

NEW LEFT PROJECT

Workfare: Ed Miliband's Defining Challenge?

Ed Miliband has become Labour leader at an opportune time, when a new progressive vision is required, when the labourism that dominated progressive politics for a century has run its course. There are many legacies to remove. But one should be at the heart of progressive renewal. The new generation must rescue work (productive and reproductive activities outside subordinated labour) from labour ('jobs'), and reverse the trend to what should be called 'labourfare'. It is not being too polemical to say that under New Labour and under the Coalition Government the trend has been towards forced labour by the precariat, the emerging class consisting of those in insecure economic situations without a sense of career or satisfactory balance between their education, aspirations and opportunities[1].

We may accept that the designers of labour market policy in the globalisation era are not in favour of forced labour. However, the philosophical premises that have guided the development of workfare risk generating precisely that outcome for a minority of our citizens. Since the 1990s, labour market and social protection reform in the UK has been driven by religion and finance. The key figures shaping it have been Tony Blair (a convert to Catholicism), Gordon Brown (a man of Christian convictions), Frank Field (ditto) and Iain Duncan Smith (another Catholic convert), as well as a former merchant banker, David Freud, ennobled by New Labour for his services to social policy, who switched to advise David Cameron when he saw which way the political wind was blowing and who is now a government minister.

There has been a religification of social policy, led by Catholicism, drawing on Pope Leo XIII's famous encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, which set out the duty to labour by the poor. Tony Blair's favourite theologian, Hans Kung, regarded laziness as a sin. Duncan Smith has also said it is a 'sin' not to take up jobs. Just after entering government he made the eerie statement, 'Work helps free people', reminiscent of a saying etched in our collective memory as emblazoned on a gate to a hell on earth. Of course, he did not intend the reference, but his statement reflects the naiveté of equating labour with work, and imagining that jobs liberate. Since he meant 'labour', he must explain how litter-clearing or graffiti-cleaning for pitiful wages (the activities he has set as mandatory labour) could enhance freedom.

Religions tend to treat 'the poor' as 'the unfortunate', to be pulled up by charity and the discretionary benevolence of the state, church, synagogue or mosque. Workfare is most likely in highly unequal societies where social mobility is low, and where tensions are rising due to economic insecurity among the losers, those who have fallen into 'social exclusion'. A mental image emerges of a minority separated from the mainstream.

An attitude of benevolent paternalism prevails: The poor are not like us. They fit into three categories – the deserving, undeserving and transgressing, the last being not just undeserving by habit but lawbreakers as well. This allows a judgmental perspective, consistent with the Americanisation of social policy, whereby the poor are not seen as our brothers or sisters but as subjects for reform, for treatment.

Both New Labour and the Conservatives have looked to the USA for their welfare policy, lauding in particular what has been done in Wisconsin and, in the Conservative case, rushing in two openly paternalist American advisers within weeks of taking office. One, Lawrence Mead, another committed Christian, has said that Christ gave no preferential treatment to the poor, has called theologians the ‘unacknowledged social legislators’ and has written that the unemployed must be induced to ‘blame themselves’ for their hardships. In the press in 2010, he expressed pleasant surprise at how his advice had been welcomed in Downing Street. Meanwhile, another paternalist, Richard Thaler, joint author of *Nudge*, became adviser to Cameroon’s new ‘Nudge Unit’, the task of which, according to Deputy Premier Nick Clegg, is to make people make ‘better’ decisions. Such a statement would make the great liberal, John Stuart Mill, rage in his grave.

The religious and paternalistic ways of thinking transform policy by making it *moralistic*, directing people to behave in ways deemed by the policymakers as best for them and for society. But if you are being told what to do, you cannot be moral. To be moral is to act out of self-imposed duties and ethics. Paternalistic policy takes away the freedom to be moral and thus risks cultivating an ethos that is amoral. Great philosophers, such as Kant and T.H.Green, have taught us that.

Besides religion, the road to welfare has been paved by utilitarianism, in which the pursuit of the happiness of the majority allows a different attitude to the unfortunate and ‘persistently misguided’ minority. It is no coincidence that another influence on social policy under Labour was Richard Layard, also ennobled for his endeavours. Layard, an avowed admirer of Jeremy Bentham, who was keen to punish and shame society’s minority of losers through his panopticon devices, helped shape the coercive aspects of Labour’s various New Deals. He later became its ‘happiness and therapy czar’, inducing the Government to coerce youths into jobs and the unemployed to take sessions of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. It was also the Labour Government that introduced unannounced snooping on the homes of benefit claimants, dressed up as a device to ‘help’ the unemployed. Is anybody fooled?

By contrast to all this, the progressive instinct throughout history has been to see someone in difficulty as a brother or sister, not a sinner, but someone having bad luck that could be mine tomorrow. This has been the essence of social solidarity and egalitarianism throughout the ages. Progressives avoid moralism, which does not mean they lack morality. The financiers, old Etonians and moralistic religious conservatives want to reform people to make them more

employable and righteous. They are prepared to use coercion and rely on sticks rather than carrots, especially if the sticks can be made to look like carrots (a point made explicit in the welfare White Paper). The progressive thinks in terms of structures and factors that induce pervasive alienation and anomie. The progressive thinks that the human condition is such that we all want to better our situation, and that if some are victims, the first place to look for answers is in reform of the market economy. Perhaps people are shut out by an absence of opportunities to develop their humanity. Perhaps the available options are so low paid and so precarious that people resist taking them, because they offer no escape from the poverty trap and the precarity trap[2]. This does not make them lazy or scroungers. There are jobs and options that most of us would hate ourselves for taking. It is not being haughty or lazy to have an aversion to activities beneath our dignity. There is even a collective aspect of this, shown when people not only refuse to buckle but resent it if their friends or relatives buckle, thereby putting moral pressure on each other. This is not reprehensible. It is all very well for those who have had private welfare for life, through inherited wealth and comfortable upbringing, to lecture those being pushed towards unpleasant precarious jobs. But the precariat is growing angry.

The dominant sentiment of the religious conservative is *pity*, and as David Hume pointed out long ago, pity is akin to contempt. The losers are failures worthy of our help, as long as they show gratitude and earnest endeavour. If they do not follow our guidance, they should be persuaded to mend their ways, and failing that they should be coerced or penalised. The road from one thought to the next is well-trodden.

By contrast, a progressive starts from a sentiment of *compassion*. That is me over there - or could be. That man or woman should have the same security as anybody else. Only then can they make something of themselves. But I do not know what they want. That is or should be up to them. I have no right to force them one way or the other. This is where the progressive takes a stand.

With religification and utilitarianism dominant, progressives should develop a counter narrative as a matter of priority, and not fall into the opportunistic trap of matching the dominant line. Unfortunately, having laid the groundwork for workfare, Labour is in danger of allowing political opportunism to win. When the workfare plans were being hatched in late 2010, Labour's Shadow Work and Pensions spokesman, Douglas Alexander, said he was in favour of 'real jobs and real sanctions', the latter being for those people not taking 'real jobs'.

Well, clearing litter is a 'real job', even if it pays a pittance and could end a week after a person has steeled himself to do it. Suppose somebody 'refused' such a job. What would be the 'real sanction'? One presumes Alexander meant 'effective'. But suppose taking away 50% of the benefit was the real sanction for not taking that litter-clearing job. It would make life more miserable for the person. Suppose it did not work in driving the unemployed into litter clearing. Would Labour go to the next stage and to the one after that? Take away all benefits, and fine

them for causing us distress? This line of argument may make it harder for the utilitarians to call Labour soft and in favour of idleness. But it is a dreadful road to take that is anathema to a progressive narrative. Surrendering the ethical ground, in the vague hope that if the policy fails political capital can be gained later, is no way to forge a progressive strategy.

A progressive response should be that *if* our people – brothers and sisters – do not want to take up precarious, low-paying jobs that require long commuting or medical risks, then we should do something about the nature of labour and the payment on offer. This goes back to the reasoning by Adam Smith, the father of neo-liberal economics. He reasoned that wages would adjust to compensate for the unpleasantness of specific jobs. It has never worked remotely like that. A progressive should say that we should move towards that model. Let the labour market act like a market is supposed to work. Let us have commodified labour (the activity) where the wage adjusts to match supply and demand. But let us move to a situation where people as workers are decommodified, having adequate economic security in which to refuse jobs they regard as undignified, dangerous or damaging to their long-term development. Start from the presumption that the human condition is to want to work, to want to better ourselves. This is not being naïve. If a few individuals want to dissipate their lives, perhaps idly, we may want to encourage them to think differently, but not with ‘real sanctions’. And trying to identify and chase ‘undeserving types’ is arbitrary, socially corrosive and undignifying for all concerned.

Consider the other part of Labour’s current position, that workfare is justified as long as there are ‘real jobs’ for the unemployed. I defy the Labour leadership to come up with a definition of such jobs that could be defended ethically or economically. Suppose they say the jobs should pay the minimum wage and that their productivity would be such as to justify paying it. Putting the unemployed into such jobs would put downward pressure on the wages and conditions of others doing such jobs, which could then drag them into poverty. On what ethical principle would this be justified? Or suppose the jobs were of a kind that others did not want to do, because they were dirty, dangerous, stigmatising or undignified. They would have the opposite effect of what Alexander, like Duncan Smith, would presumably want, namely to break ‘the habit of worklessness’. Such jobs would be done only under duress, in desperation. Is this what Labour has in mind? One hopes not. It belongs to the utilitarians and religious paternalists. Egalitarians should want the labour market to operate so that wages in unpleasant jobs rise until labour supply emerges freely. Those in the precariat understand that, which is why they would be politically and morally justified in opposing any party going in the workfare direction.

Workfare should be a touchstone issue for a progressive. Labour – or the left more generally – has up to four years to develop and present a radical alternative perspective towards work and occupation[3]. Unless it is prepared to risk short-term unpopularity by reaching out to the precariat, Labour cannot claim to be a progressive force for the 21st century. It could start by remembering that social services should be precisely that, and not be instruments of social engineering, however benign, and by remembering that people who have basic security make

better decisions by themselves. Instead of making security dependent on behavioural conditionality (a contradiction), progressives should trust ordinary folk to behave well if they are provided with basic security as a right. If Ed Miliband can grasp that age-old value of the left, he could use it to forge an emancipatory egalitarianism suited to the next round of progressive politics. Will the utilitarians and religious souls around him allow him to do that? We shall see.

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Notes

1. See G.Standing, *The Precariat – The New Dangerous Class* (London, Bloomsbury, 2011)
2. For analysis of the precarity trap, see *The Precariat – The New Dangerous Class*, and the companion article to this one in *Soundings*.
3. For an attempt to outline such a strategy, see G.Standing, *Work after Globalisation: Building Occupational Citizenship* (Cheltenham, Elgar, 2010).

About this article

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