

Social reforms of the liberal government?



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Between 1908-1914 the Liberals catapulted into one of the biggest 'programmes' of social reform ever. Ongoing investigations by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree produced reports about poverty that shocked the nation. The problem of poverty became national and therefore had to be dealt with by the Government. The Government recognized the factors of poverty were illness, unemployment, low wages, being too old or too young to work. The Government passed a number of social reforms in order to try and eliminate poverty. However many historians believe that the reforms were passed for selfish reasons, in order to attract more votes. It would be very severe to argue that the Liberals passed the social reforms just to ensure votes. A new generation of the Liberals thought that the government had a obligation to help the poor. The new Liberals with new ideas, including people such as David Lloyd George, who later went on to be Prime Minister, who were given important roles in Government. These appointments are one of the many reasons the reforms happened from 1906 onwards.

The death of Prime Minister, Henry Campbell Bannerman, brought a new generation of Liberal politicians. Bannerman was replaced in 1908 by a younger man, Asquith. These 'new Liberals' had new interventionist ideas, new younger people were appointed into Government jobs. People like David Lloyd George, who had new plans to make Britain better. The arrival of younger politicians with New Liberal ideas is one of the main reasons why so many reforms happened from 1908 onwards. The New Liberals argued for more government intervention to help the poor by redistributing taxes. This did not tide well with the middle class, who believed that poverty was not something the Government could or should handle. They believed in self

reliance, the idea that people should do everything for themselves. If helping the poor meant taxes would have to be increased, the Liberals middle class supporters would not be happy. David Lloyd George was infamous for his 'People's Budget' in 1909, the budget raised taxes on alcohol, land, tobacco and income tax. The budget enraged land owners especially, by passing the budget the Liberals lost votes. Some could argue then that the Liberals were not doing it for votes, they knew they would lose their votes from the middle class and yet they still helped out. Showing the Liberals must have had a genuine concern and it was not part of their political pragmatism. The reason they were named the 'New Liberals' was because they had different views and ideas from the usual Gladstonian ideology. People like David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill had a personal interest in the nations state, they were shocked by the poverty in Britain and wanted to make a change. David Lloyd George became Chancellor of Exchequer in 1908, his influence in Government is one the reasons so many reforms were prompted and passed. His view of intervention to eliminate poverty encouraged the party to make a change. Winston Churchill also an important role in the 'New Liberals' set up the Labour Exchange Act in 1909, his influence is also one of the reason the social reforms happened from 1906 onwards. Although the Liberals were not known for their sympathy or compassion, it can be seen that they would only help for selfish reasons to benefit themselves. If a 1/3 of the population was in Poverty and the Government helped them all, it was a possibility of 1/3 of the populations votes. However, it is also evident that the introduction of new younger Liberals had a great impact on the Liberal party and is one of the main reasons the social reforms were passed from 1906-1914, due to genuine concern for the masses.

During the 19th century poverty was exceptionally high in Britain, social investigations by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree exposed the problem of poverty. The reports showed that $\frac{1}{4}$ of the population living in poverty. Charles Booth's investigations "The Life and Labour of the People of London" showed that 30% of the population in East London were below the poverty line. This meant that people could not afford basics such as food, clothing and rent. Seebohm Rowntree's investigation stressed the problem of poverty more by showing that 28% of York were in poverty. Both investigations found the factors of poverty to be: old age, low wages, unemployment and illness. Mainly pointing out that it was not the people in poverty's fault. The University Settlement Movement began in the late 1800's but was reinforced in the early 1900's. The Settlement was a way to get the richer and poorer people to live closer together, settlement houses were put into poor areas. They would allow the middle class to share their "knowledge and culture" with the poor people. The houses provided food, homes and education for poor people, the richer people would volunteer their time to help out in the houses. The University Settlement Movement allowed young middle class men to witness the life amongst the poor for themselves, this showed the nation why the government should intervene and help. The Movement proved to the middle class and those better off just how severe the problem of poverty was. It was a way of trying to get the middle class to help out and not argue with the Government's new ways. More people started to help out, Charities were founded to help the suffering and hardship of the poor like the Salvation Army. Some could argue the Government only passed the social reforms to prove they were not the cause of the poverty, in order to cover up their tracks from not helping ever before.

The nation had been exposed to the reality of poverty in Britain, with more people realising how bad the situation was the Government realised they had to do something. This is one of the reason the social reforms were prompted from 1906-1914, and can be seen as genuine concern for the masses to some extent.

In the late 19th century, the Boer War highlighted how problematic poverty was, the war saw 27% of men volunteering to fight turned away as they were deemed unfit. This was due to their lack of health which was directly linked to their wealth, they couldn't afford healthcare, food and necessities to make their lives healthier. Britain no longer had its military supremacy, and so called imperial power. This is when Prime Minister Asquith got involved as he could not watch his country get weaker and lose numbers in his army. The Government worried that if this was the extent of the problem now, how much worse would it be in the future when the country may need a big army. It was therefore very important to see the problem of poverty eradicated in order to get the nations health back up to standard. This is one of the reason the social reforms were prompted from 1906-1914. However, this could be seen as selfish as the Government only intervened because their army was in bad shape. Some people could argue that the Government wanted to help to ensure the army would protect the country, this could be seen as genuine concern for the masses to some extent. The Government also seen inadequacies in their industrial strength, Britain saw Germany's social welfare system had created a great increase in productivity in factories. Which is a reason why the social reforms from 1906-1914 were prompted,

however these were due to selfish reasons and could not be seen as genuine concern for the masses.

The introduction of a new party, the Labour party, seen the Liberals worry about their votes. The Labour party's "raison d'être" to protect the interest of the working class, was competition for the Liberals who before 1906 took little interest in the working class. By the 1907-1908 elections, the Labour party and Conservatives were winning seats. The Liberals had always tried to attract the working class, but with the Labour class now fighting for the same votes as the Liberals, especially after the 1909 recessions which brought high unemployment, the Liberals had to do something to prove they were not unsympathetic. The Liberals felt the Labour party could push them out as the main party against the Conservatives. By the 1910 elections the Liberals parliamentary majority was exceptionally weakened in the elections of 1910, this may not have necessarily been because of the Labour party but it was definitely a contributing factor. It could be said that the Liberals only prompted the social reforms from 1906-1914 in order to compete with the introduction to the Labour party, this could not be seen as genuine concern for the masses.

In conclusion, the Liberals social reforms between 1906-1914 were prompted by genuine concern for the masses to some extent. It is evident that the 'New Liberals' had a great impact on the social reforms, their new attitude towards poverty and genuine concern for the people is what prompted the reforms. However, the introduction of the Labour party was also a factor in the social reforms. Although there is evidence to support both arguments that the Government had genuine concern for the masses or for selfish

reasons, in order to obtain votes. Helping the poor not only showed the nation they were compassionate, but it would potentially gain them a third of votes. It was a win-win situation for them, by helping them they would gain there votes and look sympathetic. However the reforms were unpopular with the middle class and the Liberals lost votes from them. If they wanted to ensure popularity amongst the nation then they would not have divided into numerous reforms that were so unpopular with the majority. Their unpopularity could be seen as them having a genuine concern for the poor people, they genuinely wanted to help. The investigations by Booth and Rowntree are what opened up the Governments eyes to let them see how severe the problem of poverty is, another reason why the Government prompted the social reforms from 1906-1914. The finally realised they had to do something to help