The British Welfare Citizen: Past, Present, Future

Covid-19, the legacy of the financial crisis in 2008 and the unsustainable promises made past Governments have together accelerated the crisis of the western European welfare state. Nowhere is this clearer than in Western Europe's least generous and most residual welfare system, that of Great Britain. The challenges here are profound. A universal state pension system that already has the lowest income replacement function in Europe is on the verge of collapse, sustained only by an inexorable increase in the national retirement age, likely to reach 70 in the 2030s. Unfunded pension promises made to public sector workers run into trillions of £s. During Covid-19 disability benefits and services almost completely evaporated and the disabled, to use a colloquial English phrase, 'were thrown under a bus'. The crisis in adult social care, notably the funding of care home places for those with dementia, was magnified and extended by Covid, even if the enhanced death rate of old people in such places has meant that some of the urgency for a solution has disappeared. Millions of people thrown out of work discovered what social policy scholars had been noting for decades: that the British unemployment benefit system is the least supportive of income in Western Europe. The NHS, a totemic centrepiece of the post-1945 British welfare model yielded amongst the worst health outcomes of any health care system in the developed world prior to 2020. During Covid-19 it collapsed completely and a system set up to support the people suddenly found itself on life support such that politicians felt the need to 'save the NHS' by accumulating debt and enforcing the most swingeing controls on liberty since the English Civil War. Even though the tax burden on the British people is the highest since 1952, the British welfare state is clearly on the brink of functional collapse.

In these senses, the single most important legacy of Covid is and will be the need for a new national conversation about the rights and obligations of welfare citizens, States and taxpayers. Britain is not unique in this respect, but the need for the conversation is more compelling. We have been here before. Between the later nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries as European countries sought to create or codify recognisably 'modern' welfare systems, their political and economic leaders fostered these national conversations.[1] More than this, the canvas on which they worked was truly international, with the exchange of people, ideas, philosophies and structures.[2] In this context – as leaders, providing evidence, founding pressure groups and fostering debate about

[1] See contributions to S. A. King and J. W. Stewart (eds.), *Welfare Peripheries* (Oxford, 2007), and R. Bellamy, D. Castiglione and E. Santoro (eds), *Lineages of European Citizenship: Rights, Belonging and Participation in Eleven Nation–States* (Basingstoke, 2004).

[2] E. P Hennock, *The Origin of the Welfare State in England and Germany, 1850–1914: Social Policies Compared* (Cambridge, 2007).

alternative structures and modes of finance - we find historians such as Syndey and Beatrice Webb. Modern politicians, policy makers and even pressure groups have lost sight of this history of conversation and participation. Indeed, across Western Europe it is the case that the problems of the welfare states are constructed in 'presentist' terms; modern problems with modern causes and modern solutions. This mode of thinking goes some way to explaining the risible policy tinkering and deepening crisis that we see in Britain in particular.

My accumulated work has sought to reverse this argument and thinking. In essence, I contend that the history of welfare is not simply a backdrop to the modern welfare arena, but an integral part of the explanation for current crises and of understanding what policies might save the British welfare state. This argument has particular reach in the British context. While Scotland and Ireland/Northern Ireland did not align with England and Wales in terms of the organisation and funding of welfare until the 1840s or even later, the latter two countries were unified in the first large scale national welfare system (the 'Old Poor Law') from 1601.[3] They continued to be yoked together into the centrally organised New Poor Law, which ran between 1834 and 1929.[4] In all senses then, the modern British welfare state stands on these foundations; the history of welfare is essential rather than discretionary.

Given this philosophical starting point, I have made four core arguments about the way that history can and should inform current dilemmas and potential solutions. The first is that all British incarnations of the welfare state from 1601 onwards have been imposed upon, created or intensified marked regional differences in sentiments to welfare and welfare recipients. While other historians have focussed on regional particularities in the causes and scale of poverty or in the ability of local taxation to meet need, my own work has argued that these variables are of secondary importance compared to deep and long lasting spatially defined cultures of welfare.[5] In effect I argue that up until the 1940s there was not *a* single system of welfare, but multiple systems existing within a notional overall national policy. The post-war welfare state has, through its intertwining policies of universalism and rigid national rules, given a

[3] S. Hindle, *On the Parish? The Micro Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England 1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004); J. Healey, "Coping with risk in the seventeenth century. The first age of the English Old Poor Law: A regional study", in M. Tanimoto and R. Wong (eds), *Public Goods Provision in the Early Modern Economy: Comparative Perspectives from Japan, China, and Europe* (Los Angeles, 2019), 100–17.

[4] B. Harris, *The Origins of the British Welfare State: Social Welfare in England and Wales, 1800–1945* (Basingstoke, 2004); L. Hollen–Lees, *The Solidarities of Strangers: The English Poor Laws and the People 1700–1948* (Cambridge, 1998).

[5] S. A. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700-1850: A Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000); S.A. King, "Welfare regimes and welfare regions in Britain and Europe, c.1750-1860", *Journal of Modern European History*, 9 (2011), 42-66.

veneer to the impression that we have a national welfare system and yet utterly failed to work through the consequences of regional differences in sentiment which persist in the 2020s. Thus when in 2020 the disability charity SCOPE listed the worst places in Britain to be a disabled person (in terms of services, opportunities and welfare dependence) few of those reading the statistics would have been aware that those same places would also have been the worst places to be disabled in the nineteenth-century as well.[6] The potential solutions – their cost, scope and markers of success – to problems like these change, once we appreciate the deep historical roots of dilemmas that are currently constructed in presentist terms.

My second intervention has been to demonstrate that the British welfare system is rooted in the discretionary powers of local officials and taxpayers. For more than 240 years from 1601 there were no legal rights to receive welfare; merely a right to apply for it.[7] This system was of course open to abuse by individuals and to systemic attempts at cost saving, but the post-1948 welfare state is hardly a model in these matters either. The advantage of local discretion was that innovative and tailored solutions to particular welfare problems, as well as more co-ordinated responses to exogenous events such as trade depressions, were a natural and expected part of the operation of State welfare. More than this, because such welfare was financed from local property taxes, it is universally true that such localities taxed themselves for welfare purposes at a much higher rate than a central State could ever have done. Modern welfare states, especially that of Britain, are predicated on the basis of national rules with no local discretion. Thus, the very worst poverty problems are merely contained rather than addressed. This history matters as the country struggles with the moral and economic costs of income support in the wake of Covid-19.

It follows from these observations (and my third core argument) that in the long history of the British welfare system, a tri-partite negotiation process – between officials, taxpayers and the poor or their advocates – lay at the heart of who got what welfare, in what form, and for how long.[8] The power structures involved

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[6] See: https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/disabled-people-and-coronavirus/the-disability-report/. Accessed 6/1/22.

[7] S. A. King, "Negotiating the law of poor relief in England 1800-1840", *History*, 96 (2011), 410-435; S. A. King, *Sickness, Medical Welfare and the English Poor 1750-1834* (Manchester, 2018); S. A. King, *Women, Welfare and Local Politics 1880-1920: "We Might be Trusted"* (Brighton, 2005).

[8] S. A. King, P. Carter, P. Jones, N. Carter and C. Beardmore, *In Their Own Write: A New Poor Law History From Below* (London, 2022); P. Jones and S. A. King, *Navigating the Old English Poor Law: The Kirkby Lonsdale Letters, 1809-1836* (Oxford, 2020); P. Jones and S. A. King, *Pauper Voices, Public Opinion and Workhouse Reform in Mid-Victorian England – Bearing Witness* (Basingstoke, 2020); S. A. King, *Writing the Lives of the English Poor, 1750s-1830s* (London, 2019).

in this process were unequal and a determined official could override the concerns of both the poor and taxpayers. Yet for the most part the negotiation process meant that outcomes had legitimacy. The poor did not always get what they wanted or felt they deserved but nor did the taxpayer. Those who became or stayed dependent upon welfare benefits were not exactly partners, but nor were they the equivalent (to use modern welfare terminology) of 'clients' or 'customers'. Both of these terms inscribe powerlessness into the situation of the poor and both privilege the processes and linguistic registers of the system itself. Rather, the poor were and were seen to be welfare citizens. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the establishment of the NHS, poor people were specifically constructed in these terms.[9] It is only subsequently, in the maturing welfare state from the 1960s, that mechanisms of negotiation and associated concepts of citizenship have been supplanted by rigid rules and the submersion of 'the personal' in welfare arrangements. The collapse of the disability benefit system during Covid-19 is just one example of the disastrous consequences of the retreat of a negotiated welfare citizenship.

Finally, I have questioned the utility of legal rights to welfare. As established above, at no point between 1601 and the Liberal Welfare Reforms of the early 1900s (and even thereafter for many people) was there a right to welfare.[10] In the twentieth-century and particularly since 1945 this situation has been reversed. Starting with pensions and unemployment support, and extending to maternity, child and disability benefits, frameworks of legal right associated with fixed national rules and processes of evidencing have come to dominate the experience and perceptions of welfare. Associated anti-discrimination legislation has led to a levelling of those rights. Yet, when the Conservative-Liberal Coalition sought to respond to the Financial Crisis in the 2010s by in effect defining away disability through raising the movement and cognition thresholds required to obtain disability benefits, there was little popular protest outside of the liberal elites and stakeholder groups.[11] The British law courts have subsequently blocked some of the worst aspects of this policy but it remains the case that ordinary people simply did not care, or worse suspected disability benefit fraud to be endemic and hence cuts to be reasonable. As legal rights to welfare have extended, so the moral rights of welfare claimants have receded. Yet the Old and New Poor Laws were predicated on the basis of moral

[9] J. Harris, "Political thought and the welfare state 1870–1940: an intellectual framework for British social policy", *Past and Present* 135 (1992), 116–41.

[10] D. Sutton, "Liberalism, state collectivism and the social relations of citizenship", in M. Langan and B. Schwarz (eds), *Crises in the British State 1880–1930* (London, 1985), 63–79; J. Cooper, *The British Welfare Revolution, 1906–14* (London, 2017).

[11] See: https://www.newstatesman.com/uncategorized/2015/04/disability-audit-eight-coalition-policies-have-hit-disabled-people. Accessed 2/1/22.

rights and those moral rights ensured more favourable welfare outcomes than the legal rights that have replaced them.

What, then, might the participation of welfare historians at the centre of a new national conversation about the future British welfare citizen look like? In terms of the current state pension crisis they might be the ones talking about the absurdity of a universal system, demonstrating that universalism is a recent product of political gesturing which does untold damage to the needs of the poor and leads directly to miniscule income replacement rates. They might also be the people talking about a flexible and negotiated retirement system, one in which work and pension can be fused to generate minimum incomes and unconstrained by a standard 'retirement age'. In terms of disability benefits, these same welfare historians might be those arguing for a new moral framework to shape the place of the disabled in the welfare state broadly defined, and for this moral framework to be a driver for fundamental uprating of benefit packages that reflect the historical place of the disabled as the core group of the deserving poor. And in terms of income support, the welfare historian might be the one arguing (both on the basis of history and the disastrous inability of welfare systems to cope with adult unemployment due to Covid) for a system of flexible, tailored and discretionary support with a strong local input. They might, in other words, be the ones arguing that the welfare past and welfare future are indelibly linked.

Conclusion

The British welfare state offers systematic subsidies to the lifestyles of the middle-class, chiefly through the NHS but also maternity and child benefits. Many of these elites have become ever more distant from the poor, especially from the 1960s. Covid changed that as many middle-class people were suddenly confronted with the systemic failures of the British welfare state. Much as in the 1870s and 1880s, when newly formulated poverty lines demonstrated to an incredulous public that poverty had mainly structural, life-cycle and cyclical, rather than individual roots, there has developed a 'moment' for a new conversation about welfare citizenship.[12] The starting point for this conversation has to be the shrinkage of moral and conceptual distance between the same three parties that have always dominated the British welfare bargain: officials (and their political controllers), taxpayers and the poor. In this sense we would do well to remember that such distance as now exists is a product of the most recent incarnations of the welfare state. In the past people were not (or in most

[12] A. Gillie, "Identifying the poor in the 1870s and 1880s", *Economic History Review* 61 (2008), 302–25; A. Gillie, "The origin of the poverty line", *Economic History Review* 49 (1996), 715–30; E. P. Hennock, "The measurement of urban poverty: From the metropolis to the nation, 1880–1920", *Economic History Review* 40 (1987), 208–27.

cases not just) part of the same physical community, but they were part of a wider emotional community of poverty and its alleviation. Stephen Reynolds locates this very precisely, arguing of the working-class communities in which he lived during the early twentieth-century that enforced and:

> Extreme thrift, like extreme cleanliness, has often a singularly dehumanising effect. It hardens to the nature of its votaries, just as gaining what they have not earned most frequently makes men flabby … It is all right as a means of living, but lamentable as an end of life.[13]

A new welfare conversation thus requires localism, moral right, discretion and negotiation at its very core.

[13] S. Reynolds, *A Poor Man's House* (Oxford, 1982), 229.