

How accurate is it to describe the government as liberal tory



The era in which Lord Liverpool was Prime Minister is often analysed in two different periods; 1815-1822 and 1822-1827. The latter is often described by historians using the term “ Liberal Toryism”. The word “ liberal” in this case means supporting the right for individual freedom.

Therefore liberal policies were those which increased people’s independence. It is now necessary to contemplate whether assessing Liverpool’s government as “ Liberal Toryism” in this period is justified. Most of Liverpool’s government in 1815 were considered to be traditional Tories who wanted to preserve the status quo and believed in order over liberty. Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary, Vansittart, the Chancellor, and Lord Eldon all wanted to maintain order and were against reform and against Catholic emancipation.

After the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Europe and particularly Britain was fearful of revolution thus making Liverpool’s government even more against reform. However, a number of people felt that parliamentary reform was a necessity as the government’s system was biased to the landowning aristocracy, and that the House of Commons needed to be an actual representation of the people. So, throughout this period, the government faced a number of attempted revolutions. The most serious of these revolts was the Peterloo Massacre in which eleven were killed as the Manchester Yeomanry were sent into the crowd who were waiting to hear a radical speech from a member of parliament in favour of parliamentary reform. In response to this discontent the government, suspended “ Habeas Corpus” which allowed people to be arrested on suspicion, prevented seditious meetings and informers were hired to find out about future protests.

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These actions led to a number of the prominent agitators being arrested. Liverpool acted in this way because he felt that this hardship was unavoidable due to the war and the fact that Britain was going through a period of economic and social change. This led to the government being condemned by British radicals as reactionary. Nevertheless due to the lack of opposition from the Whigs, Liverpool managed to survive this period of unrest. It is no coincidence that the era known as " Liberal Toryism" coincided with a change of personnel in Liverpool's government. In January 1822 Sidmouth, the Home Secretary was replaced by Robert Peel.

Castlereagh, the Foreign Secretary, committed suicide in August 1822 and was replaced by Canning and in January 1823 Robinson replaced Vansittart as Chancellor and William Huskisson became President of the Board of Trade. These four are considered to be the " Liberal Tories" due to their policies in this period. It is necessary to study these policies and see how " liberal" they were before deciding whether it is justified in describing this era as one of " Liberal Toryism. Robert Peel, who became Home Secretary, worked hard to reform the penal system and making sure that these reforms were a success.

Before Peel's appointment the penal system was considered harsh. A number of criminals were being sent to Botany Bay, Australia and more than two hundred crimes resulted in the death penalty. As a result juries were against finding the accused guilty and in many cases they were allowed to go with no punishment as this was deemed fairer than handing out the death penalty. So, Peel removed the death penalty for over one hundred and

eighty cases, modified the punishment for lesser crimes and improved the legal proceedings which made the whole system much fairer.

Peel also improved conditions in the prisons which were dirty and overcrowded in the Gaols Act in 1823 and in 1829 created the Metropolitan Police Force, although this was in Wellington's ministry. However, although these policies were "liberal" they were not original and his ideas were often taken from other penal reformers especially Sir James Mackintosh.

Huskisson, who became President of the Board of Trade, believed in freer trade and therefore he modified the Navigation Acts which was presented in parliament by London merchants. The change in the Navigation Acts allowed ships from all countries to bring in goods instead of goods having to be carried in English ships or in the ships of the country that the goods came. Huskisson also lowered the duties on imports and signed the Reciprocity of Duties Act, 1823.

This was an agreement with other countries in order to lower the tariffs between them. Robinson, who became Chancellor, worked closely with Huskisson. He had a less difficult task than Vansittart due to a more successful economy due to the work of Huskisson described above. However Robinson reduced taxation and still managed to balance the budget. By reducing taxes on goods that the rich would buy he felt that he was supporting everyone as the rich would need more workers thus also benefiting the poor. Robinson also extended the concessions to more basic commodities like coal and wool in 1824.

As stated above, Robinson's task was made easier due to Huskisson. At this stage the government's stability still depended on the support of the landowners therefore Robinson's and Huskisson's reforms were limited as they had to ensure that any reforms did not disadvantage the rich. Therefore it can be suggested that the reforms by Robinson and Huskisson were only as " liberal" as the landowners allowed. Despite these problems Robinson was shrewd and managed to increase the wealth of the nation instead of concentrating on one class shown by his reduction of taxes on goods that the rich would buy.

Huskisson's reforms were also vital and his work was probably more important than is suggested but his reputation suffered when conditions got worse and there was a decline in exports in 1925. Canning became Foreign Secretary in place of Castlereagh in 1922. He quickly became popular and known as " the friend of the peoples". Canning's policies were certainly " liberal" as he supported liberty in Greece, Spain and Portugal and backed the freedom and independence of South American republics. His manner made him seem more progressive than he was; he was charismatic, ambitious and unconventional which appealed to the public.

However, Canning's views made him seem less than liberal. Although he supported Catholic emancipation, he defended the behaviour of the magistrates at Peterloo, supported the Six Acts and opposed to reform of the electoral system and the penal system. However, due to his policies and especially his manner he is considered by many to be the only one of the " Liberal Tories" who could even be considered " Liberal" under Liverpool's government.

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