

Review:

Peter Beresford (2016) *All Our Welfare: Towards Participatory Social Policy*

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Beresford's basic argument, that the welfare state has been pulled significantly from its origins and needs to be rethought for our contemporary society, is not likely to be a surprise to many Concept readers. Neither will Beresford's rallying cry for a participatory welfare state that values diversity and places the experiential knowledge of service users at its centre be unfamiliar.

However, using a persuasive mixture of historical account and sociological analysis, Beresford illustrates how this is not the narrative that underpins existing social policy. While in 1945 'welfare' and 'wellbeing' were considered by policy-makers to be broadly synonymous, and the aim of the welfare state was to improve all our lives, by the 21st century welfare has become a 'safety net' for certain groups of people who are judged – by objective experts – to be a burden on society. A division has formed between those who receive welfare and those who don't and, in order to reinforce this division, the NHS and state pension (from which a much broader section of the population will receive support) have been decoupled from the narrative of the welfare state. Therefore, particularly in times of austerity, the narrative has shifted from social welfare as part of the solution to welfare as a problem for individuals that needs to be reduced.

While the welfare state had been developed in order to address the problems originating in the inefficiencies, inconsistency and inequalities of the market, now the market is presented as an alternative to the deficiencies of the welfare state! (p 134)

Beresford goes on to argue that recovering the welfare state needs to begin by denying the division between 'us' (professionals, experts, strivers) and 'them' (service users, uneducated skivers). Rethinking the welfare state is a political activity that necessitates the welcoming of people's direct experience, emotions and values into the dominant narrative. What is needed, Beresford suggests, "is not another theory or model, but a

wholly different approach to social policy, based on different knowledges, ways of understanding and on a different process” (p 359).

As a community educator focusing on participation, who has recently worked mostly within the social policy departments of two different universities, and as a welfare state user and supporter, the book offered both uncomfortable moments and moments of clarity. Repeated descriptions of how ‘community engagement’ has been co-opted into the neoliberal exercise of experts identifying the wants and needs of service users (just think of Blair’s focus group culture), challenged me to interrogate my own practice. A genuinely participatory welfare state must be premised upon a political commitment to prioritising the ‘ordinary voices’ of all of us who use the welfare state; not seeking to control engagement but to welcome people and groups of people not only to speak for themselves but also to act for themselves. Service user research, suggested as a counter to research conducted by self-appointed ‘experts’, “offers a chance to develop their own narratives, framed in terms of their own experience, understandings, models and theories... This is a process of production, not just of inquiry.” (p 232)

Despite all the barriers to such re-imagining, Beresford identifies significant room for optimism. He points to increasing service user movements and new ways of political and social organising that welcome knowledge based on direct experience whilst prioritising shared understandings political barriers and social solutions. We are challenged to think about the conditions, values and relationships that are necessary to make genuine user involvement possible. We are also challenged to reposition (dare I say, celebrate) the welfare state as part of a solution rather than as part of the problem. Looking after each other will always be labour intensive. It also provides some of the most creative, meaningful and interesting opportunities for work, whether we are talking about work in education, health, support, housing, administration, research or management. (p 329)

In *All Our Welfare*, Beresford provides a thorough, powerful, and thought-provoking argument for the need to completely reimagine the welfare state and, more broadly, social policy. Embracing new knowledges, experiences and emotions might introduce

more complications and contradictions, but, in order to meet the needs of real people in real communities, social policy needs to engage with the mess rather than attempt to sanitise it. Rather than thinking of welfare as a dirty word, we should think about how we could better use welfare to take care of each other as human beings. The most depressing thing about this book is that, in the current political climate, this feels like a novel idea.

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