

REVIEW: LETTERS TO WILLIAM BEVERIDGE

Ian Martin

Usha Brown, Gil Long and Carolyn Sawers (eds) (1998) **Dear Sir William ... letters to the father of the welfare state**, Glasgow: Scottish Poverty Information Unit, Glasgow Caledonian University, pb, £6.95, ISBN 1 901248 28 3, 84pp.

It's a neat idea: Sir William Beveridge writes an open letter to whoever is interested in giving him their views about the health of the British welfare state - 'my baby' as he rather coyly puts it - as we approach the beginning of a new century, about fifty years after its birth in the immediate post-war period. He is particularly interested in what people think about two criticisms that, he understands, are frequently expressed about his progeny: first, that it has encouraged a dependency culture and undermined individual responsibility; second, that it has failed to keep pace with social, economic and cultural change, and has, in effect, become an anachronism. He also wants answers to two particular questions. First, are people still willing to pay for the welfare state, and does their attitude to this vary between universal services such as health and education, on the one hand, and selective services such as social security, on the other? Second, can we, as a society, afford to pay for the welfare state?

The text takes the form of 38 replies to this letter. Each is prefaced by an emboldened quotation from what follows. These vary from critical analysis, eg '... tax reliefs constitute a form of upside-down benefits or reverse targeting', through uncompromising critique, eg 'Your paternalistic notions ... never seemed well founded in reality. What was all that stuff about the welfare state being meant for short periods of temporary misfortune?' to the authentic cry from the heart, eg '... with old age looming over me, I feel very frightened'. This is what is most interesting and refreshing about the book:

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the range of voices that speak directly - often eloquently - to the reader through such a deceptively simple formula.

Basically, there are four sets of voices. First, there is the expert voice, represented by several (but not too many!) contributions by well known academic authorities and commentators on social policy. For instance, the opening letter from Adrian Sinfield is a cogently argued case for a committed modernisation of the welfare state that is based firmly on its founding principles of equity and progressive redistribution; Lindsay Paterson celebrates the real social and material successes of the welfare state, recognising education's central role in this achievement, whilst going on to advocate a radical rethink so that the social policy of the next century is more open and accountable to the diverse, demanding and sometimes dissenting citizens it has helped to create. Second, some members of the civic establishment respond, notably Sir Herman Ouseley of the Commission for Racial Equality and Cardinal Thomas Winning. Third, there are the many and varied voices of organised civil society in Scotland. Most of these represent special interests with particular concerns: people write in from voluntary agencies, pressure groups, social movements organised around welfare issues, trade unions, churches and quangos. Fourth, and perhaps most interesting, are the voices of private individuals - ordinary people telling their own stories or beating their own drums. Notable by their absence from this debate are the voices of party politics in Scotland. It is not clear why this is so, but it does seem to me that the important thing, as the election of the new Scottish parliament approaches, is that the politicians listen to the people before they claim to speak for them.

Any attempt to summarise the contents of this book would fail to do it justice because the contributions are so different, often idiosyncratic. Nevertheless, there is clearly a broad consensus in favour of a renewed commitment to the basic principle of a publicly funded welfare state as one of the building blocks in the process of democratic renewal in Scotland. What is more, this must be based on a recognition - and there is an unequivocal message for New Labour here (if it wants to listen) - of the role of the state in both providing and managing welfare services on behalf of the people to whom it is ultimately accountable. The new Scottish state has a job to do - and there is certainly no popular mandate on this evidence for handing that job over to the market. As one contributor puts it, 'Governments have a duty to argue the case that a decent society for everyone requires adequate public expenditure funded through taxation'.

Given this general message, four key themes stand out for me.

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First, the welfare state has transformed people's lives. In comparison, the so-called dependency culture is either deliberately misconceived or simply insignificant. Several contributions, particularly those from individuals who speak for themselves from their own lived experience, show how the welfare state, whatever its weaknesses and meannesses, has given ordinary people the opportunity to flourish as human beings and to serve the interests of the wider community. For instance, there is the son of 'Red Clydeside' who overcame childhood polio thanks to the new National Health Service and went on through state schooling to study theology at university and become a minister of the church - much to his father's pride and disgust. The case for universality could hardly be better stated.

Second, times have changed and the welfare state needs to change. Nevertheless, some things, like poverty and inequality, have not - fundamentally at any rate. Beveridge could hardly conceive of the kind of economic, demographic, social and cultural transformations that have taken place over the last fifty years. The problem is that the welfare state, to some extent overtaken by events even before it even took shape, was constructed in ways which were bound to make some aspects of social policy anachronistic, anomalous and contradictory - for example, in relation to women, lone parents, many minority groups, and, of course, the poor and unemployed. So reform is required, but there is almost unanimous agreement that this must be about strengthening rather than weakening the state's commitment to its citizens' collective welfare.

Third, reform must reflect critique. As Richard Titmuss argued and many of the accounts in this book demonstrate, social policy means making choices and consequently 'welfare for some' has meant 'ill-fare for others'. The most consistent and insistent line of critique comes from women: 'How could you ignore the situation of women?' These are voices of both anger and despair. The modern welfare state has been built largely on the backs of the private, unpaid and invisible welfare provided by women and the assumption implicit in this of the gendered division of labour that is characteristic of the traditional (was it ever?) nuclear family - increasingly a minority pursuit in contemporary society. Here is something that Scotland's new parliament must address if democratic renewal is to mean anything at all because:

Women do not become 'undeserving' because they have children - do they? Are working mothers supporting men and children 'deserving' - if so, of what? Not a minimum wage or public child care or full trades union protection, it seems.

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As Lindsay Paterson points out, we can expect the case to be made all the more forcefully as the young women - as well, increasingly, as our minority ethnic communities - who have benefited from the meritocratic opportunities provided by non-selective comprehensive education in Scotland make their voices heard. They are not going back to the kitchen sink or dead-end jobs!

Finally, of Beveridge's five giants, the one we have had least success in slaying is Want. This is largely because we have not understood - and perhaps we have been unwilling to confront - the causal relations between poverty, inequality and class. This, in turn, takes us back to the relationship between economic policy and social policy, and the purposes and values which should - but so seldom seem to - inform and guide the relationship between means and ends. All too often, the welfare state has been the victim either of its own success or, as Adrian Sinfield suggests, of a misdiagnosis of the problem:

It is not the welfare state which is the main cause of the current problems of welfare, but the growth of those very factors which led to the introduction of the welfare state in the first place - the social and economic costs of inequality and poverty, high unemployment and labour market insecurity.

So what does this book have to say about the agenda for democratic renewal in Scotland?

The study of social policy has become something of an academic industry in its own right and the arguments are necessarily complex and contested. What is valuable, refreshing and distinctive about this collection of letters to the father (sic) of the modern welfare state is its simplicity and directness. There is, of course, plenty of difference and debate about the details, and this must become the stuff of democratic politics and policy-making in the new Scotland. We do need to evolve new more open, decentralised and participatory forms of social welfare - essentially a more democratic and inclusive welfare state. But the overall message of the voices that speak through this book is loud and clear: the welfare state - whatever its deficiencies and disappointments - has made life much better for most people in Scotland. It will have to change with the times, but there is no popular mandate for dismantling it or privatising it. All but one of the contributors to this unique collection would endorse the view of Tom Leonard which prefaces the text that we have had more than enough of mean-minded managerialism and the discipline of market:

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the state hospital
with one bed

always full
always efficient

All too often, 'thinking the unthinkable' has meant 'doing the unspeakable'. What we want in Scotland is a properly accountable and publicly funded welfare state - and we are willing to pay for it out of direct and determinedly progressive taxation. That is the message that comes out of this book. Prospective MSPs take note!

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