National efficiency

Range of anxieties

- Decline in birth rates: 114.5 births per 1000 in 1901, 98.0 per 1000 in 1911 (middle class families in particular spacing and reducing family size)
- Boer War: 1 in 5 soldiers turned down due to health problems
- Increased foreign competition
- Influx of cheap foreign imports of food and goods

1904 Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration

- Ignored a range of physical and environmental factors
- Finger of blame often pointed at working class mothers: labelled ignorant and feckless
- General conclusion: rejected the idea that progressive physical deterioration was taking place
- But it did see 'very abundant signs of physical defect' caused by 'neglect, poverty and ignorance'

Physical deterioration

- Seized upon by sections of the press, scientists, medical profession and some politicians
- Provided a 'mental landscape' within which to understand anxieties about Britain's domestic and global problems?
- Growth in eugenics: racial health and purity
- But has the influence and popularity of 'physical deterioration' been exaggerated?

The government response: Liberal Welfare reforms, 1906-1914

- Key personalities: Winston Churchill at the Board of Trade 1908-10 and Lloyd George at the Exchequer 1901-15
- Public attitude to the poor changing
- Growing political pressure from the left and the working class voter
- 'State of the nation' anxieties over the health and efficiency of the national 'race'