

## **Welfare Imaginaries: Constructing Rhetoric, Realities and Resistance Over Time**

### **Seminar 2: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Welfare – Understanding the present**

Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> September 2018, Blackburne House, Liverpool

#### **The American corporate influence with British welfare reforms. Mo Stewart**

Thanks to Ruth and Kayleigh for this opportunity to speak here today, and congratulations to all involved with these valuable seminars.

The information I'm about to share does not make easy listening. I'm a healthcare professional by training, a disabled veteran of the Women's Royal Air Force medical branch; and this talk is designed to alert you to the preventable harm created by the adoption of American social policies, in the UK, over the past 25 years. This led to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) adopting a fatally flawed assessment model, as used to resist funding long-term sickness and disability benefit for those in greatest need.

If unfamiliar with my research of the last ten years, this information is all available in the public domain, and a lot was reported in my book '*Cash Not Care: the planned demolition of the UK welfare state*'. However, this important information appears to have been suppressed, as the American influence with UK social policies has never been reported by the national press; and the brief 2007 BBC News report, which identified the UK government being advised by American corporate "*racketeers*", is no longer available for public access. This American corporate influence was adopted by the DWP, as US social policies were gradually introduced by successive UK governments since John Major was elected as Prime Minister in 1992.

Margaret Thatcher was the first neoliberal politician in Parliament and her very strong friendship with President Reagan, and his influence, is well documented. Neoliberal politics places '*the market*' as the top priority, as greed replaced need. Regardless of human consequences, anything is acceptable so long as it decreases cost and makes a profit, and that agenda would influence the social policies of successive UK governments following the Thatcher administration.

Every effort would be made to decrease welfare spending, viewed by cross-party neoliberal politicians as a financial burden on the State. Welfare Reform was introduced by New Labour in October 2008. Incapacity Benefit (IB) had been the long-term sickness and disability benefit and was replaced with the new Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). Gently introduced by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who had replaced Tony Blair, there was no suggestion that the new social policies were destined to become a cruel reality for many.

Access to the ESA benefit required claimants to undertake a Work Capability Assessment (WCA) to demonstrate that they were unfit to work. This didn't seem unreasonable at the time. But Gordon Brown overlooked the needs of the chronically ill, who have permanent ill health from which they can't recover. He also failed to mention that the WCA would disregard all medical evidence and would also disregard mental health, which guaranteed suffering.

The WCA uses the Waddell and Aylward biopsychosocial (BPS) model of assessment, as influenced since 1992 by the American corporate government advisers when known as UnumProvident Insurance.

It was in 1992 that John Major invited UnumProvident to advise with the view to reducing the UK welfare budget. By welcoming UnumProvident as corporate advisers successive governments disregarded a debate in the House of Commons in 1999, which exposed the company's philosophy of **disability denial**; as adopted by the DWP in 2008 when masquerading as welfare reforms, and increased in 2010 by the coalition government with the addition of savage austerity measures.

UnumProvident Insurance were identified in 2005 by the California Department of Insurance Commissioner as an "*outlaw company*" and a company that "*has operated in an illegal fashion for years*". By 2007 the company were exposed by the Yale School of Law in a paper named the UnumProvident Scandal, which identified the disability denial policy used to resist funding health insurance claims. In 2008 the American Association of Justice identified UnumProvident as the second worst insurance company in America. Ten years later, nothing has changed.

At the same time as Unum were being exposed in America they were sponsoring the former DWP Chief Medical Officer Mansel Aylward, at Cardiff University, with £1.6 million at the then named UnumProvident Centre for Psychosocial and Disability Research.

This corporate funded research centre was commissioned by the DWP in 2005. Together with Gordon Waddell, Aylward produced the required policy-based research known as '*The Scientific and Conceptual Basis of Incapacity Benefits*'. The research was largely self-referenced and promoted the Waddell and Aylward biopsychosocial (BPS) model of assessment; which was a replica of the Unum disability denial assessment model. The Waddell and Aylward BPS model was adopted for the WCA, and guarantee that every chronically ill and disabled person in need of financial support would learn to live in fear of the DWP.

Some academics still identify the WCA as a medical assessment, which is incorrect. The WCA is identified by the DWP as a non-medical functional assessment, which is the invention of the health insurance industry, and which totally disregards diagnosis, prognosis and past medical history. The ESA application process is psychologically devastating, and it's meant to be, to persuade as many claimants as possible to stop claiming the benefit.

The welfare of the sick and disabled community in need of State financial support would plummet with the election of the Coalition government in 2010, and the appointment of Iain Duncan Smith as the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. He spent six years successfully manipulating the British public to discredit the welfare state, by demonising claimants of long-term sickness benefit when aided by the tabloid press. They used banner headlines claiming that 75% of disability benefit claimants were '*faking*', as Duncan Smith terrorised the sick and disabled community with his many false and exaggerated claims. In 2014 the actual figure for identified fake disability benefit claims was 0.7% of the entire welfare budget, with DWP errors listed as costing 2.1% of the budget. The DWP's incompetence costs three times more than any fake claims.

During Duncan Smith's time in office prosecuted disability hate crimes increased by 213%, with a Chief Constable making an impassioned statement on regional

TV news regarding the savage attacks on the disabled community, at times resulting in murder, which was disregarded by the national news media.

At the same time as this DWP demonisation, the constant political claim of getting one million people off disability benefit and into work was regularly repeated, with no reference to where this figure came from. In reality, 39% of IB claimants had a mental health problem, and that 39% represented almost one million IB claimants.

The distress created by repeated WCAs for conditions that can't ever improve created a dramatic negative impact on public mental health. Following an epic ecological study, Ben Barr and colleagues concluded that relentlessly reassessing people on disability benefits '*was independently associated with an increase in suicides, self-reported mental health problems and increased antidepressant prescribing*'. The research team highlighted the fact that the serious adverse consequences for mental health created by the use of the WCA '*could outweigh any benefits that arise from moving people off disability benefits*'.

In August 2015 the DWP published the long-awaited ESA mortality totals, which identified over 80,000 deaths linked to the WCA. The figures identified that between December 2011 and February 2014 a total of **2,380** people died, following a WCA after being found "*fit for work*", rejected for the ESA, and ordered by the DWP to look for work. The figures also identified a total of **7,200** claimants who died after being placed into the work related activity group; a group who the DWP had decided were fit enough to prepare to get back to work.

According to these DWP figures, an average of 80 people per month were dying after being found "*fit for work*" by the DWP. The medical world established a long time ago that the WCA using the BPS model was dangerous, and the most recent academic research identifies the WCA linked to **democide** but the DWP remain unrepentant.

In 2016 Professor Tom Shakespeare and colleagues produced an academic paper which destroyed the credibility of the Waddell and Aylward BPS model, as adopted for the WCA. Waddell and Aylward's research was exposed as being '*cavalier, unevidenced and misleading*,' but these findings were disregarded by the DWP. The DWP also disregarded consultant clinical psychologist Professor

Geoff Shepherd and colleagues, who had warned against adopting the WCA, citing the negative implications for public mental health. But the DWP were “*ruthless*” and “*reckless*” when forcing through the adoption of the WCA against the advice of their own panel of medical experts.

This ongoing psychological cruelty is enforced by the contents of all DWP correspondence, arriving in the now infamous brown envelope. Every letter from the DWP includes coercion and intimidation, reminding claimants of the ease with which the DWP can sanction their benefits for up to three years. This is often because a bus was five minutes late for a WCA appointment with another unaccountable American corporate giant, known as Maximus, recently funded with **£579 million** per year, for the next three years, to terrorise those in greatest need on behalf of the DWP.

The DWP is using coercion against the most vulnerable and it will undoubtedly continue. There is nothing to stop it as the UK moves with each passing year ever closer to reproducing the flawed American welfare system, when ably assisted by Esther McVey. This new Secretary of State for the DWP was well trained by Iain Duncan Smith when she was a DWP Minister during his term in office.

The DWP has now warned disability charities who deliver the government’s new Work & Health Programme that they are **not permitted** to criticise Esther McVey or the Department, or they risk their government contracts. This intimidation demonstrates the confidence of the DWP to restrict criticism by some of those perhaps best placed to challenge the Department.

Historically, the Welfare State was introduced to provide the financial safety net needed to prevent destitution for those who were unable to earn a living. With the introduction of the ESA using the fatally flawed WCA, the Welfare State is successfully being demolished, and the safety net destroyed, on route to being replaced by private healthcare insurance as first suggested by Thatcher in 1982.

Some claimants are actually starving to death when sanctioned. These deaths directly linked to the ESA assessment process are also disregarded, as thousands of chronically ill and disabled people are helped to an early grave by this identified DWP tyranny, masquerading as welfare reforms.

The most recently published ESA mortality totals identifies **10,950** people who died when in the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG) between March 2014 and February 2017, which is a significant increase on previously reported mortality totals in the WRAG group. The DWP are refusing to publish the numbers who died after being declared “*fit for work*” in the same time period, and someone should surely challenge why these figures are being withheld?

Identified as corporate welfare crime, these rising mortality totals will continue to be dismissed as the DWP disregard the medical profession, who had repeatedly warned about the inevitable preventable harm and deadly human consequences of using the fatally flawed BPS model of assessment for the WCA.

The predictable devastating human impact of these welfare reforms adopted by successive UK governments, who outsourced the assessments to the private sector to distance themselves from responsibility, will continue. Chronically sick and disabled people in desperate need of support will continue to die in the UK when, quite literally, killed by the State – as advised by invited American corporations who are motivated by cash, not care.

#### Notes

Cash Not Care: the planned demolition of the UK welfare state by Mo Stewart  
London, New Generation Publishing, 2016, 188 pp., £16.99, ISBN: 978-1-78507-783-8 (pbk)

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