The New Poor Law of 1834

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Why?

- Old Poor Law (1601)
  - Workhouse Test Act 1722
    - Allowed parishes to set up workhouses and deny relief to those who refused to enter
  - Gilbert’s Act of 1782
    - Permits “the establishment of union parishes for poor law purposes with salaried guardians of the poor” (Roach, 71)
  - Speenhamland of 1795
    - Establishes a sliding scale that uses family size and bread prices to determine minimum weekly wage (Boyer, 10)
Main Issue

The Poor Laws “proceeded upon principles which border absurdity as professing to accomplish that which, in the very nature and constitution of the world, is impracticable. They that in England, no man, even by his indolence, improvidence, prodigality, and vice, he may have brought himself to poverty, shall ever suffer from want. In the progress of society, it will be found, that some must want.” –Joseph Townsend, 1786
Malthus’s Influence

- Theory of Population & Wage Doctrine
  - the amount to be given as relief will not proportionately increase with population
- Supply outdoor relief to able-bodied laborers ruins the incentive to work
  - The parishes “create the poor which they maintain”
- Argued to replace poor relief w/ guaranteed minimum wage
Bentham’s & Chadwick’s Influence

• Two Essential Ideas
  • The “controlling power of the central government”
    • Maintains uniformity of wages
  • Independent Laborers > Paupers
    • Deters individuals from receiving relief
  • Utilitarianism
    • Greatest good for the greatest amount of people
Maintaining Wages
The New Poor Law

- Establishes “The Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales”
  - 3 people
  - New central Authority
- Stricter guidelines for able-bodied laborers
  - The commissioners may “declare to what extent and for what period the relief to be given to able-bodied persons or to their families …may be afforded”
The Poor Law Commission

- Cannot have seats in Parliament
- Members Appointed
  - Thomas Frankland Lewis
  - George Nicholls
  - John Shaw-Levfre
  - Secretary: Chadwick (Poor Chadwick...)
Consequences

• New Rules for Relief
  • No $ to be given to able-bodied men
  • If an able-bodied man works, at least half of his wage will be $
  • $ of relief to widows or single women will be $
  • No rent payments for able-bodied men
Criticism and Backlash

- Anti-Poor Law Committees established
  - Deemed it “cruel, unchristian and dictatorial”
  - The Poor Law Commissioners portrayed as “inhuman tyrants”
- Anti-Poor Law propaganda spread
  - Tales of pauper abuse
  - Pamphlets
Works Cited

• Works Cited