enduring tactic, however, was to participate as Chartist electors, candidates and elected representatives in local politics, where the right to vote was more widely, if still unequally, distributed. The extent of this activity has yet to be fully understood, but it was particularly pervasive in the English midlands and north and it ranged from local highways boards and parochial vestries to local councils and borough corporations. This aspect of Chartism was the cradle from which popular participation in local politics (along with the close canvassing and doorstep politics necessary to prevail) became the norm.

Local political activism also largely defined the occupational groups most committed to Chartism: the declining crafts where jobs were most vulnerable to mechanisation (such as handloom weaving and hosiery knitting), factory workers, and skilled craftsmen who still had considerable autonomy at the workplace, such as shoemakers and printers. Support from urban workers thought of as unskilled and from agricultural workers was far weaker. Journalists and lawyers were disproportionately represented among Chartism's national figures, the most widely and passionately acclaimed of whom was Feargus O'Connor, the presiding genius over *Northern Star* as well as one of the most accomplished public orators of the early Victorian age.

### **Outcome**

The broad social democratic programme adopted (as we saw) by the National Charter Association in 1851 did not stem the decline of Chartism. The organisation held its last national convention in 1858. It was a muted affair compared to that of 1839, albeit one that at last recognised the case for co-operation with middle-class radicals. The Chartists failed to achieve any of the six points of the People's Charter. Universal male suffrage became

a reality only in 1918 and the possibility of securing annual parliaments is as chimerical now as it was in 1838. It is important to register that annual parliaments were as integral to the Chartists' demands as universal male suffrage, intended to create a practical and direct representative democracy in which MPs would be the mandated delegates of their constituents, rather than effectively unaccountable and carefully managed by party machines.

Yet Chartism was characterised by a multiplicity of small victories. Although Parliament rebuffed all demands for the Charter, from the mid-1840s legislation that was more obviously in the national interest rather than that of the landed classes became increasingly prominent. The worst effects of the Poor Law were also ameliorated by local pragmatism (not least because of Chartist pressure). Participation in the movement generated the social capital that individual Chartists took forward into successful participation in local politics, in the emerging Liberal Party, campaigning journalism, and in voluntary organisations (notably trade unions, consumer co-operation and independent working-class education).