

We should have a social security system that enables pe...

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In the [thread I wrote yesterday](#) on the need for a peaceful revolution that might restore the countries of the UK and help them recover from the ravages of both neoliberalism and populism I said this:

The right to support from the state should be enshrined in law.

The state should have a legal obligation to ensure that those who need help get it.

Oddly, when I asked last week about what I should write about almost no one suggested that I address the difficult relationship between tax and benefits. That was a slight relief: that is an area full of difficulty. Then I went and wrote the above two sentences as one tweet in a thread written in not much time yesterday and set myself off on a course of thinking that I have occasionally considered before, which is why we have such a passive state when it comes to tax and benefits.

Parliament is aware that such is the scale of need in the UK that cannot be met by market forces that we need a social security system. This is reinforced in some cases by providing tax reliefs and allowances. The difficulty is that access to the resulting benefits has always been made as seemingly hard as possible.

Anyone who has looked at universal credit knows that claiming it makes compliance with most aspects of the tax system look easy. But let's also be honest, compliance with the tax system is not easy whenever multiple jobs or any aspect of self-employment become a part of life. That is very often the case for those least able to afford help, and who live on very low incomes. Even knowing, as I do, that under-declaration is an issue, [average self-employed earnings](#) are only just over 50% of average employee earnings: self-employment and hardship are intimately related issues.

Despite this fact the state really does do its utmost to firstly make it hard to claim benefits and second to access information on the right benefits to claim. Too often it fails to draw the attention of people to the benefits to which they are entitled but do not

claim.

As example, only 6 out of 10 of people entitled to pension credit make that claim each year. £2.5 billion [goes unclaimed](#), due to maybe 1 million pensioners for whom the average £2,500 a year that would provide would be a staggering additional sum each year that could transform well being. Given that most so-called flu deaths each year are in fact from pneumonia, and are related to living in under-heated property, in the case of this benefit payment of the missing sums that are owing would not just transform lives, it could save them.

It's my suggestion that the state should have an obligation imposed upon it to ensure that such benefits are taken up. I am aware that there are difficulties with the declaration of self-employed incomes (but they are not insurmountable) but when it comes to most benefits HMRC now has real-time online data supplied by all employers on a person's income on a monthly basis. This should be the basis for the transformation I am suggesting.

It is, firstly, absurd that many on low pay but in complex employment situations have to still also make benefits declaration despite their data already being available, and second that this data is not then reliably used to work out benefits entitlement.

Don't get me wrong: I know the complexity of what I am suggesting. But those making that objection have wholly missed the point of the state.

The state does not exist to punish, withhold and impose. The state should exist to support, uphold and provide where needed.

What I am suggesting is revolutionary. I am proposing that we do not treat those in need of support as failures, outcasts and claimants, which is all too commonly the attitude in much of our inhumane social security system. I am saying that we treat an economy that can leave people in poverty as the evil that requires correction, because it is. It should not be possible in a country where there is plenty for people to die from cold, for mothers to go hungry to feed their children, and for food banks to be thriving.

The entire premise of the social security system is wrong. It should be built on the logic that it exists to help. It should be an enabler. Of course appropriate checks to prevent fraud must be made, but the current bias against the claimant, who is undoubtedly made to feel that they are a burden, is wrong. The system should be built around an apology from society that it has not as yet thought up a better way of organising society so that there are still those in need.

What would this require? A system that used as little claimant data as possible. A system that was willing to compromise on data need. One that permitted human failing, but not abuse. One that was programmed to flag those likely to be needing additional support, and sought it out for them. One that anticipated requirements wherever

possible, rather than waited for a claim. One that, in other words, sought to treat people with respect.

And whilst we were doing that, tax should do the same. It too should help wherever possible, by pre-filling tax returns for example, and also accepting tolerance where now there is little or none.

These are all tax justice in my issues. I see social security and tax as being in a continuum. I see the state as an enabler. I want people respected. This is what a courageous state would do. It doesn't. Why don't we demand better? Why can't we expect respect? Why isn't help the default position within social security and tax? Isn't it time the state led by example? That's what I want to see.