

The Liberal Reforms 1906-1914

Why did the Liberals introduce Social reform 1906-1914?

Ever since the Liberal's implemented social reform 1906-1914, historians have been divided as to why such reform occurred. However, there are some key reasons why the Liberal's implemented reform:

Reason 1: Social investigations of Booth and Rowntree

At the end of the nineteenth century middle class social explorers such as Charles Booth and the Quaker social reformer Seebohm Rowntree highlighted unprecedented levels of poverty in different parts of England. From Booth's investigation of the social conditions of East London he published *The Life and Labour of the People of London*, which appeared 1889 - 1903. He found that 30% of East London were living below what Booth called a 'poverty line' which meant that the family income was insignificant to meet basic needs such as food, rent and clothing. These findings were amplified by Rowntree's study of conditions in York which found that 28% of York were living in some degree of poverty, either what he called 'primary' poverty when a family income fell below the 21 shillings required to maintain physical efficiency, or 'secondary' poverty, where spending took the residual income below the poverty line. The importance of the findings by Booth and Rowntree as a motive for social reform was that it highlighted the fact that poverty was not due to personal inadequacies, but attributed to low levels of wages, the uncertainty or irregularity of employment, and from the ravages of sickness, infirmity and old age.¹

One of the most famous investigations into poverty was carried out by **Charles Booth**. He conducted extensive research in London and presented his findings as hard, statistical facts - not opinions. He showed that poverty had causes often beyond the control of the poor themselves. These causes included low pay, unemployment, sickness and old age.

Another investigation into poverty in York was made by **Seebohm Rowntree** and was even more shocking. The Rowntree report showed that 28% of the York population lived in extreme poverty and people realised that if York, a relatively small English city, had such problems then so would other British cities and that the problem of poverty was therefore a national problem.

¹ D. Powell, *The Edwardian Crisis, Britain, 1901 - 1914* (London, 1996) page 13

Reason 2: The Boer War and National Efficiency

The greatest motive for reform was the poor physical condition of recruits for the Boer War that brought the scale of poverty unearthed by Booth and Rowntree to the surface, and showed the inadequacies of a non-interventionist state. Conflict in the Boer War at the end of the nineteenth century sent warnings that Britain's imperial supremacy could be in danger of disintegrating due to the physical inadequacies of a large number of recruits who were deemed unfit for service. In Manchester 8, 000 out of 11,000 would-be volunteers were turned away.² However, even in conflict it appeared that Britain had lost its military supremacy as the supposedly mighty Imperial power, had some difficulty in defeating a relatively small number of Boer farmers. The lack of military efficiency on the battlefield and the physical inadequacies of the male populace led to the term 'national efficiency' becoming part of the political language of Edwardian Britain. The mishaps of the Boer War brought great concerns for the security of Britain against her European neighbors especially an increasingly militaristic Germany who were after their own 'place in the sun.' (Lands abroad)

Without the Boer War unearthing the horrors of poverty that an industrialised non - interventionist state had created, it would have been highly unlikely that reform would have played such a major role in Liberal politics between 1906 - 1914.

When the Boer War started in 1899 volunteers rushed to join up but almost 25% of them were rejected on the grounds that they were not fit enough. If men of military age were so unfit for service, the government worried about Britain's future ability to defend itself against a stronger enemy.

Reason 3: Britain's place in the World and the threat of Germany

With the mishaps of the Boer War and a decline in the British economy and industry (taken over by Germany and America) it was clear that Britain was weak compared to its European neighbor Germany. Therefore, questions had to be raised to why Germany had overtaken Britain economically, industrially and militarily? It became obvious that the Germans were more prosperous due to their commitment to 'national efficiency.' Britain for all her 'personal liberty', boasted of nothing that could rival Germany's model army, Bismarkian network of social insurance, or the highly organised educational system. The reference to 'Bismarkian' was to the compulsory sickness and

² G.R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency* (London, 1990) page 60

accident insurance and old age pensions introduced by the German Chancellor Bismarck, in the 1880's.³

The importance of the German model as a motive for reform was that Germany's industrial, economic and military dominance, provided politicians in Britain with evidence that state intervention had great benefits in formulating an efficient nation. Without the pure detest and resentment from British statesmen that they were being overshadowed by Germany industrially, economically and militarily by 1906 and the clear evidence from the German model to the benefits of adopting Bismarkian social policy, then reform would probably would not have been so rapid.

By the end of the nineteenth, Britain was no longer the world's strongest industrial nation and was facing serious competition from new industrial nations such as Germany. It was believed that if the health and educational standards of Britain's workers got worse then Britain's position as a strong industrial power would be further threatened. In Germany a system of welfare benefits and old age pensions had already been set up in the 1880s. If a main competitor could afford to do it why could Britain not do likewise? Therefore, the need to secure Britain's imperial position, to re-establish a physically fit army for any future conflict and the need to produce young healthy children to breed national efficiency for future generations were strong motives for the uncharacteristic burst of activity by the Liberal Government of 1906 - 1914.

1. Why did it become clear that Britain was weak compared to her European neighbors?
2. Why were the Germans more prosperous?
3. What was 'Bismarkian' social policy?
4. In what three ways did Germany overshadow Britain?
5. What was the importance of German social reform as a motive for British politicians?
6. What according to the last paragraph were reasons for British social reform?

Reason 4: Threat of the Labour Party

Although the Labour Party was numerically insignificant in the context of Liberal euphoria in 1906, it did give cause for concern as the growth of Labour showed that the workingman felt that they needed special sectional representation within the political system. The 1906 election provided the Liberals with the chance to show that there was a party of concern and

³ G.C. Peden, *British Economic and Social Policy*, (Hertfordshire, 1991) page 21

conscience which could legislate in the interest of the poor and that there was no need for a party designated to this one sole interest in society.⁴ The threat of Labour as a motive for reform in the early period of Government is unimportant. However, the growing threat of Labour began to be felt from 1909 onwards due to high unemployment caused by Britain entering a recession.

This led to great discontent among the masses, which is clear from the bad run of by-election results in 1907 and 1908, with Conservatives and Labour winning seats. A threat was therefore obvious to those politically astute politicians such as Lloyd George. It is therefore no coincidence with growing discontent due to unemployment from the working class and the gain of seats in by-elections by Labour that the most revolutionary Liberal reforms occurred before the 1910 election and after. The most important pre-election legislation was Winston Churchill's Labour Exchange Act, and Lloyd George's famous, 'Peoples Budget' of 1909 which taxed the rich for the poor. Many historians believe that the Liberal Reforms were passed for very selfish reasons. Since 1884 most working class men had the vote and the Liberals wanted to attract those votes. But by 1906 a new party-the Labour Party-was competing for the same votes. If the Liberals were seen as unsympathetic to the poor, what might happen at elections in the future? It was therefore to the political advantage of the Liberal government to offer social reform, even if they did not fully believe in the principle of government intervention.

Many historians see the Liberal social reforms as a response to the growth of socialism at the start of the twentieth century. In 1906 the Labour Party was founded to represent the working class in Parliament. The Labour Party was committed to a programme of social reforms such as old age pensions. Twenty-nine Labour MP's were elected to Parliament in 1906. Many Liberals felt that Labour had the potential to replace them as the main alternative to the Conservatives. A Liberal programme of social reform could out-trump Labour and stop the working class defecting to them. There was also a deep concern that a more radical brand of socialism, committed to the destruction of the capitalist system, might arise if action was not taken to improve conditions for the working class.

By 1900 most working men had the vote. Workers now had some al power. They would obviously vote for the party which promised to improve their conditions. The Labour Movement was calling for old age pensions and for action against unemployment.

⁴ D. Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State* (Hampshire, 2003) page 161

The Liberals therefore had to keep an eye on the Labour threat and so deal with social questions. Many Liberals regarded social reforms as an antidote to socialism. So the fear of socialism did play an important part in causing the Liberal reforms. One of the reasons Lloyd George and Winston Churchill pushed for limited state intervention was to draw support away from the Labour Party.

between 1906 and 1914 the Liberals launched into one of the biggest programmes of social reform ever. The question you must be prepared to answer is why the Liberals carried out so many reforms. You should be able to identify the most important reasons and explain them.

Overall, the Liberals saw social reform as a way of heading off socialism. They hoped that a system that gave people a degree of social and economic independence would be an insurance against the spread of socialism.

1. Why did the growth of Labour give cause for concern in 1906?
2. Why did Labour become a growing threat after 1909?
3. What prompted the Liberal's burst of reform before the 1910 election?
4. What were the two most important pre election legislations?
5. What did the Liberals hope a degree of social and economic independence would stop?

Reason 5: New Liberalism

Therefore with opinion swaying towards state intervention and the emergence of the Labour party who were seen as the party of the working class, a change in the direction and ideology of Liberal Policy had to be implemented. Thankfully however, there was a change in direction in Liberal thinking at the beginning of the twentieth century producing a group of charismatic men who fell under the term '**New Liberalism**'.

It would be far too harsh to argue that the Liberals passed social reforms just to win votes. A new generation of Liberal politicians genuinely believed that the government had a responsibility to help the poor. The "old Liberal" Prime Minister Campbell Bannerman died and was replaced by Asquith in 1908. New Liberals with new "interventionist" ideas such as David Lloyd-George were given important government jobs. These appointments are the main reasons why so many reforms happened from 1908 onwards.

This left wing '**New Liberal**' group broke away from traditional Gladstonian ideology and included some of the most important politicians in twentieth century history such as, Asquith, Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. These men had a great awareness of the social problems and the obvious

failures of the Poor Law and philanthropy.⁵ They had personal desires to help those in poverty and to remove the stigma attached to the 1834 Poor Law as this law only offered a solution to destitution, not to poverty. The personal motives of a group of politicians to relieve poverty cannot be disregarded in explaining the burst of reform from the Liberals 1906 - 1914. Without a change in thinking, reform would not have played such a major role in Liberal Policy, as the old doctrine of self-help would still have been the bedrock for Social Policy. However, the emergence of politicians who realised the inadequacies of a non-interventionist state and the problems that poverty brought to society meant that these men with their position and personal motives to relieve poverty, could make a difference in the direction of Government Social Policy. Without the emergence of such an intellectual revolution in Britain it would have been very unlikely that Britain by the outbreak of World War 1 in 1914 would have had social policy implemented that helped create a more efficient nation for the onslaught of war. **Ideology:** political belief

1. Why did the Liberal party change their ideology?
2. What did new Liberals break away from?
3. What important men were involved in this group? What did they have a great awareness of?
4. What desire did these men have?
5. What would not have happened with out a change of thinking?
6. What did these New Liberals realize?
7. What was important about this intellectual revolution?

In conclusion it is clear from the information gathered that reform in Edwardian Britain was not as the outcome of one event. There were many motives that brought social reform to the top of Liberal policy between 1906-1914 such as the findings of Booth and Rowntree, the decline of British industry and economy, the mishaps of the Boer War, the rise of Germany, the threat of Labour especially from 1909, and the development of "New Liberalism. These motives contributed to the formation of social policy in Britain, It was the culmination of these most important motives that led to the last Liberal Government being the developers of social reform implementing policies that are still relevant in the welfare state to this day. century

⁵ K. Laybourn, *The Evolution of British Social Policy and The Welfare State* (Staffordshire, 1995) page 162

Reasons for the Liberal Reforms.

1. Explain how the investigations of Booth and Rowntree helped to change attitudes to poverty.
2. Identify some of the "New Liberals" who urged their leaders to introduce reforms to improve people's lives.
3. Briefly summarize some of the arguments used by these "New Liberals". (Pay particular attention to Lloyds George and Winston Churchill).
3. Briefly explain the main ideas put forward by the Liberal thinkers like T.H. Green and J.A. Hobson. pp92
4. How did socialist and labour societies believe that the problem of poverty should be tackled? pp90-1
5. What evidence can you find to support the view that "the Liberal social reforms were partly motivated by a fear of Labour"? (Socialism) p 92
6. Explain how fear for Britain's place in the world caused the Liberals to introduce their programme of social reform. P93 (This is often referred to as the "National Efficiency" argument).
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