

The Birmingham Debate: The Welfare State - can we afford it?

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“The current welfare state is fundamentally broken – we need a new ‘Beveridge report’ for the twenty-first century” (Professor Jon Glasby

"Although it is doing many of the wrong things, the current Coalition's diagnosis of the problems is closer to the truth than many would like to admit. Many commentators agree that the current cuts are too much too soon, and that they could hit the poorest hardest. There is also a suspicion that the underlying motives might be ideological rather than economic, using the current financial context as a pretext for changes that some in government would have liked to make anyway.

Despite this, the government's notion of a 'Big Society' does touch on something real and important (even if the phrase itself isn't necessarily very helpful). In the early twenty-first century, elements of the welfare state are in the middle of a 'transformation' process based on the concepts of personalisation and self-directed support. Beginning in adult social care, these approaches seek to recast users of state welfare away from being passive recipients of pre-purchased services towards a situation where they are active citizens with a right to control and shape their own support. Central to this agenda has been the concept of direct payments (pioneered by disabled people's organisations from the mid-1980s onwards) and personal budgets (developed from 2003 by a national social innovation network known as In Control).

Although starting in adult social care, this approach is now being piloted in children's services and in health care – and the University of Birmingham has been at the forefront of debates about scope to extend these ideas to other areas (such as the tax/benefits system, housing, education, rehabilitation for ex-offenders, substance misuse services and support for young people not in education, employment or training).

Underpinning all this is a broader sense that the values and ethos of the welfare state remain too dominated by 1940s thinking and assumptions – and that some of the concepts inherent in debates about personalisation and self-directed support could help to shape ongoing debates about the future of welfare reform. If the Beveridge Report is widely credited with establishing the thinking behind the post-war welfare state, then a similar document and process is needed to clarify thinking and options around the relationship between the state and the individual in the twenty-first century."