

Labour government
and the welfare state
in Britain history
essay



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Between 1945 and 1951 a Labour Government led by Clement Attlee carried out a series of reforms that are often seen as creating the “welfare state” in Britain. The Labour government won the 1945 election by a surprise landslide possibly the greatest factor in Labour’s win appeared to be their policy of social reform which was based on a report called the Beveridge report. The Beveridge Report, published in 1942, proposed the creation of a Welfare State (A Welfare State is a system in which the government undertakes responsibility for the well being of its population). It called for a dramatic change in government policy, with provision for health care, state funded education, national insurance and a new housing policy. The report was widely read, and thousands of copies were bought, turning it into a best-seller (a new thing for political investigations). The Labour Party took up the report readily. Labour offered a new comprehensive welfare policy, reflecting a broad agreement across all peoples and political parties that social changes were needed. Some historians think that the Labour government was not the creator of the welfare state (that they created a welfare state is undeniable) as there was a lot of previous work to build on from the Liberal government of 1906-1911, The National Government, and the Wartime Coalition

A national health service was one of the main aims of the Report. It fell to Clement Attlee’s Labour government to create the NHS as part of the welfare state reforms in the aftermath of World War II. Aneurin “Nye” Bevan, who was newly appointed the Secretary of State for Health, was set the job of bringing in the National Health Service as there was an agreement amongst all the people of Britain that “no society can legitimately call itself civilised if

a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means.”- Aneurin Bevan, In Place of Fear- so there had to be change. HealthCare in the UK prior to the war had been a mix of private, public and charity schemes. Bevan thought that the way forward was a national system rather than a system operated by regional authorities, to prevent differences between different areas. He proposed that everyone in the UK would be signed up to a specific Doctor’s surgery as the point of entry into the system, and would have access to every kind of treatment required without having to pay for it up front. Doctors were initially opposed to Bevan’s plan, mostly because it reduced their level of independence. Bevan had to get them to sign on, as, without doctors, there would be no health service. Bevan managed to push through the radical health care reform measure by dividing the opposition and by offering valuable payment structures for consultants. When asked about this he said, “ I stuffed their mouths with gold”. On July 5, 1948, Bevan unveiled the National Health Service. The cost of the new NHS soon took its toll on the treasury. So large was the cost that on 21 April 1951 the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Gaitskell, was forced to propose that there should be a one shilling prescription charge and new charges for the cost of false teeth and glasses.

The Labour government created a whole new healthcare system which was referred to by Sked and Cook as “ an almost revolutionary social innovation since it improved the quality of life of most of the British people”; they created free at entry universal healthcare, an idea which had never been attempted by any British government previously. It was a major success and improved almost everyone in Britain’s quality

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Of life however, it did cost much more than the government had expected so the original plans had to be moderated slightly.

However, the labour government did not do all the work towards creating universal healthcare, there was work towards this done by both the Liberal government and the Wartime coalition.

There was a large amount of work towards the establishment of the NHS done by the wartime coalition. A white paper called "A National Health Service" published in February of 1944 suggested a system of healthcare financed by taxes but all discussions on the paper were deferred due to the war and were resumed by Atlee's government. This white paper basically told the labour government how the new NHS would run and be managed, almost like an instructions book. The wartime coalition also introduced free healthcare for all bombing victims during the war.

The Liberal government of 1906-14 also contributed towards universal healthcare. It started with medical inspections of school children in 1907 as a means of checking up on the health of the nation's children, this was supported by the addition of free clinics to treat any illness discovered by the medical inspections. The liberals also introduced a system of health insurance for workers who earned less than £160 a year. This system was slightly different to the NHS as it was paid for by contributions by the worker, employer and government instead of taxes, and was only available to the insured worker and not his family or anyone else but this was an important step towards allowing the government to run all healthcare.

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Therefore, although the other governments had made considerable changes from the systems they already had, it would be fair to say that the Labour government made the most revolutionary changes to healthcare in Britain by actually implementing, successfully a system of free, and universal healthcare for all people

In 1946, Clement Attlee and his Labour Government passed the revolutionary National Insurance Act that created the structure of the Welfare State. The Act gave necessary contributions for unemployment, sickness, maternity and widows' benefits and old age pensions from employers and employees, with the government paying the rest. All people in work, except married women, paid 4s and eleven pence a week as National Insurance contributions. For the average worker, this amounted to nearly 5 % of their income. Also a system was created for those who would be unable to be part of the national insurance system because they had retired by the time the national insurance act was passed or had not paid enough in contributions. This was called national assistance and, if proof was given that the person required it, it would pay benefits to those uncovered by national insurance (although national assistance was paid at a lower rate). In 1946 an act was passed that meant entitled members of the national insurance scheme, who could not work due to an injury sustained at work, would receive a weekly benefit. All of this meant that the people of Britain were never helpless and would always be helped by the government in all circumstances which helped make it a welfare state as it was for all people regardless of jobs or age

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The wartime coalition also contributed to the establishment of the welfare state. In September 1944 a white paper titled "social insurance" proposed a social insurance system that was all covering and with a few changes was turned into the 1946 national Insurance act. The coalition also passed the family allowances act which meant all families with more than one child were paid the amount of 5 shillings per child apart from the firstborn. This family allowance was paid to the mother of the family so that the man could not waste it on "beer, cigarettes, and gambling" this act was designed to prevent a falling birth rate by making it slightly easier for parents to look after their children and therefore making having children slightly more appealing.

The Liberal Government of 1906-11 passed a lot of legislation to do with social security, The National Insurance Act 1911 gave workers the right to sick pay of 10 shillings a week and free medical treatment for 26 weeks in return for a payment for 4 pence. There were further contributions from the government and the employer of 5 pence between them so the scheme was marketed as "four pence for nine pence" this scheme was only open to workers on less than £160 a year which meant that many workers were still unable to afford health care also, the medical treatment was only for the worker not his family so they were no better off. Under the National Insurance Act, insured workers were given seven shillings unemployment benefit which could be claimed for up to 15 weeks a year. This scheme was also paid for through the contributions of workers, employers and government. In 1908, pensions were introduced for those over 70. They paid 5 shillings a week to single men and women and 7 shillings and sixpence to

married couples, on a sliding scale with people getting less the more income they got. The single person's rate applied to those over 70 earning under £21; this sum could be collected at the local post office. The pensions were means-tested (to receive the pension, they had to earn less than £31. 50 annually).

This all shows that the although Labour's national insurance system was firstly the extension of the liberal system to a large extent but also the continuation of the wartime coalition works, the labour government did also add a lot to the previous governments work by making it include the whole of society as opposed to just certain groups of society making the government look after all of its peoples social problems

The labour government made great strides in building houses after the war to replace houses damaged by the blitz in cities and to provide new communities in the country called " new towns" which were towns which were planned in construction so that there were a variety of house types, pedestrian travel paths separate from the roads that cars travelled on. There was also to be social facilities for all in the communities such as shops, community centres and schools the government also led a large drive in building council houses for people to rent. The house building was hampered by the lack of raw materials after the war and also by the lack of labour, so much so that builders and plumbers etc were among the first to be demobilised from the army. The government also allowed people to use disused army camps as accommodation and made sure that they had the appropriate facilities to live there. This showed that the government knew both the long term and short term need for housing.

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The 1944 Education Act also known as “ the butler act” after R. A Butler who steered it through parliament created the first nationwide system of free secondary education, an entirely new system was created where everybody was placed by ability instead of by what education they could afford. The new system had 3 types of schools, grammar schools, secondary modern, and secondary junior schools. Pupils were split into these schools after taking a new exam to determine their ability, the “ 11 plus exams”. Those who did very well in the exams were sent to grammar schools where they were given the education to go to university and become a lawyer, a doctor or some form of academic. Those who did moderately well in the exams were sent to secondary modern schools where they were given the education to become an engineer or a banker or something similar. The rest were sent to secondary junior schools where the boys were taught how to do manual labour and gardening and the girls were taught how to be good housewives and mothers. This was a major work for the wartime coalition as they improved the educational system in Britain dramatically for the good

Labour added to this new education scheme by recruiting thousands of teachers with a new one year teaching course.

There was not a lot left for labour to add to the new education system so it can be largely described as a wartime coalition work but they did implement the new system and build new schools for the purpose.

Overall, it is quite accurate to say that Labour should be called the creators of the welfare state. Although the Liberals of 1906-14 did begin the process <https://assignbuster.com/labour-government-and-the-welfare-state-in-britain-history-essay/>

and made a number of changes to the Britain of their time, it was still far from being complete by the end of their term in power. They also left housing in Britain completely unaltered when it was a major contributor to poor health and the cycle of poverty and so were not as successful as the Labour Government. The other Governments, such as the wartime coalition, although creating major changes, cannot claim the title alone, as individually they did not create as large an effect as the Labour Party. The Labour government managed to fully complete the Welfare State in their time in power and created a set of lasting reforms. The most important factor behind Labour being the creators of the welfare state is that labour made the health service, national insurance and all the other changes for the entire country to benefit from, regardless of class or any other factor. They created a state that looked after all of its people " from cradle to grave" whereas previous governments had only produced legislation that affected certain jobs or certain areas. So for these reasons it is very true to say that the 1945-51 Labour government should be known as the creator of the welfare state