

Liberal reforms and its impact on the lives of the people

Government



“ To what extent did the liberal reforms in 1906-1914 improve the lives of people? ” The Liberal government introduced a series of reforms aimed at moving away from the Laissez-faire ideology and toward a more self help scheme aiming to move people away from poverty and to make Britain a better country both in health and prosperity; Churchill said “ If we see a drowning man we do not drag him to the shore, instead we provide help to allow him to swim ashore”. To do this the Liberals aimed at giving aid to the young, the old, the sick, the unemployed and the workers; these groups will be discussed throughout the essay.

These reforms were later regarded as the foundations for the welfare state. Children were one of the most critical groups for the government to help because they were unable to help themselves. They were also the next generation of workers and soldiers and knowing that war was looming meant that the government were very eager to improve their health. In 1906 an act was passed called “ Provisions of Meals Act” which meant local authorities were allowed to provide free school meals for destitute children; however this was not made compulsory until 1914 and so only a few councils took it on board right from the start.

These free school meals were effective in two ways; they were found to have vastly improved children’s diet and growth and also improved the children’s concentration during school. Parliamentary papers quoted “ Children are unable by reason of lack of food to take full advantage of their education” this proves the point that children were so hungry they could not concentrate and benefit from a proper education.

In 1907 the “ Administrative Provisions Act” was passed which introduced free medical inspections in schools checking the children’s weight, height, eye sight and general health but it was not until 1912 that free medical treatment was provided before any illnesses were observed, but little could be done by poor families who could not afford treatment also some parents believed it what their duty to look after their children and keep them healthy a historian Pugh said “ much of the states activity in connection with children - vaccination, medical inspection, school meals, arrangements for taking them into care was represented by parents as an infringement of their role. ”. Both of these acts did not improve the overall lives of the young in Britain and showed that not enough was truly being done to effectively make change and that the illusion of change was not enough.

Arguably the most important of reforms for children was the “ Children’s Charter” which was introduced in 1908. The general idea of it was to protect children from cruelty and corruption: juvenile courts were set up, imprisonment would occur in borstals, identity was protected, neglecting parents could be fined and age restrictions were placed on products such as alcohol and tobacco. The minimum age restrictions to products had limited success to start off with but it did make a difference. Overall, these acts together were believed to guarantee better lives for children. The elderly were helped by being given an old age pension. In 1908 the government paid up to 5 shillings a week to people over 70.

The pension received depended on income and was set on a sliding scale so those with the highest income received for the least (or none) in pensionmoney. The idea of pensions was admirable but there were many <https://assignbuster.com/liberal-reforms-and-its-impact-on-the-lives-of-the-people/>

unfair features of it when first introduced. Not all elderly British citizens could qualify for it; those who had avoided work, had a criminal record, or were habitually drunk were excluded. Also, the fact that it was provided for the over 70's meant that not many people lived long enough to receive their pension and also those who did had not received it early enough as monetary aid since it would have been required many years before it was provided.

Finally, the pension given did not raise the elderly income above the poverty line; Seebohm Rowntree's minimum income for comfortable survival was over 35 shillings a week, Taylor stated the government " provided a meagre pension for the needy over the age of 70" which shows many people believed that the amount paid for the pension was not nearly enough to live on. Therefore, despite the idea and intentions being good they did not go far enough to improve the lives and ensure security for the elderly. The sick were another group the government tried to help. A contributory scheme was introduced for workers in case of illness. At the time there was no free national health service and the poor usually could not afford medical help. The " National Insurance Act" of 1911 gave some medical benefits for the worker who, when working, had paid into the scheme which their employer and the government would then add too.

One of the main causes of poverty was the sickness and subsequent absence from work so any amount of income during absence from work would benefit the worker and their family greatly. However there were many problems with the scheme. For a start the workers did not like the idea that 4 pence of their money every week would be taken from them despite the possibility they

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may not claim on their insurance and they may have need the 4 pence for their own survival at the time. Also, it was only the workers themselves who were able to claim from the insurance despite the difficulties another illness in the family may put upon the other family members.

Thus, to be of greater use and to have been viewed in greater favour by many this scheme would need to cover a broader spectrum of difficulties within the family unit and appear more obviously beneficial to the majority rather than just the worker. Unemployment was another important factor of society which the Liberal reforms attempted to tackle. They did this by introducing “ Labour Exchanges Act” in 1909 where workers could find out where work could be found. Part of the National Insurance Act dealt with unemployment; it was a contributory scheme like that from illness from both the worker and the government for which they would receive a payout when unable to find work. However, this payment only lasted for up to fifteen weeks so if they were unemployed any longer no help was given. The scheme also only applied to seven particular jobs.

Churchill explained “ there are trades in which seasonal unemployment is not only high, but chronic; marked by seasonal fluctuations”. It was not designed to deal with long term unemployment and the labour exchanges act was slow and inefficient. The workers were helped by the government by introducing a “ Workman’s Compensation Act” in 1906 that covered 6 million workers who could claim compensation for disease or injury that was a result of poor working conditions. However, in many trades and industries the government failed to establish a minimum wage level or a limit to working

hours therefore did little to improve the lives of people during this period of change.

On the other hand there were many positive reforms passed to help this category. In 1908 miners secured an eight hour working day. In 1909 the "Trade Boards Act" tried to protect workers from the sweated industries by setting up trade boards to fix minimum wage in jobs where workers were liable to exploitation and where trade unions could not protect them. Finally, in 1911 a "Shop Act" limited working hours for shop assistants and guaranteed a half day when the shop is closed. The government did make changes to this group but did not solve all their problems. To conclude, it is certainly true to say that the Liberal reforms marked a change away from "Laissez-faire" to a more interventionist approach which meant that the government took some responsibility for the welfare of everyone in the country. It is wrong to say the Liberals created a welfare state. They did however mark a transition point between the old attitudes and the new attitudes towards poverty. The reforms did help to improve the lives of many people living in Britain during this time but did not solve all problems faced by the government and by the citizens of Britain; poverty was not solved and many people still lived under the poverty line, housing was not improved and there was still no free health care and so until these issues were dealt with overcoming these major problems would be difficult to do.