

The Welfare State: Labour reconstructing programme

What is the Welfare State?

From a general perspective it is a concept of government in which the state plays a key role in the protection and promotion of the economic and social well-being of its citizens. It is based on the principles of equality of opportunity, and public responsibility for those unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a good life. A fundamental feature of the welfare state is social insurance (security), a provision common to most advanced industrialized countries. Such insurance is usually financed by compulsory contributions and is intended to provide benefits to persons and families during periods of greatest need. The Welfare State also usually includes public provision of basic health care services, and even housing in some cases at low cost or without charge.

However, the modern use of the term is associated with the comprehensive measures of social insurance adopted in post-war years by Great Britain on the basis of the report on Social Insurance and Allied Services (1942) by William Beveridge. In its more detailed form the welfare state provides state aid for the individual in almost all phases of his life “from the cradle to the grave”. Beveridge’s objective was to banish the giant evils of Want, Disease, Squalor, Ignorance and Idleness from Britain. Family allowances for all children irrespective of income were granted in 1946. The National Insurance Act, of the same year, insured all adult men and women in sickness, unemployment and old age. Since its introduction, the welfare state has been reformed many times and sparked off much debate.

Social Security

Social Security is a system under which the state gives money regularly and directly to people in financial need, e.g. the sick, the elderly, the unemployed, the disabled and those with no other income. It is an insurance against life’s risks like illness, unemployment, early retirement, family breakdown, and it helps families with children. It mainly aims at relieving poverty and providing basic means for all. The State gives basic benefits payments (i.e. financial help) to people who experience difficulties because of illness, unemployment, disability, etc. to alleviate poverty resulting from the lack of earned income. People can only obtain contributory benefits if they paid towards the scheme for long enough when they worked. Contributions are deduced from the workers’ salaries. The main contributory benefits are:

- **Jobseekers allowance (JSA)** which is given to unemployed people- they are now called jobseekers. As the name of the benefit indicates, recipients must seek work actively and the objective of JSA is to help people get back to work quickly;
- **Retirement pensions** are not very high, so people must take arrangements to invest money during their working years: then they can increase their income after retirement

Non-contributory benefits: are paid from general taxation and are given to people who have not been able to pay contributions. Many non-contributory benefits are means-tested, i.e. before giving a particular benefit; the authorities check that the person claiming that benefit really needs it: claimants have to give details of their income and what circumstances they are in.

The National Health Service (NHS)

The NHS, which was founded on 5 July 1948, provides a comprehensive health service. When it came into being, it was based on the principle that treatment should be provided according to clinical need and should be free at the point of delivery. The NHS covers a wide variety of services, which range from family practitioner (medical, dental, ophthalmic, and pharmaceutical) services to hospital, specialist or ambulance services.

For ordinary citizens, the system is simple: they only have to register with a local family doctor, who is known as a GP (General Practitioner); when they are ill, they visit their GP, who provides a first diagnosis, prescribes a suitable course of treatment and arranges for tests, specialist consultation and surgery if (s) he thinks are necessary. Patients do not pay for GP's consultation. GPs are free to accept or refuse patients. They are paid a capitation fee: the NHS gives them an amount of money which depends on the size of their list, i.e. the number of patients who registered with them, and not on the number of consultations they have.

Although people are satisfied with the NHS on the whole, they complain about the hospital waiting lists: since the NHS lacks resources, there is a shortage of hospital beds. People usually have to wait for surgery for several months and sometimes for over a year, even if their operation is fairly urgent or serious. People sometimes die as a result of the wait. A sign of public's discontent with the NHS is the expansion of private health institution. Individuals, trade unions and companies subscribe to insurance companies which enable member patients to go to private hospitals or to use pay beds. They can thus avoid the long waiting lists and get treatment more quickly.

The “Troubles” in Northern Ireland

The 1960s were a turning point in the social evolution of Northern Ireland. The Catholics in the North felt that they had been for too long treated like second class citizens. For that reason the **Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association** organised marches and demonstrations. The civil rights crisis broke out in 1969. Riots followed in Londonderry and Belfast in 1969 and British troops were deployed to control them. Rioters threw petrol bombs and stones and the army retaliated with tears gas. In 1972, paratroopers opened fire on an illegal civil rights march in Derry, where 13 civilians were killed and 29 injured. That day has since been remembered as “**Bloody Sunday**.” The bombings continued throughout most of the seventies, eighties and nineties. In 1979 the IRA¹ killed a public figure, Lord Mountbatten, a cousin of the Queen and former viceroy of India. It represented a direct assault on the

¹The Irish Republican Army, it is the most extremist political movement in Northern Ireland. The organisation advocates violent methods such as shooting policemen and public figures.

Crown. In 1994, the IRA called for a ceasefire and London accepted to start for negotiations. An agreement was finally reached on **Good Friday (the Belfast Agreement)** in 1998, after 22 months of intensive negotiations that involved eight of the ten Northern Irish political parties. The talks were chaired by former US Senator George Mitchell and included British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, and President Bill Clinton. However, the dream of a peaceful Ireland was shattered in August when a bomb attack in Omagh (Ulster) killed 28 people. It was regarded as the worst atrocity in thirty years. On May 30th 2000, Britain returned home rule to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Since then there have been several outbursts of violence, especially every July when Protestant loyalists organize parades and walk through Catholic areas, which Catholics see as a provocation.

The Falklands War

British presence in the Falklands Islands dates back to the 1830's when the archipelago became a crown colony. But, Argentina had always claimed sovereignty over the islands because they are geographically close to the country on mainland Latin America, and they had been fishing grounds for Argentinians since immemorial times. Clearly, the disagreement had always existed between the two sides and past attempts to reach a peaceful settlement failed. So, when Argentina invaded the Falklands on 2 April 1982, it did it with the belief that it was recapturing its territories. However, for Britain, the invasion was a premeditated attack on its overseas territories.

The novelty in this war is the short duration of the conflict and the reliance on air and naval technology, mostly as the war theatre was a group of islands that did not allow the British and Argentinian forces to use classical warfare. The crisis lasted only two and a half months, it evolved on two levels. On the one hand, there was the fighting, and on the other hand, there were the diplomatic efforts to reach a cease fire. The military campaign was violent throughout costing hundreds of lives mostly in naval and air warfare; as there were only few brief encounters on land. The end of the war appeared on 21 May, when a British task force including four thousand troops landed on the East Falkland indicating their growing control of the war theatre. From 1 June, five thousand more troops joined the islands opening thereby the last land campaign under the leadership of Major General Jeremy Moore. Finally, on 20 June 1982 the war ended.

Devolution in Wales and Scotland

The New Labour government put devolution at the top of its political agenda. Devolution is a form of subsidiarity passing power back to the people. It is the transfer to a subordinate elected body, on a geographical basis. In September 1997 two referenda were organised in Wales and Scotland. Both Scotland and Wales decided in favour of devolution. It was an unprecedented event since the union of Wales with the United Kingdom in 1707. The devolution programme launched in September 1997 aimed at making the government of the United Kingdom more efficient and bringing decision-making closer to the people. The devolution legislation provides a constitution for Scotland and Wales within the framework of a Scottish Parliament and Welsh assembly. The two bodies began to operate in 1999 by organising their first elections.