

## Reviews

### **All Our Welfare: Towards Participatory Social Policy** Beresford, P., OBE

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This is an important book written by a leading advocate of participatory social policy. Using the creation of the UK welfare state as a case study of change, the book examines the past, present and future of social policy (p.7). Peter Beresford explains that he wrote the book without a publisher or contract because he 'felt it had to be written' (p.x).

It is an unconventional and intensely personal book, and we learn much about the author: his background as a long-term user of mental health services and welfare benefits, with a longstanding involvement in issues of participation as service user, writer, researcher, campaigner and educator. He explains that his background has influenced why he wrote the book and the way he approached the task. It is 'crucially concerned with the way that people have over their own welfare' and 'draws equally on experiential and academic knowledge; lived experiences as well as research findings'. The book includes 'many people's direct experiences of social policy and the welfare state' with an emphasis on diversity and inclusion, making it possible for the widest range of such voices to be recognised, valued and heard, in addition to the 'usual voices' of politicians, policymakers and academic experts. These voices include his own and his family's and 'a very wide range of people as welfare service users' (p.3).

All of this adds up to a long book (over 350 pages of text and some 45 pages of references) with two very distinct parts. Part One – 'The legacy of the past' – is composed of eight chapters which essentially cover a conventional history of social policy starting with the Poor Law, albeit with some unusual academic and non-academic sources. Part Two – 'The way to the future' – presents a critique of social policy and the academic discipline of social policy, and presents an alternative perspective.

Part One, then, covers familiar ground in some unusual ways. It is a very readable account, with reference to films, novels (e.g. Charles Dickens) and vignettes from his family. There is a heavy reliance on particular sources such as the 'popular' histories of David Kynaston, and 'general' social policy accounts rather than history of social policy accounts. This may explain some errors. For example, with reference to the Poor Law, 'less eligibility' did not involve a comparison to what the individual in question could expect (i.e. a counterfactual), but to the lowest paid worker. Similarly, the 'workhouse test' was not whether someone would be 'able to apply' to the workhouse, but rather to 'test' if they were desperate enough to accept the only offer available of the 'house' (in other words, an offer you can't refuse) (pp.31-32) (see e.g. Fraser, 2010).

Chapter 8 is a bridge to Part Two, focusing on social policy as an analytical approach and academic discipline. He points to the 'social policy trinity' of three key characteristics which have been associated with social policy: being scientific; having its own corps of experts; and with them providing the evidence base (p.144). He goes on to argue that Fabianism was the dominant strand in British social policy analysis and practice until Mrs Thatcher came to power. Its three 'key commitments' seem to be broadly similar to the earlier 'social policy trinity' (p.151). After discussing the early Fabianism of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, he writes that 'this top-down elitist approach to social policy, with its cult of the expert, dominated UK social policy thinking and practice for many years' (p.52). He stresses 'the importance of Peter Townsend' as the 'personification of Fabianism' (p.154). He mentions 'the Marxist new left' (p.155), but there is surprisingly little on the journal *Critical Social Policy* in which he has published.

This links to Part Two – 'The way to the future' – placing people on the receiving end of social policy at the centre of social policy, where the 'future of social policy' is to be 'shaped and owned by the people for whom it is intended' (p.171). He argues that standard social policy accounts

'tend to have little or nothing to say about, or to report from people as welfare state service users' (p.79).

He claims that if there is 'one abiding theme which emerges from the history of social policy and the counter histories of service users, it is the central role of the self-appointed professional 'experts'. These have almost invariably been experts without direct experience of the issues they discuss, who have played a key role as analysts, mediators and shapers of policy and practice. They offer policy prescriptions, justified by the rationale that these are in 'people's best interests'. If social policy were a religion, then they would have been its high priests (p.189). He illustrates this point by contrasting the two very different approaches of disabled people's movements – between a traditional organisation for disabled people (associated with Peter Townsend) and an organisation of disabled people (Vic Finkelstein and Paul Hunt) (p.189). In general, he advocates 'speaking for ourselves' (e.g. p.201), 'user controlled research' (p.224), and moving 'from experts to experiential knowledge' (p.225). He presents 'A new approach to social policy' (Chapter 12), which includes discussion of the British motorcycle industry, aerospace, heritage railways and the canal system, 'Welfare politics for the twenty-first century' (Chapter 13), 'Supporting each other in the future' (Chapter 14), 'Changing welfare' (Chapter 15) and ends with an 'Afterword: a different way forward?'

While this text makes a strong case for participatory social policy, I am not clear about its level of assumed knowledge or intended audience. Moreover, I am not convinced by some of his claims. For example, he claims that Fabian social policy did not recover from Mrs Thatcher's attacks, and largely shifted to the right, first as 'welfare pluralism' and then as part of the 'third way' (p.155). He points to a sense of complacency in social policy writings, and a strong sense of Fabian 'business as usual' lingers (p.355). From my 'experiential' point of view from attending social policy conferences, there seem to be very few 'welfare pluralists' or 'third wayers'. Similarly, I have not detected a sense of complacency. Social policy academics have been very critical of recent government policy, although writing to the 'Guardian' (see p.141) does not appear to have produced much change.

The book also seems to omit some important elements. For example, Beresford is critical of objections to 'user-based approaches' as they lack an evidence base. However, as a Professor of Citizen Participation' (p.356), he is ideally placed to critically examine from both academic and experiential points of view the theory and evidence base on participation (see e.g. Dean, 2017 for a recent review). While there are sections on 'user-controlled research', there is little on co-produced research (e.g. Ellins *et al.*, 2012), or on the contribution of non-user controlled research which engages directly with people with lived experience of the issues at stake (e.g. Glasby *et al.*, 2016). He criticises some social policy texts for not exploring disability, but this text, for example, contains little on race, beyond his family as Jewish immigrants.

Finally, there seem to be some possible inconsistencies in the logic of his argument, along the lines of 'be careful what you wish for...'. He argues that we need to listen to the widest range of voices of users, based on first-hand experience; and lived experience and experiential knowledge (pp.16-17). However, in recent years many of these 'users' have voted for Conservative, New Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments in turn, which he clearly disagrees with. Very broadly, opinion polls have shown support for the division between the 'deserving' and 'underserving' poor, and for greater conditionality (e.g. Hudson *et al.*, 2016).

Similarly, his anti-expert view has some similarities with the 'Govian' position of distrusting experts. The gulf between 'expert' and 'lived experience' views was indicated by the Brexit decision. The small majority for Brexit may be compared with an estimated 10% of academics who favoured Brexit (THES, 2016). In a caricature, it might have appeared to many traditional Labour voters in some areas in the North, the Midlands and Wales that social policy academics stood shoulder to shoulder with the establishment or elite of multi-national capital, millionaires, bankers, and chief executives. Moreover, those who dared to disagree with the experts were 'othered' and seen to suffer from 'false consciousness' at best, or be stupid or racist at worst.

He criticises social policy academics for being ‘them’ not ‘us’. Beresford clearly sees himself as part of ‘us’. While his personal experiences include living on poverty level state benefits for eight years and being a user of mental health services for some 12 years (p.19), his biography is also unusual, with aristocrats in his family history, an Oxbridge education, and being a university professor awarded an OBE. He regards himself as a service user: but we are all service users, although most of us tend to have experiences of ‘mainstream’ or ‘mass’ services, such as the NHS and state education (in my case, a comprehensive school that was the old secondary modern). His reference to service users appears to be more to service user movements and activists, sometimes characterised as ‘the usual suspects’, who may not be typical of ‘ordinary’ service users.

His family may have identity diversity: being ‘surprisingly diverse in terms of class, culture, sexuality, ethnicity, age, disability and faith’ (and gender) (p.3). However, there does not seem to be much cognitive diversity. In other words, his family voices are largely friendly voices: the ‘widest range of voices’ does not include opposing voices, with different points of view. For example, would the ‘widest range of voices’ include BNP views on race (as in the post-modern view that no narratives are privileged)?

Similarly, his wish for the ‘widest range of voices to be recognised, valued and heard’ do not appear to include the views of people who disagree with his views on Personal Budgets, which are dismissed as ‘cosy stories’ (Beresford, 2008). He writes that in recent years we have hardly seen policymakers follow public opinion in response to key issues like MPs’ abuse of expenses, bankers’ bonuses and the costly state bailout of the banks. He notes that despite popular support for capital punishment, Parliament has consistently rejected it. I am not clear if this is an argument in favour of capital punishment. In other words, while he points to ‘the importance of narrative’ (p.21) it is not clear whose narratives count. If we wish to move towards ‘participatory social policy’, should ‘all our welfare’ be shaped by ‘all our views’?

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