Introduction - Liberals came to power in 1906 with a huge majority. Britain was at the peak of its powers with a huge Empire and massive wealth. However, many Britons lived in abject poverty. Between 1906 and 1914, the Liberals passed a series of reforms which sought to tackle the problem of poverty, including introducing pensions and National Insurance. There were several reasons why they did this; the Reports of Booth and Rowntree, concerns over national security and efficiency, New Liberalism, the threat of Labour and Municipal Socialism. It can be argued that it was the reports of Booth and Rowntree which provided the evidence of poverty and motivated politicians and the public to support reform **or** It can be argued that it was for political gain that the Liberals decided to pass a series of reforms.

Factor 2 = **New Liberalism**

Traditional Liberals believed in laissez-faire – the idea that individuals should look after themselves. New Liberals believed that government should help the most vulnerable in society.

K – In 1908, the Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith appointed the “New” Liberals David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill to leading positions in the Government. Both of them were strongly committed to reform, and indeed Lloyd George claimed he was “a man of the people” since he came from a working class family

A – Because Lloyd George and Churchill believed firmly in the role of government helping the poor, they were extremely important in proposing bills and pushing them through Parliament. The sheer number of Acts they passed e.g. Pensions, National Insurance, suggest that they were key to implementing reforms.

K – Churchill and Lloyd George were very popular with the public and other MPs. They were charismatic and made excellent speeches.

A – This allowed them to force through legislation in Parliament and to convince others to support their cause. However, many, indeed the majority of the Liberal Party, still supported a largely laissez-faire agenda.

Evaluation – New Liberalism was key as it changed the whole philosophy of government. However, without Booth and Rowntree, it may not have carried such support.

H – Murray - ‘New liberalism was given a powerful impetus by the revelations of Booth and Rowntree’.

H - Lloyd George - “It is….a shame to allow those who have toiled all their days to end in poverty and possible starvation.”

*“I see little glory in an Empire which can rule the waves and is unable to flush its sewers”.* Winston Churchill

Factor 1 = **Social Investigations of Booth and Rowntree**

Many believed that poverty was self-inflicted through laziness, drunkenness etc. This meant that many politicians believed that people had to help themselves.

K – Booth investigated East London. He found that 30% lived below the ‘poverty line’ – where income did not meet basic needs e.g. food and clothing. Rowntree investigated York, finding that 28% lived in poverty. He also documented primary poverty (which was unavoidable e.g. old age) and secondary which was caused by lifestyle choices (e.g. alcoholism).

A – It can be argued that the extent of poverty shocked the public and put pressure on government. The evidence was hard statistical facts –not opinions. This made it impossible to argue against.

A – Rowntree’s findings added weight to Booth’s. It was not a problem restricted to London. If York faced such profound problems, it was likely that many other towns and cities did too.

A – Rowntree and Lloyd George became close friends. Therefore he was able to influence one of the key decision makers in government.

K – Booth found that poverty impacted on people at specific times; as children, during unemployment, ill-health and old age.

A- This proved that poverty was not due to personal failings, but unavoidable circumstances e.g. sickness. It introduced the idea of the ‘deserving poor’ and convinced the government that they had a duty to tackle poverty. Evidenced by Acts such the Old Age Pension Act.

Evaluation – The reports were vital in spurring on the government to pass reforms. It backed those who opposed laissez-faire.

‘The reports set thinking Britain alight’ – Andrew Marr

Factor 4 = **Fears Over National Security and Efficiency**

Britain had dominated the 19th century. It had a huge Empire and a booming economy. However, in the 1900s Britain faced strong challenges from other powerful nations, such as the USA and Germany.

K – Britain fought a war in South Africa (Boer War -1899-1902). Volunteers rushed to join up but almost 25% of them were rejected on the grounds that they were not fit enough. In Manchester 8, 000 out of 11,000 would-be volunteers were turned away. British children were thinner and shorter than their American counterparts. It took Britain 3 years to defeat poorly equipped Boer farmers.

A – This was significant as politicians and the public worried over Britain’s ability to defend the Empire, especially as Germany was becoming more militaristic. This led to the formation of a Government committee which found that poor diet and overcrowding were causing widespread ill-health. This led directly to reforms such as the Provision of School Meals Act, showing its significance. However, the costliest reforms were pensions, which would not add to Britain’s fighting stock.

K – 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. In Germany a system of welfare benefits and old age pensions had already been set up in the 1880s.

A- Therefore, Britain was forced to act to ensure it had a healthy, fit workforce to compete industrially, and an efficient way to fill jobs. This led to the introduction of Labour exchanges, showing its direct link to policy. The example of Germany also provided proof that state intervention could improve national efficiency.

Evaluation – Concerns over Britain’s place in the world helped to prompt reforms. However, it can be argued that it was Booth and Rowntree who showed how these concerns could be addressed. H – Murray - ‘Concerns over national efficiency were reinforced by the findings of Booth and Rowntree’.

Factor 3 = **Municipal Socialism**

During the 19th century local authorities began to take an increasing role in the lives of the public.

K – Local authorities carried out improvements which were funded by local taxes. These taxes were based on how much an individual earned. This was known as Municipal Socialism.

A – The fact that local authorities were attempting to influence and improve the lives of the people put pressure on the government to do the same.

K – In Birmingham, the Liberal Mayor, Joe Chamberlain, used tax income to clear the worst slums and build better houses. He also introduced a city park system and made sure that gas and water supplies were under government control.

A- These measures were extremely popular and successful in Birmingham. This meant that influential figures began to consider that it could be adopted on a national level.

A – The success of Chamberlain’s measures also convinced the public that the government could intervene to improve their lives. However, many of the members of the Liberal Party and their voters regarded using taxation to finance social reform as deeply undesirable.

Evaluation – Municipal Socialism offered an example to the reformers. However, without the changing attitudes of the New Liberals, the example of Municipal Socialism may not have been seized.

Potential Questions

To what extent did the Liberal Government of 1906–1914 introduce social reform due to the social surveys of Booth and Rowntree?

How important were fears over national security as a reason why the Liberal Government introduced social welfare reforms, 1906–1914?

Conclusion

It can be argued that the Liberal Reforms were motivated by a desire to secure Britain’s place in the world and to prevent it from being overtaken by emerging powers.

It can also be argued that the political gain to be made by passing popular reforms inspired politicians within the Liberal party, especially when faced by an emerging Labour Party.

Some may suggest that some Liberals did have a genuine desire to help the poor and that the decline of laissez-faire paved the way for reform.

However, the key reason for the passing of reforms was the evidence of Booth and Rowntree. It provided hard-evidence of poverty, motivated politicians and offered a clear blueprint for tackling primary poverty – a blueprint which was largely followed by the Liberals.

Factor 5 = **Party Advantage and the Rise of Labour**

K – 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. 29 Labour MP’s were elected to Parliament in 1906.

A – This can be viewed as significant as the Liberal reforms were aimed at the poorest in society, most of who were in the working class.

CA- However, this factor has limitations. The 1905 election campaign did not promise to help the poor and so it can be argued that the Liberals did not pass reforms to win voters.

K - The growing threat of Labour began to be felt from 1909 onwards due to high unemployment caused by Britain entering a recession. Labour won several by-elections between 1906 and 1910.

A - A threat was therefore obvious to politicians such as Lloyd George. It is 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.

K - 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.

A – It can be argued that some Liberals saw social reform as a way of heading off socialism. By helping the poorest in society, they could prevent them from turning to more revolutionary ideas.

Evaluation – Labour did present a challenge to the Liberals and it is clear that some of the reforms were passed in order to boost the popularity of the party. H – Hay – ‘The measures adopted always had a tactical significance in the political struggle between the parties’.

*“Political historians have commonly seen the Liberals’ reforms of 1906-14 as an attempt at propping up their increasingly threatened position on the left of British politics”.* Duncan Tanner