

Why did the Liberal Government place such emphasis on attacking the problem of poverty in the years between 1906-1911?

The Liberal government came into power in 1906 after 10 years of Conservative rule. The Conservative Government, lead by Balfour, was dominated by the upper class and they held a large majority of upper class votes across Britain. Not until very late in to the Conservative's rule did they try to do much for poverty in Britain. Chamberlain's Tariff Reform programme was set on improving the national economy which would have directly improved the life style of the working class if it had worked. Balfour was extremely indecisive about this issue and the only work done was by the Royal Commission. The lack of work and support by the Conservatives left the working class in a state of abject poverty and it was the Liberals' job to conquer this problem before it got out of hand.

There were several different pressures that drove the Liberals into attacking the problem of poverty and one of them was the pressure from other parties and groups. Socialist ideas began to gain popularity during the late 1890s and early 1900s owing to thinkers like Karl Marx and his philosophy of the state. New Liberalism was, in part, a response to the new political climate and socialism. Socialism was concerned with the people's quality of life and the need for a more just and equitable society. During periods of suffering, such as Britain's Great Depression, people generally looked to the extremes for help and at the time Socialism could have been their answer if the government had not controlled poverty. "Socialism seeks to pull down wealth: Liberalism seeks to raise poverty." Churchill said this in response to socialist ideas and it indicates that the Liberals felt it was necessary to clarify the difference and to emphasis their work on poverty to gain support. Socialism's presence heightened the awareness of social problems but there was not only a threat from the socialists, but also from Labour. By the early 1900s Labour was vastly increasing in strength and their main ideas were to help decrease the amount of poverty and fight for the working class. On principle, the Labour Party represented the working class far better than the Liberals did, but the upper classes voted mainly for the conservatives and the Liberals did not have a major dominance by one social group. Owing to the Labour weakness at the time, the Liberals attacked the problem of poverty to gain the working man's vote. Many of the House members on the progressive wing of the Liberal party, who held advanced opinions on social issues, were aware of the need to prevent the Labour contingent from running them down, and the only way to stop this was to attack poverty and satisfy the working class's needs.

Until the beginning of the 20th Century the House of Commons largely consisted of the middle and upper classes. At the turn of the century more and more working class people became involved in politics. The main reason for this was the introduction of payment for MPs. Before 1911 MP s were not paid which made it hard for the working class members to support their families as well. With the increase in working class males in parliament, publicity of their concerns was enhanced, making it easier for the Liberals to attack the problems as they knew the specific issues.

It was not only the Government that changed in 1906, but also the identity of the Liberal Party. With a new batch of Liberal MP's developing, like Churchill and Lloyd-George, came new ideas and New Liberalism. The change of attitude by the Liberals came from the idea of National Efficiency. The discussion over national efficiency presented new ideas from the Liberals. At the heart of new Liberalism was their new attitude towards the state. Whereas

Gladstonian Liberalism was in favour of non-intervention and self-help, New Liberalism believed that state intervention could actually improve people's lives by providing them with the liberties self-help failed to deliver.

Much discussion over National Efficiency arose during the period 1906-11. There was concern about poverty in Britain and anxiety that Britain was in decline as a world power lead to the idea that Britain had to improve its "efficiency" by taking steps to improve the quality of the work force. For Britain to maintain its position as a world power, it had to be run efficiently. In countries such as Germany efficiency was excellent and this enabled them to develop faster as a country. There were several main points that lead to the debate over National Efficiency. Firstly, during the late 1890s and early 1900s two major surveys showed horrific results. Rowntree and Booth both did different surveys in different areas and both concluded that the standards of living of the working class were unacceptable. Rowntree began to investigate the working class population of York. He found two thirds of the population of York were working class and that 20,302 people were living in poverty. Rowntree's figures were close to those arrived at by Charles Booth, who discovered that just over 30 % of the people living in East London in 1900 lived below his poverty line. Secondly, Britain was not so dominant as it used to be and by 1900 it was a long way off Germany and America. Germany was Britain's immediate threat as it was closer and enjoyed building weapons and arms. Between 1900 and 1914 there was a massive amount of tension in Europe owing to the arms race, secret alliances and the troubles in the Balkans and Morocco. Europe was on the brink of war and Britain was lacking in strong and efficient troops. During the Boer War one third of the working class volunteers were turned away from their medical for ill health and the fact they were not physically able to participate in a war. To defeat countries like Germany, British troops needed to be fit and healthy, but the army was having problems recruiting infantry soldiers, of which the majority would have been working class, because of poor health. For Britain to stand on its own in a war the Liberals needed to improve the health and living conditions of males so they could perform the tasks expected of them, in the work place and on the battle field. These points suggest that action would have to have been taken by the government if such people were to make a positive contribution.

The debate over National Efficiency made a huge impact on Liberal thinking and ideas both before the 1906 general election, and particularly after it. Many of these ideas and facts drawn out of surveys sparked the new developments of the Liberal regime which directly attacked the problem of poverty between 1906 and 1911.

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