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Poor Law reform

In 1832, the government appointed a royal commission to investigate the workings of the Poor Law and make recommendations for improvement. The commissioners sent out questionnaires and visited over 3,000 parishes (out of a total of 15,000) collecting information.

One of the leading commissioners, Edwin Chadwick, was already convinced that the system needed to be brought under rigorous central control in London. It also needed to be reformed in such a way as to deter people from making unnecessary demands on public funds.

The commission's report and recommendations were published in 1834 and received wide support in Parliament. The commissioners had come up with a way of providing an efficient government cure for the problem, yet one which ensured a minimum of state interference and cost.

Reform

The Poor Law Amendment Act was quickly passed by Parliament in 1834, with separate legislation for Scotland and Ireland. It implemented a major overhaul of the old Poor Law by adopting all the commission's main recommendations. A 'Poor Law Commission' (a new government department, in effect) was set up in London employing inspectors to supervise the work of local officials. Instead of an administrative system based around parishes about 600 locally elected 'boards of guardians' were set up, each board having its own workhouse.

Outdoor relief - the financial support formerly given to the able-bodied - was no longer to be available to them so as to compel them to work. Outside assistance was widely available to the sick and elderly. But in many areas assistance was only given within the confines of the workhouse where the regime was deliberately harsh and often cruel.

Pioneering Act

The new Act was pioneering in introducing a role for central government in the care of the poor, and remained in force throughout the Victorian age. But, as social commentators remarked, the treatment of genuine hardship caused by economic circumstances beyond the control of the individual had been ignored. By the 1880s, greater understanding of poverty and its complex links with economic conditions (such as low pay and unemployment) slowly began to change opinion in Parliament.

Biography

You can access a biography of

Edwin Chadwick

from the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography for free, online, using your local library card number (includes nine out of ten public libraries in the UK) or from within academic library and other subscribing networks.

- [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#)

External link

Visit a preserved workhouse maintained by the National Trust

- [The National Trust: The Workhouse, Southwell](#)

Related information

Parliament and government both play a part in forming the laws of the United Kingdom.

Historic Hansard

The House of Commons debates the Second Reading of the Poor Law Amendment Bill 1834

- [Poor Law Amendment Bill 1834 \(9 May 1834\)](#)
- [Parliament and government](#)
- [Poor Law Amendment Bill 1834 \(9 May 1834\)](#)

Did you know?

Workhouses were often called **bastilles** after the infamous French prison which had been stormed by the French revolutionaries in 1789.

● UK Parliament 2023