

The welfare reforms of the liberal governments between 1905 – 1915



When the Liberal government came to power in 1906 they had no stated intention of government intervention of social policy. Between the years 1906 and 1914, the Liberals took steps to improve the health, living and working conditions of the groups of individuals their policies were designed for. The victory for the Liberals was a surprising landslide which left the Liberals with 401 seats and Labour with 53 seats.

Even though Labour owed their seats partly to the Liberals as they made a pact to prevent anti-Conservative votes being wasted they showed no gratitude as liberalism was about tariff reform, taxation and foreign policy but labour had always concentrated on equal rights for workers. The Liberals main policies were over Chinese slave-labour and commercialism and were mainly trying to appeal to commercial factory owners; they had been forced to prioritise social policy because of the growing numbers of supporters Labour had gained. if the government failed to address social problems Labour would indeed become a great sweeping force in this country- a force that will sweep away Liberalism'. (Constantine, Lloyd George) The Liberals were not the first to implement social policy before the Liberal reforms began in 1906.

The Conservative party passed a number of acts like the Unemployed Workmen's Act in 1905, and the Employment of Children Act 1905. Local councils passed bylaws on issues like child labour. They also cleared slum housing and sanitary measures had been successful. The problem was that action still depended on the attitude of the local authorities.

Some councils did take action. Others did not, usually because of the cost of measures like building new housing. These early Acts strongly suggest continuity in that these tentative measures seemed forced. The Liberals still had an 'old' Liberal wing antagonist to social reform; and they were also conscious of the hostility to social reform of the Conservative dominated House of Lords. The Boer war of 1899-1902 highlighted the physical deterioration in the British people. The war fought to preserve the Empire.

It revealed the fact that the British people were weak and unhealthy. Fears were expressed that generations of urban living, in often appalling conditions, were leading to degeneration of the national physique.

Commentators pointed to the fact that Britain was the most urbanised society in the world with nine out of ten of its population living in towns and cities. The call for medical inspection and meals was sounded by the interdepartmental committee on Physical Deterioration in 1904 but the first real enactment of the Liberal government's social policy was the 1906 provision of meals act.

This act meant free school meals for children but the significance of it was it had no stigma attached, it treated all school children equally. It came under opposition from the Charity Organisation Society as they felt the supply of free school meals was inadequate and 'the want was found to be due to many different causes, and could only be removed by thorough treatment at the home. (Charity Organisation Society; Special Committee on the School Meal)The Liberals were pressurised to allow the introduction of school meals by Margaret McMillan and Fred Jowett from the Bradford School Board. Jowett argued, " If the state insists on compulsory education, it must take <https://assignbuster.com/the-welfare-reforms-of-the-liberal-governments-between-1905-1915/>

responsibility for the proper nourishment of school children". The provision of School Meals Act was a rather cautious piece of legislation which only encouraged local authorities to take measure as they saw fit. The provision of school meals did not become compulsory until 1914, however, research carried out in 1907 showed a clear correlation between weight gain during school terms and weight lost during the school holidays of children who received school meals. In the following year the Liberals introduced The Education (Administrative Provisions) Act where children were given medical inspections in school and free medical treatment was also provided.

This piece of legislation was passed after the Government's own civil service pressurised the Liberals to take action, but the educational authorities largely ignored this act' (<http://learningcurve.pro.gov.k/>).

It was viewed by many that both of these acts were an infringement of parental rights, which undermined the roles of the parents. There was certainly, during this period, the argument that there was a new found acceptance of the need for government intervention. Ideas on the causes of poverty had altered during the 2nd half of the 19th Century from the Laissez-faire to the welfare beliefs. The Booth and Rowntree reports had shown that poverty was often not due to personal failings and that in fact it was impossible for some people to lift themselves out of poverty.

This was a shift in belief which was also backed up by scientific reports such as Booth and Rowntree who provided cold statistics to back up their arguments. New Liberalism, however, reflects change but at the same time smacks of continuity. In the case of the Old Age Pension Act of 1908 it

emphasises this concept of the 'deserving' poor because this pension was a non-contributory based, those eligible were paid 5 shillings per week which was collected at the post office. Old age pensions were not available to those still collecting out relief, drunks or ex-convicts.

It at first imposed on the elderly means and character tests not far removed from the Old Poor Law. The concept of deserving and undeserving poor remained. Workers who had been fired as a result of misconduct lost all benefits. Victorian moral ethics were still being upheld. Unemployment Insurance covered only those with 'high-risk' jobs (building, shipbuilding and iron founding) therefore many of the poor found they simply did not qualify for insurance and their families and they were still at risk of poverty or the workhouse. The third set of reforms the Liberals introduced endeavoured to deal the problems of sickness, injury and unemployment.

The Workman's Compensation Act of 1906 existed for insurance of workmen against accidents occurring in the course of their employment. The Act also provided compensation for certain industrial diseases and scales of compensation were increased. The first part of the National Insurance Act covered 'provisions against the accidents of life'. Lloyd George himself is quoted to have said 'with old age the suffering is confined the individual alone; but in these other cases it extends to the whole family of the victim of circumstances'. Lloyd George appeared to be a true believer in social policy but his party was often guilty of political expediency.

'The National Insurance Act' gave the British working classes the first contributory system of insurance against illness or unemployment. The

workers now had a contractual right to benefit. The contributory system was superior because people were happier with benefits they had earned; the only problem was that some people simply could not afford to pay the rates as it was a flat rate the same throughout society. Employees paid 2.

5d per week, if they were to become out of work they should be permitted to up to 15 weeks of benefits. This does not properly take into account the situations of those living in absolute poverty. Keir Hardie remarked at a miner's meeting that when miners asked for a minimum wage the answer was No say the Liberals, but we will give you an Insurance Bill. We shall not uproot the cause of poverty but we will give you a porous plaster to cover the disease that poverty causes'.

This shows the Liberals responding to the current causes of poverty (low wages, seasonal unemployment, and sickness) by offering aid to individuals with problems rather than altering the circumstances which breed poverty. The Poor Law would continue all this time but this part of the Act was designed specifically for sickness, giving them an alternative to the workhouse. This was a marked turning point in the state's responsibility for welfare and created new ideas of lasting importance. There was no underlying intention to establish the state as the permanent provider of welfare. The Liberals sought to shield deserving groups such as the elderly poor from the Old Poor Law.

On the other hand, measures (such as the Trade Board, and National Insurance Acts) began a process of providing for the majority of the working population a security against poverty. The interwar period was one of

significant change and expansion in the welfare responsibilities of the state. This was not the outcome of any plan. ' From a variety of such schemes to ease Britain out of depression, came the seeds of much of the social legislation introduced after 1945. ' (M. A.

Crowther, *Social Policy in Britain, 1914-39*). During the interwar years there was intention from the Liberal Government to improve living standards. Education and housing legislation, was introduced in 1918 and 1919 but careful management of money took precedence over helping the poor. Government policy at this time was sporadic and ad-hoc.

After the post-war boom there was an increase in unemployment, it never fell below one million. The Unemployment Insurance was simply not up to this pressure and resulted in emergency ' makeshift' acts, the end result was the government settling for a system of ' extended benefit' harking back to out-relief. The growing strength of the Labour Party in urban local government also had a large part to play in the Liberals taking action as they would wish to try and secure urban votes. Questions must be asked about the significance of Liberal actions during this period. For example they marked a turning point in the treatment of the poor emphasising the states acceptance of responsibility, but they did not embrace everyone, they did not work as a whole and the poor law did not disappear. The Liberal actions were limited, and almost immediately faced pressure for change.

Their effectiveness is made difficult to judge because of the beginning of World War One. The war created the need for further intervention from the government in social matters and the influence of the Labour Party

increased. Fear of post-war revolution influenced the wartime government in making plans for post-war reconstruction. Both wars seemed to create a sense of 'obligation' and responsibility on the side of the government for those who had suffered. Substantial social policy would have been expected whether the Conservatives or Labour won the election in 1945.

And, at the end of the war, intervention was greatly extended. Labour pushed forward the idea of central government intervention at a local level and benefits to the whole community. This would seem to show permanence and despite its limitations the Liberal reforms are undoubtedly the beginning of the modern welfare state.