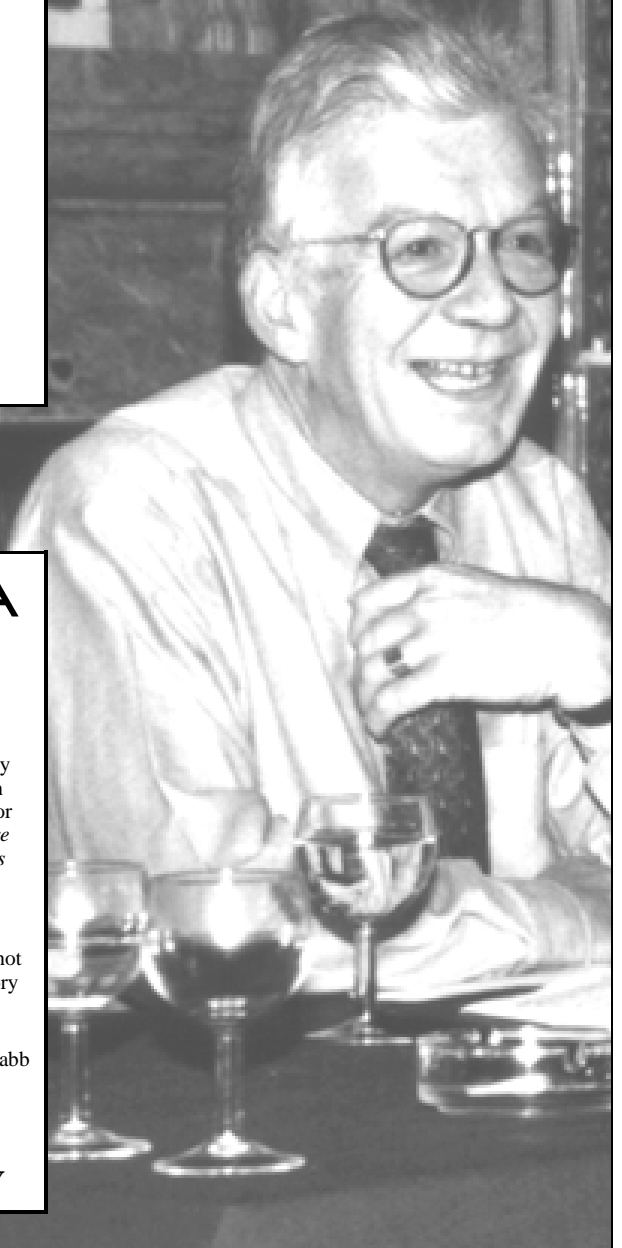


# LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE WELFARE STATE

THE GROWTH OF  
GOVERNMENT  
— c1880-1914

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# LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE WELFARE STATE:

## THE GROWTH OF GOVERNMENT — c1880-1914

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My starting point is from Desmond King's recent book *In the Name of Liberalism*. In the Introduction, he points out:

Government use of social policy to alter society perhaps marks out the twentieth century more distinctively than previous centuries. From the horrific metamorphosis of totalitarian regimes, to the terrors of fascism and diluted forms of socialism, the landscape of intervention is extensive and, in some, countries, baneful.<sup>1</sup>

My concern is to explore how it happened and how we can account for the growing collectivism and the increasing role of the state that has characterised twentieth century British social welfare. It is an attempt to throw some light on the question posed by the Oxford historian, José Harris:

How did it come about that Victorian social welfare provision — largely purveyed through face to face relationships within the medium of Civil Society — evolved into the most 'rational' and bureaucratic of modern welfare states?<sup>2</sup>

There are many explanations and the factors are complex. As Peter Baldwin notes:

... so extensive is the literature on the origins, rise and development of the welfare state that even the seasoned observer may be forgiven for feeling lost in the academic Babel of paradigms, models, interpretations and accounts.<sup>3</sup>

My contribution to this academic Babel is to examine the way in which the late Victorian and Edwardian era laid the foundations of that double-headed hydra: big government and the welfare state. It has recently been observed that the years between 1880 and 1914:

... witnessed momentous economic, political and social developments which in turn challenged the doctrine of *laissez faire* and undermined minimalist government in respect of both economic and social affairs.<sup>4</sup>

For me, it is a period of pivotal change both in ideas and action: a re-negotiation of the relationship between state and citizen in matters of welfare and well-being. And in the process of that re-negotiation, many issues were raised which have become the essentials of twentieth century politics:

- relations between central government and local authorities;
- the financing of an expanding state and the burden of taxation;
- the rights and responsibilities of citizens
- the relationship between work and welfare;
- and, as the years between 1909 and 1911 highlighted in the aftermath of Lloyd George's People's budget, the constitutional role of the House of Lords. That too, has a fairly contemporary ring to it.

Against that background then, let me now move on to look in more detail at the years between 1880 and 1914, at the process of government growth and the laying of the foundations of the welfare state. In doing so, my discussion falls into 3 parts.

1. The first concerns *evidence*. What is the evidence for the growth of government especially in domestic and social policy?
2. In the second section, I shall be concerned with *explanation*. How have historians accounted for this increase in government activity in the late 1800s and early 1900s?
3. My third and final part will concern the *effect* of this process on the programmes of the political parties and on the specifically working class agencies of welfare such as the Friendly Societies and the Trade Unions.

## I EVIDENCE

There are several indicators which lend support to my argument and suggest the growing activity of government especially in matters of welfare.

### a. The volume of social legislation

It would be easy — and tedious — to simply list a whole succession of Acts of Parliament that are suggestive of a more pro-active state. Instead, let me indicate three ways in which this legislation was re-defining relationships.

The first concerns the functions of local authorities. Successive Acts of Parliament laid responsibilities on local authorities that took them far beyond their very limited public health and poor relief functions of the mid-Victorian years. The most far-reaching of these new, centrally-imposed local government obligations was undoubtedly the provision of elementary and secondary education under the Education Acts of 1870 and 1902. But there were others: slum clearance and rehousing, the power to purchase land to provide smallholdings and the 'make work' schemes initiated by the Local Government Board in 1886 and 1893.

The second refers to the state's encroachment in the private arena of the family — through legislation concerning the custody and guardianship of infants and the Married Woman's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882.

The third concerns the relations between employers and their workers through the Workman's Compensation Act of 1897 which, for the first time, compelled employers to take responsibility for accidents to their employees.

All of this suggests an expansion — piecemeal maybe — of government activity and its growing involvement and control in local, domestic and economic arrangements. Cumulatively this represents the late Victorian and Edwardian redefinition of 'public goods', and a growing role for the public sector in securing them.

### b. Government was initiating more inquiries into social conditions

Heclo marvels at the growth of British parliamentary reports during the nineteenth century. By 1850 the *annual* product of parliamentary papers in terms of number, size and circulation was greater than the product of all the centuries before 1800 put together.<sup>5</sup> That pace gathered even greater momentum in the final decades of the century and increasingly the focus of such reports was on social issues, in contemporary parlance 'the condition of England question'.

Pat Thane refers to some of the more important inquiries of the 1880s and 1890s. These included the Royal Commissions on Labour (1893-4), Housing and the Working Classes (1884-5), Aged Poor (1895), the Depression of Trade and Industry (1886); and Select Committees on Distress from Want of Employment (1895), National Provident Insurance (1885-78), Old Age Pensions (1895, 1899), the sweating system (1890), Poor Law Relief (1888).<sup>6</sup> Poor Relief was also the subject of the famous Royal Commission which produced Majority and Mi-

nority Reports in 1909. The latter, much influenced by the Fabian Socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb, used to be acknowledged as a blue-print for Britain's Welfare State. More recent historical research however suggests that the similarities between the two Reports are greater than what appeared to divide them. In the short term, the proposals of both Reports were skillfully by-passed by Lloyd George and the Liberals in favour of the *via media* of National Insurance. Nevertheless it has recently been pointed out that

[M]embers of this Commission orchestrated a massive public debate on the underlying principles of government, citizenship and social welfare — a debate which constituted perhaps a unique episode in the history of the relationship between British society and the various administrative organs of the state.<sup>7</sup>

### c. The number of Government Departments with a responsibility for domestic and social affairs was increasing

In place of the multi-purpose Home Office and the Privy Council, a whole variety of new departments developed which reflected the ever-proliferating functions of government. The Local Government Board had been established in 1870. Thereafter came the Commercial, Labour and Statistical Department of the Board of Trade (1886), the Scottish Office (1885) the Board of Agriculture (1893) and the Board of Education (1899). This laid the foundation for more specialist departments that developed during and after the First World War. Government, in short, was becoming more functionally specific.

### d. Changes of this sort meant an increase in public sector employment

Between 1891 and 1911 the total of those employed in the armed services, the civil service and local government increased from approximately  $\frac{1}{2}$  million to just over  $1\frac{1}{4}$  million or from 3.6 to 6.9 per cent of the working population. But in that 20 year period the largest absolute and relative increase in employment occurred in local government which was the locus of much social welfare-related activity, not least in teaching. Local government employment increased from 175,000 in 1891 to 660,000 in 1911. As a percentage of the working population that represented an increase from 1.2 to 3.6. More people, that is to say, were becoming dependent on the state for their employment and earnings.

### e. The growth of Government also had implications for public expenditure

This indicator too was already well established on an upward trajectory by the outbreak of the first World War. Peacock and Wiseman in their analysis of the trends in public spending show an increase from £130.6m in 1890 to £305.4m in 1913.<sup>8</sup> Over the same period, as Roger Middleton has shown in his recent re-analysis of the data, central government's financial subvention of local authority services increased from 38.4 to 44.8%.<sup>9</sup> And in that local authority sector, it was spending on social services

that was increasing the fastest: from £19.4m in 1890 to over £64m in 1913.

#### f. the growing importance of social policy in the realm of 'high politics'

This is my final piece of evidence. The statistics are quite clear. Cabinet memoranda on social policy issues increased 12-fold in absolute terms between 1880-4 and 1905-9, and four-fold as a percentage of government business.

But in addition, as José Harris noted, over the same period the departments of state concerned with domestic and social policy affairs became increasingly attractive "to talented and ambitious young politicians anxious to make a name for themselves in the public eye".<sup>10</sup> The careers of Joseph Chamberlain, Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George — to name but three — all attest to that.

And increasingly, as the same author notes,

[E]ven among politicians whose primary concerns were defence, order and expansion of the empire, social policy came to be seen not as separate from but as complementary to those functions.<sup>11</sup>

Social policy, that is to say, had come swiftly to a position at the interstice of government. The whole turn of the century debate about 'national efficiency' and the related issue of recruitment to the army in the Boer War are just two examples of that complementarity between social policy and other concerns of state.

## II EXPLANATION

That then is a brief review of the evidence. What of explanation? Here I want to suggest the importance of four inter-related themes.

(a) It is important first of all to note *the inheritance*. No government begins with a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate. And what the late Victorian and Edwardian governments inherited was the impact of what has been termed 'the nineteenth century revolution in government'.<sup>12</sup>

The traditional view of the years between 1830 and 1870 was that it was the classic period of *laissez faire* and the night watchman state. Dicey's influential interpretation<sup>13</sup> has been much challenged by more recent historical research which shows a steadily increasing administrative state, not least in areas such as poor relief, public health, factory conditions and elementary schooling. The process was not planned according to any grand design. Rather it was pragmatic, piecemeal; but in the process — as Kitson Clark noted — "one of the most effective systems of state government in Europe was being created".<sup>14</sup>

But not only in central government. It was also happening in local authorities. As we noted earlier, central government was imposing new and additional responsibilities on local administrations. But there were also many examples where radical and dynamic local authorities themselves expanded their own influence, often beyond the legal limits of their statutory financial powers. Civic

improvements, municipal socialism, competition between adjoining 'city states' in buildings, amenities and services all advanced the self-perpetuating administrative momentum of earlier in the century.

(b) Both the central and the local state expanded in *the conditions of increasing democracy* and an extended franchise.

The successive Reform Acts of 1832, 1867 and 1884 extended the parliamentary franchise at least for men: while women — or at least some of them (especially widows and single women as independent rate-payers) progressively became eligible to vote in local elections after 1869.

But how far did this changing and extending franchise impact upon the expanding state? In a celebrated analysis of 'the vote motive', Tullock argued that government had increasingly to be responsive to the wishes and aspirations of those responsible for electing them. The result — he suggests — was a more interventionist and more pro-active state.<sup>15</sup>

The 'vote motive' may certainly have been a relevant factor in the second half of the twentieth century. In our period the specific relationship between the extension of the franchise and the growth of the state appears more tenuous. Public welfare was not prominent as an election issue between 1885 and 1914; many of the working class were wary of a more interventionist role for government and it was working class organisations, for thrift, self improvement and self insurance which hindered middle class reformers trying to introduce the Old Age Pensions Bill in 1908, labour exchanges in 1909 and the Bill for National Insurance in 1911.

The significance of the 'vote motive' should not, therefore, be over-emphasised. But, as Michael Bentley argued in relation to the 1867 Reform Act, the extension of the franchise "provided a threshold across which British politics begins in retrospect to appear recognisably 'modern'".<sup>16</sup> Part of that modernity was the nature of political leaders: the slow shift from the aristocracy of independent gentlemen to those who relied on public office as a form of professional income. The change, however, was not only in personnel, but also in culture. As a consequence of the extension of the franchise

[A] powerful wedge [was] driven into the largely axiomatic assumption that defence of property rights was the prime purpose and function of the British Constitution and of organised political life.<sup>17</sup>

(c) Governments in the late Victorian and Edwardian period addressed questions of social welfare against a *background of increasingly 'scientific' information*.

I am referring here, of course, to the growth of social investigation, such as the poverty surveys of Booth in East London and Seebohm Rowntree in York. But social investigation *per se* was not new. Indeed, the accumulation of facts about their changed and changing society was one of the growth industries of Victorian Britain. It is there in the local statistical investigations of interested

amateurs, in the establishment of the General Register Office, in the journalistic explorations ‘into unknown England’, the England ‘beyond the tracks’ of poverty, insecurity and insanitary housing as well as in novels highlighting the ‘two nations’. All of this was an indispensable dimension of the condition of the people question.

But what gives added significance to the work of Booth and Rowntree is their attempt at scientific objectivity; in their area analysis, the construction of measures of poverty, the notion of the lifecycle of poverty and the distinction devised by Rowntree between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ poverty. All of this gave a new dimension — and quantification — to the condition of those who were living out their lives in ‘poverty in the midst of plenty’.

But their research did not stand alone. It accorded with other evidence increasingly coming from official sources and, in addition, it became part of the emerging debate about national efficiency.

The evidence from the recruitment offices at the time of the Boer War highlighted the number of recruits refused as medically and physically unfit for military service. At the end of Queen Victoria’s long reign, this focussed attention on the fitness of the nation for its Imperial Task. There is in the early twentieth century a clear association between empire and welfare. Increasingly, however, commercial competitiveness from other countries also contained a welfare message. As Hennock has argued:

The stress and keenness of international competition was to raise poverty — a poverty that would result in a nation unfit to retain its share of the world market — into a matter of urgent national interest.<sup>18</sup>

It was the threat to both the empire and Britain’s trading position that provided the context into which dropped the statistical findings of Booth and Rowntree’s research. And in that debate about national efficiency, the Report of the Inter-Departmental Commission on Physical Deterioration has an honoured place. Physical defect, it argued, was due not to nature but to nurture. And if nurture was responsible then it could be offset by ameliorative programmes such as school meals and school medical inspections. These did not have to be state provided — of course — but there was by that time a clear indication that the problem — and the proposed solution — was of greater magnitude than could be dealt with adequately by local charitable activity alone.

(d) It was in this way that the foundations of the welfare state represented what Perkin has termed “*the triumph of the professional ideal*”.<sup>19</sup> In doing so it brought together politics and personalities, ideology and action.

Let me now highlight some of the elements of that convergence.

Perkin points out that there were three divergent streams of social thought in the nineteenth century: (i) the Radical or Utilitarian stream, encompassing Bentham, John Stuart Mill and The Fabians; (ii) the Organicist or Idealist stream stretching from Coleridge and Southey via the Christian Socialists and Oxford Idealists to the University

settlements in the East end of London; and (iii) the Utopian Socialist stream which, beginning with Robert Owen, took in Morris and Ruskin, the Independent Labour Party and the Guild Socialists.<sup>20</sup>

What was significant about the late Victorian and Edwardian period was the convergence of these streams in groups of people who moved easily between the Fabians, Toynbee Hall — one of the University settlement centres — and the advanced wing of the Liberal Party. They were increasingly drawn together by their commitment to a collectivist state and the professional ideal of service to the community.

But for this group of middle class reformers, laying the foundations of the Welfare State was about more than altruism. It was also about self interest. Part of this self interest lay in replacing a loss of religious faith by a programme of secular social reconstruction. Part reflected — as Brian Harrison notes — their

... concern about the consequences of gross contrasts in wealth: the doctor could not cure his patients till their daily living conditions were improved, the teacher could not educate his pupils till they were properly fed. Ruskin and Morris prompted the artist to feel uncomfortable in his middle class suburb if beset by the ugliness of poverty.<sup>21</sup>

... and so on. But the issue went beyond the middle class conscience. A more pro-active Government offered the developing professional middle class the opportunity to achieve its separation from the commercial world. As Perkin notes, the creation of the welfare state offered to them

Perhaps the greatest prize of all, a share in the expansion of expert services provided by or paid for by government, a higher level of remuneration guaranteed by the State and for some of them at least an increase in power and prestige in a system increasingly dependent for its smooth operation and success upon themselves.<sup>22</sup>

### III EFFECT

But what of the effect of such a growing collectivism? This theme I wish to explore both in relation to the effect on working class welfare institutions and on political party programmes.

#### (a) Working class welfare institutions

Working class agencies of self help and mutual aid were heavily involved in the supply of welfare in the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly these agencies — the Friendly Societies, the trades unions and the co-operative movement — were sceptical of the expanding state, since it potentially threatened their own interests and involvement. But generalisations are difficult, simply because, as Thane’s evidence suggests, working class attitudes — like the organisations that represented them — were diverse.<sup>23</sup>

Certain common themes, however, do emerge. The first concerns the distinction between, what in late nineteenth century terms were, the helpable poor and the residuum.

Writing of the Independent Labour Party's programme of social reform, she comments that its aim was

To give maximum aid to the majority of self-respecting hard working people whose wages and conditions of life kept them severely deprived despite their best efforts.

As with many other socialists, plans for the residuum were far more severe.

Secondly, support for state action in welfare was highly specific. Reforms such as education — which entailed sacrifice — were less popular than those such as Old Age Pensions which did not.

Thirdly, there was considerable opposition to those measures which entailed intrusion into working class lives and homes. Many of the manifestations of the encroaching nineteenth century state had shown a controlling face. As Michael Thompson has argued, the appearance of sanitary inspectors and inspectors of nuisances

... might well portend uprooting and eviction from buildings condemned as unsanitary and unfit for human habitation.<sup>24</sup>

The introduction of compulsory schooling in 1891 threatened the basis of fragile domestic economies among the working class and the

Truant officers who appeared to enforce school attendance — were no more welcomed by the parents than by the children they were sent to chase.

Nor were health visitors making domiciliary visits which could easily be seen to be patronizing and uninvited intrusions on the privacy of the home and offering high-minded advice on nutrition and personal hygiene ... necessarily welcomed in working class households.<sup>25</sup>

For the working class therefore there was a deep seated suspicion of the central state, continuing support for the traditional agencies of working class welfare and a quest for regular work and wages sufficient both for a decent life and to allow them sufficient surplus to save for hard times.

#### (b) What then of the party political programmes?

Here again the issue is not clear cut. In his recent study of the Conservative Party E. H. H. Green has argued that:

From 1884 a central assumption of British politics — which the Conservative Party did not dispute — was that finding an answer to the social question was bound to be an electoral imperative.<sup>26</sup>

As we have already noted, there was little 'pressure from below' from the newly enfranchised electorate for such an outcome. But the available evidence does seem to indicate that among politicians of both the main parties — Conservative and Liberal — such a perception did exist. "Politicians" according to one commentator "increasingly believed that voters *were* motivated by social welfare issues."<sup>27</sup>

Within each party, however, there were dissidents. The Liberty and Property Defence League established in 1882 consisted mainly of Conservatives who were committed to resist over legislation, maintain freedom of contract, advocate individualism and combat attempts at government control of economic and social life. Its intellectual guru was Herbert Spencer and two of his disciples Wordsworth Donisthorpe and W. C. Crofts were especially involved in the foundation and activities of the League. The Liberal Party also had among its members those — such as Hillaire Belloc, G. K. Chesterton and A. V. Dicey — who opposed the tendency of the centralising state and remained passionate defenders of traditional liberal individualism. For Chesterton:

The Collectivist State  
Is a Prig and a Bandit;  
It may be my Fate,  
But I'm damned if I'll stand it.<sup>28</sup>

The state and social welfare was thus an issue which internally divided the political parties of the time (much like the issue of Europe today).

But among its supporters there were very different routes by which a more progressive and interventionist social policy could be attained. For the Conservatives the solution lay in Joseph Chamberlain's programme of tariff reform with its inducement both of saving British jobs and financing social reform. As Martin Pugh observes,

Their protectionism, proved to be instrumental in drawing the Tory Party towards the twentieth century notion of the state with its responsibility for managing the economy and maintaining the living standards of the people.<sup>29</sup>

In the event, it was the Liberal Party who engineered the foundations of the welfare state by their programme of social legislation introduced between 1906 and 1911. This represented a significant step away from the Gladstonian Liberalism of the nineteenth century, not least in the method by which it proposed to finance social reform, as well as the naval re-armament which was becoming increasingly necessary. Lloyd George's People's Budget was "frankly and overtly redistributing wealth through taxation". It was seeking to raise revenue by taxing the wealthy few for the benefit of the penurious many. Here, as Derek Fraser observes, "was the essence of the novel approach: financial policy geared to the social needs of the people: the budget as a tool of social policy".<sup>30</sup> Despite the enormous constitutional issue that the People's Budget set in train, by 1914 only one million people were liable for Income Tax. As a result, "the majority of voters could cheerfully support higher direct taxes of the sort imposed by Lloyd George without personal loss".<sup>31</sup> That situation like many other features would significantly change in the subsequent history of the welfare state in the twentieth century.

## CONCLUSION

The detail of the twentieth century lies beyond my remit. But let me — in conclusion — suggest three themes that seem to follow from my discussion.

The first is the redrawing of the boundaries — what Finlayson termed “the moving frontier”<sup>32</sup> between the state and other welfare suppliers that has taken place this century. At the end of the twentieth century there still exists a mixed economy of welfare, just as was the case one hundred year ago. But the balance of power between its components — public, private, statutory, voluntary and informal — is significantly different.

Secondly, the late twentieth century notion of the therapeutic state — the panoply of experts, civil servants and advisers — is the link with Perkins’ professional ideal. These are the people whose interventions — whether of policy and professional practice — are based on the classic paternalist assumption expressed so well by Douglas Jay the Labour politician 60 years ago, that “the man in Whitehall or Town Hall knows best”.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, I detect at the end of the twentieth century less of a political debate about the limit and scope of Government action. I say that despite Tony Blair’s rhetoric about a new welfare contract between State and citizen and his re-casting of the debate to emphasise duties and obligations rather than — or as well as — rights. Despite that, it seems to me — rather like the ‘end of ideology’ that Daniel Bell discussed in the 1960s<sup>34</sup> — that contradictions and conflicts are presented as problems to be managed. As Clarke and Newman observe:

Terms such as efficiency, effectiveness, performance and quality, depoliticise a series of social issues and this displace real political and policy choices into a series of managerial imperatives.<sup>35</sup>

That too is part of the legacy of the professional ideal and its transmutation into the managerial welfare state of the late twentieth century.

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