

Work is the Key

The government recently published its plans for benefit reform rooted in the idea of getting more people back to work

During much of human history the reality was not far from the assertion in Genesis that we would work by the sweat of our brow. For most people life was nasty brutish and short: if you were lucky enough to escape war, disease and famine, you would probably die from the sheer toil of trying to exist. The Beveridge Report of 1942 wrote of the need for the state to attack the 'five giants of Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness'. Out of this report arose the welfare state under whose care most of us have grown up. As it approaches its own three score and ten, the welfare state has become itself something of a giant - bureaucratic complexity.

One example: in an article for the *Manchester Evening News* on 10 August 2010 David Cameron claimed 'Welfare and tax credit fraud and error costs the taxpayer £5.2bn a year'. In fact, the amount attributable to fraud is at most £1.5 billion, with the rest attributable about equally to wrong information and to departmental errors. The rest is down to spin.

Iain Duncan Smith had visited Easterhouse in 2002 after losing the leadership of the Conservative party and came away notably affected. Yet, in the words of T S Eliot, he seems to have 'had the experience but missed the meaning'. This is certainly the opinion of Bob Holman, who introduced him to some of the folk working in Easterhouse, but who feels that he has since suffered a relapse to a conservative mentality.

With the arrival of the coalition government, Iain Duncan Smith was the obvious choice for the Department of Work and Pensions. Within a couple of weeks of coming to power, he had produced the most extensive welfare reform policy since Beveridge (presumably it had been cooking for some time previously). There was a period for response and consultation – nowadays about as much use as whistling into a force 9 gale. Among the ambitious and progressive recommendations were a Universal Credit to replace the more than thirty existing benefits; and the removal of anomalies that make it financially more rewarding to remain on benefits than to work. These plans were hobbled by the Chancellor's almost simultaneous statement of intention to cut £11 billion from the DWP budget, with a further 7 billion trimmed by November.

The plans are also hampered by a peculiar, if self serving logic. First, you propose that many people are living in welfare dependency purely as a matter of 'lifestyle choice'. Your Alice in Wonderland (or rather American) solution is that in order to make people independent, you curtail or remove the welfare. Simple.

And spin is of the essence in a campaign which has to fall back on to the older strategy of blaming those on benefits for their predicament. Politicians and the self appointed guardians of virtue in the media, conveniently forgetting that this system is based on National Insurance contributions, push the notion of subsidising 'scroungers' with 'handouts'; not least since it allows ignorant people to assume a sense of moral superiority.

The root problem with the proposals, and the place where they lack any connection with Catholic Social Teaching is in their complete failure to recognise the difference between work and jobs. Work is that which affirms, rewards and dignifies work undertaken for the Common Good. Jobs are all too often little more than wage slavery combined with a bit of

displacement activity, frequently damaging to the Common Good. It is not so much what you do: all work has elements we could probably do without. Nor does it concern the apparently menial nature of the work. If an occupation does not recognise and affirm the dignity of those doing it, it is not real work.

No real account is taken of what Ivan Illich calls 'shadow work': work in the home, so-called 'women's work', unpaid and non-quantifiable work as home makers, carers and enablers which nonetheless provides the foundation for society and permits extra-familial and extra-community work. This kind of work is relegated to the scam that is the 'Big Society'.

At the end of October Mr Duncan Smith had a 'Tebbit' moment - or else proved his ignorance of his brief and public transport. The day following his suggestion that unemployed workers Merthyr should be 'getting on the bus' to Cardiff, figures showed that there were 15,000 people in Cardiff chasing just 1,700 jobs. Comparable figures show 18 jobseekers for each vacancy in Edinburgh. These vacancies are almost entirely low paid, temporary, high turnover and mainly at the lower end of the job market. You can check out your own local vacancies at the Jobcentre Plus search database.

This policy is being overseen by a cabinet, 80% of whom are millionaires, mainly through inheritance and the City. It is guided by a philosophy that to induce the well off to work harder you must pay them more, whereas to get the poor to work harder you pay them less. An ideological commitment to less government and lower taxes and the catch all excuse of recession is not a good basis for a compassionate approach to welfare and work. Coupled with a defective approach to work, however, there is little likelihood of a humane policy emerging.

There is a better approach reflected in Catholic Social Teaching. Next year will be the hundred and twentieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, the foundational encyclical. To celebrate its ninetieth anniversary, Pope John Paul II wrote *Laborem Exercens* where the following fundamental insight occurs:

'human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of human good. And if the solution-or rather the gradual solution-of the social question, which keeps coming up and becomes ever more complex, must be sought in the direction of "making life more human", then the key, namely human work, acquires fundamental and decisive importance' (LE 3).

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