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The end of an era? The resignation of Iain Duncan Smith, Conservatism and social security benefits for disabled people

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ABSTRACT

Iain Duncan Smith resigned as the UK's Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in March 2016. While not invisible from the debate following his resignation, the fact that changes to social security policy for disabled people were central to Duncan Smith's time as Secretary of State and central to his (at least public) reasons for resignation was lost in a focus on the internal machinations of the UK's Conservative Party. In this short article, Duncan Smith's resignation is used to examine the location of additional cost social security benefits for disabled people in Conservative thinking in contemporary Britain.

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Introduction

When he resigned, Duncan Smith was a hate-figure for many disabled people and much of the disabled people's movement. A lot of this ill-feeling was related to the fact that he oversaw the extension of Employment and Support Allowance (an out-of-work benefit for sick or disabled working-age people) to existing Incapacity Benefit recipients when it was known that its Work Capability Assessment was fundamentally flawed (Spartacus Network 2015). He also oversaw cuts to the value of individuals' disability benefits on an unprecedented scale. His resignation, therefore, was celebrated by many people associated with the disability movement. Given the controversial nature for disabled people of Duncan Smith's tenure as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (SSWP), it is worth examining his resignation and the role of disability benefits within it.

A cut too far?

In his resignation letter, Duncan Smith noted that his 'driving reason' for being a government minister was the 'advancement of social justice', and that he resigned because the nature of announcements in the UK's 2016 Budget suggested that the Conservative Government had lost its way in relation to such issues.¹ He noted that he had 'come to believe that the latest changes to benefits to the disabled and the context in which they've been made are a compromise too far'. While in a narrow, public finance sense the cuts could be justified, he suggested that as part of a Budget which also announced cuts to the taxes of higher wage

earners by increasing income tax thresholds, reductions to disability benefits were problematic. While the government denied it was the case, for Duncan Smith cuts to Personal Independence Payment (PIP) (an 'additional cost' benefit for sick and disabled people) announced in the 2016 Budget were occurring to facilitate income tax cuts for better-off workers. Nelson (2016) notes that it was the juxtaposition of these two policies that Duncan Smith had problems with, rather than their substance. Together, he felt that they would be 'politically toxic' (Nelson 2016, 2).

Duncan Smith was concerned with potentially damaging political effects of the changes announced in the 2016 Budget, rather than the policy of removing even more income from disabled people. Duncan Smith's position indicates not an ideological opposition to further cuts to disabled people's benefits, but a pragmatic concern with their politics. As was pointed out by many people, Duncan Smith did not have much concern with cuts to social security benefits for working-age people and a toughening of their sanctioning regime when he was SSWP. While not the only group impacted by these changes, disabled people have arguably been disproportionately affected, with Demos (2013) estimating a collective loss of £28 billion of benefit income between 2013/14 and 2017/18 at a time when the additional costs of disability are estimated to be £500 per month (Brawn 2014).

Duncan Smith oversaw the introduction of PIP as a replacement for Disability Living Allowance (DLA), a move designed to save £1.075 billion per annum (SSWP 2010). Also, in 2015 he led the abolition of the work-related activity component of Employment and Support Allowance, a measure that would cost new workless disabled people placed in the work-related activity group of Employment and Support Allowance £29.05 per week from 2017. It is not surprising, therefore, that there was disbelief regarding Duncan Smith's justification for his resignation.²

Roulstone (2015) suggests that the replacement of DLA by PIP can be understood using Stone's (1984) notion that disability is an administrative category used by the state to mainly preclude people from accessing social welfare resources. Hence, Roulstone argues that the shift from DLA to PIP was an attempt to redefine the disability category by excluding 500,000 people from receiving it. The cuts to PIP announced in March 2016 which Duncan Smith objected to (although he and his department had agreed to them before their announcement in the Budget) can be understood in this context – as a means of narrowing even further the disability category. It represented another effort to retrench expenditure on disability benefits by reducing or ending the entitlement to PIP of 640,000 disabled people (SSWP 2016, 19).

Duncan Smith was replaced by Stephen Crabb MP, who rapidly announced that the government had 'no further plans to make welfare savings beyond the very substantial savings [already] legislated for';³ meaning that the cuts to PIP announced in the 2016 Budget would no longer go ahead. It is unlikely that this reversal of policy was the consequence of Duncan Smith's resignation. It was more related to a concern in the government that, because of its slim parliamentary majority (12 MPs), it would have been unable to get the measure through parliament. Several backbench Conservative MPs, for instance, had indicated a willingness to vote against it.⁴

Compassionate and civic Conservatism, and difficulties for disability benefits

In reversing the proposed cuts to PIP, Stephen Crabb alluded to the fact that his ideas were informed by a form of Conservatism – compassionate – that is also argued (Ellison 2011) to

have framed Duncan Smith's ideas. Crabb, for instance, noted that he was a 'One Nation' Conservative and that he was 'absolutely clear that a *compassionate* and fair welfare system should not just be about numbers; behind every statistic there is a human being.'⁵

Compassionate Conservatism, however, is arguably not concerned with human stories. It is a form of Conservatism that, often religiously inspired, has attempted to make a moral case for Conservatism – how, for instance, 'to tackle poverty and social justice in ways that [appeal] to a traditional Christian world view' (Ellison 2011, 51). In policy terms it is argued that this requires a geographical and institutional devolution of power to localities, and the private and voluntary sectors. Such arguments were made by the Centre for Social Justice that Duncan Smith set up with similar like-minded Conservatives (for example, SJPG 2007).

Compassionate Conservatism is consistent with a second notion of Conservatism (civic) that has also helped to shape policy in recent years (Ellison 2011). In this version of Conservatism, the focus is on the potentiality of local networks and ties in helping to develop reciprocal and altruistic relationships. While the state is viewed as having some role to play in this, it should not develop into a monopoly supplier, and should not attempt to impose policies before they are likely to be accepted (an approach that was obviously not adhered to in the case of the proposed changes to PIP).

The influence of civic Conservatism can be seen in the ideas of David Cameron. When he was the UK's Prime Minister, for instance, he argued that addressing social issues cannot be left to the state. Individual well-being, for example, Cameron (2006, 1) suggested, could only be achieved by 'making sure every part of society ... individuals, families, community groups, businesses, the public sector ... all play their part'.

What we have in these versions of Conservatism is an acknowledgement of social issues as being problematic, but a moral case that their solution should not be the preserve of the state – that although individuals might receive some support from various (non-state) institutions, in the final analysis people must expect to provide for themselves and their families. For working-age people this should come primarily via wage work. Duncan Smith, for instance, recently told the American Enterprise Institute that compassionate Conservatives should aim to develop 'a welfare system that encouraged rather than replaces work and the family' (as quoted in Nelson 2016, 2), something that was central to his Centre for Social Justice's view that '*Work is the key route out of poverty for virtually all working-age households*' (SJPG 2007, 6; original emphasis). This view is consistent with a related argument that the causes (a lack of wage work) rather than the consequences (a lack of income) are required to tackle poverty and related social problems. The implication is that in order to address poverty and exclusion, individuals do not need higher incomes, they just need wage work.

There are various problems for disabled people in the implications of these versions of contemporary Conservatism. The obvious issue is that the emphasis on self-help through wage work is problematic when it is known that disabled people face substantial discriminatory barriers to accessing the activity which is supposed to address their poverty and exclusion. There is, for example, a 30 percentage point gap between the proportion of disabled people and non-disabled people in wage work.

Perhaps less obvious is where a benefit specifically for helping to address the additional costs associated with disability fits in such Conservative notions. They might form part of the safety net that Duncan Smith said he was so keen to protect in his resignation letter, but their broader role in promoting 'independence' has in recent years been questioned. Benefits like PIP are arguably an incentive for disabled people to take wage work because they are

not automatically withdrawn or reduced in value when people take such work. In contrast, in recent years, additional cost disability benefits have been perceived by governments as acting as a disincentive for disabled people to express their 'independence' through wage work. So, for instance, one of the critiques of DLA, which led to its replacement by PIP, was that '*it can act as a barrier to work*' (SSWP 2010, 10; original emphasis). In contemporary Conservatism, any hint that a social security benefit does not promote 'independence' through wage work is deemed problematic. PIP is no exception to this. For working-age disabled people it is arguably seen as part of an outdated approach (one associated with 1997–2010 Labour Governments) that is accused of having relied 'too heavily on redistributing money, and on the large, clunking mechanisms of the state' (Cameron 2006, 1).

Conclusion

In this short article, the focus has been on the position of disability benefits, notably PIP, in the resignation of Duncan Smith. The implication of the article is that while plans to further retrench PIP have faltered, this is unlikely to denote an end to Conservative concerns with additional cost benefits for disabled people. This is because although contemporary Conservatism points to a need for collective solutions to social problems, of which the poverty and social exclusion of disabled people is one, it has a particular view of how such issues should be addressed. It has been seen that compassionate and civic Conservatism suggest that primarily this should be done outside the redistributive potential of the state, through either the private sector (wage work) or the voluntary sector (charity). In this sense, the resignation of Duncan Smith is unlikely to represent the end of a particularly brutal era of austerity for disabled people, but merely a change of personnel to administer its continuation.

Notes

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-35848891>. Accessed 24 May 2016.
2. See comments of John McArdle of the Black Triangle Campaign. <https://www.commonspace.scot/articles/3719/6-years-of-horror-disability-activists-call-for-cuts-reversal-after-ids-resignation>. Accessed 24 May 2016.
3. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm160321/debtext/160321-0002.htm>. Accessed 24 May 2016.
4. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/iain-duncan-smith-resignation-stephen-crabb-says-he-hopes-to-bring-same-passion-and-thoughtfulness-a6941341.html>. Accessed 24 May 2016.
5. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm160321/debtext/160321-0002.htm>; emphasis added. Accessed 24 May 2016.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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