Cut Out

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Living Without Welfare

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To Barrie Blower, in homage and friendship.

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Introduction

'Rich' and 'poor' are ancient, apparently inseparable opposites; sometimes antagonistic (the rich monopolise the necessities of the poor), at others symbiotic (without the wealth-creators we cannot afford the social amenities we need). The words are so clear, and so deeply embedded in linguistic habit, that we have almost ceased to ask how people come to be included in these categories: they are self-evident, unavoidable. The rich, like the poor in scriptural admonition, will always be with us.

This book is concerned with what makes people poor in modern societies, and what prompts governments to relieve or to aggravate poverty. The economic condition of 'the poor' – an abstract collective noun – has been the object of much attention throughout history, not least because of their capacity to disrupt or interfere with the established order. Their social and political potential for mischief has been a matter of great concern to ruling elites. They have been in receipt of both punishment and leniency, according to the temper of the age. It might have been thought that in countries as rich as ours, the poor would be treated with consideration, if not tenderness. This is far from being the case.

The condition of poor people in societies of unparalleled wealth raises certain questions. Since most people in Europe, North America and Australia are no longer poor, those who remain so have become victims of a popular contempt that was absent when a majority of the people lived in poverty. (What the wealthy minority thought about them is another matter, since they have been constantly referred to in disparaging

terms – the great unwashed, the masses, the hoi polloi, the common people; more recently, the underclass, trailer trash, losers.)

'The poor' have been only crudely differentiated, usually into groups understood to be meritorious or culpable, that is, deserving and undeserving. Much effort has been expended on defining the virtuous poor by ascribing exculpatory causes to their poverty. Everyone knows that widows and orphans, the lame, halt and blind may be poor through no fault of their own; while the idle and vicious, the feckless and addicted, the degenerate and improvident are thrown into the category of the perverse and wilful. If an aura of piety surrounds the idea of the blameless poor, denunciations of those who have brought upon themselves their own misfortune are far more resonant and morally charged. There is something satisfying in the condemnation by the righteous of those they see as unworthy and excluded. And a minoritised poor – welfare cheats, scroungers, skivers, parasites, free-loaders, beggars – attract a lexicon of abuse in rich societies, in which majorities no longer insecure can congratulate themselves on their own (often less than merited) prosperity, while expressing their loathing for those unable, for whatever reason, to avail themselves of the abundance which developed societies have placed, at least in theory, within the reach of everyone.

The economic function of the poor in our time is twofold. They serve first of all as a constant reminder that yet more economic growth is essential in order to remedy their plight and to lessen their – already diminished – numbers; and secondly as a spur to further self-enrichment by those who have already achieved much, since to fall into poverty is a fate not to be contemplated. Poverty must remain grim, a state

to be dreaded. For this reason, poverty in the contemporary rich world has a strong element of contrivance: it must remain as a deterrent, in order to encourage the respectable and the well-to-do to avoid it all costs.

There is clearly a contradiction in these purposes: piety is at war with condemnation. This is not difficult to explain – the 'need' for constant economic expansion must be maintained, since this is the vital purpose of the economic system itself; yet this increasing plenty must still exclude significant cohorts of people, in order that they may be brandished as a scarecrow at those comfortably situated. In other words, the poor must be punished, but they must on no account be permitted to vanish, for their presence is essential: to be scourged, but not into disappearance.

This dual function makes for a certain complexity – ensuring poverty-abatement but not poverty-elimination is quite a tricky task in an economy that produces annually some £2 trillion in GDP. But remarkably effective ways have been found to ensure that enough people remain poor, or on the verge of poverty, to prevent the rest of us from becoming complacent or, even worse, admitting that we have enough for our needs; such an admission would, of course, be catastrophic for an economy which depends upon a perception of perpetual scarcity in order to keep on expanding.

This book tries to show how certain individuals remain or become poor; and also to account for efforts by the present government to impoverish them further, in the interests of maintaining a sense of insecurity among the better-off. 'Reforms' to the welfare system should be seen in this light; for they ensure that poverty – as a carefully maintained and harrowing experience – is in no danger of being eradicated,

and that the poor, unlike many other creatures in the world, are in little imminent danger of becoming an extinct species.

The 'causes' of poverty may be sought primarily, not in the easy moral categories beloved by politicians, but in the profound inequalities that are part of the great diversity of human characteristics. It is difficult to ascribe individual responsibility to the existence of such a distribution, which is why we tend to concentrate solely on *behaviour*, to which everyone is expected to conform, despite their differences in endowment, inheritance and capacity. Some cultures, of course, value certain human attributes above others; but, in general, a particular set of observances, decencies and codes of conduct is exacted in all societies. Those which prevail in our privileged moment make it rare indeed for people to make a virtue of restraint, frugality and abstention from consuming as much as human beings can when they set their minds and money to it.

While researching this book, I was struck by the factors, some profound and ineradicable, some easily remediable, which had determined the state of want and lack of basic necessities in the lives of people who might appear as failures, as unsuccessful, poor or marginalised; and by how little of this complex skein of circumstances could be reasonably interpreted as a result of their own wilful behaviour. Who, with any other option, actually makes a 'choice' to sit in the rain or under a bridge stinking of piss, holding out a styrofoam cup to receive pence from passers-by?

In the judgements and condemnations lie archaic remnants of morality long overtaken by what we now know about human psychology, the nature of societies, and the inheritance of individuals. Is it an absence of imagination, an inability to

enter into the experience of others, or a residual conviction in the existence of an unqualified 'free will' that makes us humiliate poor people? It is a constant refrain of the successful that 'If I could rise out of poverty and disadvantage to become what I am today, why can't he or she?' The argument suggests that because some people have been able to make good in the world, despite the most horrific circumstances of birth and upbringing, it must follow that if others fail to do the same, they are in some way guilty and must be stigmatised accordingly. Rather than singing hymns of gratitude to their good fortune, those who have risen in the world often prefer to turn indignantly upon those incapable of following the path they have 'chosen', and to condemn their inability to do so as a moral failure.

The wounds and injuries suffered by many poor people do not enter into the crude calculus by which benefit systems, social security arrangements or welfare provisions operate. Yet if anything close to 'social justice' were to be established, it would be necessary to inquire into the situation of those disadvantaged a) psychologically (lovelessness or bereavement, neglect or cruelty in childhood), b) intellectually (people endowed with a modest capacity for reasoning), c) socially (the inheritance of generations of servitude or slavery), d) mentally (the chance distribution of emotional and psychiatric disorders), e) linguistically (those in a society they do not understand), f) culturally (people whose traditions and norms are at odds with the dominant social values), g) genetically (inherited diseases and health conditions, including some very common ailments, prone to heart disease and cancer), h) accidentally (victims of traffic or other accidents), i) traumatically (especially through war, crime or natural catastrophe),

or j) randomly (as in the distribution of certain characteristics, such as timidity, fear, anxiety or recklessness). Many other human features readily stigmatised – idleness, promiscuity, irresponsibility, anger – were not actively selected by those who exhibit them. And this takes no account of the predictable trajectory of human lives – the dependency of childhood, the ability to procure and sustain labour that will provide a living, the process of ageing, decline and death.

It was an awareness of these complexities that informed the basic premise of the welfare state: to answer need at the point where it was identified, irrespective of the cause. 'Need' is no more enhanced by virtue than it is cancelled by unworthiness. The provision of welfare was originally against the known vicissitudes of human life, and broadly, against the vagaries of economic cycles – times of full employment, of recession, of economic change, of the impoverishment of some groups and the prosperity of others. It was a fairly blunt instrument, but the misfortunes to which all humanity is prey at one time or another endowed it with a sense of fairness and propriety, recognised and approved of by a majority.

If the subsequent partial privatisation of provision for unemployment and old age, as well as private health insurance and education services, the raising of fees for university education, the necessity for the individual to make his or her accommodation with a capitalism become global, have combined to make the idea of a welfare state appear as redundant as many of those to whose afflictions it was designed to respond, the biggest contributor to its apparent dispensability has been the growth in prosperity and the rise in living standards. This has made a majority feel secure in providing for their own needs (with the exception of the National Health

Service, which remains one of the most loved institutions in Britain, the erosion of which is both feared and resented), and has created a sense of daily well-being for a majority who do not foresee long periods of dependency upon State support. This, together with the spectre of spiralling 'welfare costs', has made possible the government assault on the well-being of poor people, with only modest resistance from the still-prosperous majority, who, confident that they will not fall into want, often feel distant and uninvolved in the fate of the unfortunate. 'There but for the grace of God go I' was a common reaction at a time of mass insecurity and poverty; but as we have become richer, the grace of God has become, like the finances required by welfare, a scarce resource, and we need no longer look with the same compassion upon those in whose wounded lives we might once have been able to read our own possible destiny.

It cannot be a lack of resources that prompts cuts in welfare in a country which, despite the recent recession, has never been richer, and in which a potlatch of excess co-exists with a pinched, skinny misery. If a country virtually bankrupted by the Second World War could find the wherewithal to institute a universal welfare system, the claim in that same country, awash with luxury, ostentation and extravagance, that it can no longer afford to care for its least fortunate is so blatant an untruth as scarcely to need refutation. If public anger against government policy has been muted, this is probably because the actions of government are seen by the poor as simply yet another malignant visitation among many, as part of the bleak landscape of the deprivation they have come to expect in life.

There are two obvious tasks facing today's dissenters and radicals, although the fact that they are self-evident does not make their accomplishment any easier. These are not the

overthrow of capitalism (of which there seems little chance), and certainly not acceptance of the current 'reforms', which is a euphemism for the undermining of welfare. The first is to strive for greater fairness, in which the wealthiest will make a just contribution to the well-being of those out of whose labour, acquiescence and powerlessness their fortunes are made; the second is to embark on a genuine reform of welfare, which will provide the damaged and injured of capitalism with a decent subsistence that does not debar them from full participation in the life of society, however eccentric and wasteful that society may have become.

Such feasible improvements demand a more humane understanding of the needs of the vulnerable and deprived; the more so since many of those vulnerabilities and deprivations have been artfully and cunningly wrought, in order to maintain poverty rather than to alleviate it. As it is, personnel administering the benefits system are themselves undervalued in an unequal society, and the low worth in which they are held gives them an added inducement to visit their own resentment upon those they are supposed to serve. More sensitive training and appreciation of the life of people who use all welfare services should be instituted. A more responsive approach to 'casework' by the social work profession (itself also discredited in our baleful, welfare-hating age), should be available, and assessments of need not left to a mechanistic calculus, the justice of which few are in a position to monitor. Assessing the needs of other human beings is not an ignoble undertaking, the drudgery of ill-paid functionaries. It should be endowed with prestige and a sense of 'vocation' (that curious word which meant 'calling', not necessarily by God, but by the heart and imagination, themselves now atrophied organs in a dust-dry

system increasingly void of compassion). A renewal and re-dedication of the welfare state is on few political agendas; probably because it is the first requirement of a regenerated humane society. That political parties vie with each other in denouncing the poor, and in pleading the artificial poverty that prevents the richest societies in history from assisting those in need, should be denounced for the cant that it is.

The thrust of the present Conservative 'reforms' to the welfare system has deep historic roots, and they are the opposite of what is required to bring relief to the poor. It imposes an ideological rigour that stifles and conceals real needs. The 'discipline' of reduced incomes, the sanctioning of benefits, the withdrawal of support, evoke an old and – it had been thought – discredited tradition of compulsion enshrined in centuries of punitive poor laws, workhouses and all the other instruments and institutions of 'correction' for those spectres at the feast of wealth and power, who, if excluded from it, were obliged to serve it with mute and subservient respect.

There are two main themes addressed in this book: first, the personal, social and psychological forces that contribute to contemporary poverty; and second, the failure of those who have the capacity to do so to offer any useful or plausible remedy other than their own prejudices. That this latter process has so far worked better than the government might have expected – with relative social peace and the easy crushing of dissent – does not mean that such a happy situation will last for ever. The direction in which capitalism is moving – as Oxfam reveals that the richest 62 people on the planet own as much wealth as the poorest half of humanity – does not suggest that the poor will remain for ever quiescent, or even in a permanent minority. Pressure on new generations, the degradation of work, the

insecurity and fragility of general prosperity, the accumulation of private debt, long-term stagnation of incomes, the disparagement of public sector workers, homelessness, people being forced to work at levels far below their capacity, the unstoppable growth of inequality – all this scarcely confirms the picture of progress the government paints, any more than it supports its vision of a 'high-wage, low-welfare, low-tax' economy. Poverty, in societies of such wealth, is economic violence – a phenomenon that goes unrecognised as such because 'economic forces' (with their coercive overtones) are noted for their impersonal nature, their capacity to deprive by stealth, so that impoverishment appears as a 'natural' phenomenon.

Patience and resignation have always been commended to the dispossessed by those who have withheld from them, or robbed them of, a decent sufficiency. And for long periods they have shown acquiescence and fortitude. But such qualities, admirable though they may be, are not inexhaustible. Sooner or later, they will rise up to instruct ruling elites, rarely with the magisterial loftiness with which they have themselves been treated, in the necessity for greater humanity and forbearance.

The sudden awakening of the much paraded (but for the past six years at least, slumbering) social conscience of Iain Duncan Smith, and his resignation from government in March 2016, undermined the principal pillar of Conservative social policy, and admitted to the world that its devotion to austerity is elective. He confirmed the story of this book, and what many have long suspected – that 'reform' of the welfare state is simply a euphemism for demolition.

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