

David Lloyd George: The New Liberalism (1908)

[Speech on social reform delivered at Swansea, October 1, 1908. Mr. Lloyd George was the principal speaker at the meeting of the Welsh Liberal Convention.]

[...] What is the work still waiting the Liberal party in this country? It is to establish complete religious equality in our institutions. There is no religious equality so long as men of capacity and character are debarred from competing for teacherships in 14,000 State schools because they cannot conscientiously conform to the doctrines of some dominant sect. There is no religious equality as long as one sect whose dogmas in Wales, at any rate, are repudiated by the vast majority of the people, is able to pose as the official exponent of the faith of the Welsh people, and to enjoy all the privileges, emoluments, and endowments attached to that position. I place the establishment of complete religious equality in the forefront, because it lies in the domain of conscience [...] and nothing can save a people afflicted by such institutions from the spirit of bondage but an incessant protest against them. [...]

The same observations apply to the question of civil equality. We have not yet attained to it in this country—far from it. You will not have established it in this land until the child of the poorest parent shall have the same opportunity for receiving the best education as the child of the richest. [...] It will never be established so long as you have 500 men nominated by the lottery of birth to exercise the right of thwarting the wishes of the majority of 40 millions of their countrymen in the determination of the best way of governing the country. I hope no prospect of a temporary material advantage will blind the people of this country to the permanent good for them of vindicating in the laws and institutions of the land these great principles, which lie at the root of freedom and good government for the people.

On the other hand, I think there is a danger that Liberals may imagine that their task begins and ends here. If they do so, then they will not accomplish even that task.

British Liberalism is not going to repeat the errors of Continental Liberalism. The fate of Continental Liberalism should warn them of that danger. It has been swept on one side before it had well begun its work, because it refused to adapt itself to new conditions. The Liberalism of the Continent concerned itself exclusively with mending and perfecting the machinery which was to grind corn for the people. It forgot that the people had to live whilst the process was going on, and people saw their lives pass away without anything being accomplished. But British Liberalism had been better advised. It has not abandoned the traditional ambition of the Liberal party to establish freedom and equality; but side by side with this effort it promotes measures for ameliorating the conditions of life for the multitude.

The old Liberals in this country used the natural discontent of the people with the poverty and precariousness of the means of subsistence as a motive power to win for them a better, more influential, and more honourable status in the citizenship of their native land. The new Liberalism, while pursuing this great political ideal with unflinching energy, devotes a part of its endeavour also to the removing of the immediate causes of discontent. It is true that men cannot live by bread alone. It is equally true that a man cannot live without bread. [...] It is a recognition of that elemental fact that has promoted legislation like the Old Age Pensions Act. It is but the beginning of things. [...] Poverty is the result of a man's own misconduct or misfortune. In so far as he brings it on himself, the State cannot accomplish much. It can do something, however, to protect him. In so far as poverty is due to circumstances over which the man has no control, then the State should step in to the very utmost limit of its resources, and save the man from the physical and mental torture involved in extreme penury. [...] The aged we have dealt with during the present Session. We are still confronted with the more gigantic task of dealing with the rest—the sick, the infirm, the unemployed, the widows, and the orphans. No country can lay any real claim to civilisation that allows them to starve. Starvation is a punishment that society has ceased to inflict for centuries on its worst criminals, and at its most barbarous stage humanity never

starved the children of the criminal. [...] Is it just, is it fair, is it humane to let them suffer privation? I do not think the better-off classes, whose comfort is assured, realise the sufferings of the unemployed workmen. What is poverty? Have you felt it yourselves? If not, you ought to thank God for having been spared its sufferings and its temptations. Have you ever seen others enduring it? Then pray God to forgive you, if you have not done your best to alleviate it. By poverty I mean real poverty, not the cutting down of your establishment, not the limitation of your luxuries. I mean the poverty of the man who does not know how long he can keep a roof over his head, and where he will turn to find a meal for the pinched and hungry little children who look to him for sustenance and protection. That is what unemployment means. [...]