

Ruth Naughton-Doe

What prompted the Welfare Reforms of the Liberal Government between 1906-1914?

In the period of 1906-1914, social reform acts were passed in parliament by the Liberal government under Herbert Asquith PM, Lloyd-George MP and Winston Churchill MP. These acts laid the foundations for a basic welfare state to which our current welfare state was built up from. The acts provided basic support for mothers and children, the old, sick and the unemployed. These changes have been considered very radical considering they took place in Victorian England. There are many issues to examine when asking the question of what prompted the Welfare Reform Acts of the Liberal Government.

Prior to the 1900s, the general consensus on impoverished people was that they were in poverty because they were lazy and hence worthless. People did not seem eager for social reform to help the poor people because they were regarded as having got themselves into their situation through their own fault and hence could get themselves out of it. However, shortly before the turn of the century and immediately after it, new ideology on how people came to be poor was released. For example, Charles Booth's 'Life and Labour of People in London' and Seebohm Rowntree's 'Poverty and a Study of Town Life' were published in this era. Their ideas stated that a quarter of people were living in poverty in England, and also, that they were in poverty through no fault of their own. Instead they declared people were in poverty due to unfair social conditions that meant they could not work.

*“Adverse social conditions were the root cause”*

Low wages, unemployment, illness and old age were some of the causes of poverty. This knowledge among the middle and upper classes meant that no longer did people simply believe the poor were in poverty due to laziness, and hence they were keener to help them out of it. The Welfare Reforms came about because poverty and its true cause were exposed and people saw the harsh reality for themselves, for example when young educated students went to live among poor people to witness it first hand. Humanitarian concern among the educated induced the Liberal Welfare Reform Acts because the majority of the population wanted it, and parties obey their nation's opinion.

Ruth Naughton-Doe

The Leaders of the Liberal Party, predominantly Lloyd-George and Winston Churchill, showed a personal interest in social reform.

*“These problems of the sick, of the infirm, of the men who cannot find the means of earning a living are problems with which it is the business of the state to deal with. They are problems with which the state has egllected for far too long”* Lloyd-George, speech made to parliament 1908.

Lloyd-George had a very non-conformist and radical upbringing, he was not a Gladstonian Liberal conformist either, and liked the new ideas on poverty. Having witnessed poverty he had a personal desire to amend it and he pressured the reform movement personally. Winston Churchill, although he had an aristocratic background, was also keen to eradicate poverty on a large scale on principle alone, regardless of any political pressure. These two strong leaders who desired change for the good of humanity helped Liberal Reforms. Their personal interest in it however, was not a factor in reform as dominant as the exposure in poverty. Indeed it can be argued that their interest in it stemmed from Rowntree and Booth’s exposure. Therefore, although Churchill and Lloyd-George were catalysts for reform, changing public opinion due to exposure of real causes of poverty were more powerful catalysts, and the leaders opinions themselves perhaps just a result of exposure.

The Liberal government as a whole were starting a branch of named ‘New Liberalism’. The previous Gladstonian government ethic had been that the Liberals take a laissez-faire policy (leave alone) which meant low interference with welfare of people because of a belief that economic problems would sort themselves out. However, recent ideology on the causes of poverty caused Liberal governments to question their low interference policy. The Liberals believed everyone had to get themselves out of poverty and into comfortable situations through hard work, but as people were unable to provide for their families despite hard work, then they considered this to be unfair. New Liberalism wanted to establish a basic living standard for everyone.

“...promote measures for ameliorating conditions of life for the multitude.” Lloyd-George.

This meant that social reform was necessary, to make sure everyone could at least secure themselves a minimum standard of living. Winston Churchill declared he wished to ‘strap a

Ruth Naughton-Doe

lifeline around them'; he wanted to make sure no one was sinking too far below the poverty line. Therefore, the New Liberalist desire for a national living standard meant a need for Welfare Reform. Hence, New Liberalism was a reason that prompted Welfare Reform. However, the New Liberalism was not as important a catalyst as the changing attitudes towards poverty. Without the changing attitudes and ideology, New Liberalism would never have been born, so the ideology was the most important first cause.

The National efficiency of England was falling low. Although Britain was the leading nation, Germany, the USA and Japan were threatening its place. Britain's primacy was seen as threatened economically and militarily. The working class recruits in the Boer War suffered severe health problems and affected their efficiency. The workers in factories also suffered from ill health and affected productivity.

*"...the country that spent 250 million to avenge an insult levelled to her pride by an old Dutch farmer is not ashamed to see her children walking the streets hungry and in rags."*

Generally, the poor distribution of wealth and an unfair tax system was not beneficial to the economy. The economy in Germany had benefited from their introduction of Welfare reforms and hence the working classes' spending power had improved. The redistribution of taxes, a shift of wealth from rich to the poor, was also seen as an improvement in the German economy. Hence, the British saw this scheme as beneficial and aimed to introduce it to Britain to help their failing economy as regards to poverty; no longer did the Liberals believe a powerful national economy could sort out poverty because of the unfairly distributed wealth. Therefore, there was a lobby for social reform to help the British Empire, to eradicate poverty and keep Britain as the number one nation. The national efficiency argument for Liberal Reforms was a very large pressure for change. Without the argument that welfare reforms would be beneficial to the country as a whole and not just beneficial to a quarter of the population then perhaps reform would not have taken place. The national efficiency argument was more of a catalyst for reform than the personal humanitarian interests of Liberal leaders because without the argument, the reforms wouldn't have been seen as beneficial. However, they were not as important as changing attitudes to poverty, which perhaps were the primary cause of ideology behind a welfare state.

Ruth Naughton-Doe

The Labour Party was established in 1900s as a response to a growing demand by the working classes to have more political representation in parliament. They felt ignored by the conservative aristocratic leaders such as Balfour, and not in favour of Liberal leaders such as Gladstone who employed a laissez-faire policy which did not help their impoverished state. They wanted leaders who would identify with their needs and troubles and help them. In 1901 their membership was 350,000 and by 1903 it had risen to 861,000. This showed the conservatives and the Liberals that the Labour party were a real threat.

The Liberal Party promised no social reforms in its election campaign in the early 1900s, but recognised that they would lose working class votes if they did not answer the demands of the working classes.

*“The election is to decide whether or not labour is to be fairly represented in parliament... The slums remain. Overcrowding continues... Shopkeepers and traders are overburdened with rates and taxation... Wars are fought to make the rich richer and underfed children are still neglected...”* Labour Party manifesto 1906

The Liberals noticed that the working class were voting for labour because labour promised social reform and felt if they did not respond to the issues the labour party had raised then they would lose more votes in the next election. Therefore, social reform was necessary to counteract the development of the labour party, to try and prove to the nation that they need not change party because the Liberal's were reforming to meet the changing demands in society instead. The Trade Unionists were funding the Labour party and supported them demonstratively also. The Liberals felt that if they did not act for reform, the Trade Unions would campaign for Labour and hence give Labour more publicity and chance to increase their electorate support. Therefore, the founding of the Labour party put considerable pressure on the Liberal government to act. They were threatened by them, and hence, the founding of the labour party was more of an issue than the national efficiency argument as they were more likely to lose votes to the labour party because of not reforming than they were to lose votes because of low national efficiency.

In conclusion, the Welfare Reforms came about because of changing ideology and the founding of the Labour party, which promised more action on the growing awareness of poverty and exclusion of the working classes from political representation. The reforms were helped

Ruth Naughton-Doe

along the way by changing Liberal ideas and humanitarian concerned leaders, but perhaps these reasons were simply a political response to changing ideology and knowledge that reform was necessary to please the majority of the electorate.