

VIEWS & REVIEWS

FROM THE FRONTLINE

Thatcher's legacy

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Rats on the streets during the bin collectors' strike, the Green Goddesses, wildcat strikes, flying pickets, the closed shop, block votes, "one out all out," restrictive work practices, double digit inflation, a three day week, and a winter of discontent. The 1970s in Britain were a time of national crisis, with undemocratic and out of control trade unions.

The Conservatives won the 1979 election: working class people had voted for change. The Thatcher government crushed the unions' power, but the price was broken communities, public disorder, and mass unemployment. The industrialised north and Scotland paid the heaviest price, while the south east and London experienced economic renewal. Margaret Thatcher was a saviour to some, a political savage to others; this was her divisive legacy. Thatcherism set off a cascade of consequences: the current deregulation of the NHS is simply her unfinished free market business.

There is another Thatcherite legacy—worklessness. During the 1980s and 1990s, unskilled middle aged men were haemorrhaged from heavy industry, with no hope of work in the new service based economy. So general practitioners were encouraged to redefine the unemployed as "sick" to get the unemployment figures down. We colluded, because this meant some improvement in meagre benefits for patients. So this

worklessness doubled between 1985 and 1995, to more than two and a half million people, but varied hugely by region. Today in areas of Glasgow, 17% of the working age population is deemed too sick to work, eight times more than in Hampshire.¹ (These figures do not include people officially deemed unemployed.) This huge difference can be explained only as a social phenomenon; it cannot reflect true variation in disease or disability.

Worklessness is a modern medical scourge. With 1.8 million children living in workless households,² it is associated with poor child development and schooling, behavioural issues, unhappiness, and increased risk of being a NEET ("not in education, employment, or training") at age 18.³ For adults, worklessness is bound to poverty and premature death.⁴ It is worklessness that has created the chasm of inequality, leaving millions of children in poverty. These are society's new precariat, and society's elite are unwilling or unable to tackle this pernicious sickness. But welfare reform must happen, whatever the lobbying, protests, and conflict.

Welfare reform is not about paying down the national debt but about saving the mental and physical welfare of millions of marginalised people. And today there is a public consensus for change.⁵ We must break the cycle of worklessness. This will take Thatcherite conviction, steely leadership to see it through, a willingness to be disliked, and even historically to be considered divisive. Worklessness and welfare are a national crisis, and reform must not be for turning.

- 1 McInnes R. ESA and Incapacity benefit statistics—Commons Library Standard Note. 13 July 2012. www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN01420.
- 2 Office for National Statistics. Working and workless households 2011—Statistical Bulletin. September 2011. www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/imac/working-and-workless-households/2011/stb-working-and-workless-2011.html.
- 3 Institute of Education, National Centre for Social Research. Intergenerational transmission of worklessness: evidence from the Millennium Cohort and the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England. September 2012. www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RR234.pdf
- 4 BBC News. Poorest Scots die 13 years early, report suggests. 30 November 2010. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-11878212.
- 5 NatCen Social Research. British social attitudes. 2012. www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk/media/13421/bsa29_full_report.pdf.

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