

The Liberal reforms 1906-1914

One government that is often seen as an example of 'reforming' by introducing positive changes that really improve peoples' lives is the Liberal government in Britain of 1906-1914. Many historians label this period the beginning of the welfare state, but why did the Liberal government introduce its reforms?

Important reforms - summary

Some governments in history seem to have implemented changes that have particularly improved people's lives. For instance, Roosevelt's New Deal in America or the Labour government in Britain after the First World War. The dynamism and positive achievements of these governments make them look much better than the governments that came before or after them.

A study of poverty in 1901 by Seebohm Rowntree found that in a society where those who didn't work didn't eat, there were three times in people's lives when they were especially vulnerable:

- as a young child
- when they were old
- when they were sick or unemployed

After 1906, the Liberal government, with Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer, introduced reforms to help these three groups:

Children

—In **1906** local authorities were allowed to provide **free school meals**.

—The **1908** Children and Young Persons Act introduced a set of regulations that became known as the **Children's Charter**. This imposed severe punishments for neglecting or treating children cruelly. It

was made illegal to sell cigarettes to children or send them out begging. Separate juvenile courts were set up, which sent children convicted of a crime to borstals, instead of prison.

Old age

—In 1908 **pensions** were introduced for the over 70s, which gave them 5s a week, or 7s 6d to a married couple. Old people cried as they collected their pensions, and said: 'God bless Lord George'.

Workers

—In 1909 **labour exchanges** were set up to help unemployed people find work.

—The 1911 **National Insurance Act** was passed. Part 1 of the act gave people the right to **free medical treatment**, and **sick pay** of 10s a week for 26 weeks in return for a payment of 4d a week. Part 2 of the Act gave people the right to unemployment pay (**dole**) of 7s 6d a week for 15 weeks in return for a payment of 2½d a week.

Reforms and reasons

More reforms passed during this period:

—1906 - the Trades Disputes Act ruled that unions were not liable for damages because of strikes.

—1906 - the Workers Compensation Act granted compensation for injury at work.

—1907 - school medical inspections.

—1908 - eight-hour day for miners.

—1910 - half-day a week off for shop workers.

—A Merchant Shipping Act improved conditions for sailors.

—From 1911, MPs were paid. This gave working men the opportunity to stand for election.

Why did the Liberal government introduce these reforms?

—**Seebohm Rowntree's study of York** in 1901 found that 28 per cent of the population did not have the minimum to live on at some time of their life.

—The **Boer War** - when Britain went to war in 1899, the army found that two-thirds of the men who volunteered for the army were unfit to join up.

—**Germany** - which had a good system of state welfare for workers, was passing Britain as a great industrial power.

—Strikes, especially in 1910-12, and the **growth of trade unionism** meant politicians feared that, unless standards of living improved for the workers, they might turn to Communism or rebellion.

—The **Labour Party was growing stronger** and it was attracting working-class voters because of its demands for welfare reform.

—In 1910, the **Liberal Party did not get a majority** of seats in the House of Commons, so it had a coalition with the 42 Labour Party MPs who had been elected.

—Many government politicians, especially Lloyd George, genuinely wanted to '**wage war**' on poverty.

Four Results of the Liberal reforms

1. Mixed effects on people's welfare

Measure	For	Against
Free school meals	By 1914, 150,000 children were getting one good meal a day.	Not compulsory - some councils did not provide free meals
Pensions	Kept many old people out of the workhouse.	Was refused to people who had never worked during their life.
Labour exchanges	By 1914, 1 million people were being employed through the labour exchange.	Most of these jobs were temporary or part-time; the government did not do anything to increase the number of jobs available.

Measure	For	Against
National Insurance	A vital safety net to tide people over hard times.	Poor people had to pay the contributions out of their wages; dole and sickness pay only lasted for a limited time; and 7s 6d was not enough to live on - a family of five needed £1 a week.
Free medical treatment	Literally, a life-saver.	Only for the wage-earner - it was not available to their wife or children.

2. 1909 Budget

The 1909 Budget - to pay for the reforms, Lloyd George's 1909 budget raised duties on tobacco and spirits, raised income tax by 16 per cent (from 1s to 1s 2d), and introduced a new 20 per cent tax on profits from selling land.

3. Parliament Act 1911

When the House of Lords refused to pass Lloyd George's budget, the House of Commons passed an Act stating that the House of Lords could not reject a bill that had been passed three times in the House of Commons. It also required a general election every five, not seven, years.

4. Lloyd George

Lloyd George became loved - old people cried when they got their pension and blessed 'Lord George' who gave them - and hated - workers who objected to paying national insurance chanted: 'Taffy was a Welshman, taffy was a thief' at him.

Revision tip and answer preparation

Revision tip

To help familiarise yourself with the reforms, write them out in a table under the column headings of 'Children', 'Old people' and 'Workers'. Sort the reforms into the correct columns.

Answer preparation

As part of your revision, think about the **arguments** and **facts** you would use to explain:

1. **How** effective the government's reforms were.
2. **Why** the Liberal government introduced reforms to help the young, old and unemployed.
3. **How** far the welfare state was established by 1914.
4. **How** far the government changed as a result of events between 1906 and 1919.

Now try a Test Bite

Source:

BBC GCSE Bitesize.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/history/mwh/britain/liberal_reformsrev1.shtml