



Understanding Social Change

Welfare - who's responsible?

Sarah Neal

In what ways do you think these voices reflect the movements and changes in welfare provision in Britain since the 1940's? Rob.

Rob Sykes

Well it's often said, or often used to be said that we've lost the golden age of the Welfare State and that what had been established, based upon the Beveridge Report in the 1940's represented some sort of high point of welfare provision in the UK. And it's certainly the case that the provision of National Health Service, education, social insurance, a whole raft of provision of policy to do with welfare in that period really did represent what is called nowadays a step change in terms of welfare provision in this country and I suppose, therefore, it's sometimes easy to forget that, although it's rather more difficult for me – just to add a personal note since I was born shortly after the establishment of that – and it's rather easy, I think, to sort of rubbish the notion that there was in fact a real shift in people's attitudes and, indeed, in the provision of welfare in that period, when seen from the trajectory of where we are now in 2003. There certainly were, however, gaps in provision and there certainly was a sense in which the golden age was for some people, and in some senses, not quite to gilded as it was for others.

Sarah Neal

Heidi, how do you think that those three voices capture the shifts in welfare provision?

Heidi Safia Mirza

I think that they capture it very well. Beveridge is talking about security through social citizenship and Thatcher was a real sea change where she's talking about the state inhibiting the energy of, and the vitality of the population, so moving away from the state, and then you come to Blair who wants to combine the two which is often called the Third Way, and bringing the individual together with the state, and having a kind of symbiotic relationship. I don't think that there was a golden age, and I don't think that's what Blair is seeking to find either. There have been much exclusion from the state welfare provision; it wasn't all-embracing and all-encompassing. For example in the 1950's when I was born, *The Times* was saying that commonwealth immigrants are lazy, they come here to sit around, not work, get money from the Assistance Board, as it was called then, and take our social housing, and it's so interesting because you could actually mirror some of those attitudes towards those commonwealth citizenship people today in looking at how asylum seekers are seen as scrounging from the welfare state, so they were definitely excluded, even though they had the right of British citizenship in the fifties, and came here as migrant workers they were still excluded. There was also gender exclusion because the welfare state was constructed very much around an ideology of a male breadwinner, so women often didn't or weren't able to have the national insurance contributions so that they could have the benefits, they were often in part-time work and didn't see themselves in that role, so we have both gender and class exclusions, and race exclusions.

Sarah Neal

Rob, in terms of the impact of the Thatcher administration on welfare provision, what was that, what happened in the 1980's?

Rob Sykes

Well sitting and listening to what Heidi had to say there, and I agree entirely with her about the points about the exceptions and the people who were missed out, I think it's important

nevertheless and I think she would probably agree with me, that one of the interesting conceptions, one of the interesting notions which was introduced in the immediate post-war period, and which until perhaps Mrs Thatcher came along, was quite prominent, was the idea of an inclusive collectivist approach towards welfare, the idea of a certain sort of social citizenship. Heidi's absolutely right, of course, that largely meant the male head of household. Now what Mrs Thatcher did was to challenge centrally those ideas, those ideas about collectivism and the ideas about how welfare could and should be provided. She did that in two ways, I think, by opening up, in her phrase, the British economy to the full force of international competition, essentially allowed the economy to suffer in many senses, because what happened was that there was an increase in unemployment in various areas as people lost their jobs, as a result of that competition certain businesses simply couldn't compete, manufacturing in particular. And that that in turn, of course, had implications in terms of increased poverty, what nowadays is more referred to social exclusion. For a number of other policies associated with what she saw centrally was a need to move away from the state, the collectivist provision of welfare, more towards people doing it for themselves, putting the money into people's pockets so they could buy their own welfare. Perhaps an example of that is the sale of council houses, but there are others too; the idea of a property-owning democracy was at the heart of all of that. But just as important, actually in my view even more important in the long-term, in terms of looking forward to Mr Blair and New Labour policies, was the ideological shift, the ideas associated with welfare, it wasn't just that she was attacking collectivism as a means of delivery, it was also about the idea that individuals were the best people to make their own choices, and that we look to ourselves as providing our own welfare. So in a sense the sale of council houses, the sale of shares, the property-owning democracy is both a sort of policy shift associated with opening up the market, but it is also an ideological shift, a shift about how in terms of what Mrs Thatcher thought anyway, we should change our views about what the state could and should do.

Sarah Neal

And picking up on that, Heidi, that idea of an ideological shift, do we see that informing more contemporary patterns of welfare provision in the late 1990's and 2000?

Heidi Safia Mirza

I think the ideological shift that we've seen over the last forty years of the welfare state has been matched by an economic shift. I think there's been a major change in structural unemployment and employment. The welfare state, which was very much structured around the person being in work and making their contributions, began to really challenge the economy because if you have rising unemployment, how do you then pay for this welfare state? So the ideological and the economic shifts go together, and I would say that the recent Blair position on the Third Way very much represents the way in which you have individual responsibility and duty, and then you get certain rights, rights for certain kinds of support from the state. So if, for example, the new deal for employment where young people are trained and they find jobs through government schemes, and that's to bring them into the workplace, but they then have the responsibility to work, and there are sanctions if they don't maintain their side of the bargain, so that's the way that the welfare state now works. There's this duality where you have rights and responsibilities in one fell swoop.