British History 2 Essay, Research Paper

How effectively did the Liberal government meet the needs of the British people?

The Liberal government implemented a number of reforms some of which were helpful to the public and some of which were not. The Liberal welfare reform legislation was grouped into five main categories. The first of these was the Young people, this included the Education (Provision of Meals) Act 1906, the Education (Administrative Provisions) Act 1907, and the Children Act 1908. The second group was the Old people there was only one reform in this group, however it was a very significant one, the Old Age Pensions Act 1908. The third group was the countries Sick people, again this only included one reform, the National Insurance Act Part 1 1911. The fourth category was the nations’ workers, this included the Workmen s Compensation Act 1906, the Coal Mines Act 1908, the Trade Boards Act 1909, and the Shops Act 1911. The fifth and final category was the counties vast Unemployed faction, this included the Labour Exchanges Act 1909 and the National Insurance Act Part 11 1911. The reforms were not accomplished over night, they introduced the reforms over a relatively long period of time.

The Liberals introduced several reforms for children s health, they initiated school meals (one per day), medical inspections, and the children s charter. Since education became compulsory the teachers began to notice that lots of children were coming to school hungry, dirty or ill. Therefore in 1906 the government introduced legislation that compelled local government to provide free or subsidised school meals for all poor children. Most of the credit for this new law is accredited to two reports which were published in the wake of the Boer War: The Royal Commission on Physical Training in Scotland (1903) and the Report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration. The introduction of these meals was not the be-all and end-all, by 1912 over half the local authorities had still not set up a school meals service. This reform was important for two main reasons. Firstly because it was the first step away from schooling and into the concept that welfare benefits could be granted to the poor without them having the debt or disabilities associated with the poor law. Secondly it was a step towards recognition that parents were not wholly responsible for their children s undernourishment. Also that, with public support, needy children could be well cared for at home and did not need to be put into public or voluntary care.

The second Liberal reform for Young people was the introduction of school medical inspections under the Education (Administrative Provisions) Act of 1907. The Government did not want this Act to be implemented because they felt they could not afford to treat the chronic health problems which would inevitably be discovered. However, administrative pressure from Robert L. Morant, the permanent secretary of the Education Board, who was in turn influenced by Margaret Macmillan forced the government to take action. This reform was particularly helpful because the Board of Education set up a medical department, and the gloomy reports from doctors led to the introduction of school clinics from 1912. These clinics were very good at identifying defects and illnesses. On the other hand the cost of treatment was often too great for some families and their children rarely received treatment.

The final reform introduced by the Liberal Party for Young people was the Children s Act of 1908, which later became known as the children s charter. This legislation made it illegal for parents to neglect their children. There were several extensions of this which dealt with specific circumstances such as-Children under 16 were forbidden to smoke or drink and stiff penalties were brought in for shops which supplied them with alcohol of tobacco. This Act had no real significance as most of its finer points were contained in the parents morality or the two previous Acts, it only really served as a follow up to the main Acts.

The next main reform introduced by the Liberal party moved away from Young people and to the opposite end of the scale with the Old Age Pensions Act of 1908. Basically the Liberals introduced a state pension for all people over seventy who had worked all their lives and could no longer work and they complied with the conditions- which were not too strict. This Act was the culmination of over 20 years of discussion of the topic of poverty among the elderly and it came about for two main of reasons. The first and in many peoples opinion the most important was the example of the monumental German state insurance and pension scheme. The second was that leading figures such as Joseph Chamberlain and Charles Booth had taken up the cause. The government miscalculated how many people would claim the pension. They had estimated 500,000 when actually 650,000 people applied and by 1914 this had increased to nearly a million. This fact show that the pensions were badly needed and wanted by Britain s elderly community. Just how grateful people were for this pension is displayed by this quote When the Old Age Pensions began, life was transformed for such aged cottagers. They were relieved of anxiety, and when they first went to the post office to draw it tears of gratitude would flow down their faces. Therefore we can see that people really did want state help but were too proud to wear the badge of Pauperism.”

The next reform dealt with the countries sick people, this was the National Insurance Act Part 1. After Lloyd George had completed his inspection of the German social insurance scheme, he was left in no doubt that Britain needed a much more comprehensive system. He was presented with immense pressure from the opposition such as friendly societies and doctors, however he was determined to build the scheme and not be bullied into submission. As a result of the opposition he had to modify his original scheme accordingly. It was basically an extension of the pension scheme and the concept was that the richer elements for the country should pay more so the poorer elements could contend with difficulties when old or sick. This budget was passed in 1910. This had the same effect as the pension scheme though on a smaller and less consistent scale.

The next category for the Liberal reforms was the Countries workers, the Liberal government passed four Laws which are stated in introduction, they sought to improve working conditions, these included minimum wage, fewer hours, etc. These measures constituted a significant improvement for millions of workers, many of whom had no one to speak up for them.

The fifth and final category was the unemployed. Up until the turn of the century unemployment was still seen partly as a moral problem of individual idleness and partly as a seasonal problem for certain industries such as shipbuilding and construction. Few people were willing to accept that it may be out of the individual workers control as a result of the lack of wide ranged evidence. The Labour Exchanges Bill was passed in September 1909 as a result of two reports and a book advocating their establishment. The basic idea was that a Labour exchange would allow employer and employee to register their requirements at one central location and could therefore have them met. They also had detailed information of job vacancies. By 1914 there were 430 exchanges throughout Britain and 3000 people were provide work through them every day so they were pretty important in relieving Britain s unemployment problem.

The second of the reforms for the unemployed was Unemployment Insurance. This scheme was worked out be Llewellyn Smith, the permanent secretary for the Board of Trade, and it was essentially Part 11 of the National Insurance Act 1911. By 1915 2.3 million workers were insured. Admittedly this was a small proportion of the total working population, however it was accepted as the beginning of a much more comprehensive system.

Between 1906 and 1911 the Liberal Government introduced all of the above reforms, this impressive list of social reform measures adds up to a significant shift away from minimum government and Laissez Faire. Many Historians argue that the current welfare state finds its origins in the Liberal reforms. This view is justified when one considers that old age pensions, safeguards against unemployment and illness are the basis of the modern welfare state. Consequently many historians believe that the Liberal reforms were extremely limited in scope and failed to deal adequately with the considerable welfare problems of housing and they did not attempt to set up a national health service. Moreover the reforms which were introduced were very limited: Pensions too low; health insurance did not cover employee s family; and unemployment insurance only applied to seven trades. Obviously the effectiveness of the Liberal welfare reforms is debatable. By the standards of the time they were accepted as fundamental actions for social reform-some more so than others. On the other hand, looking back with our frame of reference (modern welfare Britain), the Liberal reforms appear to be severely inadequate. However, it is important to remember that both Lloyd George and Winston Churchill saw their reforms as only the first step.