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The welfare state we're in

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"Governments and society are the mutual beneficiaries of a healthy, well-educated and secure populace"

Opinion: is it time to reclaim the concept of welfare and the welfare state?

During the 2018 presidential campaign, the term "welfare state" was cast into the popular lexicon through the words of then presidential hopeful [Peter Casey](#). Just as Casey apparently failed to understand the rich and diverse community represented by indigenous Irish Travellers, or Mincéiri, he clearly failed to grasp the complexity of the post-war project that has seen the on-going development of multiple welfare states. This is most readily evidenced by Casey's use of the terms "welfare" and "welfare state" in the pejorative sense.

But troublingly, Casey is not alone in this. In reality, the social act of denigrating those who find themselves reliant on some form of social-assistance through a weaponised use of the word welfare is a well-established practice. Use of the word welfare in this particular way is something that has arguably migrated across the Atlantic from the US to Britain and is now making its presence felt in the Irish political landscape. An example of this can be found in the "[Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All](#)" campaign in 2017, overseen by then Minister for Employment Affairs & Social Protection, [Leo Varadkar](#).



Former Minister for Employment Affairs & Social Protection Leo Varadkar launches the "Welfare Cheats, Cheat Us All" campaign in 2017

The use of the word welfare in this context may, at first, seem incidental. However, it could also be argued that negative use of the word next to the word "cheat" possesses a strong ideological undercurrent, denoting a deliberate, political choice

So what is a welfare state?

What then *is* or at least *should* be meant by welfare and the welfare state in a formal sense? Ascribing meaning to the word welfare is hardly onerous, as it is clearly concerned with the ideals of health, happiness and well-being, all inherently positive things that we would generally wish people to possess in abundance.

The term "welfare state" is more contentious, but let us say that it can be generally said to represent a state that takes a formal stake in the welfare and well-being of its populace. This conscious undertaking is usually then manifested in things like health, housing, education and, of course, income maintenance.



From RTÉ One's Six One News, the Secretary General of Department of Social Protection John McKeon on how the "Welfare Cheats Cheat Us All" campaign was a "mistake"

However, this should not be taken to imply some sort of unilateral beneficence on the part of governments. Rather, governments and society are the mutual beneficiaries of a healthy, well-educated and secure populace. There are also different models of welfare state: corporatist models, which are strongly based on social insurance type payments; liberal or residual models, which are strongly based on means-tested payments and social democratic or universal models, which are strongly based on the concept of universal payment. Britain and Ireland generally tend to be referred to as liberal or residual welfare states.

The British post-war welfare state did not happen by accident and was very much the result of forward thinking

Britain and the Beveridge Report

Perhaps the most notable and well-known iteration of a formal welfare project can be found in the British post-war welfare state. This did not happen by accident and was very much the result of forward thinking accompanied by a plan.

It was founded largely as the result of the publication of what was formally known as the [Social Insurance and Allied Services Report](#), more generally referred to as the Beveridge Report after its author, [William Beveridge](#). Published in November of 1942, at the height of the Second World War, part of the report proposed that all people of working age should pay a weekly national insurance contribution.

From RTÉ Radio 1's Drivetime in 2012, Colin Murphy marks the 70th anniversary of the Beveridge Report, which led to the creation of the British welfare state

In return, benefits would be paid to people who were sick, unemployed, retired or widowed. The overall goal of the report was to "slay" what were referred to as "five giant evils stalking Britain" through a series of cradle to grave welfare measures. The five giants to be slewed were want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness.

Most of the report's recommendations were eventually implemented by [Clement Atlee's](#) Labour government through a series of acts of the British parliament namely, [the National Insurance Act 1946](#), [the National Assistance Act 1948](#) and [the National Health Service Act 1946](#), which together founded the modern British welfare state.

A welfare state in Ireland?

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Ireland's welfare state trajectory has been very different to Britain's. In the early 1920s, initial welfare measures taken by the newly formed free-state government were ones that essentially rowed back on those they had inherited from the previous administration. The potent influence of the Catholic Church and Catholic social teaching has also been a key feature in the development of Irish social policies. Resultantly, welfare in Ireland developed in a rather ad hoc way.

From RTÉ Archives, George Devlin reports for RTÉ News on criticism of plans to investigate social welfare fraud in 1986

The establishment and bedding in of the Department of Social Welfare from 1947-52 saw some formal structure through the amalgamation of various payment schemes. However, comprehensive efforts to eradicate want, squalor, ignorance, idleness and disease were not top of the state agenda as economic issues arguably took precedence over social ones. Throughout the decades that followed, Ireland did develop a welfare infrastructure that some would argue is favourable, at least when compared internationally.

Reclaiming the welfare state?

In attempting to reclaim these concepts, we must begin by remembering that the ethos of welfare in the context of a welfare state is positive and imbued with altruistic intent. A welfare state, in fact, is something we should aspire to, with those who can paying-in, so that those who can't, whether permanently or temporarily, need not face the indignity of poverty.

Arguably, this norm of beneficence has been lost somewhere along the way. In Britain, those who seek welfare do so under the continuous propagation of the "scrounger" narrative in popular and political discourse. In Ireland, people who find themselves reliant on welfare often face similar indignities.

READ: [all you need to know about basic income](#)

In both jurisdictions, there is undoubtedly a strong social tendency for people to forget their humanity and to ridicule and condemn those who are in contact with the welfare state. This narrow-mindedness undermines the very purpose of collective welfare; it's also divisive and ultimately destructive. With this in mind, is it not time to reclaim welfare and the welfare state? Doing so would restore the positivity associated with these words and concepts by rejecting their use in the pejorative. In doing so, we would extend a hand that rejects division in favour of reinforcing our common humanity.

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not represent or reflect the views of RTÉ
