

Introduction

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We live, as ever, in interesting times. With a General Election imminent, the UK Social Policy Association has decided to repeat its successful publication *In Defence of Welfare*, published for the 2010 election with a follow-up volume, *IDOW2*. The intention is to publish *IDOW* in the run-up to successive future elections as a means of marking the 'moment' and drawing attention to developments (or the lack of them) in social policy over the presiding government's term of office. What is in this current volume? Nearly fifty short pieces from a diverse range of social policy academics and commentators – senior academics, those just starting out on their academic careers, policy makers and journalists – that concentrate on one aspect or other of 'welfare' over the past five years. The overriding tone is critical, whether the focus is on growing inequalities of income and wealth, the nature of welfare reform and the impact of 'austerity' on the worst off sections of the UK, migration and immigration or the vagaries of the changing labour market. Taken together, these contributions amount to a sustained attack on a government that has displayed little understanding of what it means to be 'disadvantaged' (a word that barely conveys the social and financial exigencies to which many people have been exposed in recent years) – a government that has quite clearly and systematically favoured the demands of the powerful and better off over the needs of the poorest sections of society.

It is not difficult to understand why this particular kind of favouritism should be the case. 'Twas ever thus, many would say. Fatalism of this kind, however, is not what is required – and not what characterises the views expressed in this volume. What *is* required is a sustained critique of embedded neo-liberal assumptions that privilege wealth creation over distribution, private over social investment, tax cuts over public spending and, consequently, inequality

over equality. Looked at through a social, as opposed to economic, lens, what the Coalition Government has done is to place the demands of an economic deficit over those of a growing *social* deficit. Better, apparently, to stick to the line that the most wealthy must be allowed to continue their pursuits unhindered, in the interests of protecting liberal capitalism, rather than address the obvious weaknesses of a system so starkly exposed by the banking scandal and ensuing economic crisis – and reform the system itself. Greater attention to the social deficit – the social and individual consequences of, *inter alia*, extensive benefit cuts, increasing conditionality, low wages, cuts to local government services, 'efficiency savings' in health and social care, and cuts to legal aid – would produce a more equitable balance between the needs of people and the (supposed) 'needs' of the economy.

To move in this direction – to embed the economic within the social rather than vice versa – is not an easy path to choose because it brings critics face-to-face with the serried ranks of politicians and economists who persistently proclaim that there is no alternative to deficit reduction and the austerity measures that accompany it. Their views need to be challenged. Leaving aside the question of whether the notion of the 'deficit' is essentially a social construction (it is), the constant refrain about the need to reduce it and the policies developed to achieve this aim means that it is certainly real in its effects. In the UK and elsewhere, the message has gone out that deficit reduction is the only thing that matters and, further, that the only way of achieving this goal is to cut public spending radically, while allowing private wealth creation to flourish. The result, of course, has been a failure to tackle head-on the inequalities of wealth and income that have grown in the UK over the past thirty years, the cumulative costs of which underpin many of the analyses

presented in this edition of IDOW. It is for social policyists, social scientists and citizens in general, to challenge the claim that reducing the deficit should be the single most important objective of the next government. This assumption should be countered at every turn in the shape of questions that ask about the social costs of narrowly cast economic policies. Is it acceptable, for example, that suicide rates among benefit claimants are increasing in the wake of rising sanctions (penalties levelled against ESA claimants, for example, rose 470% between December 2012 and June 2014, see the *Observer*, 14th December, 2014)? Is it acceptable that people in receipt of benefits should be removed from their homes and communities because they cannot pay the 'bedroom tax'? Conversely, is it OK that wealthy individuals do not apparently face penalties when their tax avoidance and evasion strategies are exposed? Again, how reasonable is it that zero hours contracts and/or exploitative working conditions for those at the sharp end of the labour market are allowed to continue (at significant cost to taxpayers!) by a government that has continually claimed that 'work pays'?

To those who ask about alternatives to austerity, it is not difficult to argue that taxation should play a bigger part in the overall picture – there is considerable room for both higher income and

property taxes, for example, in addition to the proper enforcement of the current tax regime. Social investment strategies, particularly those that target local, regional and UK-national economies, could help to regenerate areas of the UK outside London and the South East. Further, policies designed to re-empower trade unions would help to balance a labour market environment which has seen too much power accrue to large employers with inefficient and inequalitarian results. The wider point, though, is the need for balance. A future government should seek to restore the significance of the social, valuing what a focus on this dimension has to say about what it means to govern in the interests of *all* citizens. Crucially, as part of this approach, there is a real need for politicians to develop a responsible civic language that does not divide people into the simplistic categories of 'scroungers', 'benefit cheats' and 'shirkers' – or, for that matter, 'taxpayers' and 'hard working families'.

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