

British politics in the years between 1900 and 1914



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The document in question is an extract from a speech given by David Lloyd George at Swansea on the first of October 1910. I have been unable to establish the precise provenance of the document as I could not find the speech in published form and there are no precise references to it in the books I have read on Lloyd George's career. I have found from reading D. Cregier's book *Bounder from Wales* that the speech was made at a time when Lloyd George was awaiting a response to his proposals for a coalition government.

The memorandum containing these proposals also contained his proposals for huge welfare reform in relation to "... housing, sickness insurance, unemployment insurance, the Poor Law, education, local government..." as well as other home and foreign policies. This and the communication of Lloyd George's fear for growing unemployment and a discontented working class were a large part of one half of this memorandum. He was awaiting a response from Balfour, one of the Conservative parliamentary leaders when he made his speech on the First of October. The speech includes lines that could be related to Lloyd George's hope for imminent change such as referring to the behaviour of Old Liberals" and a promise of change under "new Liberalism".

It also includes similar themes to the memorandum, pledging to endeavour to remove the "immediate causes of discontent". Cregier states that Lloyd George had been influenced by propaganda generated by Conservative tariff reformers. This suggests that a leaning towards the Conservatives could have influenced the content of Lloyd George's speech giving it a not entirely Liberal bias but one of unity, a desire for the country to work as a whole to

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deal with the problem of poverty. A more basic but necessary approach to the provenance of this extract is information on the author, date, purpose and potential audience.

The author of the document is David Lloyd George who at the time of the speech's writing was Chancellor of the Exchequer and MP for Swansea, where the speech was given. I do not know whereabouts in Swansea the speech was given, whether at a public or private event. It is likely though, that wherever the speech was given, it would have been documented in the local press to enable the majority of the local population to know its content. If the speech had been commented upon in the national press there is no way of knowing what the audience number could have been.

There was little difference between the views given in the speech and the well-publicised views of Lloyd George on the question of welfare reform. It was widely known that from the early 1900s, Lloyd George and to some extent, Winston Churchill, were greatly concerned with the problem of poverty and that both of them tried to develop reform that would suit the needs of the poor yet be accepted by the upper classes in control of government at the time. The extract emphasises the need for State intervention as opposed to private or voluntary help for the poor.

This is shown by frequent references to the State as having a duty to help the poor and the extract ends with the line "No country can lay any real claim to civilisation that allows them [the poor] to starve". This plays on the conscience of the upper classes to maintain Britain's dignity and international reputation as a wholly successful nation. Lloyd George was well

known for having political views seen at the time as outrageous, there were many sections of society that saw government intervention in poverty as unnecessary.

Lloyd George campaigned to change their minds and force home to all sections of society that poverty, unemployment and sickness were very real problems which needed more than just monetary investment, they needed carefully instigated legislation to keep Britain the international power that it had always been, in military and industry. With this in mind, the extract is typical of Lloyd George's views and actions. The document focuses on the problem of poverty, how it has been used in politics in the past, how Lloyd George claims the new Liberals will deal with it and what the real issues are.

At the beginning of the extract Lloyd George claims that the old Liberals in Britain have in the past used social issues purely to gain the support of the working classes, promising them perhaps a better future or just a kind of status for putting up with the problems of poverty for the sake of the country (in terms of the suffering economy). As I have already mentioned, Lloyd George states that new Liberals will aim to tackle the causes of poverty such as unemployment, poor health and education.

He is certain that the State should take responsibility for looking after people who find themselves victims of poverty through no fault of their own. He describes how the present Liberal government has introduced Old Age Pensions but is determined to deal with the problem of "the sick, infirm, the unemployed, the widows and the orphans". There are some significant points in the extract which can help to answer the question of why the problem of

poverty came to the fore in British politics during this period. Much of the extract can be related to the work of Rowntree and other researchers into the problem of poverty from 1900 onwards.

The second half of the extract would suggest that it was this research alone that brought poverty to the attention of politicians. There are specific references: " save the man from the physical and mental torture involved in extreme penury... " this can be seen as influenced by Rowntree's research in rural areas where people became cut off from the outside world, unable to buy a daily paper or anything else other than the necessary food for survival which meant that they lived " a life without colour, space and atmosphere, that stifles and hems in the labourer's soul, as in too many cases his cottage hems in his body" iii.

The quote I gave from the extract detailing the future efforts of the Liberals might have been influenced by Batley's research in Yorkshireiv, which showed huge problems with sickness and infant mortality, and helplessness experienced by women in providing income and care. The first part of the extract looks more at the political motives that could exist for the development of social policy.

Many historians feel that the Liberals focussed on social reform in order to gain more support from the working classes. They could have been introducing social reform as a way of bringing more people out of poverty or as a controlling measure to make them more dependant on the government and policing their behaviour. By reading around the subject of Liberal welfare

reform 1900-1914 I have discovered many more reasons why poverty came to the fore in British Politics at this time.

The research conducted by Rowntree and others was an important factor in bringing the exact state of poverty in Britain to the attention of politicians and the upper classes. Other major factors were the influence of other countries and their social policy and the social and economic effects of the Boer War. In relation to the issue of foreign influence, Germany, Australia and New Zealand seem to have had the biggest influence on British welfare reform in this period.

Foreign influence had already been seen in 1898 with example of the New Zealand Act giving influence to the National Committee of Organised Labour on Old Age Pensions and the Association of British Chambers of Commerce wanted the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws to follow the German example of social policy two years before Lloyd George's visit there in 1908 which is said to have heavily influenced Britain's welfare reform. Germany had introduced a form of National Insurance in the 1870s. Their main aims were to quell the rise of socialism among the workforce and the insurance legislation was changed in 1911 to include white-collar workers.

As most of the world developed more technological, mechanically led industries there was little use for child or elderly labourers. This left huge numbers of people potentially unemployed and destitute and led many countries to introduce state pensions as well as individual businesses setting up private pension schemes to be able to legitimately carry out these new measures. The Australian government introduced the minimum wage in

1907, which according to Mr Justice Higgins was " appropriate to the normal needs of an average employee, regarded as a human being living in a normal country" v.

I do not see it as merely a coincidence that these words are similar to the phrase used at the end of the extract and the whole tone of the second half of the extract where Lloyd George seems to be imploring to the audience to see the reasoning that people in a civilised [normal] country should not be forced to live in anything but a normal manner. Higgins defined this manner or standard as " sufficient to ensure the workman food, shelter, clothing, frugal comforts, provision for evil days etc" vi.

Australia did not have National Health Insurance and Old Age Pensions fully implemented until 1914 because of the strength of 'self-help' institutions and voluntary institutions although there was widespread subsidised healthcare in 1910. It is hard to dispute that Australia led the world in welfare reform during this period and it must have been hard for politicians in Britain who were campaigning furiously for welfare reform to see a colony providing better care for their most needy citizens than the head of the empire.

An extremely important factor in bringing the issue of poverty to the fore of British politics during this period is the after effect of the Boer War. This led to the need for economic change, which in turn required important developments in welfare such as health care. The Boer War brought about awareness of the problem of poverty in a new demographic. The difficulty of Britain's forces to win the Boer War was primarily due to the poor physical state of the soldiers, many of whom were suffering from under nourishment

when they signed up for the army, showing how Britain's poverty problem had spread right through the workforce.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Britain was beginning to lose industrial superiority and strength in comparison to Germany and the USA. These two issues showed the ruling classes that Britain could easily suffer defeat by Germany both in industry and war. As a result of this realisation there was an emphasis placed on increasing the size, physical and productive efficiency and birth rate of the country and lowering infant mortality rates.

Employers saw that industrial efficiency would not be improved by merely investing in technology but that they would have to invest in the problem of sickness and poverty as well. Employers either set up private aid schemes or campaigned to the government for action. This brought calls for social help from the state from a more influential sector of society than just organisations such as the Fabian Society. As in many sections of government legislation, I feel that economic factors had the biggest influence on the introduction of welfare reform.

It was clear by the early 1900s that the British economy was in trouble and needed a healthy, strong workforce that could replenish itself easily. All aspects of welfare reform, even those focussing on the elderly and children, come back to economic and industrial factors. A welfare state should not have been considered a financial risk as any money invested in education and healthcare would be recouped by keeping the workforce healthy and

productive and producing a better trained, more intelligent workforce for the future.

To quote a Keynesian argument, "unemployment benefits would help maintain levels of consumption during an economic depression, and act as a built in stabiliser" vii; a healthcare system would also keep the unemployed workers healthy until employment was available again. I feel that the extract sheds little light on how the issue of poverty came to the fore in British Politics in this period. The extract states what the problems are and how they might be dealt with but it does not give detailed reasons why they are necessary at this point in time when they have not been used in Britain before.

The extract seems to be more of a passionate plea for understanding of the problem itself rather detailing the economic implications it could have on the country if left unsolved. The extract could also be more convincing in its argument if it used examples of other countries where welfare reform has worked. This would give the audience more confidence in the beliefs of Lloyd George, which, without this backup and in the changeable political climate of the time, could be left unfulfilled due to a huge lack of support and understanding.