A powerful mandate: why was the 1945 election result an important foundation for Labour’s Welfare State?

Churchill was reluctant to put William Beveridge’s plan into place, as he believed that it would cost too much, especially in the midst of a war. He was supported in defeating the motions for immediate implementation of the report by labour coalition members, and so the welfare state would likely not have been put into place under Churchill

Attlee’s government was not the first government to address the issue of welfare reform [The Liberal government of 1906 had introduced ground-breaking welfare reforms such as Old Age Pensions and Unemployment and Sickness benefit [for workers]. Labour’s agenda however, was set by the report of William Beveridge. Who was Beveridge [use Britannica for this]? How ‘radical’ [or ‘socialist’] was his report?

William Beveridge was a highly regarded economist, famed for his work on the British welfare state (widely known as the founder of the NHS). Beveridge served in government under Churchill, first as an adviser to the board of trade, then as director of labour exchanges, and then as a permanent secretary of the ministry of food. Beveridge’s report was considered by many (but interestingly not Churchill) to be radical and socialist-leaning. This was due to the proposals that he put forward such as socialised healthcare (the NHS today) which he said should be free for all who wish to use it, offered all citizens protection “from the cradle to the grave”, and also due to the fact that much of his social welfare system was centred around redistricution (a cornerstone of socialist thought). However, despite this, Beveridge’s assumption was that capitalism would continue, and therefore his report cannot be considered socialist as a whole, as a main feature of socialism and of it’s many forms is a conviction that the capitalist system is “ultimately indefensible”.

Why did Beveridge emphasise ‘personal responsibilities’ in his report? What do you think was the most common criticism made in the UK about the idea of the Welfare State?

Beveridge’s emphasis on personal responsibilities was intended to encourage individuals to save as private citizens, in accordance with liberal tradition, and to avoid an increase in government expenditure.

In my opinion, the most common criticism made in the UK about the idea of the welfare state would have been it’s socialist leanings, criticisms which would have been encouraged due to the threat of communism from the east.

What were Beveridge’s ‘Five Giants’? What would be the major problem facing any government trying to tackle them in the context of post-war Britain?

Beveridge’s ‘Five Giants’ were the issues of: Want, Ignorance, Disease, Squalor and Idleness. He intended to solve these through: National Insurance, an effective education system, a comprehensive health service, slum clearance and rehousing, and full employment respectively. A major problem facing the government trying to tackle these in a post-war Britain would have been lack of funds, with repayments on loans from the USA required, and money being needed elsewhere to rebuild the country after such a devastating conflict.

Why was there broad [cross-party] agreement on the need for ‘social reconstruction’ following the war?

The principle of ‘collectivism’ had been introduced and built upon. Collectivism is placing priority upon the welfare of a group rather than an individual, and all parties could see that the country desperately needed social reconstruction, despite a possible cost to their own personal finances and lives.

What were the key features of the Welfare State established by Attlee’s government in the six years after the war?

The key features of the Welfare state were: The creation of national insurance, providing against unemployment, sickness, maternity, widowhood, retirement, etc… , the National health service being created, allowing the whole population free, indiscriminate healthcare, funded through general taxation and national insurance, and the industrial industries act, which provided cover for accidents that occurred in the workplace.

Which of Beveridge’s ‘Five Giants’ had been addressed by the Conservative minister, ‘Rab’ Butler, but which [controversially] was not tackled by Attlee’s government?

Ignorance was not tackled by Attlee’s government, but the Education/Butler act was introduced, and provided free, compulsory education for all, with the 11+ exams determining their secondary education path. This was seen as one of the first attacks on one of Beveridge’s Five Giants

Which of the other ‘Five Giants’ appears not to have been a top priority in this period?

Idleness does not seem to have been a top priority in this period.

Which welfare reform was by far the most controversial but is now regarded as the most important?

The NHS was the most controversial, with only 10% of the medical profession supporting the scheme. However, after it came into effect, it was soon seen to be the most important and impactful reform of all.

**Glossary of Key Terms**

*Capitalism*

An economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state

*Collectivism*

The practice or principle of giving a group priority over each individual in it.

*Consensus*

A general agreement

*Family Allowances*

Synonymous with Child Benefit; an allowance given to aid in the raising of children

*‘Five Giants’*

Beveridge's 'Five Giants' were: Want, Ignorance, Disease, Squalor and Idleness

*Free at the point of delivery*

A core principle of the NHS. All healthcare should be free in the place where you receive it, without the question of whether an individual is able to pay or not

*Landslide*

An election result in which the victorious candidate or party wins by an overwhelming margin

*Liberal*

A political and social philosophy that promotes individual rights, civil liberties, democracy, and free enterprise

*Mandate*

The authority to carry out a policy, regarded as given by the electorate to a party or candidate that wins an election

*NHS*

The National Health Service. Socialised healthcare, [free at the point of delivery](app://obsidian.md/index.html#Free%20at%20the%20point%20of%20delivery)

*Slum Clearance*

The demolition of slums, usually accompanied by the rehousing of the inhabitants, to improve living conditions and the environment of an inner city

*Social Reconstruction*

A condition in which the population achieves a level of tolerance and peaceful co-existence, gains social cohesion through acceptance of a national identity that transcends individual, sectarian, and communal differences and has the mechanisms and will to resolve disputes nonviolently

*Socialism*

A political and economic theory of social organization which advocates that the means of production, distribution, and exchange should be owned or regulated by the community as a whole

*Welfare State*

A system whereby the state undertakes to protect the health and well-being of its citizens, especially those in financial or social need, by means of grants, pensions, and other benefits