

## GALLERY BACKGROUND

### INTRODUCTION: WHAT WERE THE LIBERALS TRYING TO ACHIEVE?

This is a really difficult question. Lots of brilliant historians in universities have argued about this for many years and they still cannot agree. The main arguments go something like this:

- Some historians believe that the Liberal reforms of 1906 onwards laid the foundations of the welfare state today. These historians believe that Lloyd George's reforms made changed attitudes. They convinced people that governments should help the poor and needy. This made it possible for later governments to bring in reforms like the National Health Service (in 1948).
- Other historians see the Liberal reforms in very different terms. They believe that the Liberals were only interested in Britain's efficiency as a country. They brought in their welfare reforms because they were afraid that a sick and badly educated workforce would leave Britain lagging behind other countries like Germany.
- Another view of the Liberal reforms is that they did not really have any plans at all. Some historians believe that the Liberals discovered a wide range of social problems once they came to power. They did not really have a clear plan on what to do so they adopted measures that seemed sensible as they went along.

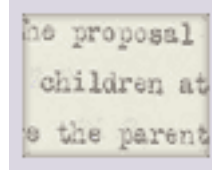
Whatever the thinking behind the reforms, there is no doubt that they were controversial and also had some important effects.

### CRITICS OF THE LIBERAL REFORMS

It may seem strange today but at the time of the Liberal reforms there was a lot of opposition to them.

Many people in society as a whole still believed that it was the job of the individuals and their families to look after themselves. They were worried that if the state gave too much help to poor families then they would become lazy and expect the state to provide everything for them.

Another factor that brought criticism was the cost of the reforms. The most spectacular example of this came in the years 1908-11. In 1908 the Liberals



### BACKGROUND SOURCE 1

**An extract from a letter from the Board of Education to the Monmouthshire County Council, 1904**

**(PRO ref: ED 125/11)**

introduced Old Age Pensions. In 1909 the Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, introduced what he called the People's Budget. In simple terms, this budget put taxes on to the wealthy to pay for welfare reforms like pensions. Lloyd George disliked the wealthy and was very happy to upset them by passing measures like the People's Budget. The Budget caused outrage. The House of Lords opposed it. They threw out the Budget even though the elected MPs in the House of Commons had approved it. This led to another election, which the Liberals won. The Liberals then passed the Budget and passed the Parliament Act (1911), which greatly reduced the power of the House of Lords.

There were other critics of the reforms as well. The British Medical Association (which represented the doctors) often criticised the National Health Insurance Act and the provisions for school medical inspections and treatment. It should be said that they usually criticised the way the measures worked, rather than the measures themselves.

Trade unions and friendly societies also criticised the detailed workings of the reforms, even though they supported the reforms themselves. For example, Friendly Societies complained that the doctors who gave treatment under National Health Insurance were not always the highest quality. Trade unions often complained the Old Age Pension was not high enough.

One surprising group of critics were ordinary working people. They disliked having to pay 4d. a week out of their wages for National Insurance. There were many campaigns to get certain trades made exempt (e.g. domestic servants). However, once people saw the benefits of National Insurance - health care and unemployment pay - the criticisms grew less.

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### THE LIBERAL REFORMS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The reports and investigations which you may have studied in Gallery 1 showed the Liberals that they had to do something about children's health, education and general welfare. They brought in a range of important measures.

In 1906 they brought in the Education (School Meals) Act. This gave local councils the power to provide free school meals for the poorest families. In many ways this was a great success. By 1914 158,000 children were receiving free meals. On the other hand, the Act allowed local authorities to provide meals, but it did not make them do so. Also, the councils had to raise the money for meals from their local ratepayers.

In 1907 the Liberals introduced compulsory medical inspections. The checks were free, but in some areas they were carried out more thoroughly than others. Another problem was that treatment was not free. This changed in 1912 when school clinics were introduced to provide free treatment for children.



**BACKGROUND SOURCE 2**  
**Police notice from 1909 warning people about the terms of the new Children Act**  
(PRO ref: MEPO 2/1138)

In 1908 the government introduced the Children and Young Persons Act, usually known as the Children's Act. Children became protected persons, which meant that parents who ill-treated or neglected their children could now be prosecuted. The Act also banned the sale of alcohol and tobacco to children and banned them from working in dangerous trades like scrap metal. Also, children who broke the law were now dealt with in specialist juvenile courts and prisons.

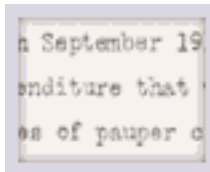
### THE LIBERAL REFORMS AND OLD PEOPLE

The Liberals were fully aware that for most people the main cause of poverty was old age. As a result they introduced Old Age Pensions in 1908. It was highly controversial because of the expected cost. It was also controversial because some people thought that old people in poverty were only poor because

they had wasted their money all their lives.

Overall, the pension was very well received and had support from most people. To qualify, people had to be over the age of 70. They also had to earn less than £31 per year and have lived in Britain for 20 years. Criminals and anyone who was felt to be idle did not qualify either.

A single pensioner got 2 shillings a week, while a married couple got 7s. 6d. It was not a fortune but it was a lot better than nothing. It was also costly. The government spent millions each year on pensions.



**BACKGROUND SOURCE 3**  
**Extract from a government document setting out what the likely cost of pensions would be in the year 1911-12**  
(PRO ref: AST 15/48)

The number of old people who depended on charity or the Poor Law dropped dramatically. Even so, there were still many thousands of old people who did depend on the workhouse for somewhere to live. This was usually because they had no family to live with and the pension on its own was not enough for an old person to pay rent, bills and food.



**BACKGROUND SOURCE 4**  
**Old Age Pensioners meeting Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George in 1910**  
(© Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru / The National Library of Wales 2002: PZ4257)

### THE LIBERAL REFORMS AND WORKING PEOPLE

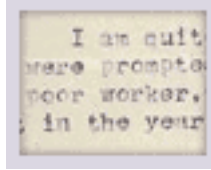
Some of the most far-reaching reforms brought in by the Liberals concerned working people. Throughout the early 1900s there were many different measures taken by local authorities to help the sick and unemployed. The government supported many. However, by 1911 the Liberals were convinced that some kind of government-controlled national system was needed.

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As a result they introduced National Insurance in 1911. The National Insurance Act was in two parts. Part 1 dealt with unemployment. Part 2 dealt with health. Workers earning under £160 per year had to join the scheme. They paid 4d. per week from their own wages into an insurance scheme. Each payment gave them a stamp in their card. The employer added a further 2d. and the government added 3d. on top of that.

When the scheme was introduced there was a lot of opposition. Many workers resented the money being taken from their wages. Many employers resented the amount of money it cost them.

In return for their contributions workers got sick pay (10 shillings a week for 6 months) and



### BACKGROUND SOURCE 5

**A letter to Liberal politician David Lloyd George from the National Association of Domestic Servants complaining about the introduction of National Insurance, 1911 (PRO ref: T 172/49)**

unemployment pay (7 shillings a week for up to 15 weeks). As with the other Liberal measures, National Insurance helped but it was far from perfect. There were some problems with the organisation and standard of medical care under the scheme. There was always the problem of the families of workers. They were not insured or treated under the scheme if they were ill.