

Editorial

Poor Law Britain

After the second world war and for many years afterwards it was widely agreed that the best way for society to care for its elderly, children, sick and poor was through the welfare state. But since the 1970s this idea has come under attack from all sides: we can't afford it, we don't like the nanny state, welfare creates dependency, we want more choice, we are in thrall to producer interests. These sentiments have allowed the right to tap into working-class anti-authoritarianism, to set the respectable against the feckless, and generally to undermine the principles of collective or mutual provision for security - or for collectivism of any kind. New Labour, while restoring funding to many of the services that had been completely run down by Thatcher and her successors, largely went along with this litany of complaints. And in the mean time its authoritarianism lent further disenchantment to the state, while in the public sector it mistook accountancy and audit for accountability, thereby exacerbating people's sense that services were unresponsive. Far from contributing to a renewal of public confidence in the public sector, it helped pave the way for the current assault.

The attacks on the welfare state do have some basis in reality, but the solutions that have been offered have ignored the problems it sought to address - namely that, historically, neither genteel philanthropy nor market magic have ever been able to meet the basic needs of large numbers of people. While it is undoubtedly true that the state will rarely compete with the loving care offered by friends and family, it is also the case that it is the best means we have of combining our resources together to provide a network of security for the times when we need help. The big society will never step up to take the place of state provision, and the market will never offer security to all. David Donnison's article in this issue points to the problems that remained when a new professional class took over the prewar gentry's roles of supervising local schools and hospitals and providing poor relief. But his answer is not that we should go back cap in hand to the gentry, but that we should find

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ways of making services more democratically accountable. What is needed is new thinking on mutuality, and ways in which the state can develop more responsive forms of care - with the state understood as a kind of reciprocal/democratic embodiment of our human responsibility for each other's welfare.

Historically, whenever the economy has failed to produce enough employment for those who want to work, there has arisen a general bemoaning of the fecklessness of the workshy, while benefit dependency has been wheeled out as the main cause of worklessness. New Labour's major contribution to this theme was the myth of the million who unjustifiably live on incapacity benefit. Steve Griffiths demolishes this myth - first by tearing apart the tendentious single piece of 'research' on which all adherents of this view base themselves, and secondly by comparing benefit statistics with health statistics, which show that one part of the state is denying the evidence of sickness clearly supported by another. The notion of a dependency culture - that need is caused by a flaw in the nature of the individual, rather than resulting from sickness, age or external economic circumstances - is perhaps the most pernicious aspect of current thinking on welfare. The constant harping on scroungers and cheats has been a cover for the pauperisation of the huge majority of those who live on benefits because of illness or because they cannot find work or have just lost their jobs. Guy Standing shows how this kind of rhetoric has led to benefits cuts, which produces downward pressure on wages at the bottom of the payscale, which in turn leads to further benefits cuts as their relative value is found to have increased. As he shows, the inevitable result of this downward spiral is workfare - compulsory and humiliating work as the price of benefits. The inspiration here is perhaps the discipline of the Poor Law.

Fiona Williams explores the implications of our over-reliance on market provision for child care. She sees the low pay and poor conditions of most who work in this sector as symptomatic of our society's general undervaluing of care - we haven't developed the means to measure its productivity - but also points to the ways in which this intersects with global inequality. Because women in Britain are now expected to participate fully in the workforce, someone else has to be found for the caring work they previously undertook. The numbers of low-paid British workers carrying out this role are increasingly being supplemented by migrants from the global South and Eastern Europe - who also help shore up the rest of our underfunded welfare state, to the cost of the home countries that have raised and trained them.

Soundings

A number of contributors to this issue offer insights into ways in which the left can regroup. Jonathan Rutherford argues that Labour needs to engage with conservatism, and to base itself in values that are shared in common - and that to do so it must move away from its strong embrace of liberalism. Marc Steers puts forward a radically different approach to Labour leadership. Richard Grayson urges a continuation of the dialogue between the Social Liberals and Labour. Richard Archer, writing from Australia, argues the pressing need for social democrats to engage with the green agenda. Finally John Stewart's inspiring account of the campaign against the third runway at Heathrow offers a textbook example of how to mobilise for change.

In the rest of the issue Andrew Blake reflects on the relationship between sport and national identity, while Amir Saeed looks at the fascinating range of identifications that are invoked by the figure of Mohammed Ali. Michael Burke argues that the EU has imposed a settlement on Ireland that has offered up the savings and incomes of its citizens to a joint EU/IMF debt-collection agency that is acting on behalf of Europe's banks - and this is part of a wider pattern in which the banking sector has continued to offload responsibility for the financial crisis. John Grahl argues that many of the most serious errors in EU economic policy stem from a basic failure to understand how market economies function in a monetary union. But though EU policies continually fail, the remedies they propose do no more than repeat their original positions 'with Brezhnevite consistency'. The constant resort to dogma in face of overwhelming contradicting evidence appears to be a tip that the market fundamentalists have picked up from previous unresponsive regimes.