



History 7042
Specimen Question Paper 2M (A-level)
Question 02 Student 1
Specimen Answer and Commentary

V1.0

Specimen answer plus commentary

The following student response is intended to illustrate approaches to assessment. This response has not been completed under timed examination conditions. It is not intended to be viewed as a 'model' answer and the marking has not been subject to the usual standardisation process.

Paper 2M (A-level): Specimen question paper

02 'The Liberals introduced welfare reforms in the years 1906 to 1911 because they were afraid of the rise of Labour'

Assess the validity of this view.

[25 marks]

Student response

During the years 1906 to 1911 the Liberal Party introduced a raft of welfare reforms which covered three main sections of society: children, the elderly and workers. As the Labour Party had risen to prominence after the Lib-Lab pact of 1903 and the electoral gains made in 1906, these reforms could be viewed as having been motivated by a fear that the Liberals were being overtaken on the left by Labour. However, some historians have argued that there were other motives behind the reforms. This might include the ideology of New Liberalism or the ambition of men like Churchill and Lloyd George.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence in favour of the threat of Labour being the main causal factor behind the Liberal legislation is the sheer volume of policies which would directly affect the workers. The whole reason for the rise of the LRC and then the Labour Party had been in the increasing politicisation of the working classes and the extension of the franchise several times in the 19th century did mean that a significant number of working class men could vote. In 1908 and 1909 respectively, the Miners 8 Hours Act and the Trade Boards Act helped to regulate working conditions and pay, measures which would surely help the Liberals appeal to the working class voters. Indeed, further legislation such as the two National Insurance Acts were partly designed to appeal to this same portion of the electorate. George Dangerfield wrote in the 1930s that, after the emergence of Labour, the Liberals were doomed to decline as they had been overtaken as the party of the left and perhaps Liberal politicians had realised this threat and sought to try and circumvent it. Indeed, political cartoons from the time allude to the threat of Labour and Lloyd George himself spoke publicly to members of his own party about the threat of Labour.

However, this view can be criticised, and indeed has been, through analysis of voting patterns in the years before the First World War. The fact that Labour did so well in the 1918 election should not be taken as evidence of an inevitable rise; actually by 1911 they still had a very limited number of MPs; many of whom had only been elected as a result of the Progressive Alliance. Indeed, had Labour been viewed as more of a threat then it seems odd that the Liberals pressed ahead with some legislation which was so openly criticised by Labour. Old Age Pensions, for example, were viewed as very piecemeal as they only provided 5 shillings a week for the very poorest over the age of 70. This would not help the Liberals in a practical sense as the poorest of the working classes were still disenfranchised, and, in not taking the legislation to the extreme which Labour wanted, this would not reduce any threat posed by Labour. Equally, the National Insurance legislation was heavily criticised as being far too restrictive with Labour arguing especially against the contributory element. In 1911 Lloyd George introduced payment

for MPs for the first time, which was clearly designed to help prospective Labour candidates, who were struggling for funding in the aftermath of the Osbourne Judgement. Again, this seems odd if Labour were viewed as a serious electoral threat. It could be argued that it was actually the political threat of the Conservatives which was actually more of a driving force behind Liberal actions. By the two elections of 1910 they had clearly recovered from the disastrous result of 1906 and it was clear that they might introduce their own welfare reforms should they get back into power. In 1903 Chamberlain's Tariff Reform campaign had been based on the idea that funds raised would be used to pay for welfare reforms, perhaps Liberal actions were more a case of 'getting in first'.

Some historians have suggestion that the Liberals had slightly more altruistic motives for the introduction of welfare reforms. Surveys, such as those conducted by Booth and Rowntree at the turn of the century, had revealed for the first time the truly shocking extent of poverty across the country. Many of the prominent politicians within the Liberal Party, men like Churchill, Lloyd George and Asquith, viewed themselves as 'New Liberals'. This branch of the party believed that it was the responsibility of government to step in and help people to help themselves, thus abandoning the more traditional laissez-faire attitude of Gladstonian Liberalism. Much of the Liberal legislation shows 'New Liberalism' in action; the idea of a 'helping hand' rather than complete charity. This then explains the nature of the Pensions legislation; money was given to help provide for people in their old age, but they would still need to work and save money earlier in life. Similarly, National Insurance would help in times of Unemployment or Ill Health, but the worker would still have to take some responsibility by making contributions themselves, which were added to by the state and the employer. Churchill famously wrote about a 'life vest' approach to social help. The legislation aimed at children similarly had a moral aim and the 1908 Children's Charter set out rules for how children should be treated.

It is also possible that the Liberals were motivated by a concern for 'National Efficiency'. The Boer War, which ended in 1902, was a very narrow victory for Great Britain, and had raised questions about the health of the nation. That it took so many men and so much money to defeat a 'nation of farmers' led to serious debate about how Britain would fare against a stronger enemy. Whilst it would be false to argue that a war on a world stage was inevitable in the years 1906-11, international tensions were certainly rising and Britain wanted to ensure that she was in a strong position. Free School Meals (1906) and Medical Inspections (1907) for children would hopefully help to improve the quality and health of the next generation of soldiers and workers. Having a healthy workforce would help Britain to compete in a world economy where Britain was being quickly overtaken by countries like the USA and Germany.

Thus it seems to be the case that the Liberals had a multitude of factors behind their decision to embark upon an ambitious welfare programme in the years 1906-11. Whilst the threat from Labour was present, it does not seem to have been sufficient at this stage to be the main driving force behind the Liberal policies, and we should be careful of using hindsight of the events of 1918 onwards as 'evidence' for the inevitable rise of Labour. It seems more likely that the emergence of New Liberal ideas, espoused by prominent members of the Liberal administration, added to a genuine compassion and concern for the health of the nation was the real driving force behind the Liberal Welfare Reforms.

Commentary – Level 3

The answer has both strengths and weaknesses. It is strong in its assessment, in the third paragraph, of why the reforms were not motivated by the fear of the rise of Labour and is

perceptive in its assessment of how New Liberalism differed from Gladstonian Liberalism. The dangers of hindsight are reflected on convincingly. Its main weakness is that the assessment, in the second paragraph, of the fear of the rise of Labour motivating the reforms, is not fully convincing. That reforms were made which benefitted workers cannot be seen as incontrovertible evidence that this represented fear of Labour; they could equally reflect genuine concern for the workers. Much more detail is required in the answer as to the development of the Labour Party in the period and how far its growth was seen as a threat. This is missing and weakens the answer significantly.

There are also vague generalisations which need to be avoided: references to unnamed 'many/some historians' is very unconvincing and it is debateable at least to claim, as the introduction does, that Labour 'had risen to prominence' by 1906. Given, then, the central focus of the question has not been assessed convincingly, this is a good Level 3 answer.