

To what extent was the liberal election victory of 1906

Politics



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The 1906 election was a landslide victory for the Liberal Party. It was a dramatic turn-around for the main contender to British Government that had been out of power for twenty years. The Liberals won 377 seats outright, and including the 27 Lib-Lab seats and around 80 Irish Home Rule seats they had made a dramatic defeat. The Conservative Party lost 245 seats since the 1900 election, in 1906 they had only 157.

However, this majority does not seem so great when looked at in percentage of votes. The Liberals won just over 50% of the vote, while the Conservatives were only slightly behind with 43%. This apparent anomaly is explained by the British Electoral system; the 'first past the post' policy where the M. P with the highest number of votes wins, regardless of whether other Parties have nearly the same number of votes. This sensational change in the British public's votes must have been a sign of the obvious change in mood over the Conservative's term. Was the electoral result a consequence of changing British values, or was it a result of Conservative blunders?

There is no doubt that the various stratas of British society were all dissatisfied at some point with Conservative rule. The working classes in particular felt upset by the Conservatives over many issues. Chinese Slavery, the decision by the Conservative Government to send thousands of Chinese labourers to South Africa to work the goldmines to rebuild the economy after the Boer War angered many of the working class. To them this decision closed the chance of white emigration to South Africa by taking away any work that would have been there for them when they got there. Some felt solidarity with the Chinese and believed that they had been put into slavery,

they wondered whether the same type of thing could happen to themselves in Britain.

The 1901 Taff Vale case enraged many of the working class, especially the unionists. After the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants went on strike and were sued, they were made to pay £42, 000 with costs. This set a precedent so that no union could strike without fear of ruination through suing. To the working class it seemed as though the Government did nothing. They did not reverse the judgement but set up a Royal Commission that served to delay the fine, not cancel it. When Tariff Reform became an issue the Conservatives split into factions - 'Free Fooders', 'Whole Hoggers' and 'Balfourites'; those who believed voraciously in Free Trade, who backed Chamberlain completely, or who supported the Prime Minister in all his decisions.

The Liberals were united against Tariff Reform and so was Ritchie, Chancellor of the Exchequer, who wanted to reassert Free Trade. The Liberals put across the 'Small loaf argument', which meant, in the most basic terms to the working classes that tax on non-Colony products like wheat would make them more expensive. The price of the basic staple of their diet, bread, would rise. As the Liberals explained it this meant that with Tariff Reform, for the money they paid for a large loaf of bread then, they would only be able to buy a small loaf later. For the working classes it appeared as though the Conservatives had provided no social reforms. In all Balfour and Salisbury's time before him, only the two Education Acts, the Workmen's Compensation

Act, the Unemployed Workmen's Act which gave no state funding and the Licensing Act had been passed to directly affected the working man's life.

The middle classes were also dissatisfied with Conservative rule. They were distressed at the attitudes used in the Boer War. The Scorched Earth policies and Concentration Camps were seen as cruel and unneeded. The Nonconformists who tended to be middle class did not like the 1902 Education Act where state funding was given to church schools as well as Nonconformist schools. They saw this as strengthening the Anglican Church. Opposition was particularly strong locally, where perhaps the only school available for Methodist children was Anglican. Members of the Temperance movement who were also mostly middle class Nonconformists who were again riled by the 1904 Licensing Act where more public houses were closed down, but the owners paid compensation.

The Temperance movement felt that they should receive no compensation at all. The middle class was also disillusioned with the Conservatives on the subject of Chinese Slavery. They felt that it was inhumane and barbaric. Many were concerned about the 'nameless practices' that might occur with the same sexes being housed together in close quarters. Like the working class the middle class also felt concerned about Tariff Reform, they didn't like the thought of prices going up, but knew that it wouldn't affect them as seriously as it would the working class.

Middleton, the Conservative Party publicist retired before the Election and his successor did not compare. Middleton had made sure that there were candidates standing in every place possible, but in the 1906 Election 27

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Liberal stood unopposed. The new publicist's organisation was inferior and this let the Conservatives down badly.

The Liberal Party had much to offer the English populous in 1906. They stood united under a common cause: to oppose Tariff Reform. They touched the middle and working classes especially by putting forward the 'Small Loaf Argument' and declaring that other countries would retaliate and put up their taxes too. The Liberals had fallen out of power partly over the divisive issue of Home Rule. To insure that their Party no longer seemed divided to the British public the Liberals did not fight about Home Rule in their speeches, and since it had not been something that had popularised them, it was not mentioned in the Liberal Party manifesto.

The Liberals promised the public that they would make changes to the Law, essentially by repealing all the unpopular Laws passed under Conservative rule. They stated they would repeal the Education and Licensing Acts and the Taff Vale case, thus attracting the Temperance movement, Nonconformists and working class. The Liberals guaranteed few reforms; they said they would try to do something about pensions but kept it vague so that the middle and upper classes would not be unduly worried enough to vote Conservative.

The Lib-Lab pact served both Parties well, it allowed Liberals and Labour to get candidates into Parliament and did not separate anti-Conservative votes.

In the 1906 election it was much clearer what the Liberals stood for, and perhaps England felt that at that particular time she was ready for a change,

but without the constant blunders of Balfour's Government thought of change may have never entered any Englishman's consciousness.