Poverty in early 20th century britain essay sample

In the late 1800's and early 1900's the major cities of Britain were growing at an enormous rate. London almost doubled in size as people came in search of employment but soon found there were very few jobs available. The majority of the poor people moved into the city centres however there were very few houses available and many ending up sleeping on the streets. The upper and middle classes became very scared of the poor because of disease and fear of rebellion so one by one they all began to leave the city centers to live on the outskirts, in the suburbs.

It had quickly become a downward spiral for the poor and action had to be taken by the British government for many reasons, this came in welfare reforms. An historian once said " The liberals introduced welfare reforms because they felt it was a moral duty to the poor". I am going to argue that this statement is not true and the government had other more important motives to help the poor than just moral reasons. There are however quite a few important reasons why someone would believe this quote is true.

It is clear that some members of parliament cared about the poor and did not want to help them purely for their own gain. These included two very influential politicians Winston Churchill and Lloyd George who both believed the poor were not solely to blame for the poverty they groveled in. The poor law was a law devised in 1834 by parliament devised to help those the government saw as ' deserving poor'. Poor people with disabilities, elderly people and children all ' deserving poor' everyone else wasn't.

The law worked by giving these people three square meals a day and somewhere to sleep in exchange for working in a workhouse. The workhouse

was open to anybody but there was terrible hard labour which was exactly what the government wanted. By making the conditions so bad poor people who could avoid going there would at all costs. The government recognized this system wasn't working and many of the politicians felt sorry for the people living in these conditions. A more social than moral reason the government introduced these reforms was their hysterical fear of the poor.

They believed that the poor worked in an underground network and were organized in a military style system. The middle classes and government became terrified of this make believe network and felt they had to appease the poor. Disease was also a scary prospect for the rich to deal with. There was no sewer system in London and as if by overnight disease could spread from borough to borough. The government knew that if they improved conditions for the poor they could lower the spread of disease drastically.

There are two very famous investigations that were carried out in the poverty stricken inner cities these were by Rowntrees and Boothe. Both these investigators wrote hefty books about the conditions that these people were living in and why. As well as this they both came to the conclusion that the poor were not to blame for the lousy conditions in which they lived. This surprised a number of politicians who had previously believed it was the poor's laziness and incompetence that led to their social position.

The government was forced to rethink its view on the poor and was finally being persuaded into making a change. The politicians who had previously felt the poor were lazy and pathetic now felt it was a moral responsibility to help them out of poverty. The British government's economy was growing

very slowly at the end of the 1800's and early 1900's. It was still the richest country in the world but others like America and Germany were catching up and fast. Although Britain was the first country to have an industrial revolution many others around the world quickly followed.

Their economies were growing faster than Britain's was and quite a few politicians thought this was because they had improved the conditions for their poor. Britain now had a big new problem in the Boer war. Troops were needed and these usually came from the poor. However there was a problem, all the poor men once capable were sick and unfit. These troops were unable to fight because they lacked the physical ability to do so. The British government saw this and knew that if they could improve the health of the population then they could increase the size of heir army.

On the political front there was an attack from a new working class party called Labour. Labour was a party for the people and by the people and was quickly becoming a threat to big to ignore for the liberal government. The Liberals knew that if they paid more attention to the working class they could possibly gain some votes back. If they didn't do this there was a strong possibility they would be voted out of government. Two politicians who knew this as much as anybody was Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George. They recognized all of these concerns and pressured their party into making crucial changes.

After weighing up all the evidence you can clearly see that the overwhelming economic pressure and hysterical fear of the poor were mostly the reason the government bought in welfare reforms. However this is not to say that

there were no moral reasons involved. At the time the government made these descions they were very crucial because previously they had not got involved in the day to day running of peoples lives so much. This was called a laissz-faire government. Members of the government though now said it was ok to intervene in peoples lives if it was for the good of the economy and their well being.