

Social change in british society history essay



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The pace of social change in British society gathered speed by the end of the nineteenth century and put Britain at the forefront of reform ahead of the rest of the developed world. At this point, Britain had become the first and for a short time, the only fully industrialized nation. Its economy grew at a swift but unbalanced pace, so that the envisioned society forecast by political leaders in the nineteenth century did not fully manifest itself until early in the next century. Late in the nineteenth century, Britain was unquestionably the first global economy, a new movement 'new liberalism,' emerged with a different attitude and the role of traditional liberalism which sought the elimination of the barriers to an individual's liberty was over, and the time had come for the government to act on the rights of the people.

The ruling class had to face the plea from the working class for political participation. In 1867 and 1884, the government responded by further extending the franchise and after the turn of the century, the Liberal Party introduced social welfare measures to appeal to working-class votes and to get hold of their loyalty. The two main acts that spurred the biggest reform were the Representation of the People (Franchise) Act, passed in 1884, and the Redistribution of Seats Act, passed the next year. The 1884 Reform Act afforded the vote to poor farmers and laborers in the country and greatly restructured electoral areas to reflect the ongoing population shift from rural areas to the larger towns. The two acts drastically changed the British Political System for years to come but "the 1884 Reform Act was not a skillful example of legislative drafting, and its enfranchising effect, though considerable, fell far short of democracy," with the key changes occurring in the counties, "where the old franchises continued, but additional categories

were added, including the household and lodger qualifications.”[1]Blewett says that it “ merely extended the borough system to the counties, and defined with greater minuteness the duties of the overseer.”[2]

A series of reform acts that started with giving the vote to the middle class in 1832 had gradually extended the franchise in England. These acts were passed by both political parties and were helpful in the increase of popularity for the political system. The Franchise Act extended the right to vote to almost all male heads of households in the county constituencies or, put in broad occupational terms, to the agricultural laborers: this was similar to what had been granted to the borough constituencies in 1867.[3]

When Disraeli became Prime Minister in 1874, his political aspirations were the same as his previous ministry. His viewpoint on social reform was designed to get hold of the votes of the recently enfranchised working class. He thought that helping the poor would be good for the entire country and he still cared sincerely for social reform.[4]This is evidenced by the social reforms that were enacted between 1874 and 1876. The Enclosures Act of 1876, the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act, and the Employers and Workmen Act, being but a few, were intended to gain the support of the Trades Unions which consequently meant the Working Classes while also being designed to satisfy the masses, turn their attention away from constitutional innovations, and enlist their loyalties for the Conservative party.[5]By setting the groundwork for the Unions and at the same time showing the Conservative concern for the cause of the working man, Disraeli expected that his party would be worthy of their votes and proved not only

his own good faith, but the reality of the neglects with which he had taunted the official liberals.[6]

The 1867 Reform Act was so wide-ranging that it appeared there would not be a lot of change needed after its passing. In spite of this belief, the 1867 Reform Act had focused first and foremost on urban areas leaving out much of the population in rural areas and can be seen as the “ second step in the long process which peacefully transformed the British government into a functioning democracy.”[7]The 1884 Act was aimed at the rural areas that had been passed over in 1867 but was “ typically nineteenth-century in form in that it was framed as an addendum to existing legislation and there was little attempt at codification.”[8]A side note to the 1884 bill was that it contained an unsuccessful amendment that sought voting rights for women.

In 1884, reform was directed at householders and lodgers in the boroughs and counties. The Redistribution Act which passed following year was connected to the 1884 act in terms of legislative strategies and was “ no less profound in its effects upon the electoral system.”[9]Accordingly, it is regarded by Stephens and Brady as “ the most profound reform in British history” by its effect of “ instituting single-member constituencies and narrowing differences in size of population.”[10]The resulting election in 1886 caused party government and class politics to emerge with greater prominence and had a “ decided impact on the internal politics of the House of Commons.”[11]The two acts of 1884 and 1885, combined with the election of 1886, changed a relatively polarized parliamentary system into a non-polarized one and contributed to the shift toward national politics by diminishing local influences in selection of members.[12]

The Reforms of 1832 and 1867 did nothing to change the overall number of members of the House of Commons. They simply reallocated the existing 658 seats but the Reform Act of 1885 increased that number to 670. The qualifications for franchise were complex and “ less than 30% of the adult population was on the electoral register.”[13]In most cases, “ access was in principle already denied to four categories of people: paupers, living-in servants, most of the military, and many sons living with parents.[14]Overall, the Reform Acts before 1900 moved Britain closer to democracy but they did not deliver the vast change sought by the people. Without a doubt, there was considerable change for the better since 1832. Be that as it may, there were still a number of issues that people wanted their government to address.

The strength of the British Government during the 1800's was its ability to suppress any likelihood of revolution by way of reform. By 1870 this had given rise to the most industrialized and most powerful country in the world. On the other hand, the Industrial revolution brought with it serious social problems as Britain was transformed from a rural nation to the most urbanized. The population also continued to increase, even though it rose at a much slower pace that led to a higher average age and “ led, as yet, not to an ageing, but to a middle-aged population.”[15]By 1880, in excess of fifty percent of the population had relocated to cities. The social problems brought about by this shift can be found in the areas of housing, education and health care which lead to a demand for improvement in the fields of parliamentary reform, worker's rights, education, and social welfare.

Much of Europe in the 1880's and beyond saw substantial unrest coming from the labor classes. Much of this dissatisfaction stems from changes brought about as a consequence of an industrial society. The growth of communications, transportation, urban growth and the distribution of news became widespread. By the close of the nineteenth century, trade unions that represented the workers realized that they had to have a say in Parliament if they were to see a change in the political nature of Britain. A succession of anti-union laws aimed at destabilizing the position of trade unions was passed.

In 1900 the unions come to an agreement which allowed certain funds to be used to set up a new organization called the Labor Representation Committee, this being named the Labor Party after 1906. The rise of Labor can be ascribed to the tough working and living conditions prevalent in late nineteenth century Britain. At this time, the Labor party became the accredited voice of the organized working class.[16] Powell states that “Labour ...existed primarily as the expression of a particular sectional interest, with all the freedom that that implied.”[17]

The party was originally found to speak for the interests of the trade unions and their members in Parliament. During the first few years of the twentieth century the Labor Party gradually increased its power. In the 1906 general election it had twenty-nine MPs elected to Parliament. Four years later they were able to boost that number to forty-two. This shift in power meant that trade union organizations had come to rely more and more on the Labor party as an intermediary in its dealings with the trade union movement and with working-class voters generally.[18]

Trade Unions for skilled workers were on the rise during the course of the 19th century and in due course were legalized by the Trade Union Act in 1871, a measure that carried a great deal of social significance, which gave the unions a legal foundation. The act recognized the legal validity of the unions and made provisions for their registration.[19]It was followed by the Criminal Law Amendment Act which was passed in an effort to define a worker redress to strike. In 1875 it was officially recognized that workers could peacefully picket their place of work when on strike by means of the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act.

Nevertheless, the trade union movement hit a major stumbling block by way of the Taff Vale Case in 1901. The case decided that an act lawful in itself is not converted by a malicious or bad motive into an unlawful act, so as to make the doer of the act liable for a civil wrong.[20]A union was found to be legally responsible for the damages to the Taff Vale Railway Company in the course of a strike. The conservative government of the time took no action on the case. After the election of 1906 in which a liberal government grabbed hold of power the Trades Disputes Act was enacted which removed trade union liability for damage by strike action and gave them a privileged status in law.[21]

The growth of cities and towns brought about by the Industrial Revolution had an unexpected result of producing countless serious social and health problems. This was a motivation for a number of actions that were carried to improve the conditions of common people. The Public Health Act of 1872 introduced Health Authorities across England. In spite of this, the management of the Act was weighed down by a shortage of money. Another

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act was needed to increase funding and was instrumental in improving the situation. The Public Health Act of 1875 was an important statute, but its most useful attributes were as a consolidation and clarification of the complex mass of sanitary legislation passed in earlier years.[22] It also pushed through a series of acts dealing with sewage, water, housing and bad health. Other legislation in this period included the Artisans' Dwelling Act (1875) which allowed local authorities the authority to acquire and demolish slum houses and replace them with modern housing. The act had little effect since the powers were obligatory and by 1880, only a tiny handful made any effort to use it.[23]

The conservative government gained power once again in 1895 and ruled for the next ten years. The flow of reforming legislation to the statute book continued unabated during the 1895-1905 period, and the activity and the resources of both central and local government continued to grow although the government's domestic legislation, though substantial, did not inspire popular enthusiasm.[24] By 1900, almost one-third of the population was on the brink of starvation and there was a great disparity of income and wealth. In addition, there was some criticism of the government's limited achievements in social matters.[25] In light of either success or failure, Pugh says that by "embedding the Conservative cause into the routine social life of many communities, the party succeeded in gaining a degree of immunity from the vagaries of political issues and policies.[26]

Britain was closer to being a democracy by 1906 than ever before. More men over twenty-one were able to vote than ever before. The Reform Acts of the nineteenth century had extended the franchise, restructured boroughs and

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as a result of the Secret Ballot, fair elections were now feasible. The major political parties had increasingly promoted those policies that would appeal to the larger body of voters. Once the Labor party had come into existence, it rapidly acquired an identity and a momentum of its own and was able to present itself as a credible alternative focus for working-class loyalties.[27]

Whatever the changes in the political landscape from 1885 to 1911, reform was on the agenda which in due course made it possible for the majority of the population to vote. The election of 1906 selected a Liberal government by a substantial majority. The Labor Party also flourished after the elect as well, owing to the growth of recently enfranchised electors. Between 1906 and 1914 the Liberal government was responsible for passing a wide range of social reforms. These reforms had an impact on all classes, the young, the old, the sick, the unemployed and many groups of workers.

The 1906 election was the beginning of the British welfare state. The Conservatives had in essence disregarded the thought of social reform over the last decade.

This led to them losing the vote of the worker's and similarly led to a decline in the standards of living for the working class. The magnitude of the reforms after the 1906 election and the speed in which they were passed was extraordinary. Reform legislation was conceived for a variety of reasons. There was an element of humanitarianism along with a degree of political calculation in the hope of electoral profit. There was also the belief that social reform would make for a more efficient society and one able to provide leadership for the Empire.[28]The New Liberals made a case that

government involvement was required to make life easier for the underprivileged and introduced more social reform. In spite of this, the new legislation was merely second-rate and the quality of life for working class people pretty much remained unchanged but what is certain is that British society in 1914 was far more prosperous than was the society of 1815.[29]

The most important issue yet to be addressed then was that of voting rights for women. The Liberal Party was split on the issue of women's suffrage. In 1903 the Women's Social and Political Union was founded by Emmeline Pankhurst to demand the vote for women. One of their declarations for this right was that " wherever women have become voters, reform has proceeded more rapidly than before, and even at home, municipal government is in advance and not behind on many important questions." [30] By 1914, substantial progress had been made in liberalizing the position of women in comparison with the earlier nineteenth century, but the changes involved were limited in scope and patchy in incidence.[31]

Although Britain was close to being a democracy, there were still some issues that prevented it from achieving that status. The House of Lords was still a body of government that was not elected for by the people and still had the means of blocking legislation and could thwart the House of Commons. The Lords were still made up of men who were lords because of birth. They were successful in blocking several acts throughout the years. The act of 1911 changed this as the House of Lords could not block acts as easily and they were unable to block any act that concerned taxation or government spending. The situation was now better but it was far from democratic. British citizens were more governed in 1914 and the level of

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public order had grown significantly. All classes of society enjoyed a higher standard of living though the conditions of the poorest were still lamentable and differences in living conditions between the social strata were vast.[32]