Out of Hours

The concept of the ‘undeserving poor’:
pejorative stereotypes and worsening inequalities undermine welfare reform

I support the current government’s attempts to reform the UK welfare system, which resembles a road to bankruptcy paved with good intentions. However, I take issue with unsympathetic narratives in the press mocking the supposedly undeserving poor, with ‘dole scrounger’ and ‘bogus asylum seeker’ caricatures firmly embedded in the national psyche. Pejorative stereotyping masks what really matters — worsening inequalities, and how politicians are actively complicit in this process.

The number of poor children has risen recently, yet two-thirds are from working households. Over-represented among them are the children of migrant workers, whose parents are often on the minimum wage or zero hours contracts, and experiencing hardship and poor health. Meanwhile, what remains of the indigenous working class is disenfranchised, with employers opting instead for the migrants. Youth unemployment continues to rise, challenging the ambition of making older people work longer.

The loss of the middle class. Analysis of social inequality has historically compared the ill-fated post-industrial working class with a thriving middle class. However, in recent years the latter has, almost imperceptibly, shrunk numerically and in influence, not least because traditional domains like teaching, academia, and in influence, not least because traditional domains like teaching, academia, and social care services in Emergency Departments.

Consequences of inequality. These trends are relevant to health care. In the book The Spirit Level, we see how very unequal societies, even if the average per capita income is respectable, suffer poorer health due to social tensions and higher rates of depression, drug and alcohol misuse, teenage pregnancy, obesity and its consequences, including diabetes, and violence and its fallout, including imprisonment. Increased deprivation fills our surgeries and emergency departments.

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months have seen wide coverage of the fate of a European country whose combination of low manufacturing output and wages, over-generous welfare, and a political class bolstering its own privileges while turning a blind eye to widespread tax evasion led to a point of no return. Not to the same extent, perhaps, but what ails Greece is relevant to the UK.

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