

What were the principles underlying the Poor Law Amendment Act and how far did they reflect contemporary attitudes towards poverty in 1830? Did those responsible for the Act achieve their goals by 1847?

In 1834, Britain was about to enter the Victorian Era. A Whig government, which had been in power for three years, made promises of great reform. 1832 had seen the passing of the Reform Bill. Its terms meant that the landowners had to share their monopoly of political power with the middle classes, who were given the right to vote. The immediate result of this was to stimulate a series of reforms within the next twenty years, one of which was the Poor Law Amendment Act.

Nineteenth century society was poor by modern standards. Most members of the working class were more than likely to be in poverty at some point in their lives due to many natural reasons, and would have to rely on the support of their families for aid. Contemporary attitudes thought that this was right and proper because it meant that the poor would have to work in order to survive. Typical outlooks were of unconcern, complacency or patronising charity epitomised by Samuel Smiles' pamphlet "Self Help", where he stated that "the common life of everyday provides the workers with scope for effort and self-improvement...even if a man fails in his efforts it will be a great satisfaction to him to enjoy the consciousness of having done his best." Selfhelp and independence were valued as virtues but help had been being given to the poor since the Poor Laws were created in Elizabethan times.

Aid given to the poor was known as "outdoor relief" as it was out of the place of work. It was easy to administer and could be applied flexibly depending on the circumstances of the family. People were, however, concerned with establishing the links between poverty and what they saw as morality, dividing the poor into the "deserving poor" who were poor through no fault of their own and the "undeserving poor" whose poverty was thought of as the result of vice or moral failure. The problem that these "undeserving poor" created was the amount of aid that could be given to them. If they were helped too much, they would see no reason to work. The poor who were working and earning their own living would also see no reason to work and may be attracted into an immoral and jobless life. These people had relied on the aid and assistance of old laws, which many people thought had no place in their new society.

The "old Poor Law" was a "ragbag" of laws that had been passed between the ends of the sixteenth and eighteenth century. It had impressed many foreigners with its success. Parishes looked after their own people and, while people still lived in hardship, they did not have to starve or sleep out in the cold, as food and shelter would be provided for them. Rates were levied on property owners and poor relief was paid to those who needed it. Those who were worse affected in the country were the agricultural workers who were subjected to bad harvests and low costing foreign grain so that the price of their grain had to be lowered. This resulted in several attempts to make the situation better.

The Speenhamland system introduced in 1795 gave allowances in accordance to the price of bread and varying with the size of each family. This system was applied to almost the entire south of the England and turned out to be a disaster, confusing the problem of wages with that of parish relief or the Poor Law. The Labour Rate was a different way of providing relief where overseers levied a parish rate to cover the relief of the able bodied poor and set a wage for the unemployed labourer. Ratepayers chose to employ these labourers at the set wage or pay the parish rate. By 1832 it is estimated that one in five parishes was operating some sort of Labour Rate.

Distress, however, grew because of the high level of unemployment and bad quality of life and this led to what has become known as "the last labourers' revolt" or the "Swing Riots" in which machinery and property was damaged, and although the government took firm action to repress any further action of revolt it was clear that something had to be done. During this time many notable thinkers and writers emerged, all with ideas of their own about how to sort out the situation. One such thinker was Thomas Malthus who believed that populations had an inbuilt tendency to outstrip all available food supplies. The Poor Laws

only made this situation worse by encouraging larger families who would ask for more relief, so proposed that the laws be abolished completely. Another political economist who reached the same conclusion as Malthus was David Ricardo proposed a “wages fund” where the more money being paid out for wages the less there was for relief so families would remain smaller, and more importantly, the abolition of the Poor Law.

Not all thinkers were against the Poor Law. Tom Paine criticised the laws because of the inadequacy and suggested a property tax on the very rich to be used for a variety of support systems for the poor. His problems lay with the able-bodied poor who he intended to put in workhouses before they could obtain relief. Robert Owen was another theorist who blamed the capitalist system for creating poverty. He proposed that if workers were put in cooperative communities everyone would share in the profits so that the harder they worked the more they would make and would have no need for poor relief. Probably the most influential of all of the theorists was Jeremy Bentham who developed the idea of Utilitarianism. He believed that the most happiness could be achieved for the people if wages and prices found their true level in a free market and all state institutions, like the Poor Law, were centrally controlled to agree standards. Although the views of each of the individuals were different, it showed clearly one thing; the situation in the country concerning the poor was unacceptable and one of the reasons for this was the ineffective Poor Law. Something would have to be done and the research into what problems there were lay in the hands of one of Bentham’s most avid disciples, Edmund Chadwick.

In 1831 the new Whig government set up a Commission of Enquiry into the Operation of the Poor Laws spurred by the increasing cost of poor relief and the fear that the systems in place, such as the Speenhamland system, were encouraging larger families. The Commission of Enquiry consisted of nine commissioners the most influential of which were Chadwick and Nassau Senior, who deeply disapproved of the allowance system. Nassau Senior had written the main section of the report before all the evidence was submitted so the report was unlikely to be impartial. The evidence collected was simply used to back up any conclusions the commissioners had already made. 3000 parishes had, however, been asked and although biased the survey was the first of its kind and pointed out the problems of the old Poor Law, as the maintenance of the status quo was not an option.

The report provided the basis of the Poor Law Amendment Act. Its terms were few but radical and designed to save money and improve efficiency. The principles on which the commissioners were to act were that there was to be no “outdoor relief” except for the old and sick. Instead the relief for the poor was to be provided in the workhouse. The conditions were to be “less-eligible” than those of the lowest paid worker outside so that only if someone was truly desperate would they chose to go to the workhouse. Parishes were to be grouped into unions, each of which was to maintain, and if necessary build a workhouse. These workhouses were to be managed locally by a Board of Guardians, elected by the ratepayers. To supervise this whole scheme a central body of three commissions and a secretary was to be set up in Somerset House.

The commissioners were Thomas Frankland Lewis, George Nicholls and John Shaw Lefevre. Chadwick was made secretary. They had very wide powers but the main aim was to stop the enormous expenditure from the Poor Rate and to make clear that men should look after themselves for aid, thus enforcing their own beliefs of “Laissez-faire”. They wanted to make it clear that “the situation of the person receiving relief should not, on the whole be made really or apparently so eligible as the situation of the labourer of the lowest classes”. The main focus, therefore, of the Act was the able-bodied poor who would make it impossible for them to survive without work, therefore reduce the cost of poor relief. It proved impossible, however, to implement these ideas rigorously.

The first task of the assistant commissioners was to establish unions of parishes so the each union could set up its own workhouse. One of the first problems that came about was that many parishes had established themselves as unions under the Gilbert’s Act of 1782. Administrators of the old relief systems were outraged at the interference of a central government because it felt the old system worked well. The commissioners had no way to implement their laws on unions and so 20 of the 50 most populous unions were dispensing

poor relief in accordance with the older acts. Also once parishes had been convinced to join together many simply refused to build a workhouse or make amendments to theirs. By 1840, however, given the limitations of time, the commissioners managed to incorporate 14,000 parishes, about 12 million people, into the new poor Law unions.

Conditions inside the workhouses varied from place to place. Given that one of the aims of the Poor Law Amendment Act was to discourage people applying for relief, none of the workhouses would be an ideal place to work and live, but in some workhouses the conditions were better than the conditions of the lowest paid worker. One example of a workhouse set up under the Poor Law Amendment Act was Stow Union in Suffolk, which was formed in 1835. The cost of poor relief was one of the highest in the country and a large workhouse had been amended to comply with the rules and regulations of the new laws. The workhouse was made to be very selfsupporting, with cows, pigs, a mill house and bakery. The workhouse also had refractory wards where the occupants were placed if they misbehaved. These would have added to the grim way of life in the workhouse.

Paupers would be categorised theoretically into seven groups, separating wife and husband, mother and child and the able bodied with the infirm. Grouping was often too elaborate for many workhouses. This was done for “moral” reasons but it was this and the workhouse dress that were the two things that the poor hated most. They also had to lead a very monotonous life, diets being practically the same every day, and jobs such as bone crushing and oakum picking meant that work was hard but very dull. In this aspect the workhouses were successful as they enforced the promise of less-eligibility. Although the diets were probably better than that of the worse paid independent labourer, throughout the country the poor hated the new legislation and bitterly resented its workings, especially inside the workhouse.

Stow Union approved of the new law as with no “outdoor-relief” the Board of Guardians would pay fewer rates, which showed that it was a success. A local resident of one of the first workhouses opened recorded how “one opening the workhouse notice was given to the poor that the weekly pension was to cease and that such as were not able to maintain themselves.... might apply to the governors of the workhouse.” He later went on to show the dramatic decrease of people applying for relief, a sign that the Act worked in reducing the number of unemployed and lowering the overall cost of poor relief. The workhouses eventually softened their regime to meet the new needs of the people but they were, for the poor a constant reminder to find work, and therefore succeeded in their aim.

In the north of England, however, it was a different matter. Chadwick urged that the instillation of the act be as soon as possible but he was simply ignored by the commissioners. It was not until 1837 that they began to focus on the north but by that time many had adapted their relief provisions to meet the cyclonic depressions of their industries. Owners of factories and Guardians resented the interference of the commissioners who had little knowledge of how they managed to keep industry going, having based the act on a survey of the South. There were many riots as associations were created against the Poor Law but these soon fell apart as workers and owners looked to Chartism to solve their problems, hoping that the government would see how ineffective the laws were and change them. This would only come in 1847.

“Outdoor-relief” was one of the things Chadwick had wanted to abolish, for able bodied persons, with the Poor Laws. In this task he failed. He and the other commissioners argued over how strictly this law was to be applied. The commissioners wanted to go slower and this resulted in the fact that all over the country “outdoor-relief” was given to help the poor, able-bodied and infirm, with the Board of Guardians using their own common sense on how strict they could be. In Stow Union, for example, although “outdoor-relief” was heavily reduced, more was being spent on it than on the workhouse itself. By 1845, though relief in kind was given out and those who received this food were generally old or unable to work. From 1832 to 1837 the cost of poor relief fell from £7,036,968 to £4,044,741.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 was made by men who did not really understand the causes of poverty. They singled out the allowance system as the main cause, and the Act dealt with it quite effectively, but this system did not apply to the north of the

country where industry was seasonal and at a given moment many people could be out of employment only for the industry to work again. The Act was one of the main causes of Chartism and opposition to it resulted in violent clashes.

In 1847 The Commissioners were replaced. The Andover scandal had revealed the worst abuses of the workhouse system and the apparent lack of willingness of the Commission to do anything about it and there were also appearing visible tension between the Commissioners and Chadwick the Secretary. Parliament decided to intervene once it saw that the Commissioners had served their purpose and replaced them with the Poor Law Board, intending to rid the administration of the Poor Law arrogance but also to link it with the government, creating a president and two secretaries, with the president as an MP, to be responsive to public opinion. This Board did have clear links with the Poor Law Amendment Act, the essentials of which lasted long into the twentieth century.

The aims of those responsible for the Act had been partially reached. In the majority of the country parishes had been joined to form unions and these had built workhouses to employ, house and feed the poor. They specifically were made to be "less-eligible" so that only those in desperate need of a job would be employed, and the others would find themselves jobs or be faced with starvation as all "outdoor relief" was to be abolished, except for the infirm or elderly. To an extent this worked. The cost of poor relief went down considerably but the overall cost was still more than that of the workhouses. Boards of Guardians gave out relief on its own judgement, and there was little the Commissioners could do about this, given their limited powers. Also the Poor Laws had little place in the very industrial North, whose system of employment would be destroyed with the implementation of the laws. It is to this extent that the aims of those responsible for the Poor Laws were achieved by 1847.