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# Conditional citizens? welfare rights and responsibilities in the late 1990s

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## **MAKING SOME SENSE OF SOCIAL CITIZENSHIP: SOME USER VIEWS ON WELFARE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **Abstract**

Against the backdrop of New Labour's claim to be constructing a new welfare state for the 21<sup>st</sup> century this paper explores how a diversity of welfare service users make sense of the principles and values central to the ongoing reform of public welfare. Drawing on a series of focus groups with welfare service users the paper adds an important empirical dimension to current debates about the contentious issue of welfare 'resettlement' and notions of social citizenship.

### **Introduction**

Whilst it is clear, that the present New Labour administration has a distinct view about the kind of social citizenship that it wants to promote and welfare reform is a high on the agenda of many academics and politicians there is little research that explores the views of welfare service users in relation to such issues. The central aim of this paper is to present the main findings of a qualitative study that explores how users of public welfare benefits and services (more particularly users with experience of having to rely heavily on the state to meet their needs) make sense of social citizenship. In order to do this the paper is divided into four parts. Initially, a brief outline of New Labour's approach to welfare reform is offered. This is followed by background information and methodological notes on the research project which informs the paper. Opinions offered by users in relation to citizenship and welfare are then discussed. The aim here is to add an empirical dimension to current understanding about the issue of welfare resettlement and popular notions of social citizenship. Finally, the conclusion

reconsiders the research's key finding in relation to New Labour's approach to social citizenship.

### **New Labour and Social Citizenship.**

New Labour continues to use the language of citizenship to underpin its welfare policy (Labour Party, 2000). Indeed, as early as 1993 Tony Blair was clear in outlining the specific notion of citizenship that remains a central part of the Government's agenda.

*“A modern notion of citizenship gives rights but demands obligations, shows respect but wants it back, grants opportunity but insists on responsibility. So the purpose of economic and social policy should be to extend opportunity, to remove the underlying causes of social alienation. But it should also take tough measures to ensure that the chances are taken up” (Quoted in Blair, 1996 : 218).*

The Government is also willing to accept a pragmatic role for markets in the provision of public welfare (Oppenheim, 1999; Driver and Martell, 1998) and it expects those citizens with adequate means to assume a greater level of responsibility for their own welfare, particularly with regards to pensions and care in old age (Powell, 2000, 1999; DSS, 1998a, 1998b). Labour's 'new politics' suggests that in relation to welfare the promotion of a particular type of moral community in which citizens earn access to their social rights through a combination of hard work, responsible behaviour and personal contribution has become the primary concern (Dwyer, 2000, 1998; Darling, 1998; Deacon 1998; DSS, 1998a; Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999). In short, New Labour is using its welfare reform agenda in an instrumental way to persuade

citizens of the superiority of a citizenship perspective which emphasises notions of individual and mutual responsibilities rather than individual rights.

The provision of state benefits, although seen as important for a minority who are unable to work, seems to have become an issue of secondary consideration, behind attempts to ensure the highest level of labour market participation. New Labour accepts that the state should assume a leading role in the provision of training and work opportunities but in return it expects citizens to take up those opportunities and contribute to both their own and society's well-being (Page, 1997); or alternatively accept that they have little right to expect support from the national community in the form of welfare. In this way New Labour is moving towards the endorsement of social rights based on a principle of mutual responsibility rather than agreed definitions of need.

Recent rhetoric (Blair, 2000; Labour Party, 2000), the now well established 'New Deal' (see Blunkett, 1998; Finn, 1998; Blair, 1997; Harman, 1997; Milne and Thomas, 1997) and emerging policies; e.g. the necessity for all new benefit claimants to attend a DSS advisory interview before receiving benefits and plans to impose benefit sanctions on those claimants who break court orders (Blair, 2000; Brindle, 1999), indicate an approval in principle and practice that social security rights come with attendant responsibilities. Whilst the Government continues to state that it will not force lone parents with young children or disabled people to accept jobs or training it is clear that ultimately they believe that such individuals have a responsibility to enter paid employment if it is at all possible (see Hyde, 2000; Smith, 1999; Ward, 1999).

The centrality of paid work within Labour's welfare reform agenda has been widely commented on (Powell, 2000, 1999; Lund, 1999; Stepney et al. 1999; Deacon, 1998; Plant, 1998; Page, 1997; Levitas, 1998, 1996) and certainly a willingness to engage in such work is central to Labour's perspective. For some who remain outside the paid labour market the acceptance in principle of a 'Citizenship Pension' (DSS, 1998a : 37) payable to domestic carers, indicates that the Government recognises the performance of unpaid domestic care work as a valid enough contribution for an individual to claim certain social rights. Recent positive changes to the benefits package available to informal carers are also to be welcomed (DSS, 2000). Whether or not such rights will become comparable to those enjoyed by individuals who are (were) active in the paid labour market remains to be seen.

Within the social housing sector the Government has also used its legislative powers to build on its Conservative predecessor's attempts (Housing Act 1996) to deal with tenants who misbehave (Ward, 2000; Crime and Disorder Act 1998). Ideas in the Housing Green Paper (D.E.T.R/D.S.S, 2000), although they may not be followed through, show clearly the Government's interest in exploring the extension of such an approach into the private rented sector (Harrison with Davis, 2001). What should not be overlooked, however, is that those who refuse to accept the rules of membership as laid down by the Government (i.e. assume paid work responsibilities, behave in a reasonable manner) will be deemed 'undeserving' of full welfare rights. New Labour believes that it is reasonable to treat such individuals as third rate welfare subjects dependant upon meagre, strictly controlled and residual means tested benefits (Hewitt, 2000). Against the background of such reforms the main body of the paper explores

how a number of welfare service users make sense of social citizenship. First it is necessary to outline the framework of the study.

## **Research Notes**

### *Methodological considerations*

This paper draws upon fieldwork for a PhD project undertaken within the Metropolitan Borough of Bradford, England. The research was motivated by a desire to explore the perceptions, experiences and expectations of a number of welfare service users<sup>i</sup> and allow their views to become a part of ongoing debates about welfare and social citizenship. To do this an abductive research strategy (see Mason, 1996; Blaikie, 1993, 1992) within what may broadly be described as an interpretative/qualitative approach was used. An abductive strategy takes the explanations of welfare service users seriously and recognises the capacity for ordinary citizens to inform a more comprehensive understanding of the social world. Within the general context of the research project, this approach was used so that investigations could begin by describing and exploring the ways in which the social world and social policies are perceived and experienced by welfare service users. Ultimately, it was hoped that their accounts could then be used to develop and amend the accounts offered by various social scientists and politicians.

### *The sample*

Noting concerns that contemporary citizenship and welfare debates are dominated by the powerful 'expert' voices of social scientists, welfare professionals and politicians

(Beresford and Turner, 1997) a decision was taken to set up focus group interviews with a range of welfare service users. In an attempt to ensure that the research did not exacerbate the social exclusion experienced by certain sections of British society it was resolved to make use of a broadly inclusive sampling framework so that the accounts of men and women, young and old, white, African Caribbean and Asian citizens etc. could be drawn upon. Two further purposively driven sampling decisions were also taken. First, given the extent of the exclusion of welfare state service users from welfare debates in the past, it was decided to largely (though not exclusively) sample groups whose members, for one reason or another, were reliant on various state social welfare benefits for their day to day survival. Second, because of Bradford's relatively large Muslim community and a noted absence of research into their views (Dean and Khan, 1997) it was resolved to include several groups of British Muslims within the sample.

In all ten focus groups were convened<sup>ii</sup>; two were exclusively female in composition, two exclusively male, with the other six groups being of mixed gender. In three of the groups all the participants were of the Muslim faith. A total of 69 respondents took part in the research; of these 36 were men and 33 women, with ages ranging between 19 and 80 years. Forty three of the respondents could best be described as white, 23 as Asian and a further 3 as African Caribbean. Ten respondents were in work (5 full-time and five part-time) and a further 8 respondents were largely dependant on various retirement pensions for their upkeep. In total 59 of those involved were outside the paid labour market at the time of the study and 17 people (16 of whom were female) identified themselves as having caring responsibilities within a family. Those respondents without paid work (excepting the retired pensioners noted above) were



reliant on a range of state benefits which included JSA, various disability benefits, a war pension, and income support. Forty one out these 59 respondents specified which state benefits they claimed with the remainder preferring to offer no further comment.

For various reasons<sup>iii</sup> many voices and groups may be missing or poorly represented in the sample but the research still offers many insights into a range of relevant ‘grassroots’ welfare service user views on aspects of social citizenship. It is important that such voices are heard especially in the present period of welfare resettlement when certain welfare rights and responsibilities are effectively being redefined.

### *Three key themes, three elements of welfare*

As Marshall (1992) [1950] reminds us, there is no universal principle that legitimates claims to welfare as a ‘right’, or the duty of the state (or other agencies) to meet or refuse to meet specified welfare needs: both remain highly contested. Similarly, Harrison (1995) points out that in spite of the retrenchment of recent decades, access to welfare rights continue to be regarded by many as a centrally important aspect of effective citizenship. An exploration of service users views on the principles that they believe should govern the provision and enjoyment of welfare remains valid. This paper is, therefore, particularly concerned with three themes that are central to notions of social citizenship, namely; provision, conditionality (a principle of conditionality holds that eligibility to certain basic publicly provided, welfare entitlements should be dependant on an individual first agreeing to meet particular compulsory duties or patterns of behaviour [Deacon, 1994]) and membership. In effect the fieldwork was an attempt to get users to share and justify their views on three main questions;

(1). Who/which institutions should provide welfare services and benefits to meet the needs of individual citizens ? (Provision).

(2). To what extent (if at all) should welfare rights first be conditional on individuals agreeing to meet communally (i.e. in the modern context state) defined responsibilities and duties? (Conditionality).

(3). On what grounds (if any) is it legitimate to include/exclude individuals from a community's welfare arrangements ? (Membership).

In terms of debates about social citizenship and welfare all three questions have an important relevance, and, indeed, they are central concerns of New Labour's reforms.

With the help of a pilot study a series of fieldwork questions and prompts were devised so that each of the selected themes could be explored in relation to three different sectors of welfare; healthcare, housing and social security. These areas were chosen for three main reasons. First, many of the respondents had first hand experience of all three sectors. Second, ongoing public debates and, more importantly perhaps, recent changes in welfare policy offered the possibility of asking questions that focused in on specific contemporary issues which both directly effected respondents' lives and also linked to the more general themes being explored in the study. Third, focusing upon more than one area of welfare in this way allowed the research to explore the respondents' views in differing contexts and offered the possibility for a more complex understanding of their views.

### *Handling and analysis of data*

Focus group transcripts were analysed in three complementary ways; i.e. by group (summaries), by question (grid analysis), and according to selected themes (thematic codes). Initial analysis began with the construction of a post interview summary. This served several purposes, notably, it provided a platform for the researcher to engage with the range of opinions expressed within each group, and it offered a preliminary opportunity to begin a basic thematic analysis of the text. Importantly, as a summary was dispatched to the respondents, it also gave each group the chance to reflect on and challenge the researcher's interpretation, potentially improving the analysis through respondent feedback (Knodel, 1994). A series of 'overview grids' that enabled an analysis of the range and justifications of opinions across all the groups in relation to a specific question was produced. These tables also provided an indication of the support for a particular view in terms of actual numbers of respondents. In this way the researcher was restrained from relaying an account based merely on the views of particularly forceful, articulate respondents and/or a personal opinion on the matter under investigation.

Thematic coding (Mason, 1996; Miles and Hubermann, 1994) was carried out to allow the investigation of patterns and themes across the various focus groups. The data was first coded according to three general categories i.e. Provision, Conditionality and Membership. These themes were then further broken down into sub-categories and coded accordingly. Data was then coded using NUD\*IST so that it could be retrieved in any number of combinations. Such methods enabled the researcher to cross check each set of findings against two other views of the data. Any

inconsistencies that this may have thrown up could then be investigated to see if the cause was simple error or, more importantly, an indication of a previous oversight in the analysis. It was believed that by connecting with the transcripts in this way a flexible, rigorous and systematic analysis would be facilitated and researcher bias reduced. The main findings of the research are presented below.

### **Welfare service user views**

#### *The state and welfare provision.*

It is clear that social rights are seen as a valid and valued part of the citizenship package and that the respondents believe that individuals who properly enjoy the status of 'citizen' should have a right to call upon the state to provide an extensive range of services to meet their welfare needs. This is in line with evidence from other studies (Dean, 1999; Dean and Melrose, 1999, 1996; Conover et al, 1991; Taylor-Gooby, 1991). Dean and Melrose (1996) report that, for many, social rights are regarded as being as much a part of citizenship as civil and political rights, whilst a comparative study concerned with conceptions of citizenship rights in the United States and Britain goes a step further and notes that the majority of its British respondents had "no hesitation in according *primacy*<sup>iv</sup> to social rights" (Conover et al, 1991 :808). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the view overwhelmingly endorsed by respondents was that the state should continue to have a centrally important role in meeting future welfare needs. This was particularly clear when healthcare and social security were being discussed;

*“When you pay your contributions it is for the rest of society not just yourself, it is for everybody else as well. I don’t think that you should make exceptions because you could then say well children are not entitled to it or whatever, or old people once they have got over a certain age and stopped paying contributions.” Linda. (Women Claimants Group).*

*“The state should take the lead in everything that is what the state is there for. The state is the living embodiment of what we are, if we are a just nation then the state is supposed to be just as well and administer justly all of these provisions.” Ali. (Informal Mosque Group).*

By contrast when respondents considered housing, support for state provision was weaker and the range of responses offered more diverse.

*“Speaking as somebody who is technically homeless although I do have a roof over my head. The first point is that I could not give a toss who supplies me with a roof as long as they do. I did get a council flat and it was in an unusable state.... From what I know of private [rented] sector housing they are much better run and in much in much better condition and the rents are comparable. But the council has a duty to make up the shortfall because if they don’t there is nobody else to do it.” Richard. (Benefit Claimants Group).*

*“I don’t think that the local council should be forced to provide houses for people because in the long run it is subsidised by the rate payers. I think it has got to be some sort of incentive from the government and the council for the private building of houses.” John. (Disabled Benefit Claimants Group).*

*“Housing that was originally owned by the local council needed quite a lot of repairs doing, and they sold it to the local housing association... have you seen*

*the transformation? The housing association seems to look after the property better than the council.” Mary. (Middle Class Charity Group)*

Partington (1994) may provide a valuable insight as to why this difference occurs. Healthcare and social security are areas of welfare that continue to be dominated by the direct provisions of the state. The financial costs of private services (or the required insurance premiums) effectively bar many from the major alternative of purchasing provisions on the open market. The overwhelming majority of respondents, drawing largely on contributory or universalistic principles, looked, therefore, primarily to the state and its agents to directly meet their social security and healthcare needs. An essential feature of housing provision is, however, its “complexity and lack of homogeneity. Partly it is directly provided by the state, but predominately it is provided by private or quasi-public bodies subject to a wide variety of legislative measures” (Partington, 1994 :126). One outcome of this situation is that there are, potentially at least, a variety of options which people in need of shelter can pursue. The varied opinions expressed in response to questions about housing provision may be a reflection of the diverse characteristics of contemporary provision. More generally the respondents’ views seem to illustrate not only some preference for extensive state involvement in the direct provision of welfare but also the realities of how provision is differently organised in discrete areas of welfare and the real options open to people when trying to address their particular needs. This suggests that people’s understandings and beliefs are likely to be confirmed or negotiated in the context of their daily experience.

Although there was strong support for the state to maintain a leading role in the direct provision of welfare this should not be taken as an indication of widespread

satisfaction with current state provisions; much of which is seen as inadequate. The respondents' accounts on this issue (which often draw on personal experiences) indicates that public welfare frequently fails to meet even essential needs.

*“Three years after my accident I was diagnosed with kidney stones and by the time they had finished it were like a rock..... I had to wait two years to have it removed. For those two years I was in pain.” Chris. (Disabled Claimants Group).*

*“I find that they are not very sympathetic towards single people, young males they tend to say to them you can go to hostels you don't need accommodation.....The young woman is much more likely to get accommodation than the man, but they need a roof as much as we do.” Doreen. (Women Claimants Group).*

Similar findings are well documented elsewhere (Beresford and Turner, 1997; Kempson, 1996; Cohen et al. 1992). The 'civilised life,' that Marshall (1992) hoped social rights would help to facilitate, remains for many a distant promise. Allied to these apparent deficiencies, the stigmatisation of social security claimants as 'scroungers' by both the workers in government agencies and elements of wider society remained persistent concerns.

In spite of the fact that the state has assumed a major role in providing welfare for the past fifty years the private sector has also continued to flourish. In Britain welfare has never been a simple question of exclusively either state or privately purchased provision, the relationship between the two sectors being more complex. Users

opinions on privately purchased welfare seem to reflect this element of entanglement between public and private provision. In general they are antagonistic towards moves to establish a welfare system in which individually purchased, private, provisions increasingly play a part, often to the detriment of collectively financed services. Attempts to impose a 'market mentality' upon the welfare state are regarded by the majority as having a detrimental effect upon social rights.

Within the healthcare sector the imposition of internal markets was widely viewed as leading to increased bureaucracy whilst contributing little to standards of care. When contemplating private health insurance and social security schemes, aside from the obvious question of cost, many feared that they would be excluded from such schemes as they would be deemed a 'bad risk' because of a lack of long-term secure employment and/or poor health.

*"That [private medical insurance] sounds okay, but I have tried for the last two years to get into a private medical fund and because I have had ##### within the last five years no one will touch me." Elaine (Disabled Claimants Group).*

Research by Burchardt and Hills (1997) substantiates this view.

When discussing housing, the denial of access to private rented property when in receipt of DSS benefit was also a familiar occurrence for many who had approached private landlords to meet their needs. The majority strongly believe that private provision has inherently exclusive tendencies and that it will not adequately serve their welfare needs or those of many other disadvantaged individuals and groups. It should be noted, however, that the respondents were not against private welfare per se, indeed, some had for pragmatic reasons, used it in the past and many hoped to be



able to afford it in the future. What people objected to were the principles and practices of the market being imposed upon public welfare provision. These are seen as being incompatible to both the substantive social rights and the notions of social justice that the respondents view as integral to their vision(s) of citizenship. This approach towards private welfare should not be viewed as incompatible to the solid support for publicly provided welfare. The endorsement of a strong provisory role for the public sector (as outlined above) does not necessarily indicate a hostility towards private agencies providing additional welfare services. The notion of social citizenship promises no more than a universally available guaranteed minimum of welfare, a minimum that is subject to constant redefinition and one which appears to be increasingly subject to reduction; the respondents appear to be aware of this and so are keen to reserve the right to make future use of private welfare as and when they can afford it.

### *Conditionality.*

Discussions concerning conditionality take us to a central issue for citizenship; the relationship between rights and responsibilities. When considering users' views on linking welfare rights to certain behavioural responsibilities it is clear that strong disagreements exist. However, when comparing the three areas of welfare that are under scrutiny (healthcare, housing, and social security) it is apparent that the degree to which users are willing to accept the principle of conditional welfare rights depends extensively on the context of its imposition. When discussing healthcare respondents overwhelmingly endorsed unconditional rights to treatment. Although they accept that individual behaviour may indeed be a contributory factor in certain cases of ill health,

the majority, for two important reasons, view any attempt to deny care on the basis of individual lifestyle or habit as unacceptable. First, they view social, cultural and environmental conditions as relevant contributory factors in causing ill health. Second, comments offered indicate that for doctors or other healthcare professionals to impose care sanctions on some types of behaviour but not others would be unfair as such decisions would be based on largely arbitrary moral judgements rather than agreed clinical practices.

*It is not just about health it is about the holistic approach to it, what are the environmental issues, what are the social issues?...We have got to start to understand those....To deny somebody who smokes healthcare without looking at the wider implications is really to victim blame.” Mary. (Middle Class Charity Group).*

*“I feel there are just too many different criteria on which to apply a value judgement, it would be impractical to apply it. You can't just take an isolated thing whether it be smoking, weight or age or nice person/bad person... The universal thing is the only real way out of it.” Darren. (Benefit Claimants Group).*

*“You could say that people who do dangerous sports or whatever are endangering their health so there is nowhere to draw the line really.” Linda. (Women Claimants Group).*

An unconditional right to healthcare on demand has of course never entirely been a constituent part of citizenship status in Britain. Political rhetoric aside, the reality of finite financial resources mean that doctors routinely take into account non clinical factors when reaching decisions about the allocation of care to particular patients

(Brazier, 1994). The ethical code of the General Medical Council notes, “You must not allow your views about a patient’s lifestyle, culture, beliefs, race colour, sex, sexuality, age, social status, or perceived economic worth to prejudice the treatment you give or arrange,” and also “You must not refuse or delay treatment because you believe that patients’ actions have contributed to their condition” (General Medical Council, 1995 :5). As Langan (1998) points out, however, ‘discrete rationing’ decisions based on principles other than individual need (which include the denial of treatment because of individual behaviour or habit) that are contrary to the above ethical statement, continue to be routinely made by some doctors and healthcare managers; an example perhaps of practice not reflecting adopted principles. Only a small minority of respondents condone such actions. For the majority an unconditional right to treatment is one of the foundational principles upon which they believe citizenship should be built. They would certainly strongly oppose Selbourne’s (1994) view that individuals who engage in harmful activities should not be eligible for treatment.

When considering the housing sector, in contrast to the above, the dominant view is that a closer link between welfare rights and responsibilities is appropriate. Users were unanimous in agreeing that individuals had a basic responsibility to behave in a reasonable manner towards their neighbours, and a clear majority believed that linking the right to housing to conditions such as Probationary Tenancy Periods<sup>v</sup> and anti-social behaviour clauses was reasonable. Interestingly support for conditionality in housing was significantly more widespread when it was linked to ‘irresponsible behaviour’ in what may loosely be termed a negative sense. That is, respondents felt that if a person repeatedly chose to ignore an agreement, and any subsequent warnings

stating they could not engage in certain types of specified behaviour deemed to be anti-social, then it was justifiable to evict such persons.

*“If they have been notified of the rule and they are a nuisance yes I think that the council or housing association has got a right to evict them.... I don’t mean for petty things but for anti-social behaviour, people who are always causing bother, always burgularing [sic] people’s houses you know. I think they should get a warning first, not just throw them out. There should be a procedure like.”*  
Molly. (Lone Parents Group).

When asked to consider if they thought it was reasonable to link the right to housing to a positive requirement that individuals agree to accept additional responsibilities, as is the case with Mutual Aid Clauses (MACs) support for conditionality was much less widespread. MACs are agreements whereby people who wish to live on a particular estate are under obligation to give up some time to help meet the welfare needs of fellow local residents. Under such schemes the link between the right to a house and communal responsibilities becomes unambiguous, anybody who refuses to sign the ‘mutual aid clause’ is refused housing (Jeavans, 1997). Two thirds of the respondents dismissed MACs as unworkable, unnecessary and outdated. Young and Lemos’s (1997) view that, at a local level, a sense of community can be regained via the introduction of MACs attracted only limited support.

Policies that linked the right to unemployment benefit to specified responsibilities attracted substantial support amongst the respondents with more than half voicing their approval. These respondents stressed the positive potential of a conditional benefit regime in two ways. First, they believed that compulsory work/training could enhance the employment prospects of unemployed individuals. Second, they believed

that in return for a right to benefit it was reasonable, indeed desirable that a community should expect a benefit claimant to accept specified training/work responsibilities; i.e. that able bodied individuals who received benefit should be expected to contribute in some positive way to the needs of the wider community. It was thought that this would help to counter the possibility of benefit provision creating a body of passive welfare dependants. Those who supported these views tended to see the causes of unemployment as being primarily related to the individual failings of claimants, consequently they supported conditionality in this context largely because they believed it would address those failings. Lazy individuals would effectively be forced into activity by benefit sanctions, whilst those 'genuine' claimants lacking the necessary skills for the jobs that were available would willingly accept a chance of retraining.

*“There are jobs advertised and there are loads of jobs about that people could get but that they don't try to get. Sorry but there are a lot of people who don't work and who don't want to work and I don't see why we who have worked all our lives and paid our dues why these younger ones coming up should not put their bit into this community work. This countryside needs a damn good clean up and if they won't work then get them into the habit of working.” Jane. (Senior Citizens Group).*

*“If you are not studying then you should be looking for work.....If they have [just] been signing on well I mean there is going to be so few jobs in 10 years time...they will have no experience, if they take this system up at least they are getting some kind of experience.” Mohammed. (Asian JSA Claimants Group).*

The substantial minority who opposed conditional benefit regimes believed unemployment to be primarily the result of failings within the wider economy rather than individual claimants. Such users, therefore, viewed the linking of unemployment benefit rights to specified responsibilities as being both punitive and inappropriate, hence the typical comment,

*“If there are no jobs people should be paid unemployment benefit.” Len.  
(Senior Citizens Group).*

The potential for welfare organised according to a principle of conditionality to restrict the welfare rights of certain individuals and groups on grounds of perceived immorality and difference should not be overlooked. In general the respondents were sensitive to such issues and were keen to distance themselves from racist or other intolerant discourses. Issues of difference vs. conformity were raised by respondents in various contexts and in relation to several groups (Asian people, gay people, disabled people, lone mothers). For example when discussing housing, respondents were aware that, potentially, different lifestyles could lead to problems of malicious complaint and/or exclusion from a specific location. However, both supporters and critics of PTPs or MACs were keen to stress the importance of respect for others and careful administration of rules prior to any sanctions being applied. Interestingly, many of those who supported the loss of benefit for individuals they saw as choosing not to contribute via paid work were also quick to acknowledge the legitimacy of benefit rights for people engaged in unpaid, informal care work;

*“Rita has this young son [referring to the baby that Rita is rocking], Rita has worked before and will work again.... But there are some people who think they are just entitled to their social security and that’s it.” Millie (Residents Group).*

*“If someone is providing care for an elderly relative..... providing them with an income. I think that is fair enough” Mary. (Middle Class Charity Group).*

Another respondent was more explicit in stating that single parents should not be subject to attempts to coerce them into the paid labour market,

*“You don’t force a single parent to go out to work when she [sic] has got children.... Not single parents. I was one myself and I know the difficulties and hardships that a single parent goes through” Molly. (Lone Parents Group).*

At a more negative level one respondent did appear to be hostile to certain ethnic minority groups.

*“There is a family..... They were born here but taken back to Pakistan and then came back once they were married. Now they have got a house here, they go back to Pakistan every year, and every year they come back to have a child. The child is born in this country with British Citizenship with entitlement to a school place, to free school meals, to housing, to social security benefits, to NHS, to everything. And they can go and live in Pakistan and come back. Now I'm not racist but, and I know that people start off by saying I'm not racist, but, I think that everyone should get healthcare whether they have paid for it or not but when you are blatantly abusing the system as this family are doing. Blatantly! And there are people in this country who might be waiting for hip replacements, or they can't go to the dentists because they can't afford it....That is why people are being penalised in this country because others are allowed to come in and take over.....I think that there should be limits.....There are enough good people in this country without more and more pouring in. We have got to draw the line*

*at immigrants no matter what the colour of their skin, or where they come from.” Millie. (Residents Group).*

An initial consideration of the above comment may lead to the conclusion that its basis is inherently racist, however, it would appear from further investigation of the data that it is the “*blatant abuse*” of the welfare system, claiming welfare entitlements without any intent to contribute in some way to the (national) community which grants those rights that causes Millie most distress. This is not to deny that such views or comments may often have racist undertones and outcomes but in this particular case it may be reasonable to argue that Millie’s comments were focusing on the view (held also by some of her colleagues) that claims to welfare rights should imply an acceptance of minimal reciprocal responsibilities. She had previously harshly condemned a member of her own family because he,

*“.....doesn't work a bloody day in his life, thinks nobody has got the right to make him work, and I'll do as I please and I'll have this money each week and its mine and I'm entitled to it.” [Agitated.] Millie. (Residents Group).*

In drawing this discussion on conditionality to a close it is worth restating the important point emphasised in discussions above; that the degree to which the respondents are willing to endorse a principle of conditionality in the provision of welfare depends extensively on the context of its imposition. It should be noted that whilst some respondents strongly support current policies which make the right to social housing and unemployment benefit highly conditional they reserve the right to revoke their support if they consider policies to be unjust or inappropriate.



*Legitimising exclusion, claiming inclusion*

When seeking to justify the exclusion of certain individuals from welfare rights (whilst simultaneously endorsing their own claims for inclusion) respondents again resorted to dialogues of contribution and individual behaviour. In many ways the arguments advanced are similar to those used by supporters of highly conditional welfare regimes. This should not be surprising as central to the whole conditionality issue is debate about whether or not it becomes justifiable to exclude those individuals deemed to have acted ‘irresponsibly’ from public welfare (Powell and Hewitt (1997). Exclusion from a right to welfare was regularly justified in two ways; either because individuals engaged in what was considered to be ‘unacceptable’ behaviour (e.g. those who inflict violence or abuse on others) or because of a lack of contribution to a community’s welfare needs.

For example in healthcare, the claims of immigrants and asylum seekers to a right to treatment are often rejected because, as outsiders from beyond the boundary of the nation state they are perceived as having made no contribution to either the financial costs of the NHS or the wider needs of the nation. Conversely, it was widely regarded as unfair to exclude senior citizens from health services precisely because they are seen as having earned a right to care through previous contributions of both money and service.

*“I think that it is wrong because they have worked all their lives. God, 60 or 70 years some of them and have paid to be in that home, state run homes for the elderly. The state should pay for it. Those people have gone through wars and*

*kept this country afloat through jobs..... I think it is disgraceful, absolutely diabolical.” Millie. (Residents Group).*

Given that much public welfare is regarded as inadequate and, the widely held view is that resources are scarce, a substantial number of respondents argue that welfare rights should be limited to the individuals and families of those who had previously paid their dues, or were willing to contribute in the future. Such views may at first appear to be contradictory to the unequivocal endorsement of unconditional healthcare rights noted above. A consistency of argument can, however, be traced between these two apparently opposed positions. Support for the exclusion of certain groups or individuals from healthcare rights is consistent with the view that citizenship (welfare) rights should be limited to fellow citizens, i.e. individuals who meet formal and/or informal ‘rules’ of membership. A large number of respondents, therefore, believe it to be acceptable to endorse unconditional healthcare rights for ‘citizens’ whilst simultaneously denying such rights to those whose claims were dismissed as invalid either because they could not or would not contribute.

*HOLLIE: [Upset when saying this, almost crying] “I agree with you. My niece was nearly a year old and had to go down to Great Ormand Street for a heart operation. It was delayed and delayed because of children coming in from overseas for operations. My niece died and it destroyed my sister, absolutely destroyed my sister, because if she had had it done when she was well enough she would be alive now. When something like that happens to you, to your immediate family, we've paid. . . . for what a child's death....”*

*KATE: “Yes I agree with Hollie in the sense that there is enough suffering in our own country without having to afford from other countries. There are*

*enough suffering children of our own without having to bring in foreign children and look after them as well. It is putting a strain on a system that is already over stretched.”*

*HOLLIE: “Yes I think you should look after your own and then, you know, let’s put medals on our chests.” Hollie and Kate. (Benefit Claimants Group).*

Similar views were expressed when social security and housing were discussed. Those identified as unwilling to contribute in some way to the wider welfare needs of the community (i.e. through paid employment, taxes, or unpaid care work) were deemed to be undeserving of social security. Similarly, it was popularly believed that for those who threatened the physical and mental security of their neighbours, or who disturbed the peace in a community, should have their right to housing within that community revoked.

In contrast the minority of respondents who outlined a more expansive view of ‘citizenship’ drew upon universalistic justifications to defend their more inclusive approach. Significantly they tended to use arguments that stressed a guaranteed non negotiable baseline of welfare provisions available to all; rights rather than attendant responsibilities being the primary focus. The concept of universal needs rather than membership of a particular ‘community of welfare’ (and the acceptance of its specified rules) informed this outlook. They also believed that in many cases the exclusion of individuals from communal welfare arrangements because of past misdemeanours failed to solve any underlying problems and often created new ones. It must be stated, however, that even those respondents who took a more universalistic approach generally accepted that individuals should be expected to behave in a

responsible manner, not least by living within the law and contributing to the society in which they live as and when they are able.

It seems that even amongst individuals who are heavily reliant on public welfare services a substantial number seek to endorse their own claims, or even sense of self worth, by utilising discourses that attack certain other welfare recipients as undeserving. The exclusion of certain groups both within and beyond national boundaries has long been a principle upon which the notion of citizenship is built (Lister, 1998, 1997, Twine, 1994). Significantly, it would appear that many of those who took part in the research are aware of this exclusionary dimension of citizenship but they do not see such exclusion as problematic. A substantial number of respondents see the imposition of certain limits to welfare provision, and the exclusion that this implies, as a legitimate part of the citizenship package.

### **Conclusions: Shared visions?**

When considering the user's views outlined above three key points relevant to debates concerned with social citizenship and contemporary welfare reforms can be identified;

1. There is a view that the state should continue to play a direct role in future welfare provision.
2. The degree to which individuals are willing to accept the principle of conditional welfare rights depends extensively on the context of its imposition.

3. A substantial number of citizens see the imposition of certain limits to welfare provision and, therefore, the exclusion of certain individuals, as a legitimate part of the citizenship package.

A comparison of these key findings and new Labour's present welfare reform agenda provides some interesting insights. In terms of provision Labour's comfort with a reduced role for the state in the provision of welfare sits uncomfortably beside the respondents' endorsement of a dominant role for the state in the provision of welfare. When considering conditionality the voices dominant within this study could possibly be seen as a confirmation of the Government's approach. In healthcare access to most services remains, theoretically at least, unconditional; this strongly reflects the almost unanimous opinion of the respondents. In housing Labour's view that a right to social housing should be linked to certain responsibilities on the part of the citizen closely mirrors the views of the majority of those interviewed. When considering unemployment benefits conditionality proved to be a more contentious issue. As previously noted a substantial minority of the respondents were deeply unhappy about the implementation of workfare type schemes; however, a small majority of respondents effectively welcomed the idea of Labour's 'New Deal' with its emphasis on defined citizen responsibilities as well as rights. It should be remembered, however, that for many respondents their support for a principle of conditionality was dependent upon how it was applied in relation to particular groups and specific policies. Labour's approach could be viewed as being in step with those respondents who believe that it is legitimate to restrict citizenship rights according to national and prescribed moral boundaries. Labour's policies which restrict or withdraw the welfare rights of 'insiders' (those who refuse to accept responsibilities) and 'outsiders' e.g.

asylum seekers (Home Office, 1999) appear to reflect the views of those respondents who view exclusion as a legitimate part of citizenship (cf. Travis and Ward, 1999).

To set these findings in some sort of context it is important to emphasise three points. First, it is not claimed that the service user views presented are representative of all women, all disabled people, etc.; such a claim lies beyond the remit of this research and would ignore the real differences that often exist within such crude categories. Second, this paper is not a detailed comparative analysis of how differences in gender, ethnicity, disability, age etc. may influence accounts of citizenship, indeed each dimension warrants further study in its own right and could form the basis of future work. Third, although *some* respondents *in certain contexts* endorse exclusive and conditional approaches to social provision it is important to emphasise that more expansive views of citizenship, based on principles of universalism and common entitlement were also present within the research.

As Mouffe (1988) states the ways in which we define citizenship are indicative of the kind of society we aspire to and the values that underpin that vision. It should be noted, however, that the type of social citizenship currently being promoted by new Labour is built largely on notions of conditional contract rather than universal entitlement (cf. Cox 1998); it is likely, therefore, to promote exclusion rather than inclusion. If the current Government is serious about ensuring an inclusive 21<sup>st</sup> century welfare state that meets the diverse needs of all its citizens then it needs to rethink its approach to welfare reform. In future Labour envisages a much reduced role for the state as a provider of welfare whilst also endorsing increasing responsibilities for the private sector and individual citizens (see Powell, 1999 :19-

21). This is not a vision that is shared by the users who took part in the study; as previously noted their view is that the state should maintain its central role in providing welfare. The Government should also give greater priority to addressing the inadequacies (highlighted earlier by the respondents) of current state provided benefits and services if it is really serious about providing a modicum of security for those outside the paid labour market (See DSS, 1998c :1). The crude application of a principle of conditionality within many aspects of social welfare which is presented by the Government as an unproblematic and a common-sense part of the citizenship deal (Blair, 2000, 1995a, 1995b; DSS, 1998a; Labour Party, 2000) will also have to be reconsidered if government policy is to more accurately reflect the concerns of the citizens whose views feature in this paper. New Labour has made it clear that responsibilities rather than rights are central to their vision for social citizenship. For welfare service users, however, responsibility appears to cut both ways. Although some are comfortable, in certain circumstances, with the operation of a principle of conditionality (and it needs to be re-emphasised that the context of its application is an important factor in the respondents' approval/disapproval), this is accompanied by a strong belief that the state should not forget its own responsibility to take the lead in adequately meeting the welfare needs of its citizens.

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## **Appendix A. Focus Groups Basic Information**

### **List of Focus Groups**

FG 1 Benefit Claimants and a Worker	(6 men, 3 women)
FG 2 Residents Association	(1 man, 5 women)
FG 3 Disabled Benefit Claimants	(6 men, 2 women)
FG 4 Senior Citizens	(4 men, 2 women)
FG 5 Lone Parents	(1 man, 4 women)
FG 6 Local Charity Group	(3 men, 1 woman)
FG 7 Women Benefit Claimants	(8 women)
FG 8 Informal Mosque Group	(5 men)
FG 9 Asian JSA Claimants	(10 men)
FG 10 Muslim/ Pakistani Women	(8 women)

The focus group interviews took place between March and October 1997 at various locations in and around central Bradford, Yorkshire, England. The sessions were carried out in the various meeting rooms in which each respective group routinely met for their own purposes. Two basic principles, informed consent and confidentiality, (see Miles and Hubermann, 1994) underpinned the fieldwork. Prior to each session a short introduction was offered that explained the purpose and scope of the research and respondents were given the chance to ask questions, or leave, at any time. Because the research attempted to study a similar range of themes and issues with differing groups it was necessary to impose some structure upon the interviews and this was done by using a standard set of questions across all the groups. It should be noted, however, that time was spent in carefully structuring the questions so that people had the space to develop their own discussions. A degree of flexibility was

ensured by encouraging spontaneous discussion and also the use of various prompts as appropriate. Although it was necessary to focus discussion, the subject matter, and the interest of the respondents, ensured that on many occasions there was a full and at times frank exchange of views between group members! The length of the sessions varied according to the respondents' needs and requirements with the longest lasting 2 hours 45 minutes and the average duration being 2 hours. The discussions were recorded on audio tape and field notes/observations taken by the researcher, or more usually, a friend who acted as an assistant. Each group was interviewed once, with the exception of the Muslim/Pakistani women group where a second visit was made to complete discussions.

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<sup>i</sup> The term welfare service users is utilised as a shorthand to denote ordinary citizens who are not normally involved in the formulation of welfare policies.

<sup>ii</sup> See appendix for further details of the focus groups and the fieldwork process.

<sup>iii</sup> The practical, ie financial, constraints of a PhD limited a more wide ranging study.

<sup>iv</sup> My italics.

<sup>v</sup> Part Five of the Housing Act (1996) introduced some significant changes that linked the right to social housing to specific behavioural responsibilities. A new form of tenure was introduced (ss. 124-126) that enabled local authorities to grant introductory (probationary) tenancies to new tenants for a period of up to one year. On taking up a property the tenant is told that if they behave in an 'anti-social' manner within the trial period they are liable to eviction and any right to a future secure tenancy is revoked.