

York Union: The benefits system has created a culture of dependency, not mobility

By [Ciarán Morrissey](#), Comment Editor (2015/16)
Sunday 30 November 2014



Image: James Hostford

Last week, the York Union hosted a debate regarding the role and effectiveness of Britain's welfare system. The motion discussed was the current benefits system had created a culture of dependency, rather than one of social mobility.

Arguing in favour were John Bird, founder of the Big Issue, and Camilla Goodwin, communications officer of the Institute of Economic Affairs, a neoliberal think-tank.

Arguing against were Patrick Butler, social policy editor of the Guardian, and Mark Ferguson, founder of LabourList, an influential "independent, progressive blog".

Opening the debate, John Bird argued that the benefits system did not benefit the working class and was instead a "sinister, right-wing invention". Bird, placed the blame on Thatcher; rather than re-skilling her displaced workforce, she was content for them to live on benefits. As a result, our system is merely there as a means of "warehousing", and defending this, he pointed out that only 0.5% of children who come from "benefit homes" (he didn't define this) go to university, whereas 85% of our prison population comes from such homes. Hence, the benefits system at present represents a means of trapping the poor in poverty, dooming most to lives of hopelessness and extremely dim prospects. Instead of subsidising the poor, the argument made was that we should seek to place them in gainful employment.

Patrick Butler, on the other hand, dismissed the motion entirely, arguing that instead that the idea of

“benefit families” is simply an urban myth. He explained that the idea of three generations of families living on welfare is not substantiated by statistics, and argued that the benefits system was the victim of damaging misconceptions. Citing Teesside University, Butler claimed that most people taking JSA only ever took it for a short amount of time and were instead in and out of low-paid, low-prospects jobs. This proves that a culture of laziness doesn’t exist; benefits are below-subsistence level and nobody would choose to live on them. The benefits issue, according to Butler, always comes down to a lack of jobs. There aren’t enough jobs, and hence there aren’t enough people employed and with good prospects.

Camilla Goodwin made a clear fiscal case against the benefits system. Once people begin earning, they either see their spending power drop or increase by a fraction, due to their benefits ending. This creates a system in which it is easier to live off benefits than a low-paid job and hence traps people within the system. She also argued that government-driven schemes to introduce people into work are always unpopular, such as workfare; the government would provide benefits to people to take on unpaid work, which would, in theory, allow them an easier transition into the workforce. This was attacked as a form of slave labour, and almost immediately shelved. Additionally, she said, instead of increasing subsidies towards the poor, we should focus on bringing down the cost of living in Britain.

Finally, Mark Ferguson, like Patrick Butler, attacked the notion of welfare dependency. In his view, it’s impossible to be dependent on something that you cannot depend on; the welfare system is below subsistence and so cannot be depended on, hence there cannot be a dependency culture. In addition, he made the case that there are far too few well-paid jobs and that, for a lot of young and working class people, the minimum wage represents a wage ceiling, rather than a wage floor. Like John Bird, he argued that this was a form of social control, with unemployment functioning as a means of keeping working people docile and more likely to accept their lot in life. He attacked the “manifestly inadequate spending” of the current government and called for EU-style welfare reform.

The debate focused mainly on the government’s efforts or lack thereof to engage with the unemployed and invest in large-scale, high-paying industries. There was a lot of flak directed at “Owen Jones and Polly Toynbee types” by Bird, who argued that today’s liberals do not represent the working class, are out of touch and are dooming the poor through goodwill. However powerful his arguments may have been, though, the crowd did not agree, and the motion was rejected.



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