Book Review: The Transformation of British Welfare Policy: Politics, Discourse and Public Opinion by Tom O'Grady

In **The Transformation of British Welfare Policy: Politics, Discourse and Public Opinion***,* **Tom O'Grady** *provides a comprehensive and timely analysis of three decades of British welfare politics and policy. This impressive book offers much-needed insight into how the UK became such an outlier in its welfare-to-work reforms compared to its European neighbours, writes* **Orly Siow***.*

The Transformation of British Welfare Policy: Politics, Discourse and Public Opinion*.* **Tom O'Grady. Oxford University Press. 2022.**

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This book could not be more timely. As 'post-pandemic' Britain grapples with rising fuel costs and inflation, foodbanks have become a fourth emergency service and increasing numbers of families face the 'heat or eat' dilemma. Meanwhile, Chancellor Rishi Sunak faces criticism from both fellow Conservatives and the opposition for the lack of government measures to ease this pain.

For decades, British public opinion has remained stubbornly negative towards both benefit claimants and the welfare state. How and why did policies designed to reduce poverty become so overwhelmingly unpopular? And can this be reversed? These are some of the questions addressed by Tom O'Grady in *The Transformation of British Welfare Policy: Politics, Discourse and Public Opinion*.

Grady's central claim is that 'starting in the 1990s, a long-term change in discourse from both the politicians and the media caused the British public to turn against welfare, and these shifts did not occur to the same extent in other countries' (15). The book therefore considers why and how the UK has become such an outlier or extreme case in terms of welfare-to-work reforms, compared to our European neighbours (23).

In order to document and explain these shifts, O'Grady employs sophisticated quantitative methods to analyse parliamentary debates, press coverage and public opinion over three decades. He also considers Labour and Conservative policy evolution as well as (albeit briefly) the UK in cross-country context.

The scope of the data and the analysis is impressive, as is the force of the argument. O'Grady also writes with notable transparency (and perhaps undue modesty) about his approach. He states he is 'sceptical that political scientists can, or even should, strive for complete impartiality in their work' (vi) and that in places he 'cannot supply the level of proof that contemporary social science often demands' (264). Nevertheless, the book is a convincing analysis of the causal effect of discourse as well as a rallying cry against a welfare system that the author argues increasingly resembles a 'digital and sanitised version of the nineteenth century workhouse' (13).
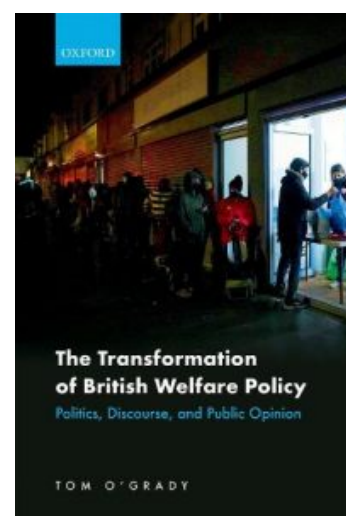
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The first empirical chapter employs topic modelling to document and measure how pro- and anti-welfare political discourse has waxed and waned over time. For those unfamiliar with the approach, this involves using machine learning to divide a text (in this case, UK House of Commons debates) into a number of 'topics' consisting of clusters of words that commonly appear together. For example, the topic 'benefit fraud' includes words such as 'asylum', 'fraudulent', 'fraudsters' and so on.

One of the benefits of topic modelling is that it can be used to analyse discourse over an extremely large set of texts (such as Hansard). This distinguishes O'Grady's work from previous studies, which have provided in-depth analyses of particular moments in the evolution of these discourses, but have not been able to test their causal effects over time. O'Grady shows how welfare went from being discursively constructed as a means of fighting poverty to the direct opposite: a *cause* of poverty.

This discursive shift, the author suggests, had far more to do with changes in Labour leadership than the 'typical historical pattern where the unemployed have been stigmatized the most, and the welfare system most heavily criticized, in times of high unemployment' (150). Instead, the core of the subsequent argument is that the Tony Blair government, spooked by eighteen years of opposition and fearful of public opinion, unwittingly set in motion what could be characterised as a discursive race to the bottom.

This shift was reflected in both political and media discourse denigrating claimants and the arguably punitive policies and practices that have resulted. As O'Grady writes: 'It is one of the ultimate ironies of New Labour that the party that did not believe it could convince the public on policy — that it had to accommodate, rather than shape — actually ended up doing a lot of the shaping' (9).

O'Grady also highlights future risks on the horizon for welfare policy, such as a wave of automation deadly to middle-class jobs, creating a tsunami of surplus labour. In this context, he lays out a series of suggestions to render welfare more sustainable in terms of public opinion. He eschews fashionable claims in favour of Universal Basic Income (UBI), advocating instead for more modest proposals comprising a mixture of universal and contributory benefits. The aim, O'Grady argues, 'should be a welfare system that is a national treasure, as well-loved as the NHS' (322). This cannot be achieved without building the consent of citizens: 'Politicians that want to sure up welfare must think carefully about how new policies could be framed in the future; building reciprocity and fairness into the system makes it easier to praise. In the end welfare must be seen to give something to everyone, not something for nothing' (323).

Overall, this book is a formidable piece of work. In addition to specific questions around how the British welfare state can be rendered politically sustainable, the analysis also speaks to broader, perennial debates around top-down versus bottom-up governance as well as the impact of the press and political discourse on public opinion and vice versa. The answer to these questions remains, as ever: 'it's complicated'. O'Grady nevertheless makes a huge contribution by providing a much-needed birds-eye view into major political shifts over recent decades, which may be coming home to roost in our current moment.

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