

Assess the reasons for and the success of the liberal welfare reforms 1906 - 1911

In the election of 1906 the liberal party won an amazing landslide victory over the conservatives. One of the main reasons for this was the lack of social reform passed by the conservatives while they were in power. The liberal party knew that the public were unhappy about this and because of this they used the offer of social reform in their election campaign. Many historians have argued that the Liberal parties new found wish for more social reform was due to the idea of 'new liberalism' that was popular at the time.

It has been said that new liberalism was one of the most important forces in the fight for social reform. The new liberals such as Lloyd George and Churchill were much more concerned with the lives of the working classes than previous political groups. They did not believe in retrenchment as Gladstonian liberals had done, they meant they did not mind spending money on reforms. They claimed that reforms would actually be profitable for the economy, Watts writes "New liberals argued that the system on uneven distribution of wealth was harming the economy, it was depriving an entire class from the ability to buy goods". Although it would seem that the new liberals only had the interests of the general public in mind there have been questions of their motives in wanting these reforms.

Many historians are divided over the reasons for why the liberals wanted these reforms. Some historians, such as Searle argue that the liberals were just trying to gain support for the liberals through reforms. He writes "Lloyd George and Churchill's main concern was to capture working - class support and, by doing so, to marginalize the labour party". Other historians argue that the reforms were put in place to gain some prestige for the party by reforming the current, embarrassing state of the governments provision for the people. This was highlighted by Lloyd George's visit to Germany and by Churchill's visit to New Zealand. Both of these countries were once seen as lesser than Britain, yet at this time they both had welfare states in place that were helping the people, they had very little of the poverty cited by Rowntree and Booth in their studies. Although, for whatever reason, the liberals did introduce a number of reforms. They were divided into four sections, reforms for the young, elderly, sick and workers & unemployed.

It has often been said that the reforms for the children were the most important to the liberal party. In 1906 the first reform to be introduced by the new liberal government was the school meals act. This meant that schools could provide free meals for under privileged children, although at this time it wasn't mandatory. The committee on physical deterioration noted "it is said to be the height of cruelty to subject half-starved children to the process of education. By 1910 9 million school meals a day were being provided. In 1907 a clause was added to the 'Education administrative provisions act' to allow health visits to junior schools. The most important Liberal reform for children was the 'children's charter'. This was the consolidation of 39 previous statutes that covered a wide area of topics from negligence & cruelty to the problem of young offenders. The government was very fast to pass reforms relating to children for two reasons, they saw it as important that they keep the nation fit in case of war and an army was needed and also because these children would be future voters.

The Liberals felt that the government should give something back to the elderly after they had worked for so many years. Many committees had looked at the issue of the elderly, and concluded that old age was a main cause for poverty. In 1908, in the budget, an idea for state pensions was introduced. It was agreed that people of the age of 70 and over would receive 5 shillings a week as long as their income was below 31 pounds a year. The plan was very popular and also helped the liberals in another way as well. The liberal party were losing by-elections. Lloyd George once remarked "it is time we did something that appealed straight to the people - it will I think help to stop this electoral rot and that is most necessary".

The reforms for workers and the unemployed were a way that the liberals could keep both the workers and the rich happy. The