

## **Social State: Exploding the scrounger myth**

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Blaming the victim is a tactic with a long and dishonourable history. The caricature of the ‘undeserving poor’ was precisely what the Beveridge Report set out to challenge, basing the Welfare State, in contrast, on the concept of universal rights and responsibilities for all. But the stigmatisation of welfare recipients as scroungers has continued as a recurrent theme in public policy debates, and especially so from the Thatcher years onwards. In the current situation, the financial crisis has been ideologically reworked, from an economic problem to a political problem, it has been argued: “how to allocate blame and responsibility for the crisis” (Clarke & Newman, 2012).

Victorian fears and fantasies about the disorderly, dangerous and depraved lower orders have uncomfortable similarities with contemporary obsessions with the urban ‘underclass’ in its many guises (hoodies, chavs, single mothers, the feckless and the workshy), negative stereotypes that conservative critics such as Charles Murray explain as the result of dependency-inducing statism and welfarism (Clarke & Newman, 2012: 310).

### **The answer, according to conservative critics: slash welfare spending and blame those who need it most.**

The scrounger myth has all too obvious benefits for a government hell-bent on cutting welfare spending. But what about the facts? Who exactly are these ‘scroungers’?

### **Are there really generations of workless, work-shy families?**

Analyses of the Labour Force Survey demonstrate that in households with two or more generations of working age, there were less than 1% where neither generation had ever worked. And in a third of these families the member of the younger generation had been out of work for less than a year. That doesn’t mean that there couldn’t also be families where previous generations had also experienced worklessness – as in areas where employment has been declining over many years. But overall, the notion that there are generations of families suffering from cultures of dependency simply doesn’t stack up. Intergenerational worklessness is much more likely to be explained by a lack of jobs than a lack of a work ethic.

### **What about the myth that the main spending on benefits goes to unemployed people of working age who can’t be bothered to get out of bed in the morning?**

The largest element of spending actually goes on pensioners. And round a fifth of housing benefit goes to people in work - although this is, of course, a key target for cuts and further cuts. This is somewhat ironic given that housing benefits go to landlords - in a position to push up rents in areas such as London and the South East of England where affordable housing is in such short supply.

Other benefits to those in work include child benefit and child tax credits – benefits that are actually subsidising employers paying low wages for those in low wage jobs.

All in all then, welfare benefit cuts are having a great impact and will continue to have even greater impact on those in work, especially the poorest households.

Meanwhile research evidence demonstrates the strength of the work ethic. Most people who find themselves without work make strenuous efforts to find a job, or to find some other way of improving their job prospects, such as through training or volunteering. But low wages and high costs such as the rising costs of transport and the high costs of childcare can make this increasingly problematic. Too many of the jobs that are available are short-term, in any case. These casualised jobs leave workers vulnerable to recurrent bouts of unemployment, moving on and off benefits – adding to the problems inherent in Ian Duncan Smith's forthcoming re-organisation of the benefits system.

### **What about benefit fraud?**

Here too, the facts demonstrate that this is actually a very minor problem. When David Cameron pledged a crackdown on benefit fraud in 2010 he claimed that this was costing the taxpayer £5.2 billion. But what he failed to mention was that £4.2 billion of this sum was due to errors on the part of officials rather than fraud committed by welfare recipients. And compared with the revenues lost through tax avoidance, the figures are minute, in any case.

### **What about most people on disability benefit? Couldn't most of them be working?**

This is one of the cruellest myths of all. The stigmatisation of people with disabilities has had appalling effects on their lives. Discrimination and incidents of abuse have been increasing as public attitudes have been hardening. The tests that ATOS has been applying have been resulting in massive stress as people with disabilities are being judged as fit for work – regardless of whether suitable work might be available. Last year over 1,000 people who had been considered fit for work actually died. The proportion of ATOS decisions that have been overturned on appeal has been significant, indicating the absurdity as well as the cruelty of the whole process. And where claimants have been represented, far more of such appeals have been successful, in fact.

### **Undermining democracy**

But this all points to yet one more irony – access to benefits advice has been under threat, and legal aid coverage is being cut right back at the very time when the need for this has been increasing dramatically (even the Coalition Government's report on 'Not-for-Profit Advice Services in England' recognises this yawning gap). Access to justice for all was a founding principle of the Welfare State – essential for the functioning of the democratic process. The Coalition government's attacks on the Welfare State represent attacks on the very notion of democracy itself.

### **Reference**

Clarke J and Newman J (2012) The Alchemy of Austerity, *Critical Social Policy* 32(3)

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