

A photograph of a Job Centre Plus building. A large green sign with the words 'job centre plus' in white and yellow lowercase letters is mounted on a brick wall. Below it, the title 'MINORITY OPPRESSION FROM THE WELFARE STATE' is printed in large white capital letters. At the bottom, the subtitle 'ANALYSING LABOUR AND CONSERVATIVE MANIFESTO PLEDGES ON WELFARE' and the author's name 'ROSS DAVIS' are also in white capital letters. The background shows a brick building with large windows reflecting the sky and trees.

job
centre
plus

MINORITY OPPRESSION FROM THE WELFARE STATE

ANALYSING LABOUR AND CONSERVATIVE MANIFESTO
PLEDGES ON WELFARE

ROSS DAVIS

Minority Oppression from the Welfare State?

Centre of Pan African Thought

86-90 Paul Street, London

EC4 8HZ, UK

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, or stored in any retrieval system of any nature, without the prior, express written permission from the Centre of Pan African Thought

Within the UK, exceptions are allowed in respect of any fair dealing for the purpose of research of private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Enquiries concerning reproducing outside these terms and in other countries should be sent to our Editor in chief, please contact editor@panafricanthought.com

The Centre of Pan African Thought is an independent learning and research institute in London, UK. We publish cutting edge scholarship, analysis and research, written by respected academics, authors and community leaders. To learn more about The Centre please go to panafricanthought.com

Analysing Labour and Conservative manifesto pledges on welfare

By Ross Davis

5th June 2017

Keywords: Black-Britain, politics, poverty, economics

“State welfare has schooled us to take for granted that the Nanny State will provide for all our needs. It makes of perfectly normal, entirely capable people who happen to be in temporary difficulty a fractious, subjugated underclass of welfare dependents.”

Introduction

The welfare state is a topic of particular relevance to the black community and ethnic minority communities at large, with statistics indicating that ethnic minorities are the most in need of state benefits. It is tempting to vote with the mind-set that policies pledging the highest amount of welfare provision will naturally be the most advantageous policies for ethnic minority communities. However, my anecdotal experiences (see “*Case studies*” below), alongside much prominent sociological theory, suggest that this may not necessarily be the case, and that the situation is potentially more complex. I outline my thoughts below.

A culture of dependency

Two fifths of ethnic minority households in the UK are considered to be low income, this is twice the rate of white households. Within that two fifths, 30% are Black Caribbeans and 50% are Black Africans. As such, it is clear to see why the area of welfare should be of central interest to the black community in the UK. Various campaigns (traditionally led by those of “leftist” persuasions such as the Labour party or the Green party) place increasing the amount

of benefits available to low income households at the centre of their welfare strategy, with the Conservatives traditionally being the party associated with benefit cuts.

Contemporary Conservatives have been largely influenced by a movement of thinkers known as the “New Right”; who were prominent in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the proponents of which include Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. At the core of this discourse are notions of Libertarianism and Social Conservatism. It is the combination of these notions that leads proponents of the New Right to take tough stances on topics such as welfare provision and single parenthood. With the black community in mind, the New Right’s explanation of the “Dependency Culture” created by the welfare system should be noted in particular. Put coarsely, many argue that generous welfare provision can lead recipients to a way of life characterised by dependency on state benefits, a culture of dependency. On this, David Marshland, a leading New Right theorist, writes:

“The welfare state undermines the psychological foundations of personal autonomy by sapping individuals of their native capacity for enterprising, self-reliant rational behaviour... [it supports]... idleness”

Much of the contemporary debate and policy in respect of the welfare state has clearly been dictated by this sentiment: an idea that welfare provision should be restricted so as to prevent it from being abused by the perceived “lazy”. Recent Conservative-led cuts to housing benefits would arguably stand as an example of this idea being put into practice, as would the controversial Work Care Assessment (WCA) tests introduced by David Cameron’s government. However, Marshland continues:

“State welfare has schooled us to take for granted that the Nanny State will provide for all our needs. It makes of perfectly normal, entirely capable people who happen to be in temporary difficulty a fractious, subjugated underclass of welfare dependents.”

Marshland thus presents the idea that welfare can act to suppress its recipients. So while on one hand, many Conservatives will argue that welfare spending should be reduced on the basis that such benefits are abused by the lazy, there is a hub of Conservative thinkers who believe that welfare spending should be reduced on the basis that benefits have the potential to actually cause harm to recipients by pushing those in only a temporary need of support into full dependency. In view of the fact that Black Caribbeans and Africans are statistically more likely to require welfare than their white counterparts, the idea that the welfare state operates to subjugate its recipients does not, in my view, seem far-fetched. If anything, this idea acts to explain the statistics: if one accepts the proposition that the welfare state acts to oppress its recipients, the statistics can be taken as being indicative of the fact that this oppression is systematic and that the black community is this system's primary victim

With this idea in mind, voting statistics and related studies related to the black community should be viewed critically. In the last election, the Conservative party won only 33% of the total ethnic minority vote, in contrast to Labour's 52%. Further, research indicates that ethnic minorities vote for Labour regardless of their social class, rather than because of it; voting for Labour would appear then to be a partisan choice of ethnic minority voters, linked to their racial identities. That is, among ethnic minorities, Labour appear to be viewed as the default and natural party of choice. In view of the ideas surrounding the Dependency Culture, I would posit that this stance must be re-assessed among black voters. The Labour party, through its traditional advocating of a large welfare state, could be viewed as, in turn, advocating the sustained oppression of the black community; albeit inadvertently

Sustained oppression

Central to the oppressive nature of the welfare state is its failure to address what Marshland has described as "temporary difficulty". I can best describe situations of temporary difficulty

by reference to two scenarios that I witnessed while working as a caseworker for the MP of Tottenham, shortly after the 2011 riots.

Case studies

1. The Graduate

During A's undergraduate degree, a parent had passed away and his immediate family structure broke down. He pulled through his degree but unfortunately his marks suffered as a result of his bereavement and he entered the job market at a clear disadvantage. Due to on-going stresses, he had little option but to move out of the family home. He was granted accommodation by the council and received Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) in order to sustain himself.

He eventually found a graduate position in his preferred industry but in order to be considered for a permanent role, he needed to undertake an unpaid internship. He was informed that if he were to work unpaid, this would not be deemed as "actively seeking employment" and he would therefore be ineligible for JSA – this placed him in a very difficult dilemma. The JSA regulations provided that the grounds upon which one could be treated as actively seeking employment would include being on a training course, experiencing domestic violence and even the "manning or launching of a lifeboat or...the performance of duty as a part-time member of a fire brigade", but did not cater for the instance of an unpaid internship.

1. The Hairdresser

B was on income support and received housing benefits to supplement the salary she earned from washing hair at a local salon. She wanted to do a course so that she could qualify to cut hair and thereby potentially earn enough to elevate her beyond needing income support. The

course was to be full time for a few months, but if she stopped working, she would lose her benefits. She was deeply frustrated that in this scenario the best solution appeared to her to be to stop working and go on full unemployment benefits (note that working part-time would not be an option as the rules provided that the scaling back of hours by choice would disqualify recipients for partial or full benefits). In this instance it was difficult to disagree with her conclusion that the benefits system was actively disincentivising her from working.

In both scenarios, the claimants in question were not let down by an insufficient amount of funds being offered to them. Rather, they were frustrated by red tape and poor regulation drafting. Better consideration by legislators of the mechanics of benefits themselves, that is – how they operated in practice – could have made a difference in either situation.

From scenarios such as these it became clear during my time in Tottenham that once within the welfare system it can often be difficult to get out. Those who turn to the state because they are in a transitional period of temporary difficulty risk very quickly being caught in a web of dependency, because in its current form, the welfare state focuses mainly on maintaining the livelihoods of its recipients rather than aiding their social mobility. In order for a welfare system to actively improve the situation of its recipients, many commentators argue that elements of state paternalism are required. Jordan describes what has been branded as “New Paternalism” as follows:

“The idea that government can and should use public support programs to promote certain behaviours ...intended to improve the economic, social, and civic capacities of the recipient.”

Hence New Paternalists posit that the welfare state should play a part in enhancing the Cultural Capital of its users. In order to better the positions of its recipients, the welfare state must quite literally act as parent and support the Socialisation of those in need of its services.

The 2017 elections: “Big or Small?” vs “What and How?”

Recent election campaigns have been dominated by the sentiments of a “big state” going up against those of a “small state”. The 2017 election campaigns appear to be no different with the Labour party’s manifesto containing pledges that will cost £48.6bn altogether. In these plans, £30bn is to be spent in respect of welfare over the life of a parliament. This sum is to be funded by extra tax revenue and the effective removal of a freeze on working-age benefits that was invoked by the Conservative government in 2016 – hence, in this regard, Labour, are once again advocating a “big state”. On the other hand, the Conservative manifesto states simply that the party has “no plans for further radical welfare reform” and would presumably (alongside proceeding with a number of further benefit cuts previously stated within their budget) maintain the freeze, hence maintaining their commitment to cultivating a smaller state. It is the author’s view that the contemporary fixation on “big or small” and “more or less” welfare fails to grapple with core issues of access, function and user satisfaction. In other terms, we are pre-occupied with the question of “more or less” (if greater or lesser benefit sums should be provided by the state), but seemingly not with “what and how” (how the benefits provided by the state should operate in practice).

I side with Marshland’s view that, in its current form, the system fails to cater for those in “temporary difficulty”. This deficiency cannot be resolved by adding money or, for that matter, removing money. Rather, as should be clear from the above case studies, greater focus must be put on access and functionality – how welfare operates to service its beneficiaries. It is arguable that, although primarily led by austerity concerns, the freezing of spending on the welfare state could in theory facilitate any party in power in reviewing and revolutionising the state’s core functions, rather than simply throwing money at the problem or, indeed, taking further action against the idle.

“How?”

In the author's view, there have recently been positive inroads in tackling the question and importance of how the welfare state functions; they were instigated by the previous government. As an example, in 2010 the Conservative led coalition established the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), one of the objectives of which being "improving outcomes by introducing a more realistic model of human behaviour to policy". A core project undertaken by BIT is the introduction of Personal Commitment Devices to Job Centres. A Commitment Device is a concept used in behavioural psychology, it can be defined as follows:

"[A] choice that an individual makes in the present which restricts his own set of choices in the future, often as a means of controlling future impulsive behaviour and limiting choices to those that reflect long term goals."

It is clear then that affecting the norms and behaviour of recipients is central to BIT's strategy in respect of welfare. Hence parallel to freezing the provision of certain benefits, the Conservative government has focused resources on considering how the welfare system can engineer socialisation.

The former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, also appeared to prioritise the issue of "how". The Universal Credit, introduced under his tenure, has nuances that impact the socialisation of its recipients. For example: it constitutes several different welfare allowances rolled into a single monthly payment and entails the direct payment of benefits such as housing allowance to the recipient (rather than to their landlord, as was previously the case). The fact of a once a month payment (JSA, for example, was previously paid once every 2 weeks) alongside the provision of a recipient's full benefits budget directly to their current account has the effect of benefit provision emulating a monthly "pay-cheque", typically received in the course of one's employment. The mechanisms and functioning of the Universal Credit may then assist in the recipient's cultivation of progressive habits such as

budgeting and money management in an identical way to members of the mainstream workforce.

It is notable that Iain Duncan Smith resigned from his position in response to cuts to disability benefits in 2016 on the basis that these cuts went “too far”. This indicates the need for a delicate balance to be struck in any government’s approach to welfare: the consideration of amounts must be undertaken in parallel with considerations of which groups of people have access to benefits, and questions of access must be balanced against the projects of social engineering and social mobility. Voters must be aware of when the balance is tipping in any of these regards: too little welfare can clearly damage a recipient, as can too much (note the Dependency Culture); if benefits go to those not in need, the needy will clearly suffer and if social engineering is neglected as a goal, welfare recipients may struggle to be socially mobile. Like Iain Duncan Smith, if a voter feels that the balance is tipped in any of these aspects, they must take decisive action (most likely, in terms of who they vote for) and withhold their support from whichever policy causes the problems.

Conclusions

It is concerning that the statements on the welfare state in the Conservative party manifesto are notably less comprehensive than those made in the Labour party manifesto. The Conservatives have recently made much of the fact that unemployment is currently at an 11 year low and it is notable that rates of persistent poverty have fallen in the UK. Perhaps statistics such as these have informed a view within the party that the welfare state, in its current form, is performing well. Even if this is the case and no “radical reform” is required, given the fact that overall poverty in the UK is still high relative to other EU countries, as well as the fact that statistics predict that child poverty is on course to jump from 2.3 million (in 2012) to 3 million by 2020, the Conservative party’s failure to settle public anxieties by

sketching out a detailed strategy on welfare is unsatisfying and could arguably show them to be out of touch with real life voter concerns.

At the same time however, the author has serious reservations about Labour's massive funding pledges and associated tax rises, with their reforms to work and pensions alone having been costed at £4.6 bn, albeit that their manifesto has been more comprehensive than that of the Conservatives on welfare overall. That said, the Institute of Fiscal Studies have indicated that Labour's manifesto has failed to set out the full extent of the tax rises required to fund their pledges and that if the party want a bigger state, "they should be willing to candidly set out the consequences – higher taxation affecting broad segments of the population [rather than just the wealthy few, as has been suggested so far]". Such proposals from the Labour party thus indicate a tipping of the balance away from issues of access, social mobility and social engineering to a focus on greater amounts of state provision; this could have the effect of intensifying further dependency, with ethnic minorities statistically being the most severely affected.