

Labour's Right to Work Bill and the Politics of Unemployment Reform, 1907-1911

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Introduction, Historiography, and the Politics of Pre-war Unemployment

The far-reaching social reforms enacted by the Liberal government between 1909 and 1911 have been viewed as the cornerstone of the modern welfare state, providing the foundations for the reforms of the ensuing decades. One of the key social issues they were intended to address was unemployment, which had become a major feature of British economic life and political discourse in preceding decades, not to mention a major source of social unrest. The passage of the Labour Exchange Act and the Development Act, both in 1909, and the National Insurance Act of 1911 signalled not only new Liberal priorities, but the emergence of a new moral framework surrounding unemployment and a revised role for the state. Studies of the Liberal reforms of this period have tended to focus on the architects and parliamentary champions of the legislation. This has, however, tended to obscure the fact that a considerable amount of the political noise surrounding unemployment in these years came from the embryonic Labour Party, who, through their annual Right to Work Bill, made it one of their defining political priorities. Few accounts of the origins of the welfare state mention, let alone dwell on, the Right to Work Bill, while those that do have tended to converge on the conclusion that it was ultimately a legislative dead end.¹ On the contrary, in the essay that follows I will argue that Labour's Right to Work campaign contributed to the rising prominence of unemployment as a national issue, challenged the political common sense of the era and exerted a reforming pressure upon the Liberals. I will also suggest that Labour's engagement

¹ Arthur Marwick, 'The Labour party and the Welfare State in Britain, 1900-48', *American Historical Review*, 73.2 (1967) 380-403; K.D. Brown, 'The Labour party and the unemployment question, 1906-1910', *Historical Journal*, 14 (1971) 599-616.; Jose Harris, 'Political thought and the welfare state 1870-1940: an intellectual framework for British social policy', in *Before Beveridge: welfare before the welfare state*, ed. by David Gladstone, (London: Institute of Economic Affairs Health and Welfare Unit, 1999), pp. 43-63; Chris Renwick, *Bread For All: The origins of the welfare state* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

with the process of the Liberal reforms marked an important moment in its evolution from a party of idealists to one of possibilists.

Historians have invariably accorded some degree of importance to the material factors which underpinned the unemployment reforms of the Edwardian period.² The recurrent episodes of mass unemployment from the 1880s led to a dramatic increase in those facing destitution, placing an intolerable strain on local government finances and revealing the ineptitude of charitable relief.³ However it has been argued that the divergent paths of Britain and other European countries faced with similar levels of unemployment and poverty suggests the need to examine social, political and moral factors.⁴ One explanation is the emergence a new sociology of poverty in the closing decades of the 19th century, which unveiled the depth of deprivation experienced by the Britain's urban poor.⁵ However the degree to which this new approach represented a total rupture of the *moral* regime of the New Poor Laws is questionable; while its more radical exponents may have been moving towards an alternative explanation of unemployment, in which market disfunction replaced personal deficiency, the solutions offered were rarely less punitive than the prevailing Poor Law system that had been in place since 1834.⁶ For a political class haunted by decline and obsessed with "national efficiency", the revelation of poverty also raised the fear that the conditions experienced by Britain's working class were depriving them of the physical and

² In this essay I will adopt a broad definition of Edwardian that begins with King Edward VII assuming the throne and ends with the onset of the First World War.

³ Jose Harris, *Unemployment and Politics: a study in English social policy, 1886-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 368; Ross McKibbin, 'Social class and social observation in Edwardian England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 28 (1978) 175-99.

⁴ Ann Shola Orloff and Theda Skocpol, 'Why not equal protection? Explaining the politics of public social spending in Britain, 1900-1911, and the United States, 1880-1920', in *Britain and America: studies in comparative history, 1760-1970*, ed. by David Englander (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 242-75; A similar point is made by Renwick, *Bread For All*, p. 8.

⁵ 'New sociology of poverty' refers to the considerable efforts that late Victorian philanthropists and reformers dedicated to uncovering the extent and root causes of poverty.; Martin J. Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare: An economic and social history of Britain, 1851-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 541-2.

⁶ There was a general attempt to retain the paternalism of the existing state while doubling down on its coercive powers. The Webbs' advocated detention and disenfranchisement for the able-bodied unemployed, while William Beveridge went as far as suggesting that unemployed should lose the right to marry and bear children. Harris, *Unemployment and Politics*, p. 22.

mental capacities required by modern industry.⁷ Historians adopting a bottom-up approach have suggested that another contributing factor to the broader social shift was changing working class attitudes towards the state; the pervasive mistrust of the state that had existed during much of the nineteenth century had by the turn of the twentieth been tempered by a growing view within the labour movement that state welfare could tackle the insecurity that prevented many workers paying regular union dues.⁸ Within the context of an expanding franchise, in which the two major political parties were increasingly forced to appeal to working class voters, these changes in attitudes contributed towards the demand for reform.⁹

The scale and breadth of the Liberal's unemployment reforms were not only impressive but surprising given that there appeared to be little appetite for reform amongst the Liberal leadership before 1907. It is this apparently rapid and far-reaching shift in Liberal attitudes and priorities in just a few years which cannot be satisfactorily explained by the various perspectives discussed above. Prime Minister William Gladstone's contention in 1893 that unemployment ought not to be a concern for central government reflected not only a widely held opinion amongst politicians but also a political reality.¹⁰ Although it was accepted as a social problem, unemployment was ultimately seen as stemming 'from individual failings and the solution was the moral regeneration of the individual'.¹¹ The Liberals' disinterest in the unemployment question was evidenced by the experience of a deputation of unemployed and labour movement figures who, meeting with party leader Campbell-Bannerman in 1904, complained that 'he has no opinions on the economic and social reasons for unemployment; he has no proposals to make for their cure; he has not even a programme of palliatives'.¹² Their impression was shared by the economist and social reformer, William Beveridge, who

⁷ Martin Pugh, *"Hurrah for the Blackshirts!": Fascists and fascism in Britain between the wars* (London: Pimlico, 2005), p. 15.

⁸ Henry Mathison Pelling, 'The Working Class and the Origins of the Welfare State', in *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain: Essays*. (London; MacMillan, 1979); Pat Thane, 'The working class and state "welfare" in Britain, 1880-1914', *Historical Journal*, 27 (1984) 877-900 (p. 899); Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare*, pp. 535-6.

⁹ Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, there is an argument that not only did these changing attitudes feed into the broad support for the Right to Work within the labour movement, but that the Right to Work campaign was an important moment for the shifting perceptions of the state within the organised working class.

¹⁰ Harris, *Unemployment and Politics*, p. 89.

¹¹ Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare*, p. 472.

¹² *Labour Leader*, 9 Dec, 1904.

discovered a similar combination of ignorance and disinterest when addressing a meeting of prominent Liberal MPs on unemployment the following year. In fact, it was not until 1907 that the Liberals began to debate unemployment in earnest, only two years prior to the first of their major reforms. This presents a problem for the historian and poses a question to which this essay seeks to contribute an answer: what were the proximate causes of the Liberals' sudden interest in unemployment and their decision to make it a central political priority?

One explanation that has often been offered for the Liberals' move towards social reform in general and unemployment reform in particular is the growing pressure that from 1903 began to be exerted upon them by the campaign for tariff reform that was spearheaded by the maverick Liberal Unionist leader, Joseph Chamberlain. Chamberlain's movement emerged, in part, from a perception that the structural changes that had taken place in British electoral politics since the 1880s threatened Unionist pre-eminence.¹³ For Chamberlain and his fellow radical Unionists, tariff reform presented an opportunity to forge a new constituency amongst the burgeoning working class through a populist appeal to empire, a reduction in the cost of food by preferential tariffs and an emphasis on unemployment.¹⁴ For the Liberals this represented a significant threat, both to their primacy amongst working class voters, and to their identity as the party of change and progress. Yet it was only *after* Labour's showing in the 1906 election that the Unionists began in earnest to develop the social welfare dimension of tariff reform. Chamberlain's opinion that the defeat was due primarily to the 'Labour wave' was shared by many of his fellow Unionists, not to mention a considerable portion of the Liberal leadership.¹⁵ Labour's emergence as a political force and their alliance with the Liberals convinced the Conservatives that the opportunity to win over the working

¹³ E. H. H. Green, 'Radical Conservatism: The Electoral Genesis of Tariff Reform', *Historical Journal*, 28.3 (1985) 667-92 (p. 678).

¹⁴ Not only had the 1884 Reform Act added many of the lower ranks of society to the electoral register, it had done so overwhelmingly in the county seats that had long been the bulwark of Conservative support. Furthermore, the traditional networks of patronage and deference that might have tempered such a psephological shift had since the 1880s been upended by the great agricultural depression, which had in addition created a fertile ground for radical agitation amongst disaffected labourers. These changes were compounded by the Redistribution Act of 1885, which reduced the relative electoral weight of many county seats and redrew boundaries in a way that included suburban voters in many of these constituencies. All in all, they were changes that seriously worried Conservatives. Green, 'Radical Conservatism'.

¹⁵ Green, *Radical Conservatism*, pp. 682-3; This position was also elaborated by leader of the Conservative Party, Arthur Balfour, who identified Labour's modest gain of thirty seats as the most significant feature of the 1906 election: David Jarvis, 'British Conservatism and Class Politics in the 1920s', *English Historical Review*, 111 (1996) 59-84.

class would elude them unless a programme was developed that appealed sufficiently to working class interests. While the influence of tariff reform on Edwardian unemployment legislation has been widely recognised, this indirect role of Labour's election result— one that compelled the Conservatives to embrace reform, which in turn pressured the Liberals to do likewise— has tended to be overlooked in accounts of the Liberal welfare revolution. Labour's influence on the two main political parties would only increase in the coming years, and their growing appeal to the working class was an important consideration that helped to define Conservative and Liberal approaches to social policy in this period.

The Labour Party and the Right to Work Bill

Despite entering the 1906 election with no concrete policy on unemployment, two broad guiding principles would underpin Labour's approach in the years that followed: the first held that everyone had a *right* to work; the second that it was the state's responsibility to tackle unemployment.¹⁶ Labour's initial hopes that their Liberal alliance partners would in short order produce something significant on unemployment were disappointed when by Spring nothing had emerged. John Burns, who, as Liberal President of the Local Government Board, was responsible for unemployment, opposed progressive reform on the grounds that it reinforced 'the virtues of pauperised dependency', and made it clear that he had no forthcoming plans for new legislation.¹⁷ The initial Parliamentary protests of Labour MPs condemned his inaction and, joined by sympathetic radicals from the Liberal backbenches, forced a series of concessions. Not only was this an early sign of the pressure Labour were able to bring to bear on the Liberal leadership, it signalled the importance of their ability to act as a wedge that could split off disaffected backbenchers on the left of the Liberal Party.

Labour continued to apply regular pressure in Parliament, criticising the Liberals for failing to keep their promise of far-reaching unemployment legislation. The decisive moment came when the Liberal legislative agenda set out in the King's Speech at the beginning of 1907 failed even to mention unemployment. Stormy scenes followed in which Labour MPs highlighted the speech's omissions and invoked the 'poor of London' who had earlier that day

¹⁶ Brown, *Labour and Unemployment*, p. 72.

¹⁷ Harris, *Unemployment and Politics*, p. 172.

'been marching through our streets to parade their misery'.¹⁸ Labour swiftly drafted and tabled the Right to Work Bill, which sought to enshrine the inalienable right of every citizen to work, and the responsibility of the state to provide either paid employment or 'full maintenance'.¹⁹ Under the Bill's provisions local authorities would register the unemployed and provide them with the necessary information about job opportunities or, if none existed, would be required to enrol them in local works schemes funded by the rates.²⁰ If the substance of the Bill resembled a slightly more ambitious version of the Minority Report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, its language marked a radical departure. Whereas the Minority Report took a mechanical view of unemployment, in which all was subordinated to the efficiency of the economic system, the Right to Work Bill sought to humanise 'he who has fallen to the bottom of the gutter', demanding conditions in which the unemployed could 'keep body and soul together' while regaining 'self-respect'.²¹ Labour launched a national campaign to provide extra-parliamentary support for the Bill, which included the general distribution of 20,000 copies of their Right to Work Bill, numerous meetings and rallies, and a flurry of pamphlets setting out their case.²² While the coverage given by the press to the Bill was generally hostile, it nonetheless helped to catapult the issue of unemployment into households across the country and began to unsettle the mantra of individual responsibility that had until then been commonplace amongst leading political figures. By July 1907 Labour were able to point to recent by-elections in which Liberal incumbents were unseated by socialist candidates standing on a right to work ticket, victories which cannot have gone unnoticed by the Government.

¹⁸ *Hansard*, HC Deb (12 February 1907). Vol. 169, col. 111.

¹⁹ Ramsay MacDonald, *The New Unemployed Bill of the Labour Party* (London: ILP, 1907), p. 5-6.

²⁰ The funding mechanism proposed by the Right to Work Bill was in fact a continuation of the existing framework that had been set up by the Unemployed Workman's Act, a threadbare and widely condemned piece of legislation that had been improvised under popular pressure by a Conservative government in 1905 (Brown, 'Conflict in Early British Welfare Policy'). The fact that the Right to Work Bill would leave intact the previous Act's geographical disparities and regressive system of taxation suggests that Labour had not yet worked out a practical means by which to implement their radical ideals on unemployment.

²¹ MacDonald, *The New Unemployed Bill of the Labour Party*, p. 6.

²² For an overview of the extra-parliamentary unemployed protests of this period, in particular the rise of the hunger march, see: James Vernon, *Hunger: A modern history* (London: Belknap Press, 2007), pp. 54-60.

The introduction of the second Right to Work Bill in 1908 quickly defied predictions when on its first reading it received the backing of 116 MPs. This constituted a considerable Liberal backbench rebellion and provoked one prominent anti-socialist commentator to warn that 'this astounding measure...from the Liberal benches is pregnant with warning'.²³ Following a discussion of the Bill by Cabinet on March 11, the Chancellor (and soon to be Prime Minister) Herbert Asquith penned a letter to the King in which he conceded that while the Bill's principle was 'obviously inadmissible' the Liberals would nonetheless need to counteract it with a measure of their own.²⁴ Liberal Minister Sidney Buxton concurred, reiterating his argument of the previous summer that the Liberals 'ought at least...to have an alternative' to Labour's initiatives for the unemployed.²⁵ These reactions to the Right to Work Bill, as well as its discussion in Cabinet, demonstrate that it was taken seriously by the Government and that it constituted an important force in setting the wheels of Liberal welfare reform in motion. Moreover, they illustrate an acute awareness on the part of the Liberal leadership that their reforms ought to match Labour's appeal to the political imagination of the working class. In this way the Right to Work Bill likely had a hand in shaping not only the fact of the subsequent Liberal measures on unemployment, but also their spirit.

The anxieties that the Right to Work provoked within the Liberal leadership took four forms. The first was concern regarding its ability to draw support from a radical yet significant section of Liberal backbench MPs, which at best embarrassed the leadership and projected an image of disunity, at worst threatened defections to Labour.²⁶ Liberal backbench support for a Labour initiative also drew uncomfortable attention to the fact that the Liberals had no proposals of their own on unemployment. The second anxiety concerned the Progressive Alliance that had been forged with Labour in anticipation of the 1906 election. Herbert Gladstone expressed a not uncommon Liberal view when, in his reflections immediately following the election, he concluded that the alliance with Labour had been the single most important factor in his party's victory, ahead of free trade and opposition to the Boer War.²⁷

²³ Brown, *Labour and Unemployment*, p. 92.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 90.

²⁵ Michael Hanagan, 'Citizenship, Claim-Making, and the Right to Work: Britain, 1884-1911', *Theory and Society*, 26.4 (1997), 449-474 (p. 464).

²⁶ That these were genuine and pressing concerns is demonstrated by the fact that in 1909 and 1910 nine Liberal MPs representing the Miners' Federation of Great Britain crossed the floor to join Labour.

²⁷ Harris, *Unemployment and Politics*, p. 229.

Thus while the Liberals unquestionably held the balance of power following the 1906 General Election they were nonetheless sensitive to the demands of Labour, as well as to the danger that alienating them could lead to the loss of the prized Alliance.

The third Liberal anxiety stemmed from the widespread belief that the party's longer-run capacity to win elections hinged on their ability to retain primacy amongst working class voters. Labour's showing at the 1906 election did not in itself threaten this ambition, even if its parliamentary weight had been bolstered somewhat by subsequent by-election victories. Rather, it was the explosive trajectory of the fledgling party's popularity that was of concern, in particular their unique appeal to working class interests and their ability to peel away trade union support from the Liberals. It was feared that Labour's Right to Work Bill threatened to crown their recent success in passing the Trades Dispute Act, capturing the imagination of the working-class in the sphere of welfare as well as that of labour rights. Finally, the Right to Work jeopardised the Liberal's political identity as the party of progressive change, one which had been carefully curated since the days of William Gladstone and now took on an even greater importance under the politics of New Liberalism. Unused to being outflanked on the left in Parliament, they were shaken by Labour's depiction of them as the inert and intransigent defenders of a failing status quo. By the Spring of 1908 the pressure that the Right to Work Bill had exerted on all four of these Liberal anxieties showed no sign of abating. The Government seemed unable to dampen recurrent backbench rebellions, a seemingly insurmountable division with Labour threatened the future of the Alliance and Labour's stance on unemployment was attracting significant interest amongst the organized working class. These factors cannot but have been in the mind of leading Liberal politicians during the following year as they began in earnest to consider unemployment reforms.

Alongside the propositional content of their Right to Work Bill, Labour co-ordinated a highly personal campaign against John Burns, the Liberal Minister in charge of unemployment policy. Labour MPs in Parliament presented Burns with a persistent barrage of questions and accusations focussing on his failure to produce adequate legislation and his callous attitude towards the plight of the unemployed.²⁸ This negative publicity helped to produce a growing disquiet amongst Liberal politicians over Burns' inaction and contributed towards the leadership's decision to effectively transfer the brief for unemployment to Winston

²⁸ *Hansard*, HC Deb (27 March 1907). Vol. 171, col. 1854-1865.

Churchill and William Beveridge.²⁹ Over the course of the following year, with this pairing at the helm, the Liberals would draft and legislate a series of Acts that would create the framework for the modern welfare state, including mandatory unemployment insurance for approximately one third of working class men. The pivotal role of Beveridge and Churchill as the intellectual and political architects of the unemployment reforms of this period has been widely noted by historians, but the catalysing role of Labour's parliamentary protests in the original Liberal decision to replace Burns with Churchill and Beveridge is absent in many historical accounts. There has also been a tendency to overlook the fact that Churchill's sense of urgency was in part driven by his recognition that Government inaction on unemployment threatened to place an intolerable strain on Britain's political stability. Summarising his plans for reform in an interview with the *Daily Mail* in August 1909, Churchill spoke of how the 'idea is to increase the stability of our institutions by giving the mass of industrial workers a direct interest in maintaining them. With a "stake in the country" in the form of insurances against evil days these workers will pay no attention to the vague promises of revolutionary socialism.'³⁰ Not only had the Right to Work campaign contributed to the demise of Burns' conservative inaction, it had also provided a parliamentary articulation of the putative revolutionary threat that leant particular urgency to Churchill's pursuit of reform.

The Decline of the Right to Work Bill and the Changing Nature of Labour

1908 was to be the high-water mark of the campaign for the Right to Work Bill. Labour would introduce the Bill again in 1909 and 1911 but on both occasions it lacked the enthusiasm that had energized the debates of the first two years. In part, it had simply been overshadowed by political events: the People's Budget and the constitutional crisis that followed, the German naval scare, and the Osborne judgement, among others. There was also a new dilemma that for the first time confronted Labour MPs in the form of their potential to destabilise an increasingly fragile Liberal government, opening the door to a far more hostile Conservative administration. Moreover, a gradual economic recovery began to provide better prospects for the unemployed and the crisis of mass unemployment slowly receded from the national political debate. But another important reason for the decline of the

²⁹ Brown, *Labour and Unemployment*, p. 73.

³⁰ *Daily Mail*, 16 August, 1909.

right to work was that the energy and ideas of many of its cheerleaders began to be channelled into alternative approaches to the problem of unemployment. From 1909 the left of the Labour Party were drawn towards the recommendations of the minority report of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, which was widely perceived as pursuing similar principles as those set out in the Right to Work Bill, only with a more practical bent.³¹ It was significant that George Lansbury, a leading figure on the radical wing of the Labour Party with a respected record of agitation on behalf of the unemployed, not only co-authored the Minority Report but quickly threw his voice behind its recommendations.

At least as important an influence on the evolving welfare politics of the Labour Party, however, came from the Liberals. First of all, Beveridge and Churchill's insurance-based approach, which elicited widespread publicity from 1909, won over many of those who were pitched on Labour's centre ground. Second, many key figures on the left of the party claimed that the measures contained in the Liberal's Development Act were tantamount to conceding the principle of the right to work.³² Whether this hyperbole sprang from naïve hope, a reaction to perceived failure, or a shrew attempt to claim some of the political capital for the Liberal reforms is not clear. What is clear is that once the claim had been made that the Liberals had conceded the right to work, Labour's position on unemployment lost both its coherence and its *raison d'être*. Through a combination of splitting opinion within Labour and co-opting a considerable portion of their MPs to the Liberal agenda, the effect of the Development and National Insurance Acts was to draw the sting from Labour's Right to Work campaign.³³ In a prescient allusion to this at the time, Ramsay MacDonald noted the possibility that the Liberal reforms had removed unemployment 'from the sphere of legislation and placed it in that of

³¹ Brown, *Labour and Unemployment*, pp. 120-3.

³² In a bizarre turn, one of Labour's more radical voices on unemployment, Keir Hardie (who had long since earned the nickname 'the Member for the unemployed'), claimed that it constituted one of the most revolutionary pieces of legislation ever to pass through the House of Commons. He argued that, together with the insurance proposals in preparation, it embodied the core principles of Labour's Right to Work Bill, despite its Liberal authors denial of any such implication: *The Times*, 15 September, 1909.

³³ It is important to note that although the National Insurance Act was not passed until 1911, it was drafted and widely publicised as early as December 1908. Thus, although the decline of Labour's Right to Work took place long before the passage of the National Insurance Act, the latter's effect was apparent two years earlier.

administration'.³⁴ In doing so they had removed the question of reform from the arena of politics, the field of contention, and the public gaze.

The Liberal measures on unemployment have been portrayed as a pragmatic and non-ideological response to an enlarged working-class electorate, a fast-growing Labour Party and a resurgent Conservative Party gathered around the flag of tariff reform.³⁵ However there are two problems with this characterisation. First, it risks making the error of assuming ideological neutrality in the case of reforms that resemble the ideological consensus, in this case liberal political economy.³⁶ Second, in overlooking the potential of the Liberal reforms to act as an active carrier of ideology there is a danger of missing an important aspect of their broader political impact. By mortally taming Labour's Right to Work campaign, and by winning the support of the vast majority of its MPs for an insurance-based model, the Liberals contributed to a shift in the ideological character of the embryonic Labour Party and in particular its approach to unemployment. After the final half-hearted campaign of 1911 Labour would no longer pursue the right to work and the disquiet that the party's support for a flat-rate insurance-based model had elicited from the left of the party would quickly fade. No doubt part of the explanation for this was the easing of the mass unemployment that had animated the politics of the Right to Work Bill in recent years.³⁷ But even when in 1921 recession and mass unemployment returned, Labour's unemployment policies and the deeper principles on which they rested would not revert to the radicalism of the Right to Work years.³⁸ Though the decision to support the Liberal reforms by no means achieved unanimity within the party, Labour had ultimately opted for a compromise that traded political radicalism for legislative influence. In this sense, the resolution of the Right to Work campaign was an

³⁴ *Labour Leader*, 4 February, 1910.

³⁵ Harris, *Unemployment and Politics*, p. 363-4.

³⁶ It is perplexing that Harris is able to cite the non-ideological nature of the Liberal reforms while at the same time concluding that they were intended to 'preserve and enhance the "free market" situation which throughout the nineteenth century orthodox economists had regarded as most conducive to maximum industrial efficiency and the accumulation of wealth'. *Unemployment and Politics*, p. 364.

³⁷ Unemployment in the pre-WWI period peaked in 1908/9 at 8.7% before falling rapidly and remaining consistently low during the following decade: George R. Boyer and T. J. Hatton, 'New estimates of British unemployment, 1870-1913', *Journal of Economic History*, 62.3 (2002) 643-75 (p. 667).

³⁸ Ross McKibbin has commented that during the interwar period 'Labour's relationship to Liberalism was less one of hostility than of apostolic succession.' *Parties and People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 18.

important way marker in a broader transformation in which Labour cast aside its brief curiosity in anti-systemic and extra-parliamentary politics in favour of a possibilist and parliamentary route to socialism.³⁹

Conclusion

In the essay above, it has been argued that the important contribution that Labour's Right to Work Bill made to the Liberal welfare reforms of 1909-1911 has too often been overlooked within the historiography. In the first place, it helped to usher Chamberlain and protectionist Conservatives towards a vision of tariff reform that encompassed far-reaching provision for the unemployed; second, it aggravated Liberal anxieties surrounding disunity and defection, the solidity of the progressive alliance, the political loyalties of the working class and the Liberals' claim to being the party of progress; third, by fatally eroding the political reputation of John Burns at the Board of Trade, it removed the institutional block on unemployment reform and helped to make way for the reforming zeal of Churchill and Beveridge. Finally, the Right to Work Bill and the ensuing campaign can be seen as an important moment in the Labour Party's conversion to an exclusively parliamentary approach to politics.

³⁹ During the interwar period and after, Labour would be far more cautious about their involvement with the unemployed social movements that began to take up the right to work baton. While this general shift has been documented, its origins in the abandonment of Labour's pre-WWI Right to Work Bill has not been identified: Richard Croucher, 'The History of Unemployed Movements', *Labour History Review*, 73:1 (2008), 1-17.

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