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BLOG**

## Time to cut our ties with the welfare state?

Should we be nudging people into work or should state benefits be staunchly defended? There's an important debate to be had, says David Clements



The accusation of dependency on benefits and the focus on increasing conditionality in the welfare system to get people into work raise important questions, says David Clements. Photograph: Luke MacGregor/Reuters

There's something amiss with the present discussion about the welfare state. The interminable debate focuses on whether public spending needs to be cut a lot or a bit. There is no glimmer of light; no suggestion of building our way out of what is as much a political as it is an economic crisis. All is constraint. Whatever happened to the visionary rhetoric echoed by former Labour leader, the late Michael Foot, reminiscing on "the blissful dawn of July 1945 ... [and] the promise of a new society"?

Welfare has become a pejorative term, associated with community breakdown and antisocial behaviour, and everybody seems to agree that education is in a mess. But are things all that bad? OK, the welfare state is a creaking institution built 60 years ago to meet the needs of a long-gone age. But surely, as a society, we're in a better state than we were then, and many of the problems it set out to solve (grinding poverty, slum conditions, and an often precarious existence) are more or less ... well, solved.

Indeed, the ambition of the welfare age is rather shaming for today's pretenders to the welfare tradition. The parties of both left and right like to moralise about the lower orders and blame the feckless and the workless, but do they have any solutions beyond counselling the jobless, or managing people's emotional lives? While their predecessors built homes like they were going out of fashion – in the Depression-era and after a world war, no less – our own political leaders are apparently unable to build anything much ... least of all, houses.

And yet, the accusation of dependency on benefits and the focus on increasing conditionality in the welfare system to get people into work do raise important questions.

Is it legitimate to monitor the unemployed and "nudge" them into work, however deadend it might be; or should we continue to demand more, and stand up for the notion of a safety net, the one thing even the welfare state's harshest critics seem loathe to criticise?

The answers to these questions tell us a lot about what we think of people (or at least a particular group of people), what they are capable of and what they should aspire to. It also tells us a lot about what we think their, and by implication our, relationship with the state should be.

We may need to start again and build new institutions, or perhaps – as the new thinking would have it – take a more laissez-faire approach to welfare, and help the dependent to become independent. Do we want the state to intervene in our lives or should we go it alone – setting up our own schools, paying for our own insurance against the ravages of age and the market? Or is this just a solution for the relatively affluent, and another way of blaming individuals for economic problems?

While there is an honourable tradition on both left and right of criticising the welfare state for the legacy it has left, for doing too much to nanny us or not enough to meet our needs, it is perhaps time to take stock and figure out a new way forward, one that puts people's autonomy to the fore, and proceeds with that in mind.

- Dave Clements is a writer on social policy. He will be speaking at the Battle of Ideas festival at Goodenough College, London, on Saturday 20 March. His debate, [The welfare state: grasping the nettle, is part of the pre-election public summit: the battle for politics](#).

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