

Why was there widespread agreement among the propertied

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In 1832, the Whig Government decided to establish a Royal Commission to inquire into the working of the Poor Laws. By 1832, the old poor laws had come under increased criticism from commentators and ratepayers who were basically the propertied classes. There was widespread agreement among the propertied classes that urgent action was needed to fundamentally reform the poor laws.

This was as a result of a mixture of long term and more immediate problems, such as the ever-increasing cost of poor relief, the ineffectiveness and corruption of certain poor law administrators, and also other political and social factors such as the effect of the revolution which had recently occurred in France. When the Napoleonic wars ended in 1815, approximately 250, 000 servicemen returned to Britain, which consequently led to a saturation of the labour market and led to an increase in unemployment. As a result of this the cost of poor relief continued to increase.

This resulted in ratepayers becoming ever more agitated as they had expected, with justification, the poor rate to fall during peacetime. The high rates hadn't been a problem for ratepayers during the French wars as they could afford them because of the large profits they were making from the high grain prices. However, when wheat prices fell after the war, ratepayers demanded lower rates. The ratepayer's complaints about the increase in poor relief were indeed reasonable. During the post-war period total expenditure on poor relief increased from £5. 7 million in 1815 to £7. 9 million two years later. However, the total expenditure actually decreased and was back to £5. 7 million in 1823. Therefore, one could argue that

although the ratepayers had justification to be angered at the increased poor rates, they did actually decrease and were back down by 1823.

However, the question asks why there was widespread agreement that the poor laws needing reforming by 1832. A series of poor harvests in the 1820s led to agricultural distress and hence resulted in the rise in the cost of poor relief from 1823 onwards, eventually peaking in 1831 at i?? million. This is very significant in explaining why there was general agreement among the ratepayers in 1832, as you could say the ever-increasing expenditure had finally culminated in the ratepayers demanding for the poor relief to be reformed in 1832. Another factor, which was political as opposed to economic was that there was the criticism of the local poor law administrators who some said were corrupt. This was because contracts for poor law work were routinely given to local trades people as opposed to them being put out to open tender.

Ratepayers believed this was one way in which vested interests were exploiting the system. Indeed it seems that the ratepayers were correct in complaining of this so-called corruption, as in 1817 the select committee of the House of Commons echoed the concerns of the ratepayers.

Subsequently, an Act of Parliament in 1819 allowed parishes to set up Select Vestries. These were small committees, which could specialise in poor law administration and employ salaried assistant overseers to support it.

Therefore, the problem seemed to have been resolved. However, the Select Vestries actually produced their own forms of corruption. For example, in 1832, 11 out of 20 members of the Morpeth Select Vestry had a vested

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interest in the sale of beer. It was widely believed that generous relief payments ended up being spent in the local alehouse or pub. This failure to eradicate the corruption of local poor law administrators is very important in explaining why reform of the poor laws was so popular by 1832.

The ratepayers were clearly becoming increasingly fed up and angry with the failure to sort the problem out and hence it is likely that this will have almost certainly led to them demanding for more fundamental reform. There was also widespread criticism of the 'Speenhamland' system. Many critics were concerned about the effect that the system was having on the attitudes and behaviour of the poor. One well known critic of the poor laws, Thomas Malthus, argued that the child allowances paid by some parishes encouraged labourers to have large numbers of children without considering the need to provide for them.

This, he claimed, increased the pauper population. The census of 1821 validated this criticism as it showed an increase in the population.

Furthermore, critics and ratepayers suggested that the Speenhamland system was causing a demoralisation of the workforce. They believed it was effectively causing a 'dependency culture' amongst the poor. Magistrates said that under the 'Roundsman' system labourers had no real incentive to work hard or to respect their employers, as they knew that the parish would look after their needs.

Also, there was criticism that employers purposefully kept wages low, as they knew the parish would support the workers and subsidise the labour.

Hence, the Speenhamland system is another factor, which resulted in

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ratepayers demanding for reform as it was clearly having a negative effect on the poor. Widespread agricultural disturbances convinced the government and the ruling classes that the rural population was causing havoc and was getting increasingly out of control. They believed this was because of the poor laws.

Also, after the revolution in France in 1789, the ruling classes in Britain were terrified that something similar would occur in Britain. As a result, landowners in Britain would have been anxious to reform the poor laws as they desperately didn't want a revolution or anything like one on their hands. In conclusion, there wasn't just one factor, which led to the general agreement among the propertied classes by 1832 that the poor laws urgently needing reforming, but in fact a series of long term and short term factors, some political, economic and social.

The fact that poor relief expenditure had increased during peacetime is undoubtedly very important in explaining why the poor laws had attracted so much criticism. However, the fact that expenditure was at its highest in 1831 is clearly a very important long term factor and the most important factor in explaining why there was widespread agreement among the propertied classes by 1832. Also, the census of 1821 showing a population increase justified Malthus' fears that the Speenhamland system was having a bad affect on the general attitude of the poor is also important in explaining why there was widespread agreement.

The poor harvests in the 1820s is an important short-term factors as they effectively caused the rise in the cost of the poor relief. The failure to find an

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effective solution to the corruption of local poor law administrators clearly angered ratepayers and is very likely to have opened the ratepayers eyes, and led to them insisting that clearly more radical reform was necessary if the poor laws were to be more effective.