

By the General Election of 1906 the British electorate had changed. The 1884 Representation Of The People Act had allowed many more working class men to vote and, as a result, issues that mattered to them, such as poverty and injustice, became important.

The Liberal Party won a strong victory – by proposing reforms that addressed the concerns of the working classes.

Its new liberal MPs believed that government had a responsibility to help the poor.

As one of them, Winston Churchill, said: “If we see a drowning man, we do not drag him to the shore. Instead, we provide help to allow him to swim ashore”.

They also had an eye on the competition – the newly formed Labour Party, founded by workers and trades unionists, was beginning to win votes.

The new government began by tackling child malnutrition.

The Education Act of 1906 allowed local authorities to provide school meals for poor children.

In 1908, an estimated seven million free school meals were served. By 1914, this had doubled to 14 million

Medical inspections in schools also became compulsory. They checked height, weight, and cleanliness, and examined eyes, ears and teeth.

Children’s rights were defined by the Children’s Charter of 1908. This put value on children as individuals and set out laws to protect them from harm, neglect and exploitation.

Those who lived on the lowest wages weren’t able to save for old age – so when they became too old to work, they were left with no way to support themselves.

The Elderly and Old Age Pensions Act of 1908 provided for 5 shillings a week to be paid to all people over 70, which could be claimed through the Post Office.

The benefit of the act was limited – as 5 shillings wasn't quite enough to live on, and many workers died before their 70th birthday.

But it helped many older people to live dignified lives.

For all workers, illness was a major worry. Those who lost their jobs through ill health had no support.

The National Insurance Act of 1911 aimed to solve this problem. It allowed employers and workers pay into a fund, and covered 15 million workers – if any fell ill, or became unemployed, money from the fund was paid out for a limited time.

The focus of British politics had now changed – and millions of people benefitted from these reforms.