

The coalition's policy of forced labour for the unemployed is manifestly unfair, and will cost the state more

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In one of the most sweeping welfare reforms in a generation, Work and Pensions secretary, Iain Duncan-Smith recently announced that the long-term unemployed would be forced to perform menial work in order to maintain their benefits. [Bart Cammaerts](#) looks closely at this policy change, and finds little evidence that it will be cost-effective, and that it may even lead to a more unfair and unequal society.



After the announcement of the emergency budget in June, I [jokingly wrote](#) on this blog that drastically cutting public services, generating a social bloodbath would 'not lead to a Big Society, but to a smaller and more unfair society. Unless, of course, the government expects all these newly unemployed to come and work for them as volunteers to provide the services they used to be paid for properly in return for their benefits.'

To my utter surprise the coalition government has actually taken this idea seriously. Instead of making sure that there are enough jobs around and making it worthwhile to work by for example raising the minimum wage for low paid jobs, the long-term unemployed, who need the most support, will be forced to 'work' as volunteers. Tasks that were proposed included collecting garbage, cleaning the parks, and other community services. At the same time the management of this forced labour scheme will self-evidently be out-sourced to the private sector.

I am not arguing here that volunteering is not useful and beneficial for society. It is not uncommon. Volunteers are the driving force of many civil society organisations, small and large. Nor am I denying that it could be beneficial for unemployed citizens to be involved, potentially learning vital skills. The problem is that a volunteer gives up his or her precious time voluntarily for a cause, organization or initiative that he or she is passionate about, cares for, wants to get involved in. The coercion of unemployed into doing services undertaken by volunteers seems to me to be a contradiction in terms.

Besides this, these proposals also represent a paradigm shift, which can be seen in other coalition government policies as well and often gets unnoticed. The coalition's claims of radicalism are thus not entirely unfounded, only the kind of radicalism is a regressive one, rather than a progressive. Just as with the shift away from universal child benefits, the forced labour scheme undermines another of the welfare state's cornerstones.

Unemployment benefits grew out of a system that was modeled on an insurance scheme against unemployment. When you work, you pay into the system and the system then compensates you if any periods you become unemployed. Such a scheme also institutionalises a level of solidarity between those who work and those that are unemployed. It has to be noted that the unemployment system also came to be best developed in a context when governments actively strived to attain full employment levels (i.e. about 3 per cent unemployment).

In recent decades, many limitations to this principle were introduced in different European countries, with the prime goal to activate a particularly difficult group of long-term unemployed. This group often included people from the most vulnerable parts of society, those with limited skills and education; those confronted with other structural problems preventing them to work or function in a professional environment' people in their late 40s, early 50s made redundant and finding it impossible to find a job because it is cheaper to employ young dynamic talent, etc. These vulnerable groups are now called upon to fill the gaps in public services in return for the benefits they receive from the state for the predicament they are in (currently £65 a week for jobseekers over 25).

The main problem in the current cuts-obsessed climate is that policies to get people – and certainly long-term unemployed people – into work do not save money, they cost money, certainly in the short term. If we look across Europe a panoply of schemes and programs have been deployed to achieve this, with various degrees of success – programs to re-train workers; reductions in taxes for employers when they employ a long-term unemployed person or an older employee; subsidies for NGOs to employ unemployed people; individual attention; addressing other issues such as housing, child care, social skills, ICT-skills, etc. All

these hold a cost to the state and it is precisely on these kind of services and provisions that will be cut.

For the right wing press and public opinion in southern England, this policy might sound fair, just and timely, but it is not. Society does exist and is not an aggregation of individuals. As long as our society cannot provide full employment and deal with the structural impediments to employment (such as the high cost of education) it is deeply unethical and thus unfair to force the unemployed to work for free, or in return for the replacement income they receive from the social security system. For once I find myself in [agreement with the Archbishop](#).

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