

The Labour Reforms 1945-51 - How successful were the Labour party reforms of 1945

- 51?

Background (for intro)

- Throughout World War II, the country was run by a government formed from a coalition of Labour, Conservative and Liberal politicians.
- During the war, the government became much more involved in people's lives.
- As part of the war effort, the government organised the rationing of food, clothing and fuel and gave extra milk and meals to expectant mothers and children.
- Most people welcomed this government intervention and wanted it to go further. The government was seen to be taking an active interest in providing for the welfare of the people
- The Beveridge Report was a report published in 1942 by William Beveridge
- The findings have been credited with providing the guidelines for the reforms the new Labour government introduced when elected in 1945
- His findings;
- The main problems in existence in Britain were **WANT, IGNORANCE, SQUALOR, DISEASE & IDLENESS**
- He suggested that the government addressed these 'five giants' or problems in order to meet the needs of the British people
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Want Knowledge:

- Poverty was seen as the key social problem which affected all others.
- In 1946 the **National Insurance Act** was passed which covered the individual for sickness, unemployment, old age pension, widows' pension, orphans' pension, maternity and death grants (compulsory comprehensive insurance against most eventualities)
- It provided sickness benefit (for as long as you were sick) and unemployment benefit (for 6 months), retirement pension and widow and maternity benefit.
- **Family Allowances Act (1945)** – 5 shillings per week for each child after the first.

Analysis

- It was said that social provision was made for citizens from the 'cradle to the grave', catering for their needs from their time of birth to their death (**success**)
- However, the scheme was criticised for the large number of officials needed to operate it and others argued that the Act did not go far enough as the National Insurance benefit was restricted to those citizens who had made 156 weekly contributions. (**limitation**)
- Weekly contributions took up 5% of average earnings & the pensions were not enough to live on (**limitation**)

Example:

Knowledge (K) = Name, date and description of a reform (law)

Analysis (A) = Giving one success OR limitation of the reform

Analysis + (A+) = combining a success with a limitation e.g.

“On the one hand it was said that social provision was made for citizens from the 'cradle to the grave', catering for their needs from their time of birth to their death. However on the other hand weekly contributions took up 5% of average earnings & the pensions were not enough to live on.”

Knowledge point:

- In the same year the **Industrial Injuries Act** was passed.
- The act made insurance against industrial injury compulsory for all employees. Under the terms of the act, industrial injury benefits were to be paid at a higher rate than for ordinary sickness.

Analysis

- The act made insurance against industrial injury compulsory for all employees. (**success**)

- Under the terms of the act, industrial injury benefits were to be paid by the government not the employer so they would be guaranteed payment **(success)**

Knowledge point:

- In 1948 the **National Assistance Act** was passed which provided benefits for those not covered by the National Insurance Act.
- National Assistance Boards were set up to help citizens whose resources were insufficient to meet their needs (i.e. old people, very sick people)

Analysis

- The National Assistance Act helped people who were not in work or those who had not paid enough contributions into the new National Insurance Scheme. The scheme was to provide a 'safety net' to ensure that nobody fell into poverty **(success)**
- The measures did give the elderly an income which allowed them to live with some degree of dignity **(success)**
- The assistance was means tested. This meant the assistance received depended on the amount of money or valuable belongings a family or individual possessed. **(limitation)**

So did the Labour reforms meet the needs of the people in terms of 'Want'?

On the one hand, The Labour government improved on existing reforms and put laws in place which did extend help to people 'from the cradle to the grave' and the reforms did help some people who would otherwise be in poverty

On the other hand, the 'means testing' of national assistance meant many elderly were reluctant to apply for it and the insurance benefits were still too low to live on (about 19% of normal wage)

Verdict: to an extent

Squalor (poor housing)

- **Knowledge point:**
- Most of Britain still had slum areas and overcrowding was a serious problem made worse by bomb damage during the war.
- To deal with the problem of squalor the government concentrated on the building of decent homes for the working class after the war.
- The government aimed at building 200,000 houses a year and many of these were prefabricated houses (prefabs) which were assembled quickly onsite.

The New Towns Act passed in 1946 laid the plans for 14 new towns in Britain to reduce overcrowding, including Glenrothes and East Kilbride in Scotland

Analysis

- Around 700,000 council houses were built between 1945 and 1951 to provide good quality family accommodation which was a big improvement for most at a reasonable rent (1/3 of private sector) **(success)**
- Poor housing, long waiting lists and homelessness were still serious problems at the end of the Labour administration in 1951 **(limitation)**
- The 1951 census revealed that there were 750,000 fewer houses than households in Britain and this was approximately the same level of homelessness as in 1931 so there was little improvement in terms of homelessness **(limitation)**

So did the Labour reforms meet the needs of the people in terms of 'Squalor'?

On the one hand, In housing, the Labour Government's record is far from praiseworthy, not comparing well with either pre-war levels or with the record of the Conservatives in the 1950s

On the other hand, However, given the severe social and economic problems (i.e. postwar baby boom) facing the government in 1945 after the end of WWII perhaps the government deserves less condemnation in this respect. **Verdict: largely unsuccessful**

Disease

- **Knowledge point:**
- In 1948 the National Health Service (NHS) Act was passed and for the first time every British citizen could receive medical, dental and optical services free of charge. **(universal, comprehensive, free at the point of use)**
- Treatment by GPs and in hospitals was free also. These benefits were free at point of use, no patient being asked to pay for any treatment on the spot

Analysis

- The NHS has to be considered the greatest single achievement in the development of the welfare state as it meant that healthcare was no longer based on your ability to pay **(achievement)**
- The NHS faced a backlog of untreated problems, with doctors, dentists and opticians being inundated with patients queuing up for treatment that they had previously been unable to afford. Prescriptions rose from 7 million per month before the NHS to 13.5 million per month in September 1948. **(limitation)**
- The enormous expense of the NHS came as a severe shock to the government and by 1950 the NHS was costing £358 million per year. The Labour Government, consequently, had to backtrack on its principle of a free service by introducing charges for spectacles and dental treatment. **(limitation)**
- Further, the government was constrained in what it could realistically afford by the economy's performance and plans for new hospitals and health centres had to be shelved. **(limitation)**

So did the Labour reforms meet the needs of the people in terms of 'Disease'?

The NHS was a wonderful achievement of the Labour government, the 'jewel in the crown' of the welfare state. It meant your social status no longer dictated your access to healthcare.

However, the government reneged on their founding principle of the NHS being free at the point of use, lack of investment meant ageing Victorian hospitals affected the provision of healthcare, most doctors (90%) opposed the scheme and the cost was too high to maintain

Verdict: largely successful

Education

- **Knowledge point:**
- In 1944 the war time Coalition government passed the Education act. The act was actually proposed by the Conservatives, but after the 1945 general election, it was the Labour government that implemented its measures.
- The Butler Act made secondary education compulsory until the age of 15 years and provided meals, milk and medical services at every school.
- An examination at age 11 years (called the '11+') placed children in certain types of school, according to their ability. Those who got the best marks in this exam went to senior secondary (grammar schools in England) and were expected to 'stay on' after 15 years and possibly go to university and get jobs in management.

Children who failed the exam went to a 'junior secondary' or 'technical school' and were not expected to stay at school after 15 years and they were expected to get unskilled types of employment

Analysis

- With education, the government had introduced the '11+' examination as a selection procedure for the limited number of places at senior secondary and grammar schools. This policy was popularly seen to be socially divisive and highly contentious/ controversial **(limitation)**
- **'for every selection there was a rejection' – B Walsh (primary source)**

- Critics said that little had been done to enhance the opportunities for working class children, most of whom left school at 15 years after 1947 with few if any paper qualifications. **(limitation)**
- Furthermore, the building of new schools concentrated on the primary sector to cope with the baby boom; the secondary sector was largely neglected. **(limitation)**

So did the Labour reforms meet the needs of the people in terms of 'Ignorance'?

- Compared to the equality of opportunity and provision being enacted in the fields of social security and health, the Labour Government did little for the educational welfare of the working class. Most education reform was developed by the wartime Conservative led coalition, not the Labour party
- However, the school leaving age did rise to 15 and for those who passed the 11+ and attended grammar schools they largely received a good education with the best teachers so middle class benefitted most

Verdict: largely unsuccessful

Idleness

- **Knowledge point:**
- After the war, there seemed to be work for everyone as Britain rebuilt itself. The Labour Government succeeded in its commitment to maintain high levels of employment after the war.
- By 1946, unemployment was reduced to 2.5 % and this was in spite of huge post-war problems such as shortages of raw materials and massive war debts.
- One way in which the government kept almost full employment was through nationalisation.
- Following the principles of economist John Maynard Keynes, the government took control of certain industries such as iron and steel manufacture. Under this managed economy the government could use tax money to keep an industry afloat even if it faced economic difficulties.

Analysis

- Unprofitable industries were subsidised in order to keep people in work, keeping unemployment low and showing the government's commitment to keeping & creating jobs **(success)**
- Despite this, nationalisation did little to improve working efficiency in these industries. Supported by taxation money, these industries had little incentive to be profitable. As such, wages and working conditions remained generally unimproved.**(limitation)**

So did the Labour reforms meet the needs of the people in terms of 'Idleness'?

- The Labour government kept their promise of ensuring employment rates were low and put employment as a priority over the economy, supporting unprofitable industries.
- However, nationalisation affected the British post-war economy badly, the British government was reliant on American Marshall Aid, working conditions did not improve, wages remained low and later conservative governments also managed to keep unemployment low.

Verdict: successful to an extent