

Welfare reform: can it work? By Helen Disney

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Today sees the launch of the coalition's flagship Welfare Reform Bill. Looking at the gamut of reform challenges which this government has set itself – from radical NHS reform through to free schools, tuition fees, reforming policing, welfare overhaul and so on – the next few years are certainly not going to be easy.

But has the task of welfare reform become politically easier and more acceptable, thanks to changes in public attitudes? While many voters are sceptical of reducing the role of the state in key public services such as health and education, research shows that they appear to be much more keen to cut the UK's welfare bill.

According to the latest British Social Attitudes survey, published at the end of last year, Britain has become more Thatcherite since Margaret Thatcher left office, with people much less supportive of the welfare state and the redistribution of wealth than in the 1980s.

Sympathy towards benefit claimants has apparently evaporated, along with support for redistributive tax and spend policies, over the past 20 years, with Labour governing during a period of significant hardening of attitudes towards the poor.

Nevertheless, the scale of changes now being proposed is significant and voters may be wondering why welfare reform is seen as such an urgent priority for the coalition government? Is it just a pragmatic response to the state of the economy and demographic changes or is there also a moral imperative behind the government's push get people back into work for their own sake? What are the key principles behind the government's current plans and how do they reflect the idea of the 'big society', an idea of which many are becoming sceptical?

Has the government been able to learn any useful lessons from examples of other countries' attempts to tackle welfare reform – either in the US or other EU countries? The Netherlands, for example, has had great success in encouraging those registered for disability benefits to be able to return to some form of work which suits their needs. Now, extending upon that success, the welfare system

there in many cities such as Rotterdam has a 'full engagement' work-first strategy with many features explicitly adapted from New York's and Wisconsin's well-known strategies.

But is it really possible successfully to enact welfare reform policies such as tougher welfare to work schemes even at a time of rising unemployment? This week's latest figures showed that UK unemployment increased by 44,000 in the three months to December to just under 2.5 million, while the rate of joblessness among young people aged between 16 and 24 rose to more than 20%.

Welfare reform may be the least unpopular of the government's current reform plans, yet enacting it in the current economic climate, will still be no mean feat. Iain Duncan Smith's greatest work challenges are still ahead of him.

Helen Disney is CEO of the Stockholm Network, a pan-European think tank <http://www.stockholm-network.org>. They are holding a conference on 'The welfare state after the crisis' on 9 March in London.