

Our Life on Benefits

We hear a lot about people who live on state benefits. Benefits are referred to as handouts from the taxpayer, and those who receive them are called scroungers. The government sponsors this grudging attitude. They have hit on a telling image, which they repeat in speech after speech. Hard-working men and women setting off in the cold half-light of morning look up at the closed curtains in their neighbour's house and think of the scroungers lying warm in bed. Not only is this an unpleasant attempt to generate envy and division; it is also dishonest in its suggestion first that everyone on benefits is out of work (many low-paid workers receive benefits to bring their earnings up to the level of a living wage) and secondly in the insinuation that those who are out of work have an easy life. We were out of work and on benefits a couple of times in the 70s, and when my salary was low we received Family Income Supplement.¹ I didn't think of us as scroungers; in retrospect I still don't think we were scroungers. Here are some notes on what happened to us and how it appeared at the time.

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When I left school in 1964 I spent the summer holidays pretty idly. I answered an advertisement in the *New Statesman*, which resulted in an interview and an offer of a job as live-in housekeeper to a couple of rich, elderly lesbians. I was a bit nervous, not about their lesbianism, which was just a word my sisters used, but because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to manage their vacuum cleaner to their satisfaction, so I didn't take up their offer. How different my life would have been if I'd been braver.

It wasn't until September that I seriously looked around for a job. My parents had a friend called Eileen² who worked for an employment bureau in London, and they sent me to her. She procured several interviews for me. One was to be a clerk in a West End solicitor's office, where the man who interviewed me talked mainly about the convenience of being able to go and play the organ at a nearby church in his lunch-hours. Another was with a firm in Store Street (off Tottenham Court Road) who wanted a packer. The woman there thought I was too highly qualified, and sent me along to see her husband who worked for a public relations firm. He took me for lunch in an Italian restaurant where I had pasta and what I think may have been *crêpes Suzette*. He was a smooth grey haired man who seemed interested in the plans I had for my life – what they were I don't now remember – but not interested enough to offer me a job. The lunch was a consolation prize. He introduced me to his colleague, a rougher diamond, who asked if I had been to the Labour Exchange. When I said no, he said he thought as much, meaning that he could see I was much too middle-class to think of mixing with the unemployed. They were surprised when I said Alan Eden-Green was my uncle (Alan was that year's president of the public relations officers' professional association), and I think they thought it was his job to find me a comfortable berth. I was hanging around for several weeks, making applications and getting rejected. Mr Callaghan agreed to act as a referee for a job at the BBC, but that of course never came to anything. The organ-player offered me a job, but by then I had decided to work at my sister Jennifer's office, the Graduate Teacher Training Registry.

I worked at the GTTR for more than a year, and went back there several times for odd periods before starting at St Andrews and again in the summer that we got married. Just before I was due to leave I went into hospital to have my appendix out. It was at the GTTR that I met Sheila Hanley, with whom I kept in touch until her death this last year. I forgot that finding a job had not been particularly easy, and that I only got the post at the GTTR through Jennifer's influence.

When we were students we lived on our grants and a bursary and a small contribution from my parents. Anna had a year without a grant, and we had a loan from the university to pay her fees.

1 Now I receive a state pension. Another aspect of the hypocrisy of the current debate is the refusal to regard the pension as a benefit, as though pensioners deserve their handout in a way that other recipients do not.

2 Surname, I think, Lewis. She was enormously fat. Her husband was a potter and an alcoholic, called Ted, I think. I seem to recall that he made tiles. Perhaps he worked at the Woolwich Poly, or the connection may have gone back further, to the war, or to pre-war days at the Mary Ward Settlement.

Grants, bursary, interest-free loan – these were substantial benefits. We also went out and earned a bit. Most students worked during the vacations in those days, but I would guess only a minority worked during term time. Anna had some short-term employment during one summer vacation, we both worked odd spells at the Quarto Bookshop, and while I was in my final year Anna had graduated and had a job at the town library. Mostly, however, we thought the vacation was for reading and studying, and mucking about. The time passed very quickly. I suppose if we had earned more money we might have been more enterprising in our use of our leisure. We heard about people taking jobs in pubs, but they tended to be people who frequented pubs. One summer when Mike wanted to stay in St Andrews (the summer when there were Shakespeare productions in the Castle) he took a job washing up at a restaurant. I think he stayed with us; I remember he was anxious about having his hands in washing-up water all day.

Someone once suggested I should go to the Labour Exchange to try to get a summer job. It was somewhere in South Street, I think – possibly where the Job Centre now is. I went in and with some embarrassment asked if they could help me get a job. The woman didn't take any particulars, guessed that I was a student, and said that they had only one job on the books. It was to work in Tentsmuir for the Forestry Commission. She looked me up and down and said she didn't think I'd be strong enough. After that I didn't dare go back. No-one suggested that we might be able to claim benefit during the long vacation; it might have been different in less pampered places than St Andrews, but so far as I recall it was not until a few years later that the rules were changed to allow such claims. The assumption was that students lived off their parents in the summer, or found themselves casual jobs.³

I put off looking for a proper job until I got my degree results, because I hoped to go to Oxford to do research. I assumed that if I didn't go to Oxford (or Liverpool, who had also offered me a place) I would 'go into teaching', both because this was the great fall-back for everyone, and because both my parents were teachers, and it had always seemed the natural job to do. If you weren't a teacher you might be a doctor or a lawyer, if you were prepared to subject yourself to years of tedious training, or else you would go into business of some sort. 'He's just a businessman,' my parents would say dismissively of people they met, or of the parents of our schoolfriends. Below businessmen in my parents' estimation were secretaries and shop assistants. It was the great threat that they held over my sisters, that they would end up serving in Woolworths. My father once threatened me with having to work in a garage.

In those days, despite the growth of teacher training (as witnessed by the expansion of the GTTR), it was still quite common for graduates to become schoolteachers without training. University education departments on the whole had a poor reputation and people said it was better to learn on the job.

When I got my first and the Oxford place was confirmed I saw myself as set up for another three years on a grant or studentship or whatever it was called – which included provision for Anna and the baby we were expecting. During the summer before I was to start I applied for a few weeks' supply teaching, but was turned down, and I answered an advertisement from an American academic looking for a research assistant, but got no reply.⁴ I was quite relieved, as I all I could think about was my academic work, and the novel I was writing. We stayed with Anna's parents in Tring, until the house in Oxford became available, which was difficult. It was a position we drifted into. It didn't occur to me until later that some of the difficulty was due to the fact that we were not contributing to our upkeep, although Anna's father did ask pointed questions about money.

The phrase *it didn't occur to us* keeps cropping up when we think about those days. We did as we were told. Even the fact that we received a lot of contradictory advice didn't alert us to the need to take more active control of our lives.

3 No-one gave the matter much thought. Students didn't have votes, on the whole, and most of their political energies went into global issues like CND, de-colonisation, anti-apartheid, and the Vietnam war.

4 In fact I am not quite sure whether these half-hearted attempts to find work were during the summer before we went to Oxford or possibly during one of the summer vacations when, perhaps, we wanted to stay in London rather than St Andrews for a month or so.

The Oxford plan didn't work out; I gave up after the first term. I assumed it would be easy enough to find a job. I had a first, after all, and I was hard-working, sober and responsible. I should have taken warning from the difficulties I had experienced hitherto. At the GTTR and the Quarto I had given satisfaction, but they were both employers who already knew me. I had never managed to persuade anyone I didn't know, apart from the elderly lesbians and the organ-playing solicitor, that I was worth taking on.

The careers advisory service, like everything else at Oxford, had some fancy name, and occupied luxurious premises. They were reluctant to take me on because I wasn't an Oxford graduate, but eventually gave me an appointment – or rather two, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The procedure was interesting. In the morning I was interviewed at length by a donnish sort of chap, who talked about my literary activities and my dreams and aspirations, and made various suggestions about jobs at the BBC or in publishing. He pooh-pooed the idea of teacher training. I came away feeling bemused but hopeful. In the afternoon I was seen by a younger man in what even I could recognise as a more expensive suit. He looked down the notes that his colleague had made in the morning. He asked me what my plans were, and I began to say that the chap in the morning had suggested ... but he interrupted and said that I could forget about all that. He sent me to Bullingdon Council as a possible trainee accountant.

I knew about Bullingdon Council, because our friend David Ormerod worked there as an accountant. He and Mary had told us that it was a regular dumping ground that the careers people used for those they had no hope of placing elsewhere. I had the impression that nobody (except David) stayed there long, so they had a constant need for new recruits. I was interviewed that same afternoon at the council offices, by a small, quiet man, who evidently thought accountancy was the finest profession in the world. He offered me a place. It was all rather sudden, as it had never before occurred to me to be an accountant. It struck me as a dismal prospect. Anna wasn't keen. I seem to recall that Mary and David advised against it. So I turned it down.⁵ I now know I could have made a satisfying career in accountancy. Turning it down meant I couldn't go back to the careers advisory service. I was on my own.

I decided to pursue the path taken by my father, and looked for a job in further education, ideally in an art school, but otherwise in a technical college. The thing was, my father would have taken me on, if I'd not been his son, and might have helped me make a career, but of course Farnham was the one place where I could not apply. I also applied for jobs in academic administration. I sent out dozens of applications. People nowadays talk of making hundreds of applications, but in those days each one took much longer. No word-processors. There was always a badly designed form to fill in, to be accompanied by a letter of application and CV in multiple copies, sometimes as many as eight or ten copies.⁶ My typewriter didn't manage fat wadges of carbon copies very easily. There was a postal strike at the time, so I went to various towns around Oxford (Abingdon, Aylesbury, Maidenhead, Newbury, Bletchley come to mind) collecting application forms and delivering completed forms by hand. When the postal strike ended the rejections began to flow in. In those days most employers notified unsuccessful candidates.

Most councils in those days demanded open 'testimonials' from previous employers (in addition to the names of confidential referees). This meant that I had to go back to my supervisor, Ackrill, to ask him to fulfil what seemed to me a quaintly old fashioned requirement. He was sniffy about it, as he was about everything. He clearly thought it was only servants who needed such a thing. Eventually he consented to give me a testimonial, but said I would have to provide the wording. The crucial point was to make it clear that I had given up my previous position voluntarily, and had not been sacked for incompetence or dishonesty. I left my wording at the porter's lodge, and in due course received Ackrill's signed copy. I had ended my draft: 'He has no obvious physical or mental defect and no criminal record,' which he kindly amended to, 'He is in good health and of good character.'

5 It amuses me when people talk about the Bullingdon Club as the epitome of conspicuous wealth and extravagance, when to me the name suggests the dark, cramped council offices and the grey man who offered me the grey job.

6 I seem to recall having to make eleven copies once for a post in academic administration, but I may be imagining it.

I severed my connection with the University in the early months of 1971, and my grant ran out at Easter. Contrary to my expectations I had not found a job by then. We had a mortgage to pay, and a baby to feed, so I had to sign-on and claim benefit. I went on the dole. Having no National Insurance stamps for the previous year, I could not claim Unemployment Benefit, and so was reliant on the lower, means-tested Supplementary Benefit.⁷ I remember the day when I went on the dole. I had to go to three offices, two of which were close enough to where we lived, but the other was a good way off – I can't remember where exactly, but it was a long walk. This last office was where I was interviewed and assessed. It was a bleak place with a large waiting area with seats fixed to the ground, and a lot of anxious adults and restless children. I'm trying to remember what book I was reading as I waited; it may have been *Gulliver's Travels*. I felt as though I was back at school, regimented, puzzled and expecting to be humiliated.

I was fixed up eventually with about eight or nine pounds a week, which was only a bit over half what I had been getting from my postgraduate studentship, but in addition we were helped with our mortgage, so we were not much worse off. The cash was handed out when you signed on at the office on the Abingdon Road. This was a barn-like building, a temporary construction like a nissen hut. Going in you found a lot of people milling around, which gave it something of the atmosphere of a jumble sale, except that most of the people were men. You queued up to sign on, and then queued up again to get your money. The staff were always very business-like. They weren't discourteous, but didn't go out of their way to be friendly, and it wouldn't have taken much imagination to feel that they despised you because they had a job and you didn't. One day I missed my signing-on time, because it was difficult to keep track of days, and when I went along later the manager was called and said that if I forgot to sign-on again, he would forget to pay me. I have a feeling that the clerk at the desk felt a bit ashamed of the manager's bluster, and tried to make up for it with a flicker of friendliness – but here I may possibly be inventing something that I would like to think is true.

I was interviewed by someone whose job was to help me find a job. This was at the third of the offices that I dealt with, which was in modern and quite attractive premises on St Aldates. The young woman who interviewed me was hugely pregnant and had the most astonishing blue eyes I have ever seen, harebell blue, I suppose it was. She was probably much too uncomfortable to give much thought to my case. She signed various forms, which were necessary to authorise my benefit, and that was that. I was put on the Professional and Executive Register, which meant that if any Professional and Executive jobs in my sort of line were notified to the Labour Exchange I would be told about them, but the woman with blue eyes said it was unlikely to happen. She may have said other more helpful things, but I didn't remember, her eyes were too fascinating.

I continued to send out applications, and even had one or two interviews. I continued writing my novel, visiting the Bodleian, playing with Jessy, walking the dog and helping around the house. Quite often we entertained friends at weekends, or friends with cars took us out. So it wasn't a bad life. The back garden led onto a big field where children played and dogs chased each other. I remember one sunny day when we sat in what the estate agent had called the loggia at the back of the house, and we all three of us got too hot. I was reading *Dombey and Son*, and it was on that day that my love of Dickens began.

I didn't feel I was skyving or scrounging, but neither did I think the dole money was mine by right. What I thought was that it was taking a little longer than expected for me to find my place in society, and that the dole was needed to keep us going until that place revealed itself. My right to the dole was exactly the same as the right I was to have later on to my salary, no less and no more. It seemed to me then, as it does now, that society owes nobody more than is needed to keep them fed, clothed and housed; and that the members of society are obliged to contribute what they can to the common good, not in return for payment, but out of their obligation to others. As I say, that is how things have always seemed to me, but since I've never found anyone to agree with me, I suppose I must be wrong.

⁷ I think strictly speaking the term *dole* was used for Unemployment Benefit – at least it was when I worked in the Social Security office in Leven – but it was loosely applied to all benefit paid to the unemployed. Although the non-contributory benefit had been called Supplementary Benefit since 1966, the Oxford Labour Exchange still seemed to refer to it as National Assistance.

There was always a young man from the Workers Revolutionary Party outside the dole office selling the party's paper. I used to buy a copy from him. I don't remember what it was called, but Wikipedia says it was *Workers Press*. It was well written, often quite convincing. I remember a photograph of Tony Benn visiting the Clyde. It was a clever photo – he was smoking his pipe and they managed to make him look a smug, upper class fool (as perhaps he was). I got to talking to the vendor – he was called Cope, and struck me as a nice chap, who seemed anxious about selling his quota of papers. He came to our house and tried to get us to join the party. When I tried to explain my objections, he said I was being subjective, and I really ought to be objective. He wanted us to attend a WRP meeting, to be addressed by Gerry Healy, somewhere in the north of Oxford. He was very keen for us to go, so to please him we went along. It was terrible, quite menacing. There were members of a rival group of Trotskyites there, ostentatiously drinking beer which Healy didn't approve of; to stop them going out for more he had the doors locked. I began to fear there might be some sort of violence. After that I think I stopped buying the paper, and before long Cope the vendor disappeared.

The Open University interviewed me twice for posts in their administration. These were jobs I should have liked to do. Here I was able observe something of the dynamics of interviews. It was clear that some of the (large) interviewing panel wanted to have me, but at least one was firmly against me. Others in my position would have turned this insight to advantage, but I merely found it interesting. One of those who favoured me said that things often got quite hectic and I would need a sense of humour; did I have a sense of humour? he asked. I regarded this as a trick question, because nobody who had a sense of humour, I thought, could possibly answer yes, but on the other hand it would never do to answer no. So I said I didn't know, but that I sometimes made little jokes. My supporters on the committee looked disappointed. To get to Walton Hall where the interviews were held involved a journey on a pretty branch line from (I guess) Reading. On one of my trips I left my book behind, but fortunately got on the same train going home, and the guard still had it. It was a library book, one of the lovely Hogarth Press editions of Virginia Woolf, probably *Orlando*.

At the Bodleian (which I used more now than I had while officially connected with the University) I was reading a lot of seventeenth century stuff – John Aubrey, Sprat's history of the Royal Society, and lots of tracts and pamphlets on religion and science. Lawrence Moonan encouraged me in this. At the same time I began to write unsolicited letters to the Complementary Studies departments at art schools offering myself as a freelance lecturer on the history of ideas.⁸ To my surprise I got a response from Chelsea School of Art, and went to talk to the three permanent Complementary Studies staff. They sat lolling at their untidy desks in their big office and we chatted for an hour or so. I had no idea what they wanted of me, but we seemed to get along all right. They commissioned me to come and give a lecture on any subject I liked, for which I would get a day's pay, at some enormous rate – about three times my week's dole money. I prepared a lecture on John Aubrey⁹ and duly travelled up to town to deliver it. Nobody seemed at all put out when no students turned up. They assured me that I would still be paid, and I went away again, with the understanding that I would come to teach a short course on Greek philosophy in the autumn.

I can't now remember the details, but this one day's earnings caused trouble by interrupting my spell of unemployment. I lost more than one week's benefit, and because the payment from Chelsea was a long time coming through we were short of money for a while. I don't think I had to go all round the offices to create a new claim, but there was a bit of extra form-filling. I probably made more of this than was necessary, because I was embarrassed to have got so much from Chelsea.

From September onwards I had various spells of casual work, and this tided us over for the next couple of years, without the need for benefits, although as payments were always a long way in arrears we had some spells when money was short. I did a fair bit at Chelsea, where they seemed to think I was doing all right. For a year I had work at Aylesbury FE College, but I soon found that I was only there on sufferance. The head of Liberal Studies, an American called Bill Winget, was a

⁸ My father said this was how he had found some of the staff that he employed on casual contracts to teach the art students at Farnham.

⁹ I came across it recently. It was quite good.

nice chap, and he would have kept me on if he could, I'm sure, but the students and other members of staff were complaining about me. He made various suggestions of other things I might do, such as taking holy orders or joining the police. When I asked if I could come back the next year he said no, apologetically, offering me a final piece of advice: when applying for work, he said, rather than admitting to having studied Greek and Philosophy for four years it would be safer to say I had been in prison. Still, other FE colleges were sufficiently desperate for staff to take me on the following year, but it was clear that I was not going to make a go of teaching Liberal Studies, or Complementary Studies, or whatever it was called. It is probably true to say that society would have been marginally better off paying me benefit for doing nothing than paying me a wage for being such a bad teacher. Realising this, I went back to St Andrews to resume the study of philosophy. Recidivism, I suppose Bill Winget would have called it.

Having used up two-thirds of a year of my three year studentship at Oxford, I had funding for two and one third years at St Andrews. For two years I thought I was going on well enough, but then things went wrong. I despaired of finishing. Then Anna was ill for a couple of months before Christopher was born, and I had to look after Jessy and Swithun. I felt as though I had found my vocation.

As the end of my grant approached I began applying for jobs. I suspected I'd not be able to get a job in a Philosophy department. I could see that I would never be able to teach at any level, although that didn't stop me applying for one or two teaching jobs, and going to a couple of interviews, but I reckoned I could find something in some sort of administration. The mid-seventies saw the burgeoning of 'What our American cousins describe as "quangos"'.¹⁰ They all needed administrative assistants, which was what Jennifer had been at the GTTR, and I knew I'd be good enough at that sort of thing.

But interviews were slow in coming and when they came they were disastrous. I was back on the dole. I went to sign on at Leven Labour Exchange (a 40 minute bus journey from Pittenweem) and as I still didn't have any NI stamps in the relevant year they sent me up to the Social Security office in Station Road. There I was interviewed by a nice young man with long hair, and was set up with Supplementary Benefit. I would sign on by post and receive a giro each week. Once again I received no help or advice with finding work – I'm not sure whether they still used the term *Professional and Executive Register*, but certainly nobody ever made the slightest move to force, or even encourage me to take any work. All I had to do was say I was looking for work, was available for work, and was not in receipt of any earnings, all of which were true.

This carried on from the beginning of 1976 until the autumn. In between looking for work I was still going into St Andrews trying to work on my thesis, and spending a lot of time talking to Ronnie, to Annie's annoyance. I had a vasectomy in the spring, after which I was ill.¹¹ I ought to have notified the Labour Exchange, as I was not available for work while I was ill, but I don't think I did. It wouldn't have made any difference to my money, but for as long as I had a sick note I would have been receiving my Supp Ben in lieu of Sickness Benefit instead of in lieu of Unemployment Benefit.

The giro arrived regularly, and Anna cashed it at the post office, and we got along well enough. We had no rent or mortgage to pay – but that made no difference, because if we had had housing costs they would have been covered by extra benefit. Once when I went for an interview (probably the Belfast interview) I think there was a delay in sending my form and so a delay in getting the money. Our neighbours knew we were hard up. This didn't bother me, but I suspect it bothered Anna, particularly when a young woman she used to talk to outside the school (called Sheila, I think, or Sheena) picked up the fact that the giro was late and gave her a pound note. She was a single mother with several children.

In the potato-picking season Sheila said she could get me a job in the fields. Anna was in two minds whether she wanted me to take it. I was reluctant, partly because I assumed the other

¹⁰ *The Listener*, 2 October 1975, quoted in the OED as one of a clutch of references in the mid seventies to 'a new species of animal' (*The Observer* 2 May 1976).

¹¹ I know it was in the spring, because while I was ill Harold Wilson resigned as prime minister, and this happened in April 1976.

potato-pickers would laugh at me, but mainly because I couldn't face the complications involved in going off the dole and back on again when the work in the fields came to an end. I couldn't mention this reason to Sheila because she would have said that there was no need to come off the dole, as nobody need ever know. So Anna declined the offer on my behalf. I suppose Sheila thought I was afraid of getting my hands dirty.

Soon afterwards came the provisional offer of work from my parents' lawyer friend Lyn Mostyn, who said that if his partner agreed he would take me on as an articled clerk. This involved a long stay down in Farnham while the two lawyers kept me hanging on. As a result I was unable to send the signing-on form, and so the giro didn't arrive. I realised that this was my fault, but Anna regarded it as the fault of the Supp Ben people in Leven, and she was indignant with them over the phone.

Now things moved quickly. Before travelling down to Farnham I had been interviewed for a low-grade job in the Civil Service, and had been successful. The interviewers had been embarrassed over my over-qualification, but confirmed what I had worked out for myself, that I was a few months too old to enter the Civil Service at Executive Officer level. They said I'd be able to apply for promotion once I was on the inside. I had put off accepting the offer until I knew whether Lyn Mostyn was going to take me on. When he wrote saying he wouldn't (quite a brutal letter explaining why I was unsuitable) I accepted the Civil Service and before long was told to report to the Social Security office in Leven where I was to work as a Clerical Assistant – the lowest clerical grade. The first thing that happened was that I was taken through to the Supp Ben supervisor and all the possible rules were exploited to the utmost to get me as high a payment as possible to tide us over until my first pay-cheque arrived. I saw a note on my by now quite thick file saying that the claimant's wife had phoned and had not been satisfied with the explanation.

For the first few months all I did was write giros, all day, every day. I was always too slow and my figure 8 was often criticised, and it was pretty tedious, but it was a job, and I hope I got a bit better at it as time wore on. Behind me there was a constant chatter from the desk of Clerical Officers who were dealing with Sickness Benefit claims. It was now that I first heard the view that benefit claimants were scroungers. The staff weren't unkind, and if pressed they would almost certainly have admitted that some Supp Ben claimants were just unfortunate and couldn't help needing a handout, but the general view was that they were all just idlers exploiting the system. I don't think people frequently used the word *scrounger*, and I wish I could remember what words they did use – not, I think, *waster* or *feckless*; perhaps *chancer*. Disapproval was mainly conveyed by tone of voice or facial expression. Most of the claimants were known to someone on the staff, because Leven and Methil were fairly close communities, and their individual circumstances were no secret. Who was a bidey-in with whom, how many children they had, whether they were on the fiddle, who their parents were, whether they had been in prison – all these things would be discussed. The Supp Ben claimants were not respectable IPs (insured persons) like the people who had paid their stamps and were certified as sick and so were entitled to what they received.¹²

Another reason for despising the Supp Ben claimants was that they were handled by the Supp Ben staff, who worked in the other part of the building, followed (it was thought) less rigorous procedures, and generally allowed their claimants to get away with too much. The animosity between the two sides of the office was extraordinary. Once a girl who had worked in Supp Ben was transferred to work in Sickness Benefit, and it was interesting to see how quickly her allegiance changed. They weren't true, she said, the things that people *through there* said about the people *through here*. I don't remember her ever defending her previous colleagues against the calumnies retailed amongst us.

I used to write Supp Ben giros as well as Sickness Benefit, and every afternoon a girl from the other side would bring the cases through. If she was late my supervisor would threaten that the giros would not get written, and it was a point of principle that the supervisor had to resist any request for a last minute emergency payment. In this he was invariably supported and applauded by the

¹² This is an over-simplification. The rates of Sickness Benefit were not generous, so if a claimant had special circumstances or a less than complete insurance record, their Sickness Benefit would have to be made up to the level they were entitled to on Supplementary Benefit.

staff, but over-ruled by the managers. The giros were always written and sent out, but our position as respectable people who were exploited by the Supp Ben staff and their claimants had been asserted.

Having written giros for three or four months I was moved on to other things, all of which were humiliatingly difficult for me to get right. I worked three years in Leven before being promoted to Executive Officer grade and moving to Newcastle.

While I was working in Leven my salary was low enough for us to be entitled to Family Income Supplement. We had a book of vouchers which we handed over in return for cash at the Post Office. This was how Child Benefit (the new name for the Family Allowance) was paid – essentially the same process as had been used since the introduction of Family Allowance after the war. As one of the low paid, we also benefited from the Callaghan government's incomes policy, which, as I recall, gave us a flat-rate increase of £6 per week. This helped us catch up with the high inflation of those days and made us feel quite affluent.

After our move to Newcastle we were no longer in receipt of FIS. We still had Child Benefit, of course, and also tax relief on our mortgage interest; at a time when income tax was around 30% and mortgage interest went up as high as 15%, this amounted to a huge subsidy on our housing, without which we could never have afforded a house, either in Newcastle or in St Andrews.¹³ When our children went to University there were still means-tested grants, which they all received. After that, and with the withdrawal of mortgage tax relief, I think we were off benefits altogether until I retired and received my final salary pension under the University superannuation scheme (including a component derived from my civil service pension). Although I had been paying in to the scheme since starting work at the University, there were substantial contributions from my employer, that is from public funds. Since the age of 60 we have both had a free bus pass, and when I turned 65 we both started receiving the state pension.

Having received such extensive support from the state all my life, even if I sympathised with the ideology of individualism that nowadays frames the debate on benefits I couldn't decently object to payments to those who need them. There are many explanations for the increasingly grudging attitude towards benefits claimants. One of the problems is that those who advocate the cause of claimants talk about entitlement to benefits, which allows opponents to question the basis of that entitlement.¹⁴

During my earlier period of unemployment, in the afterglow of the sixties, it seemed to me that benefits were just there, as a fact of life, for the support of those who, through choice or through bad luck, were not caught up in the world of work. It seemed natural that my sister Imogen, for example, should be on the dole between spells of working in the theatre. You heard a lot in those days about the problem of leisure – of how people would fill their time and find meaning in their lives without work. There was not enough work to go round, and there were plenty of people with ambition and drive who wanted to do it. It seemed reasonable that those who didn't want to run in the rat race, hold a position in the pecking order or occupy a seat on the gravy train should be enabled to stand aside. I felt it was inconsistent with this view of the matter to demand benefits as 'my right'. They were there to be plucked from the tree, so were no more mine than anyone else's.

Despite my idealistic views, I felt a certain shame in receiving benefits. This inconsistency was due to class. Apart from special cases such as actors, for a middle-class person to need benefits was a sign that they were on the rocks, sinking, on the way down. This was what my mother felt, and her feelings seeped into mine. I might wish to distance myself from the rat-race and pecking order, but I had not been to Dulwich for nothing. I had no sordid ambitions, but part of me had the feeling that I ought to be making a recognised (and suitably rewarded) contribution to society. I

13 The tax relief was granted as a measure of social engineering, to encourage home ownership, which was considered a social good.

14 Entitlement can be used in two different senses in this context. We might ask what level of benefit a person is entitled to under the regulations (how many children they have, how long they have been out of work, what disability they have and so on). But I'm using the term in the broader sense in which we ask what justification there is for paying benefits at all, or how the conditions and regulations for benefits should be framed.

sometimes talked of finding a manual job as a street-cleaner, and went as far as applying to be a postman, but I was afraid of not fitting in, and also people told me that I should leave such jobs for those who needed them more desperately than I did, and who couldn't aspire to anything else.¹⁵ I hoped that my writing would count as my contribution to society, but was not convinced. So I was always diffident about claiming benefit. This was why I got into trouble with the Supp Ben office when I went to Farnham in pursuit of the job with Lyn Mostyn: it all seemed too difficult to explain, and I'd have had to reveal my affairs – including the shameful fact that I was from a comparatively prosperous background.

As the seventies went on unemployment was no longer spoken of in misty sixties terms as the problem of leisure, but was seen for what it was – a scandal, a blight, spreading poverty and suffering. Campaigners for the rights of the unemployed shouted about their entitlement to benefit. Friends told me I should go in and demand what was due to me. I was never happy about this, partly because I couldn't persuade myself that I was entitled to anything, but mainly because the language of rights and entitlement seemed misplaced. When hard-working people in the early morning are encouraged to feel resentment towards benefits claimants lying abed, it is a reaction to the strident language of entitlement which developed in the course of the seventies, and became entrenched in left wing thought during years of opposition to Thatcherism.¹⁶ It would be better in this context to concentrate less on individual rights and more on the common good, which requires that those with needs should be supported.

Looking back now, I'm grateful for all the benefits I've received. I don't feel ashamed at having been a drain on society, either when I was out of work, or when I was in work and receiving the extraordinary benefit of mortgage tax relief. I think, though, that I should not have put Anna through those years of comparative poverty. She felt it more deeply than I dared acknowledge at the time. She was the one who had to cash the giro and hand over the vouchers at the post office and face the mild pity and milder contempt of neighbours. I'm not sure how I could have done things differently, but I am ashamed of the dithering and ineptitude that made me such a slow starter in the wheelbarrow-race of life.

15 Young people nowadays are much more sensible about this sort of thing. Employers also are more accustomed to taking on over-qualified staff. My qualifications were more of a burden than they would be now if I applied for a low-skilled job. The civil service was literal-minded enough to accept that a degree in Greek and Philosophy satisfied their criterion, which for a Clerical Assistant was, I think, O-grade passes in English and Arithmetic, but other employers saw it, as Bill Winget warned, as a disqualification.

16 It has been said that one thing that enabled Mrs Thatcher to get away with her destruction of British industry was the comparatively generous provision of benefit to the unemployed, which was largely left intact from the days of the Wilson and Callaghan governments.