

How Significant Was The Appeal of New Liberalism in Giving The Liberal Party Its Great Election Victory in 1906?

Although the appeal of New Liberalism was an important factor in giving the Liberal Party its great election victory in 1906, there were also other significant factors since New Liberalism was not fully established until 1908. However, it was beginning to appear in 1906 and some of its policies increased the support of the Liberal party.

The other main factors were the fall of the Conservative party and the working class support which the Liberal party gained from the early 1900's. The fall of the Conservative Party in 1906 was an extremely significant factor in the landslide Liberal victory in the 1906 Election as the Liberals were able to exploit these mistakes. The Lib-Lab pact also increased funding for the Liberals.

Several factors contributed to the fall of the Conservative party. The Conservatives' main mishap was the Taff Vale case in 1901 where workers at a railway company, encouraged by their Trade Union, went on strike to protest against poor wages and harsh working conditions. However, the railway company sued the Trade Union for their losses.

Therefore, Trade Unions were reluctant to encourage strikes because they were in fear of being sued, so workers lost their faith in their Trade Unions. This subsequently led to a lack of working class support as the Conservatives were an upper class party which were not interested in helping the working class or representing them. The Trade Unions

sought support from the LRC and there was a massive increase in union affiliations to the LRC, therefore taking support away from the Conservatives.

The Conservatives also lost the support of the public when they were in power during the Boer War. The war was from 1899 to 1902 and the soldiers that were sent to South Africa did not expect to encounter as much resistance as they did and 20,000 soldiers were killed. The Conservative government was blamed for what appeared to be military incompetence. The war also stimulated Joseph Chamberlain's campaign for Tariff Reform, which is what split the Conservative party. Chamberlain wanted a tariff on imported food from other countries but a smaller tariff or none at all on food from British colonies. However, a lot of people believed in free trade because they thought that it kept food prices low and that the imposition of tariffs would force prices to rise. The Conservative party did not agree with each other on this, causing it to split and therefore weakening its campaign. Other factors which contributed to the fall of the Conservative party were the humanitarian concerns over the use of Chinese slavery in South Africa, which brought fears that the slaves might go to Britain. The Prime Minister, Balfour, was an aloof and uninvolved man who made no attempt to address the increasingly powerful pressures from trade unions and was therefore fairly unpopular with the people of Britain. He also failed to address the rising unemployment figures, due to the Conservatives' laissez-faire attitude which made them indifferent to the problems. However, in 1905 they brought in the Unemployed Workmen Bill, but this was only temporary and did not solve the problem.

The Liberals exploited the Conservative's mistakes in many ways. For example, the 1902 Education Act was important for the Liberals to gain support. They had always traditionally gained support from non-conformists but in the period between 1886-1900 the Liberals lost quite a lot of non-conformist support. However, when the Conservative's brought in the 1902 Education Act, it offended a lot of non-conformists because it meant that some of the money they were paying to go towards the funding of schools may have gone to a Catholic or Church of England school, which was, to them, unacceptable. They launched a campaign against the act, which was supported by the Liberals. Moreover, the Liberals got back the support of the non-conformists.

The Lib-Lab pact was also a significant factor in helping the Liberal party to win the 1906 General Election. The pact definitely helped the Labour party to win 30 seats and it also meant that the anti-Unionist vote was split as little as possible. Furthermore, the Liberals gained access to the £100,000 that was the LRC's election fund which was extremely important to the Liberal party who had been short of funding.

These are all significant factors which contribute to the Liberal victory in 1906, but New Liberalism still played an important part in the victory. New Liberalism was a reaction to the Conservative dominance in the late nineteenth century, to which the Liberals realised they would have to take on a new line of attack to oppose the Conservatives. New Liberalists felt that they should provide basic minimum standards for the poorest people, paid for by taxation of the richest. These suggestions were prevalent in the Liberal campaign, with 69% of Liberal manifestoes promising social reform, which was a feature

of New Liberalism since it involved state intervention. However, Social Reform was one of many policies mentioned by the Liberal party. The Liberals began to lessen their laissez-faire attitude when they realised that some of the conditions of society were so bad that they could not just be ignored. They believed that "Self-reliance is a powerful force, but not powerful enough to cure unaided the diseases that afflict society. Liberty is of supreme importance, but State assistance, rightly directed, may extend the bounds of liberty."

Lloyd George was one of the founders of New Liberalism. He believed that if the Liberals carried on with Gladstonian (old) Liberalism, then they would eventually fail and the population would call for a new party. He stated that as long as the head of the family was in good health and was bringing in money then most families would be okay. However, problems arose when the head of the family was taken ill or got injured. Then there would be no one to bring in money for the family to help them survive and get food. Therefore, many acts with New Liberal tendencies were introduced.

The Education Act of 1906 allowed local authorities to voluntarily provide free school meals for children in need. However, it was introduced as the Private Members Bill by an independent MP, William Wilson. This was an example of New Liberalism because it involved state intervention although it was voluntary and not many local authorities carried it out. The Workers Compensation Act of 1906 gave compensation to men who had been injured at work so that their families did not suffer. This was another example of state intervention, rather than the laissez-faire attitude of Old Liberalism. Other acts

featuring New Liberalism ideas were the Merchant Shipping Act and the Trade Disputes Act, both in 1906. These were yet more example of state intervention and they show us how the Liberals gained so much working class support, because all of these acts were designed to help the working and lower classes.

Therefore, I can see that New Liberalism was a very important factor in the Liberals 1906 general election victory. However, New Liberalism was not completely established by this point, so there was still a strong element of Gladstonian Liberalism in the Liberals ideas and plans. Therefore, people had not seen true New Liberalism and some of them may have voted for the Liberals based on their Old Liberalism principles. Moreover, if New Liberalism had been more firmly established at the time of the 1906 general election, then it might have put some people off voting for them. I think that the most important factor however was the fall of the Conservatives, because they had such a stronghold on British politics that the Liberals would not have had nearly as much of a chance as they did when the Conservatives started making mistakes. Moreover, there was no other main party to vote for, so any anti-Conservative vote went to the Liberals, which meant that people were not necessarily voting for the Liberals because they agreed and supported their views, but because they were so against the Conservative party and if their vote went anywhere else then it would be a waste.

Overall I would say that the appeal of New Liberalism was fairly important in the giving the Liberal party their election win because it attracted a lot of working class support, but

if it was not for the Conservative party doing so badly then the Liberal party would not have been nearly as successful.