

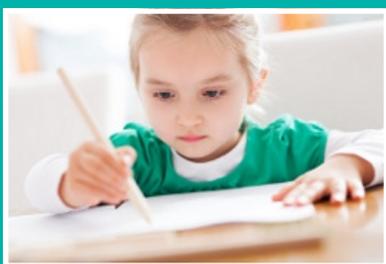
Think Piece

Achieving a Social State:
*What can we learn from Beveridge's
Giant Evils*

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Series: A Social State for 2015



December 2012 marked the 70th anniversary of the Beveridge Report, significant not only for its content but also for its context. In the midst of World War II, with a budget deficit and national debt that makes today's look negligible, the Report laid the basis for the radical reforms introduced by the Labour Government in 1945.

If war-time Britain could summon up the energy and hope to build a better world in 1945, this generation certainly can too. Seventy years ago the Beveridge Report announced the pursuit of a new settlement, one that would dramatically change the structure of Britain for the better. With this in mind, this series of work looks at what Beveridge's analysis of society can teach us about the Giant Evils of today and how we use this to chart an alternative course for a welfare state - or *Social State* - fit for a new settlement in 2015.

This paper was commissioned from the author to introduce the Social State series and look at how Beveridge's Giant Evils can be redefined for today.

Author

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What can we learn from Beveridge's Giant Evils

Want, Ignorance, Idleness, Squalor and Disease - Beveridge's Giant Evils of society give us a perfect snapshot of the core beliefs that created the towering achievement that was – is, just about – the Welfare State.

He was at the vanguard of framing unemployment from a macro-perspective; he was just starting to introduce to mainstream debate the idea that it might be the job of the economy, rather than the person, to tackle idleness; and yet he was still bound by the language of a time that saw each individual as agent of his own misfortune.

It was a time when education, too, was portrayed as a personal attainment rather than a public good, the lack of it therefore manifesting itself as a shortcoming of the individual – ignorance – and not a failure of society. And yet, even in this sink-or-swim era, when the unfortunate were blamed unreflectingly, even shamelessly, for their own misfortune, their hardship was nevertheless seen as a stain on society.

We have made significant gains in the way we understand society, and our place within it. Unemployment is now widely seen as a function of a failing economy, rather than a sudden and unexpected attack of fecklessness. Education – especially now, in the new contest about the agents of its delivery – is judged by how well it serves the poorest. We tend not to write people off as ignorant-on-purpose, although this change of attitude has not been enough, on its own, to level the playing field - the consequences of leaving school without decent qualifications are more serious than ever.

We've also made significant losses, specifically, in the amount of responsibility we will take for one another's conditions. The 'pity' narrative that drove much of Beveridge's support has fallen out of fashion; that's a boon since, though kindhearted, it was also bogus, this idea that some people were simply less worthwhile than others, and yet should be cared for nonetheless, the way you would a dumb animal. Besides which, in ascribing no responsibility to the rich for the trials of the poor, it was as likely to fuel one-off acts of charity as it was to spur a welfare state.

However, the idea that grew up in its stead – the idea of equality as a public necessity, like clean water and breathable air, a trait as beneficial to the rich as it is to the poor – has not properly penetrated the discussion. Furthermore, the assault of neoliberal ideas – specifically, the notion that society can only prosper if the rich have unfettered access to greater riches – has recast poverty as a necessity.

We can retake the vision, scope and ambition of Beveridge’s project. However, it can’t be revived on its own terms – different principles have to be underlined. Equality, as a goal, has to take the place of freedom from want. Ignorance, as a social problem, must be recast as a problem at the top more than at the bottom – the failure, or more likely refusal, to see that the accumulation of great wealth comes at the expense of security and wages. We must rethink unemployment altogether; rather than seeking a return to the New Labour era, where any job was better than no job, and low wages were subsidised by the government on behalf of ‘the children’. We must go back to the principles that Thatcher tried to destroy – a fair day’s pay; collective bargaining; and trade union representation. We are in a situation where corporate super-profits are effectively endowed by in-work benefits, and people take wages that don’t cover their rent, just for the dignity of working. This is not sustainable, economically or socially; nor is it desirable. The remarkable trait here is not the idleness of the worker, but the greed of the employer.

Which shall we say does the most damage, between idleness and greed? Idleness, even if it existed at the scale the Coalition claims, could only undermine society by degrees of one idle person at a time; one person’s greed can infect a whole industry, an entire region, a full tier of the workforce. Even if we accept at face value the notion that they are morally equivalent, we are still talking about the difference between a bayonet and a bomb.

Squalor has changed mainly in the sense of our perception that we have the power to change it – the disparity between wages and house prices ebbs and flows. It is at an all-time high right now, but it has, throughout history, been impossible for some workers to live in conditions that we – and they – would consider acceptable. In waves of squalor, solutions are born – first the building society in the late 18th century, then the permanent building society in the 1840s, then an amendment to that parliamentary act in Beveridge’s time.

Today, a combination of factors has led to an overwhelming feeling of impotence. The grand Thatcherite project to destroy social housing was a success – following the council-house sell-off, sheer scarcity of stock meant that social housing was only for the very poorest. Stigma followed, inexorably. Meanwhile, in the mainstream market, a housing bubble forced all but those with inherited wealth off the property ladder, which in turn overheated rents. A sense that we have simply run out of space fuels the otherwise incomprehensible spending plan whereby, over the next four years, the government has budgeted for £96 billion to go on housing benefit, and only £4 billion on building new houses. In this area more than any other, a new optimism is needed, married to an old pragmatism – subsidizing landlords is not the solution, and nor does it result in any meaningful control for a government.

A new programme of house building, as ambitious as that of the post-war period, is the only way out of this bottleneck. But nobody will undertake this by Keynesian logic alone, or from the thrifty consideration of the housing benefit that could be saved (though both of those are sound reasons). Only by articulating a case against squalor, insisting that a developed nation cannot abide a return to Victorian living conditions, can anyone propel this argument, with enough impetus, in the right direction.

And finally, disease – the awe-inspiring success of the NHS, both practically, as an institution, and philosophically, as a project, has sucked the fear out of this conversation. It should be a cause of wonder that commentators now talk of obesity as our greatest epidemic – it should make us rejoice in how many more frightening and more savage epidemics have been conquered. But you can't spend your life in a state of perpetual surprise.

Without the constant spectre of what life would be without it, the NHS-conversation now spins on a different axis; since the unveiling of the Health and Social Care Bill, that meaningless 'pause', and the vexed passage of the Bill, debate has centred on private provision of public services. Is it more efficient? Does it matter, so long as the service remains free at the point of need? Do we care if a profit is made, or ministers are hand-in-glove with private companies? Will this create a two-tier system, and how destructive could that be? Essentially, these are questions about the free-market. It makes perfect sense that a discussion about the National Health Service would, in our time, contain very little actual 'health'. It is the boldest Socialist project

this country has ever undertaken; people who hate it, hate it for much bigger reasons than how much it costs, and people who love it, love it for much bigger reasons than the diseases it cures.

And yet, even with the existence of the NHS, we have not conquered the disparities in life expectancy between one income group and another; indeed, the gulf of good health between the rich and poor is one of the starkest indices of what inequality does to a person, its irreparable, inescapable effects. The great battles of disease, in Beveridge's time, were medicine against polio; sanitation against cholera; public infrastructure against chaos; mankind against nature. Our battle is subtler, and boils down to altruism against market forces; fellowship against self-interest. The protection of the NHS, in anything like its current form, depends upon the case being made that it is immoral to profit from another's illness. This argument may sound anachronistic – any appeal to morals has a dated, rather precarious feel to it – and yet that principle has been the wellspring of our most important advances.

Which raises another demon, unremarked by Beveridge, perhaps because it simply didn't obtain: *disunity*. It is a powerful political tool, now, to set different income brackets against one another, and to divide people within the same income bracket by imagined characteristics. We have hard-working families against benefits cheats, and strivers versus shirkers. The rich are, apparently, a different quality of person altogether, people with no roots, who would happily move their families across the world if they lost a proportion of income that they couldn't possibly spend to the public purse. And yet, those aren't the people whose parenting ruins society – that's a moving cohort, very often defined by its poverty, which might by another light qualify it as a 'hard-working family'. Ed Miliband's coinage of One Nation Labour begins to make a point that will need to be made ceaselessly and trenchantly if change is to be wrought: society will only work if we believe ourselves all to be fundamentally alike, with the same fundamental needs and qualities and ambitions and hopes, with the same desire to help one another, with the same urge to overcome our differences rather than retreat into them. These are the values of trade unionism and socialism alike.

Achieving a Social State for 2015

Replacing Want with Inequality; Idleness with Greed; fighting a different kind of Ignorance; attacking Squalor with fresh vigour; remembering Disease for the foe that it once was, and could be again; and recognising the continuing threat of Disunity; we have our own Giant Evils.

It is very last-century, to look at barriers, many of them elemental human weaknesses, and expect to feel galvanized and invigorated by them. And yet, this is what the Marxist Antonio Gramsci called the pessimism of the intellect – without which, the optimism of the will has nowhere to go. Beveridge didn't create the Welfare State from nowhere – he created it by articulating the dangers and myriad sorrows of a life without it.

All of the policy papers in this series will look at the questions raised by Beveridge seventy years ago and will attempt to locate a path forward for the welfare state in 2015 Britain.

The Centre for Labour and Social Studies (Class) is a new think tank established in 2012 to act as a centre for left debate and discussion. Originating in the labour movement, Class works with a broad coalition of supporters, academics and experts to develop and advance alternative policies for today.



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