

Gladstone's liberalism

Government



This question focuses on Gladstone's liberalism and to what extent he applied it during his first ministry, 1868-74. Liberalism is a political philosophy that stresses individual liberty, equal opportunity and rights, Victorian liberalism was a mixture of ideology, morality and self-interest, and it advocated civil and religious liberty. Gladstone was the embodiment of Victorian liberalism, he tried to put forward his liberalism but he often found that he fought a lone battle in the cabinet.

To assess the extent of how much Gladstone's liberalism was applied during his first ministry, I will be looking at the acts that were passed during this period and looking at how liberal in nature they were. His attention was mainly focused on Ireland as he said in his own words " It is my mission to pacify Ireland". He put forward 3 acts and bills concerning Ireland, at the time these were fairly controversial, as he was one of the first Prime Ministers to address the Irish question.

The first act that Gladstone passed as Prime Minister was The Disestablishment of the Irish Church Act. This broke the connection between church and state and ended the Anglican church's status as the established church of Ireland, this aimed to reduce endowments and redistributing a third of its annual reserve to non-religious ends, e. g. improving hospitals. This was quite a liberal act as it allowed people to freely attend whichever church they wanted.

This however showed Gladstone's willingness to solve a problem without appreciating its background and not understanding its immediate practical requirements. The Irish Church Act was Gladstone's first liberal move and

gave an indication of the path his future acts would take. His second act in 1870 was The Irish Land Act. This was initially one of his most liberal measures as it gave a lot of the protection to the tenant, the individual, but it was diluted so its effectiveness was reduced.

It said that tenants should have greater protection from eviction and should be compensated if their rent was deemed excessive, be given compensation for improvements and repairs they had made and that new tenants should compensate the old tenants for their share in the property. The most important part of this act was the compensation if the rent was deemed excessive; Lord Salisbury objected to this clause as he said that no court had the right to adjudicate on the fairness of rent.

This omission made the bill limited and unremarkable, this caused anger as it did not live up to its expectations and it failed to realise the aim of the land-lord. At first this bill promised to be a very important bill as it finally gave protection to the tenants but in the end it just made the tenants position less secure as land-lords could now freely increase rent as there was no-one to stop them. This should have been another success for Gladstone but after it had passed through parliament it became just another ordinary act.

The Education Act of 1870 put forward by William Forster allowed for the continuation of denominational schools, but in districts where schooling was deficient a locally elected board would be set up. This had the power to organize schools and enforce the attendance of children aged between 5 and 12 who were not being educated in any other way, the boards could also

decide whether religious teaching was to be given in their schools. This mainly benefited the working class who before had been unable to send their children to school because it was too expensive so the children went to work instead.

The two main organizations involved in this act were the National Education League and Union. The League was non-conformist and wanted gratuitous secular education, the Union was Anglican and wanted religious teaching. The pressure resulting from the conflict between the two groups produced the Cowper Temple Clause; this meant that only non-denominational religious education was to be provided in schools receiving state aid. This was an important liberal act as it gave educational opportunities to the working class who had never before had the chance of free schooling. Other important acts included The 1870 Civil Service Act.

This meant that all positions within the civil service were open to public competition, this was obviously a liberal act as it gave the opportunity to people to hold positions which had never been open to them as before a system of patronage was used. Army reforms were also introduced these were the 1871 Army regulation Act. The aim of this was " To combine in one harmonious whole all the branches of our military forces", this abolished the system of purchase, an officer bought his commission and could sell it for whatever he could get, and also flogging in peacetime was abolished.

The 1871 University Test Act made positions of teaching at Oxford and Cambridge open to non-Anglicans. The Ballot Act introduced the secret ballot, this meant that people could express their opinions without being

persecuted. The Trade Union Act of 1871 legalized trade unions. Workers were now protected and had their interests looked after so if they felt that they were being treated unfairly they could do something about it. All of these acts cohered with the liberal philosophy, they gave long overdue equal rights and opportunities to everyone.

One of the final acts by Gladstone was the Licensing Act of 1872. This tightened the control on licensing and fixed public houses opening and closing times, with this Gladstone did his party immense harm by alienating brewers and distillers who naturally turned to the conservatives. Gladstone had no doubt in his mind what had caused his election defeat in 1874, in a letter to his brother he commented " We have been borne down in a torrent of gin and beer", this act did more harm than good and ended Gladstone's first ministry.

Gladstone's serious view of life, his devotion to progress and his insistence on justice and right made him a leader who was idolized or hated. His was the figurehead of liberalism and his many liberal acts showed how passionate he was about it. He was not a great Prime minister but during his first ministry he tried very hard to spread liberalism that appealed rather to a particular mentality that might be found in all classes, so in fact it was above class.

In conclusion Gladstone's liberalism was his belief in equal opportunities, in an era when this was not available to everyone it was a very brave belief as many of the population could not afford schooling, but thanks to Gladstone this problem was now fixed. He applied his liberalism to a great extent as he

introduced some very important changes, these being the Education and Irish Church acts. The way his ministry ended showed that he had not finished and more was to come, mainly his pursuit of Irish Home Rule. He was probably more important for what he was than what he did.