

The legacy of an ideology: A decade on from benefits as lifestyle choice

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Ten years ago, in October 2010, George Osborne, then Chancellor of the Exchequer for the UK, used his speech at the Conservative Party Conference to deliver a stinging critique of social welfare. Announcing welfare reforms, including the popular Benefit Cap, he promised:

“if someone believes that living on benefits is a lifestyle choice, then we need to make them think again. And we need to change completely the system that has allowed and encouraged them to make such a mistaken choice”.¹

Osborne was true to his word. Under first the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition, and then under a Conservative majority Government, we have witnessed a far-reaching programme of welfare reform that has profound consequences for the health and well being of populations. We have seen a ratcheting up of welfare conditionality;² the introduction of the much-lauded but equally much-critiqued Universal Credit;³ and the freezing of benefit levels, all of which have left people in poverty and contributed toward stagnating (and in some cases deteriorating) life expectancy.

Equally important, though, these years were marked by a divisive, exclusionary and stigmatising narrative on ‘welfare’ that rehashed hackneyed divisions between ‘hard working families’ and ‘welfare dependents’ and, in so doing, eroded the possibility of conceptualising social welfare as a public good, of benefit to us all; and of course, with very real and significant positive health outcomes.

Division, not solidarity, was sown; with a particular viciousness reserved for disability benefit recipients.² Suicides, antidepressant prescriptions, and depression have all risen over the last decade as welfare reforms targeted at precisely these groups created uncertainty and, in many cases, ripped away the lifelines keeping these families afloat.⁴

Fast forward to 2020 and the arrival of COVID-19 is placing an unexpected spotlight on what remains of the UK’s social security ‘safety net’. Boris Johnson’s government quickly applied

some sticking plasters to Universal Credit threadbare provision. The temporary £20 per week uplift provided to some but all social welfare claimants was itself a tacit admission of what so many already know: that benefit levels are simply insufficient to enable households to meet their basic needs. Everyday life when you're reliant on social welfare for all or most of your income is not a life of ease and excess despite what popular depictions on the television might suggest. Indeed, for many new Universal Credit claimants, the level of entitlement likely came as an unwelcome surprise, jarring with their media-saturated expectations. Covid has not only harmed health but it has revealed the frailty of Britain's social security system; and it is precisely this frailty that creates poor health; and ill serves those whose ill health means they require social security support.

Sat alongside the legacy of cuts to provision (and arguably just as important) is the rhetorical legacy, which has embedded the idea that 'welfare is bad' only more deeply into Britain's collective conscience. Even before we have extricated ourselves from this current economic crisis, we already see talk of future austerity. We can see this rhetoric, for example, in the gaping chasm between the support that is available to people through the benefits system and that provided through the various (and now multiple) packages of job support. We can see it in the refusal to even temporarily lift the benefit cap and two-child limit, policies which perhaps more than any other grew out of the Coalition's distaste for social welfare. We can see it in the rapid return of welfare conditionality to Universal Credit, justified on the basis that such measures were necessary to 'encourage' claimants to 'do the right thing' and return to work.

Finally, we see this rhetoric manifest itself in repeated association of welfare dependence with passivity.² Whilst acknowledging that removing the temporary protections created to keep people attached to the labour market would increase the number of unemployed people, Anthony Browne, a newly elected Tory MP, said: "It's not in people's long-term interest to keep paying them forever to sit at home doing nothing if they do not have a job to go to."⁵ The research evidence challenges this presumed passivity (see 2);² illustrating the hard work that being on benefits involved; as well as the very many forms of contribution in which people are so often engaged; caring, parenting, volunteering and informally supporting friends and families in their community.

The future health of populations does not merely depend on controlling the virus now, although it certainly requires that, but it necessitates a significant overhaul of the social security system and a dismantling of the political rhetoric which justifies austerity. The scarring effects of pursuing further cuts to welfare could be felt for years to come. Now is the time to start thinking seriously about what #buildingbackbetter really means.

References

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