Workfare and the reinvention of the social in America and Britain, c. 1965-1985

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> The Prime Minister saw the Panorama programme last night about 'Workfare' in the US. She was impressed by the way it helped both the unemployed themselves – through the chance it gives them to keep in touch with the world of work, to get out of the house and to do something of value – and the taxpayer, through the work done in return for welfare payments. Many of the unemployed who were interviewed liked it; the cities liked it; the unions often at least did not object and some supported it.

It was in April 1986 – with British unemployment standing at a record 3.3 million – that Margaret Thatcher's evening in front of her Downing Street television set prompted her private Secretary David Norgrove to write a letter recommending workfare to several Whitehall departments. He went on to state that, while 'the adoption of "Workfare" in this country has been studied before … the arguments for it are very strong'.[1] Clearly Thatcher wished her government to (re)examine an approach to social policy that, in her eyes, promised to address Britain's unemployment problem in a constructive manner.

In the 1980s the notion of workfare began to meander through British social policy discussions. A neologism blending the words 'welfare' and 'work', the term captured a widening desire among policymakers to demand that recipients of social security payments accept employment or risk the withdrawal of benefits. Workfare, in short, required people on welfare to work – or lose financial support. That the British governments of the eighties emerged among the first administrations in Europe to debate workfare seriously as a policy option is hardly a surprise. Since workfare promised to raise the number

1 TNA PREM 19/1839, letter, David Norgrove to John Lambert, 8 Apr. 1986. For the figure, see James Denman and Paul McDonald, 'Unemployment statistics from 1881 to the present day', *Labour Market Trends* 104, 1 (Jan. 1996), pp. 1–18.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787445475.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Britons in employment, it held out the prospect of reducing the monthly unemployment count that presented a major political embarrassment for the Thatcher government for much of the eighties. Unemployment rose dramatically during the recession in the early part of the decade and remained at high levels until 1986. By promising to integrate welfare recipients into the working population, workfare offered not just an opportunity to reduce unemployment figures; it also appeared to address what many cultural conservatives viewed as a prime cause of a moral crisis that supposedly afflicted post-war Britain. Rather than eradicate materially precarious forms of existence, the expansion of the welfare state, a conventional Conservative critique held, had generated a culture of dependency and dysfunctionality that rendered welfare recipients incapable of leading self-dependent lives.[2] With its emphasis on work, workfare appealed to Conservatives like Margaret Thatcher because it proposed to instil into benefit recipients the skills and values that many on the Right considered prerequisites for national regeneration. In other words, workfare could be viewed as an antidote to the culturally corrosive effects of welfare.

Despite the term's strong appeal among cultural conservatives, the unemployment policies the British government adopted from the mid-eighties did not constitute workfare in a strict sense. When British officials took a closer look, they identified a host of practical and conceptual problems that led them to rule it out. That workfare elicited scepticism in the UK was no accident; implementation problems haunted the concept from its inception. Workfare rose to prominence as part of Nixon's abortive attempt to reform the American welfare system. Indeed, by the mid-eighties, there existed only very few examples of workfare policies, and those that did exist were only rarely considered a success. To understand why workfare retained strong appeal among welfare reformers irrespective of persistent implementation difficulties requires an exploration of the term's surprising origins in United States, as well as its subsequent life in British welfare debates in the eighties. Examining the 'global dynamics of social policies' to which Martin Daunton has recently drawn attention, this story uncovers the limits of international intellectual exchange in the transnational history of welfare reform, and highlights how national contexts shape the reception of political ideas.[3] It also shows how a political recipe that many contemporaries considered flawed could become a

2 Raphael Samuel, 'Mrs. Thatcher's return to Victorian values', in T.C. Smout, ed., *Victorian values: a joint symposium of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the British Academy* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 9–30; Matthew Grimley, 'Thatcherism, morality and religion', in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders, eds, *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 78–94; Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Neo-Liberalism and morality in the making of Thatcherite social policy', *Historical Journal* 55 (2012), pp. 497–520.

3 Julia Moses and M.J. Daunton, 'Editorial – border crossings: global dynamics of social policies and problems', *Journal of Global History* 9 (2014), pp. 177–88. Social policy is also a prominent theme in M.J. Daunton, *Progress and poverty: an economic and social history of*

shorthand among social scientists and the wider public for a wide range of policies that, in the words of Jamie Peck, comprise 'welfare-to-work programs and … work-oriented welfare regimes'.[4] As such, the term 'workfare' points towards the manifold initiatives in social policy through which governments in affluent societies have sought to recast the rights and responsibilities of their citizens in recent decades, an ongoing process that sociologist Stephan Lessenich has considered a comprehensive 're-invention of the social'.[5] Workfare highlights a broader political trend since the seventies to link social rights to stringent conditions and reflects a growing expectation that individuals requiring material support assume responsibility for their lives. Although at first sight resembling Victorian efforts to control the poor by linking 'relief' to a work requirement in the workhouse, these recent initiatives differ from this historical antecedent in two important respects: they have aimed – firstly – to reduce significantly more generous benefits deriving from firm legal entitlements by – secondly – mobilising the state bureaucracy that had greatly expanded to administer a far more comprehensive welfare regime after 1945.

Workfare in the US

The term 'workfare' first appeared in American media in reports about Charles Evers' campaign to be elected to the House of Representatives in the spring of 1968. Although Evers did not win the third district of Mississippi, his candidacy attracted national attention. A seasoned activist and organiser for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), he was the first African American to contest this district. It had been held until recently by segregationist John Bell Williams, who had just gained the governorship of Mississippi. By mobilising 75,000 black voters in a white electoral stronghold, Evers openly challenged Mississippi's racial order. Evers, whose guards exchanged gunfire when his house was attacked by whites during the election campaign, was well aware of the risks he was taking. After all, he was the brother of Medgar Evers, whom white supremacists had murdered for his voter registration drives in Mississippi in 1963. As reporters followed Charles Evers, they were not only impressed by his accounts of boycott activities and his successful business ventures (including the Medgar Evers Shopping Center in Jackson); they also noted his unorthodox approach to welfare. 'One of Evers' programs is what he calls workfare.' Evers, a writer for *Harper's* explained,

Britain, 1700–1850 (Oxford, 1995) and M.J. Daunton, *Wealth and welfare: an economic and social history of Britain, 1851–1951* (Oxford, 2007).

4 Jamie Peck, *Workfare states* (New York, 2009), p. 10.

5 Stephan Lessenich, *Die Neuerfindung des Sozialen: Der Sozialstaat im flexiblen Kapitalismus* (Bielefeld, 2013), pp. 73–128.

had coined the term to convey his conviction 'that everybody ought to work for what he gets'. This did not mean that Evers wanted to abolish welfare programmes altogether. Rather, their reach needed to be reduced. According to Evers, welfare 'ought to exist only for those can't work or for whom no jobs can be made available'. Evers' definition of who was capable of working was clearly very wide. The correspondent for *Harper's* noted that Evers asked a 'one-legged Negro' if 'he would be willing to work, handicapped though he is, if he had a job he could handle'. After the man replied 'perhaps reluctantly' that he would accept a job, 'Evers replie[d] quietly, "Then we're going to get work for you."'[6]

While Evers never outlined a comprehensive concept for a workfare programme, the idea of linking welfare and work took up wider contemporary concerns. The Civil Rights Movement is best known for its struggle to advance political citizenship rights, but its leaders insisted that removing the obstacles barring most African Americans from access to the labour market presented an equally important aim. Indeed, Civil Rights campaigners noted with apprehension that the gaps between the median incomes as well as employment rates of whites and blacks widened significantly between the mid-fifties and the mid-sixties. In 1962 Whitney Young of the National Urban League feared that African Americans might 'end up with a "mouthful of rights and an empty stomach"' unless legislation addressed the causes of socio-economic hardship. It was thus no coincidence that the famous 1963 March on Washington, which culminated in Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech, demanded 'Jobs and Freedom'. By promising to 'get work' for fellow African Americans, Evers placed himself squarely in the Civil Rights Movement's quest for jobs.[7]

Although Evers identified a lack of employment as a part of racism's legacy, his solution diverged from the proposals aired by the majority of black activists. While most Civil Rights supporters considered Federal social policy programmes the most promising tool for combatting the effects of racism on the labour market, Evers emphasised the importance of private enterprise. His campaign against discrimination, he told a journalist, included the equality of rights to pursue commercial ventures: 'If whites can have businesses, blacks can have them,' he stated. Beyond generating personal wealth, stimulating business activity could ease racial tension by raising a community's prosperity level. Money, he declared, 'can change a racist place into a non-racist one', but, first and foremost, building black businesses advanced racial emancipation and liberation. After he had opened the Medgar Evers Shopping Center, he

6 Robert Canzoneri, 'Charles Evers: Mississippi's representative man?', *Harper's Magazine*, Jul. 1968, pp. 67–74. Another report on Evers can be found in *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 Feb. 1968, p. 1.

7 On the Civil Rights Movement and social inequality, see Thomas C. Holt, *Children of fire: a history of African Americans* (New York, 2010), pp. 331–8.

recalled, 'the black shoppers came by the dozens to buy their groceries, and the whites … were so angry they could have died'.[8] Charles Evers, for one, considered himself an entrepreneur, whose father – a lumber contractor – had instilled a staunch work ethic into his offspring: 'He never gave us anything,' Evers remembered. 'I always worked for everything.'[9] Placing himself in the American tradition of the 'self-made' man, Evers praised regular employment as the foundation for the conduct of individual life.[10] It was thus only consistent for him to promote 'workfare' schemes that, in contrast to most proposals of Civil Rights advocates, stressed the individual duty to work rather than an obligation on the government's part to offer material help in combating poverty.

Evers fervently supported the Democrats throughout the sixties for their commitment to racial equality, but his pro-business outlook as well as his emphasis on work and self-dependence established contact points with a resurgent Conservative movement in the US that contributed to Richard Nixon's election to the Presidency in 1969. Nixon's success resulted not only from concern about the radical student movement and the emergence of black power and violent social unrest including urban rebellions by racial minorities. It also marked widespread opposition to the expansion of Federal social security spending that culminated in Lyndon B. Johnson's 'war on poverty'. Dating back to the New Deal in the thirties, the core welfare programmes were the Food Stamp scheme providing the neediest with basic staples, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Initially conceived in 1935 as a measure to assist a small number of non-working poor white widows with children, after the Second World War AFDC primarily supported divorced, deserted, or never married mothers and their offspring. Between 1960 and 1969 claimant figures rose from 3 million to 6.1 million. In part this increase occurred because AFDC became accessible to African American women and men, not least due to pressure from the Civil Rights movement and the Democrat Federal governments headed by Kennedy and Johnson.[11]

Irrespective of the circumstance that both men and women could draw on AFDC in the sixties, a growing chorus of politicians, social scientists, and commentators focused on the circumstance that the programme provided support for unmarried, non-white mothers in economically deprived inner cities, some of which, including Watts, Harlem, Detroit, and Newark, became sites of rebellion. AFDC, a prominent line of reasoning maintained, undermined

8 Charles Evers with Grace Halsell, *Evers* (New York, 1971), pp. 4, 154.

9 Canzoneri, 'Charles Evers', p. 71.

10 On this tradition, see Jeffrey Louis Decker, *Made in America: self-styled success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey* (Minneapolis, 1997).

11 Premilla Nadasen, Jennifer Mittelstadt, and Marisa Chappell, *Welfare in the United States: a history with documents* (New York, 2009), pp. 24, 42. See also Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: the making of mass incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), pp. 27–62.

family values by allowing single mothers access to welfare payments. Welfare, an influential report on 'The Negro Family' by Lyndon Johnson's advisor Patrick Moynihan argued in 1965, unwittingly fuelled an expansion of single-parent households, and thereby perpetuated a 'culture of poverty' among African Americans who according to Moynihan had no chance of escaping from a self-perpetuating 'tangle of pathology'.[12] Conservatives dismissed the possibility that a high proportion of single-motherhood among African Americans may have been the result – rather than the cause – of poverty. They argued forcefully that welfare did not eradicate destitution, but undermined family values and the work ethic among America's urban poor. In other words, social security payments were held to fuel a corrosive moral crisis, and unmarried African American women with children were cast as its most notable manifestation.

In August 1969 Richard Nixon launched a plan to tackle what he called a pervasive 'social crisis' through a comprehensive reform of the 'bureaucratic monstrosity' that welfare had allegedly become. Drawing on Moynihan's advice, he used a televised state-of-the-union address to propose replacing AFDC with a federally funded system of 'family assistance' that would guarantee every poor American a minimum income. Nixon's plan was highly ambitious because it aimed to extend welfare payments far beyond the ranks of the jobless without means. As the president explained, the 'benefits [of the new system] would go to the working poor, as well as the non-working; to families with dependent children headed by a father, as well as to those headed by a mother'. Given its wider range, the plan was, by Nixon's own admission, 'expensive', but it promised to deal with what he considered one of the cultural roots of contemporary poverty. In sharp contrast to current welfare arrangements which, according to Nixon, created 'an incentive for desertion' because fathers had to leave their offspring 'to make [them] eligible for welfare', his proposal strengthened the family because it expressly permitted male heads of households to claim benefits. Nixon's welfare reform thus amounted to a classically conservative move that strove to resolve a social problem by promoting highly conventional family values.

At the same time, Nixon assured his backers that his initiative would not result in an expanded army of passive welfare recipients because it included 'a work requirement and a work incentive'. To begin with, Nixon's proposal stipulated that welfare recipients who took a low-paying job would be allowed to retain 50 per cent of their gross earnings up to a certain threshold, while they currently only retained a third of their incomes derived from paid employment. The plan also promoted work by offering higher benefit payments to those who accepted low-income jobs. Nixon professed optimism about the efficacy of his scheme to render low-paying jobs attractive through welfare support.

12 D.P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: the case for national action* (the 'Moynihan Report') (Washington D.C., 1965).

'With such incentives,' he surmised, 'most recipients who can work will want to work.' And those who could not be induced to take up jobs through incentives would face the threat of having their welfare payments withdrawn. As long as 'suitable jobs' were available, Nixon demanded, 'everyone who accepts benefits must also accept work … The only exceptions would be those unable to work, and mothers of pre-school children.' The president was convinced that his approach to welfare offered a solution to poverty-related social issues by strengthening individual initiative. 'We cannot talk our way out of poverty; we cannot legislate our way out of poverty; but this nation can work its way out of poverty. What America needs now is not more welfare but more "workfare",' he said to summarise his proposal, before restating its central motif: 'Poverty must be defeated without sacrificing the will to work.'[13] Nixon thus replicated Evers' idea to link welfare payments to a willingness to accept paid employment, so as to strengthen a sense of self-dependence.

It is unclear how the word 'workfare' entered into the vocabulary of the Nixon administration. Nixon's speechwriter William Safire claimed to have been unaware of Evers' formulation as he introduced the term into the administration's welfare plans.[14] What, however, is clear is that from the summer of 1969 'workfare' became a highly divisive part of American political language – irrespective of Nixon's failure to push most of his welfare reforms through. Fellow Conservatives baulked at the proposal when they realised that it would double the number of benefit recipients to about 20 million. Rather than slim down the welfare bureaucracy, Nixon was set to bloat it even further, commentators on the Right feared.[15] While Conservatives worried that Nixon was about to add to an overbearing federal state, white Southern Democrats undermined the bill in the Senate because it required state legislatures to implement measures broadening welfare provisions for African Americans. They regarded Nixon's initiative as yet another Federal interference with states' rights in the South that was bound to fan a conflict that had repeatedly poisoned relations between state and federal governments ever since Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954.[16] Civil Rights activists meanwhile attacked the president for creating the false impression that his initiative would push substantial numbers of welfare recipients into employment. Since, as they pointed out, 'suitable jobs' were scarce commodities in areas with a high proportion of people on welfare, forcing benefit recipients to accept workfare was beside the point. After all, an absence of employment opportunities, 'discrimination and low pay

13 The full text of the speech is in *Boston Globe*, 9 Aug. 1969, p. 5.

14 *New York Times*, 17 Jul. 1988, p. A8.

15 For a comment along these lines by renowned Conservative James J. Kilpatrick, see *New York Times*, 15 Jan. 1970, p. C7.

16 See the reports on Senate debates in *New York Times*, 28 Apr. 1972, p. 24; ibid., 29 Apr. 1972, p. 1.

[were] the real causes' of poverty, a comment in the *Chicago Defender* stressed. Nixon's initiative struck the pressure group National Urban League as 'punitive, censorious, moralistic', regarding 'people in economic need' as 'lazy, shiftless and unwilling to contribute to their own support'. Although Nixon's address had studiously avoided the topic of black women on welfare rolls, activists were enraged because the bill insinuated that black women were unwilling to work when millions of them already held down low-wage jobs to make ends meet.[17]

Since Nixon's welfare bill managed to alienate a remarkable number of political groupings, most of its suggestions ended up on the legislative dust heap – with one significant exception. At the end of December 1971, the president could sign into law a stipulation that allowed Federal states to implement workfare regulations as part of their welfare regimes.[18] An early experimental implementation in the state of New York revealed the practical challenges of conducting workfare programmes. A report from 1973 pointed out that only 8 per cent of the state's 1 million welfare recipients had found work through workfare, citing a lack of jobs as well as 'a lack of skills' as the main factors that prevented wider success.[19] Such obstacles, however, did not lead backers, who could count Ronald Reagan among their staunchest supporters, to turn against workfare. As governor of California, he championed a workfare programme entitled 'Community Work Experience' between 1971 and 1975 that required welfare recipients to accept 'public jobs' such as 'swimming pool attendants, road clean-up crew members, geriatric aide, watchman and various clerical positions'. Hailed by Reagan as 'one of the most innovative and far-reaching elements of our welfare reform programs' for 'reintroduc[ing] the work ethic into our way of life', it managed to place a mere 9,600 Californian welfare recipients in public employment. The programme's relative lack of achievement derived not only from a limited number of public positions that were available; it was also materially unattractive to people on welfare because the scheme failed to offer payments in addition to benefits if candidates accepted a job. The material incentive that had been a hallmark of Nixon's workfare plan was thus absent from Reagan's version. Instead his variant of workfare strongly relied on punitive aspects, especially by threatening to withdraw public payments.[20]

Workfare's limited impact in California did not stop Reagan from promoting it in his domestic policy agenda as president. Indeed, among those encouraging Reagan to implement workfare schemes was none other than Charles Evers, who had switched his political allegiance to the Republicans after Reagan had

17 *Chicago Defender*, 19 May 1971, p. 17; 23 May 1970, p. 32.
18 *New York Times*, 29 Dec. 1971, p. A1.
19 *New York Times*, 20 Apr. 1973, p. A34.
20 *New York Times*, 18 Mar. 1981, p. A22; *Washington Post*, 30 Mar. 1981, p. A4. Reagan's successor discontinued the programme.

announced his candidacy.[21] In 1981 Reagan called on Congress to release funds that would allow state governments to create 800,000 public jobs for welfare recipients. The 1981 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act opened the door to federally funded workfare programmes with firm employment requirements. Reagan's drive for workfare culminated in the 1988 Family Support Act, which made such programmes mandatory for Federal states accepting Federal funding for welfare. By the late eighties, the only welfare recipients excluded from workfare measures were the disabled and mothers with children below the age of three.[22]

American notions of 'workfare' thus possessed several important characteristics. The concept emerged from highly charged debates about gender, race, and poverty, casting black unmarried mothers as the embodiment of a moral crisis supposedly affecting American cities in the sixties. Rather than associate the causes of deprivation with structural socio-economic factors and racial prejudice, Conservatives attributed destitution to a self-perpetuating culture of poverty. Crucially, the welfare system did not solve America's poverty problem but, according to this line of reasoning, deepened it by weakening family ties and undermining the work ethic. The solution, then, involved reforming welfare regulations to strengthen the family, encourage self-dependence and promote a willingness to work among the poor. By creating an obligation to perform work in return for public material support, workfare recalibrated the relationship between the individual and the state to address what Conservatives viewed as a moral problem. The concept proved a profoundly controversial approach not only because it ascribed to the poor a considerable share of responsibility for their predicament; it also initially elicited scepticism among American Conservatives because it expanded the political reach of the state. The Right, however, soon embraced workfare because it imposed compulsory work on those at the bottom of society, thereby promoting a morality of self-dependence that Conservatives expected to strengthen public order. By the late eighties, workfare had become deeply entrenched in American politics.

Workfare in the UK

While workfare had been discussed in the US since the late sixties, it took until the early 1980s for British political circles to take note. Unlike their American counterparts, British politicians did not begin to discuss workfare in the context of debates about poverty. Instead the term entered into British political discourse at a time when spiralling unemployment presented a major national concern.

21 Charles Evers and Andrew Szanton, *Have no fear: the Charles Evers story* (New York, 1997), pp. 291–2.

22 Richard K. Caputo, *U.S. social policy reform: policy transitions from 1981 to the present* (New York, 2011), pp. 29–43, esp. pp. 37–8.

Between Thatcher's first election victory in May 1979 and January 1982, official unemployment rose from 1.3 million to over 3 million. In the summer of 1986 the count still hovered around 3.3 million – and Thatcher's critics held the government directly responsible for this development.[23] Responding to the recession at the beginning of the eighties with tax increases and interest-rate hikes to combat inflation, opponents argued, had raised the value of the pound, triggered business collapses, and deepened the downturn. Labour MP Jack Ashley was only one of many who accused the government of considering 'unemployment as the necessary price to be paid for reducing inflation' in 1981.[24]

The surge in unemployment triggered a sustained search for policies to combat this trend. Although the Conservatives internally acknowledged that high-interest policies had amplified the recession of the early eighties, they saw unemployment as part and parcel of Britain's wider economic problems that, according to Thatcherites, reflected excessive state intervention in business, disruptive trade unions, an expanding welfare regime, and burdensome taxation. In its analysis of Britain's economic ills, the government regarded unemployment as an indicator of inflated labour costs. Embracing a supply-and-demand model, Thatcher's administration understood unemployment as an oversupply of labour, for which demand was insufficient because the price of work, i.e. the level of wages, was too high. Reducing unemployment, this analysis implied, required lower wages.[25] In Conservative eyes the fact that a large part of the unemployed consisted of low-skilled men added to the challenge. Due to their lack of qualifications these men could only hope to find badly paid work. For many of them it was more lucrative, the government found, to rely on benefits than accept low-skilled work. By establishing a minimum income threshold, the social security system, government officials argued, suppressed the laws of supply and demand in the labour market, thereby directly fuelling unemployment. Only once the welfare system no longer shielded low-skilled men from badly paid work would demand for workers increase among employers, and only then would unemployment fall. An internal memorandum by Alan Walters, Margaret Thatcher's influential economic advisor, put this line of reasoning as a rhetorical question: 'Does not everyone believe that were real wages in Britain to fall 10 or 15 per cent, there would be a most dramatic reduction in unemployment?'[26]

23 For the figures, see Denman and MacDonald, 'Unemployment statistics from 1881', pp. 5–18.
24 *Hansard*, HC Debs, 6th series, vol. 7, cc. 272–3. On the impulses behind Thatcher's anti-inflationary policies, see Jim Tomlinson, 'Thatcher, monetarism and the politics of inflation', in Jackson and Saunders, eds, *Making Thatcher's Britain*, pp. 62–77.
25 For more detail on the internal debates, see Bernhard Rieger, 'Making Britain work again: unemployment and the remaking of British social policy in the eighties', *English Historical Review* 133, 562 (2018), pp. 634–66.
26 TNA PREM 19/525, Alan Walters, 'Unemployment measures proposed in E(81)74', note, n.d., par. 4.

Beyond distorting market mechanisms the welfare system also fuelled what many Conservatives considered a moral problem. By protecting the unemployed from absolute poverty, the benefit system, numerous followers of Margaret Thatcher were convinced, suppressed an appreciation of hard work, thrift, and self-dependence – all values that formed the epicentre of the Prime Minister's moral universe. Thatcher for one viewed herself as engaged in a quest for not just economic but also moral regeneration. In 1982 she emphasised this point in a private conversation with Ferdinand Mount, who was about to take up his post as her chief policy advisor: 'We really have to address … the values of society. This is my real task, to restore standards of conduct and responsibility … Personal responsibility is the key.'[27] Mount fully agreed. A memo reviewing unemployment, which he had co-authored with Alan Walters, lamented a widespread 'why-work-syndrome' among benefit recipients as a prime cause for high levels of joblessness.[28] Put differently, the welfare system eroded the work ethic of the poor.

It was in the context of attempts to lower unemployment that workfare ideas caught the attention of the British government. Within the administration, Alan Walters, who probably heard of workfare while at Johns Hopkins University in the second half of the seventies, emerged as an early cheerleader. When a Conservative policy group explored recipes against unemployment reported in preparation for the election campaign in 1983, he and Mount wrote to Thatcher the previous autumn that 'we all agree that some kind of Workfare scheme would be desirable to bring hope and purpose to the long-term unemployed'.[29] Despite this warm welcome, considerable insecurity and ignorance surrounded workfare in Britain. For instance, no one in the administration addressed the fact that the concept owed its origins to American attempts to break up a supposed 'culture of poverty' among African American women. The problem that concerned Whitehall differed fundamentally: rather than deprivation among non-white women, it was unemployment among working-class men that British politicians regarded as their central concern. Ethnic minorities were over-represented among those out of work, but government discussion about unemployment paid them little attention.[30] In terms of gender, race, and social issue, British and American workfare schemes were trained at rather dissimilar targets.

That the government did not dwell on these fundamental points reflects a remarkable lack of knowledge about workfare in Whitehall. Only two days

27 Ferdinand Mount, *Cold cream: my early life and other mistakes* (London, 2009), pp. 288–9.
28 TNA PREM 19/1157, Alan Walters and Ferdinand Mount, 'Unemployment: the next steps', note, 27 Sep. 1982, p. 1.
29 TNA PREM 19/1157, Walters and Mount, 'Unemployment', p. 4.
30 Yaojun Li and Anthony Heath, 'Minority ethnic men in the British labour market (1972–2005)', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 28, 5/6 (2008), pp. 231–44.

after Walters had recommended workfare in principle did the British embassy in Washington send a two-and-a-half page outline of existing American schemes, which subsequently provided the foundation for government discussions.[31] That the administration had to turn to the diplomatic service for basic information on a new social policy instrument highlights the national focus of Thatcher's government as well as the limits of transatlantic intellectual exchange between Conservatives at the time. Although Thatcherites and Reaganites shared a general political horizon, there were clearly large areas of American policy debate about which the British side possessed hardly any knowledge.[32]

If, as the government argued, unemployment resulted from inflated wages levels as well as an emasculated work ethic among those without a job, workfare appeared to offer a tool to change both. The threat of withdrawing welfare payments could be used to push people into employment and initiate a cultural change among those on welfare, parts of the government hoped. Implementing workfare policies would, a note to the Prime Minister explained, tackle 'a something for nothing mentality' because people on 'welfare benefits would no longer regard … [them] as a free good'. As such, workfare was suited to counter a 'debilitating dependence on welfare'. While no panacea, 'it could be of such transforming nature … that it may change significantly the whole ethos and approach to work and a whole way of life generally'. Workfare schemes thus promised to counteract a wider cultural malaise that, in Conservative readings of recent British history, exacerbated the nation's social problems. At the same time, the policy promised to 'bring down unemployment … [by] creating new jobs'. Since most of the jobs for workfare participants would be part of the low-wage sector, workfare would 'reduc[e] wage levels' in the economy in general, thereby stimulating hiring among employers.[33] Workfare, it appeared to some in Whitehall, offered a political tool to address both dimensions leading Conservatives held responsible for mass unemployment: it could impose conservative values including the need for hard work and self-dependence on broad sections of the British population, as well as lower unemployment by stimulating the demand for labour in the wider economy.

Despite this positive assessment, the government decided against implementing workfare schemes in the early eighties. Much of the policy debate unfolded in the autumn of 1982 when the Conservatives began to prepare for the general election campaign of 1983. In this situation the government shied away from a policy that was bound to generate conflict. Supporters warned the

31 TNA PREM 19/1157, 'US Welfare Programmes, telegramme number 3189', 29 Sep. 1982. Much of the information reappeared verbatim in TNA PREM 19/1157, Adrian Smith, 'Workfare', note, n.d.

32 For an emphasis on transatlantic co-operation, see James E. Cronin, *Global rules: America, Britain and a disordered world* (New Haven, 2014), pp. 92–120.

33 TNA PREM 19/1157, Smith, 'Workfare', par. 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787445475.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Prime Minister against the controversial nature of workfare. Alan Walters drew Thatcher's attention to the 'political difficulty' of 'secur[ing] the support for a scheme which includes the denial of benefit to non-participants'.[34] Workfare's punitive dimension, Conservatives were aware, risked inflaming social tensions at a time of economic hardship because large sections of the population, as an internal report complained, held 'that there is an absolute right (at worst) to maintain living standards'.[35] With a general election on the horizon these warnings were enough to shelve workfare schemes.

Although the British economy registered substantial growth in the mid-eighties, the unemployment count remained stubbornly above the 3-million mark. It is thus no surprise that Margaret Thatcher revisited workfare as a potential solution at the time. There was agreement in government circles that joblessness required a new approach, but officials again cautioned against workfare. This time they focused on the role of publicly funded, large-scale job creation. If the government wished to initiate a cultural shift towards self-dependence and a more robust work ethic by forcing the unemployed into jobs, it had to make a sufficient number of positions available in the first place. As Alan Walters and Ferdinand Mount had already pointed out in 1982, the government would have to display a strong 'administrative will to set up [a Job] Pool'.[36]

This task was fraught with difficulties. Whitehall officials lacked confidence that charity organisations and local councils, which would have to implement the programme, would support a mandatory employment scheme. According to the Department of Employment, the charitable sector worried that a workfare programme would not furnish it with 'reliable and cooperative' workers. Due to the compulsory nature of the scheme, many candidates for employment, charities predicted, would be unwilling and unmotivated employees.[37] From this perspective, workfare amounted to a risky gamble that put the national government at the mercy of charities and local agencies. If these bodies refused to co-operate, Downing Street would ultimately be held accountable. Beyond raising organisational problems, workfare also required substantial public spending that expanded the national government's economic role significantly. As an advisor warned in 1986, 'the state is taking on the responsibility of employer of last resort for welfare claimants'.[38] This circumstance was bound to provoke resistance among a group of politicians who regarded state

34 Walters and Mount, 'Unemployment', p. 4.
35 TNA PREM 19/525, CPRS, 'Unemployment: issues for discussion and decision', note, Sep. 1982, p. 4.
36 Walters and Mount, 'Unemployment', p. 4.
37 TNA PREM 19/1161, Department of Employment, 'Employment measures', note, n.d., p. 3. Walters and Mount had raised the same point in 1982. See Walters and Mount, 'Unemployment', p. 4.
38 TNA PREM 19/1839, David Willetts to Margaret Thatcher, note, 9 May 1986, p. 1.

interventionism as one of the causes of Britain's economic problems. In light of substantial pragmatic and ideological doubts, the Conservative government refrained from implementing workfare plans – much to Margaret Thatcher's regret.

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to dismiss the government's internal workfare debates of the eighties as inconsequential. In September 1985 Thatcher entrusted erstwhile property entrepreneur Lord David Young with the task of lowering unemployment by appointing him as Employment Secretary. Plans he presented in November focused on reducing the number of the long-term unemployed, an overwhelmingly male group that added over 1 million to the total. Young suggested that every benefit recipient who had been out of work for over a year should be called for an interview at a Jobcentre to assess their situation. At the end of the conversation, the unemployed would be presented with four options. They could sign up for training, select a position in the government's long-running job-creation scheme entitled 'Community Programme', accept a subsidised low-wage job, or sign up for a 'Jobclub', which would offer support in a targeted search for work. Crucially, candidates refusing all four options risked the suspension of their welfare benefits because, Young emphasised, they could be considered as not 'available for work', which provided the legal requirement for out-of-work welfare payments. Rather than only inform the long-term unemployed of opportunities, the interview process also introduced a significant disciplinary dimension because it was suited to identifying welfare recipients who were unwilling to work.[39]

Thatcher was initially hesitant to embrace Young's proposals because, with the exception of 'Jobclubs', they relied mostly on existing initiatives such as the 'Community Programme' and training courses to combat unemployment. That she had hoped for something more innovative is evident in her continuing propagation of workfare while Young's plan was discussed.[40] Young disagreed with the Prime Minister, explaining that his proposals were new because, in contrast to current arrangements, they contained rewarding *and* punitive elements: 'we will be working with a combination of carrots and sticks,' he stated. The disciplining components of his programme would not receive extended public coverage, he continued, for tactical reasons. To prevent public resistance, 'we must exercise great care that the sticks are never seen'. He insisted that his plans were suited to address the supposed culture of welfare-dependency that so greatly concerned the Prime Minister. 'We must tackle the will to work.'[41] It

39 TNA PREM 19/1839, David Young, 'A strategy for enterprise and employment', note, 1 Nov. 1985, p. 4.

40 TNA PREM 19/1839, letter, Norgrove to Lambert, 8 Apr. 1986; PREM 19/1569, minute, Andrew Turnbull to D. Norrington, 20 May 1985.

41 Young, 'A strategy for enterprise and employment', note, 1 Nov. 1985, p. 4.

took Young until May 1986 to draw the Prime Minister onto his side, when he assured her that workfare 'had an inherent appeal' because it 'expose[d] those who are not genuinely unemployed' and gave 'unemployed people a chance to keep alive their working habits and skills'. At the same time, he emphasised that his current proposals pursued exactly these goals – albeit without the associated political risks of launching workfare in a strict sense. In addition to reminding the Prime Minister of workfare's financial costs and administrative complexities, he feared that 'the Opposition and the trade union movement … [would] misrepresent … Workfare as "slave labour" or a return to the workhouse'. By generating public outrage, he predicted, Thatcher's opponents would derail the government's agenda.[42] In other words, the Secretary for Employment took credit for a plan that minimised resistance and sidestepped financial risks, yet pursued the same moral aims as workfare plans that prompted welfare recipients to accept low-paid work to promote a culture of self-dependence. This line of reasoning eventually convinced Margaret Thatcher, and she went along with the solution Young had designed.

Conclusions

American workfare concepts thus acted as an important stimulus in the reframing of British unemployment policies in the 1980s. That the concept had taken shape in debates about poverty among African Americans that construed black single mothers as a social problem group did not diminish its appeal in the eyes of British Conservatives. British politicians wrestled primarily with long-term unemployment among men, but they were interested in workfare because it promised to reverse what Conservatives on both sides of Atlantic considered a pernicious cultural result of existing welfare arrangements. By offering material protection against poverty and the loss of employment, the social security system had allegedly yielded deleterious moral effects by undermining an individual work ethic and a desire for self-dependence among benefit recipients. American and British Conservatives were drawn to workfare because it threatened those unwilling to accept jobs as a precondition for welfare support with the withdrawal of payments. Workfare shifted the core function of welfare from material protection against social risk towards the imposition of conservative values in pursuit of moral regeneration. Moreover, some Tories also hoped that by directing people out of work towards low-wage labour with the help of workfare, the measure would contribute to an erosion of wage levels that many Conservatives considered a prerequisite for a fall of unemployment figures.

42 TNA PREM 19/1839, David Young, 'Workfare', note, 2 May 1986, pp. 1, 3–4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787445475.013 Published online by Cambridge University Press

British Conservatives had more than one reason for not implementing workfare schemes in the eighties. Beyond raising the prospect of practical and administrative difficulties, workfare demanded major public expenditure, and thus stood in tension with a reduction of the state's economic weight, an aim the Tories regarded as central to their economic reforms. While compatible with a quest for moral regeneration, workfare clashed with Conservative economic policies for Britain's economic revival. Similar tensions did not afflict early workfare debates in the US due to an absence of a widespread sense of economic malaise in the late sixties. Furthermore, the circumstance that British unemployment policies targeted (white) working-class men predisposed the Conservative administration against implementing workfare schemes. Lord Young cautioned against workfare because he feared that its implementation would generate vocal resistance among the Labour Party and trade unions – both institutions that considered white working-class men as their prime constituency. Conservatives in the US did not have to apprehend similarly well-organised opposition because American workfare proposals targeted black women, who strongly relied on the Civil Rights movement for advocacy. With the splintering of African American activism in the late sixties, black organisers lost much of their political ability to mass mobilise against Conservative plans for welfare reform in the US.[43] Workfare plans thus faced less organisational and ideological resistance in the US than in Britain.

Nonetheless, workfare ideas prompted British Conservatives to develop unemployment policies that addressed the moral malaise that supposedly underpinned the nation's high levels of joblessness while sidestepping the pitfalls associated with the American concept. When the Tories unveiled new proposals in 1985, they steered clear of further job creation, but introduced regulations allowing the withdrawal of welfare payments. Only those who conformed to a conservative moral agenda by demonstrating a strong desire to work were now deemed worthy of material support. British Conservatives thus began to recast the relationship between the unemployed and the state by linking benefit payments to conditions. By giving to the state stronger regulatory powers to impose behavioural norms that would render the unemployed more self-dependent, British politics recalibrated the relationship between individual social rights and duties. To be sure, welfare regulations routinely embraced the assumption that citizens had a duty to work. The debates and reforms of the eighties made this point with renewed force by simultaneously reforming and mobilising the welfare agencies that had expanded so significantly after the Second World War. This incipient re-invention of the social hinged on a transformation of the rights and responsibilities that link state and society. Rights came to be far more contingent upon the fulfilment of certain responsibilities.

43 Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of fracture* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), pp. 111–43.

Workfare was important in this process not only because it set the United States on a path of welfare reform that culminated in the abolition of AFDC under Bill Clinton in 1996;[44] it also sharpened the search for social policies in Britain that would weaken the protective function of the welfare system and emphasise the need to accept work as a precondition for benefits, thereby prefiguring a wider policy shift that has by now become a feature of welfare in virtually all affluent societies.

44 R. Kent Weaver, *Ending welfare as we know it* (Washington, 2000).